Across the Border

by Tarasque

Summary

Poe is convinced, as we all are, that Finn is remarkable enough to become a great leader. But how does one transition from a heroic, kind but somewhat clueless ex-Stormtrooper to someone with enough insight and power to change the fate of the Republic, and maybe of the Galaxy?

For Finn it begins with an offer to become a propaganda poster boy alongside Poe. But the PR team that’s orchestrating it might have ulterior motives, opening a chasm between Poe and Finn that they might not be able to bridge. Add to the mix a Republic that begins to fear outsiders and barricades itself in, closing the door not only to the First Order but to any refugees that might need in, Heads of State that might not be quite what everyone hoped, defecting Stormtroopers, Knights of Ren, and various alien species and you get a situation that might end with the defeat of the Light side, or maybe with a revolution.

The story is finished and clocks at something like 114K currently 114K after edits. I should manage to update everyday barring any connexion troubles. aaaand... complete!

Notes
This is, alternatively, the story that was born when I read about the doomed friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X and wondered how it could translate to the SW universe. Don’t you think Finn and Muhammad Ali have a lot in common?

I had abandoned the idea for a while because, well, complicated! And then the wonderful Gloss (Spaceoperafeerie) posted on tumblr about how Finn would make a great leader, and how Poe, while able to lead, would happily follow him. So I told myself, YEAH. Let's write the origin story.

And then both her and the incredible Beautifullights kept reposting those incredible porn gifs and I sort of had to include something about that. (Dale Cooper is my muse, yeah baby).

So the story is for you both, Spaceoperafeerie and Beautifullights. I hope you enjoy it (and don't feel like you need to read it until the end if you don't want to!)

The Muhammad Ali & Malcolm X thing ended as an inspiration more than as a strict parallel, with a happier ending because I don’t like tragedies and because fiction allows you to be more optimistic as far as politics go. Also with a romantic relationship instead of a brotherly one. And with a totally different political situation, and a Malcolm-like character (Poe) who comes from a much more privileged background that Malcolm X did in real life.

Still, he's the outline (might be considered as vaguely spoilerish for the first half of the fic, so skip if you fear them, read if you want to find the parallels):
Young man, extremely talented and clever but unlearned and from an oppressed background, with some dad issues, meets slightly older, more learned man, from the same oppressed background (that's where it doesn't work). They form a tight relationship and the older man convinces the younger to participate in an ideological fight, under the lead of a father figure. Older man isn't afraid of using/advocating for the use of violence, while younger man, left to himself, gravitates towards more peaceful solutions, something that will get clearer in his later years.
Later, older man realises the shortcomings of said father figure and of the organisation he represents, and distances himself in spite of menaces that include death threats. He tries to make the younger man follow him but to no avail, possibly because younger man sees father figure as, well, a substitute father, possibly because he's scared for himself and his family. Older man gets murdered, probably by a member of father figure's organisation.
Younger man remains with father figure's organisation for a while, but will later say that abandoning older man was his biggest mistake.

Last but not least, a warning of sorts: in this story, both Poe and Finn enjoy sex and have sex for a variety of reasons, together or with other people. Sex is good, and anyone is allowed to enjoy it, or not, whatever their ethnicity.
"Wait a minute," Poe says. "In the same meeting, you’re briefing me for an undercover mission and you want me to meet this, this propaganda guy?"

“I believe the word is public relations attaché,” Senator and militia general Leia Organa says.

“Why me? I mean, I’m nothing important, a, a navy forces deserter, and you, you’re Princess Leia Organa from a martyr world, liberation war hero, senator! I, I still have that picture of you with that flowy white dress and the blaster on my wall!”

“Really.”

“Uh.”

“Ah. I’m a senator, as you said. I’ve pissed off more people than you’ve ever met in your whole life. They’re tired of hearing me ask for funds to fight against what they perceive is a harmless cult set up by a handful of empire nostalgics. And if you really want to know, that white dress doesn’t fit anymore.”

“I don’t care. You’re still –”

“Poe, I’m a middle-aged, short, greying woman that everyone sees as a half-mad warmonger. We need new heroes. The Resistance needs new heroes, and as our friend Montady would say, heroes are capital to bring us new people. New funds.”

“That dire, uh?”

“I wouldn’t ask it of you if it wasn’t.”

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“We fight for the same goal,” Estagnol Montady says later. “Freedom from the oppressor. Making the Republic open its eyes to the new menace. Fighting for the Light.”

The man is nothing like Poe imagined. Young, in non-descript clothes, a crew cut and utterly banal features that are lit up by the burning gaze of a believer.

“Nobody fights harder, fiercer than Leia in this war,” Montady adds fervently. “And with better reasons. I – I wish everyone could see it.”

“Yeah,” Poe can’t help echoing. “Same, buddy.”

“You can help her. With your devotion to the cause and, let’s be honest, your good looks, you can help us make the Galaxy see the light.”

No pun intended, of course. “What can I do?” Poe is surprised to hear himself ask.

“Posters. Holovids. Speeches, even, if you feel like it. Talk about yourself. Make the people love you, and let them see the Resistance and Leia through your eyes.”

Leia. Poe himself still can’t find in himself to call her by her first name to her face. She’s – so much more, deserves so much respect. But the guy is sincere.
“The General told you what I do for her, though. I’m sure of it.” Poe says.

“In general terms, yes.”

“I’d blow my cover.”

“Poe –”

Poe? They’re on first name terms? “I’m Commander Dameron, Mister Montady.”

“Oh, come on. You’re not the kind to pull rank. Poe, we’d only let them see the ace pilot. You’d
keep the helmet on in vids and work with voiceovers in flying videos. Let’s seduce them with daring
missions, romantic slices of a daredevil flyboy’s life. The sleek lines of a Starfighter, and the line of
your body in a well-adjusted flightsuit. Volunteers are going to flock on the spaceport tracks.”


“I’m not blind, Poe. And your fan base wouldn’t be either. I happened to watch a short vid of you
climbing the ladder of your ship yesterday, and –”

“Are you hitting on me, Estagnol?”

“Stan. I’m Stan for my friends.”

“Are you hitting on me?”

“I’m not. Just telling the truth. So, are you with us? No need to show much of your face or reveal
much of your real activities if you feel it’s not safe.”

“Fuck.”

“Leia’s counting on you, Poe.”

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It’s not that much of a change of pace. Stan Montady is a believer. In freedom as well as in the
Resistance, which is possibly why he gives Poe free rein, within the boundaries Poe himself
established.

Poe gets to wax lyrical and nerdy with tech specs over shots of his flying T-70. Praises the General
high and low over a visual of him walking in slow motion on the track. He’s allowed to say that he’s
unimportant, that it’s the cause that matters, when the camera sweeps discretely over his ass in that
fucking tight flightsuit they had a damn tailor sew for him.

When he says their fight is worth it, he’s allowed to bare his fear of the Dark side. He can say their
own side isn’t perfect. He can rage against hushed-up exactions against non-humans in every corner
of the Galaxy, he can avow his disgust for the marks of specism that have seeped through memories
of the Empire into so many areas of the collective mind.

Maybe his honesty is the reason it works. Credits flow into the Resistance’s accounts, the trickle of
volunteers becomes a small stream.

Or maybe it’s because he’s always been a bit of an exhibitionist. He loves to show off in flights, so
damn close to the ground, when he knows there’s a lens following him. He can feel how much the
camera adores him, how he should work his body so the flightsuit hugs him in all the right places. He
plays with the way he never completely reveals his face, makes the shots get him from behind, just a
hint of his cheekbone or his jaw, just a curl of black hair.

“Hint, don’t show,” Stan says. “You’re good.”

“I thought it was show, don’t tell?”

“In our job hint don’t show works better,” Stan grins. “A hint is erotic and makes people want to get more. A plain faceshot is just porn. Make them dream of what they can’t get.”

“Remind me. What were you doing before this stunt?” Poe asks.

“Uh,” Stan says, blushing for the first time Poe can remember. “I never told you. Porn. I was in porn. As a filmmaker.”

“Yeah. I thought I remembered your name. Mostly same-sex porn, wasn’t it? Sometimes different species. Creative. Totally up my alley.”

“You knew?”

“Heh. Not all missions are about adrenaline and flashy dogfights, you know. It gets mighty lonely up there. I may have had to find a way to spend the time and I may have watched some of these vids often enough that I remember the credits. You were good. You’re good with what you do now, too, Stan.”

There might be a spark of invite, a promise in Stan’s pale eyes. But for now Poe makes himself cling to their strange relationship, businesslike, close and united by the same goal.

After a while, Poe feels weighed down, exhausted by this triple life, pilot and commander, spy, poster boy. But it’s worth it.

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After the Hosnian slaughter and the Starkiller destruction, after Finn, things change. The Republic miraculously holds on. The surviving officials make openings to the Resistance. Alliances are established. Armies, or what’s left of them, merge. Poe finds himself reunited with some of the pilots who were the most vocal about his traitorous defection from the New Republic forces.

They tell him how much they admire him and how right he’s been all along. Maybe they really thought it all the time but weren’t in a position to tell. Maybe it’s Stan’s propaganda. Maybe they changed their mind after Hosnia and Starkiller.

Poe welcomes them in. They’re good pilots. All things considered, good guys. He gets transferred to the core worlds with them, sort of reintegrated in his New Republic Forces rank. They inform him that he should feel honoured to be stationed at the general Headquarters base, on the new capital planet. To him it’s just another of the Core worlds, Akhios, too damn far from any of the current operation theatres, and not even so large a planet, with a main city that doesn’t even cover the whole surface. But it’s there, in Drion, that Stan is going to settle for his PR operation and it makes things easier.

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“That’s great,” Stan says fervently, his eyes shining. “The Republic is with us. The people, united.”

His two-man team is fast becoming a small army of story spinners, cameramen, photography specialists and other makeup artists. He lets his hair grow into something more elaborate. His clothes
are still nondescript but they’re the expensive kind of nondescript.

“I have to look the part,” he tells Poe with a small embarrassed wince.

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Poe shows his face in the vids now. Everyone saw that fucking face, New Republic officials, recruits, refugees, Hux, Kylo Ren, hundreds of Stormtroopers, the whole of the First Order really. He’s got nothing to hide any more.

There’s one podcast that has him in tears afterwards. The one where they make him tell about the Finalizer. In painful details.

“Everyone needs to know,” Stan argues. “They’ve got to understand what the First Order is about.”

When he tries to branch out on Finn, tell them how great he is, how accurate with a gun, how incredibly good, how unbelievably courageous, how miraculous it was that he broke conditioning, they cut him short.

“It’s your story we need,” a spin doctor from Stan’s team says. “How our beloved pilot fell into the hands of the enemy and how he escaped. They don’t care about a Stormtrooper they don’t know. Go on. Look into the camera.”

The makeup artist touches up his face, selects something dark to add under his eyes, cheats with the shadows under his cheekbones. They circle around him and it’s humiliation that makes his eyes mist.

“Good,” the spin doctor says. “You’re only human, Poe. It’s okay. It shook you. It’s alright to show your vulnerable side.”

That’s not what it is about at all, Poe wants to say. But the guy is right. It’s good for the camera. People will cry. They won’t understand, because who can. But they’ll hate the First Order all right.

His X-Wing in flames, Lor San Tekka’s murder, his helplessness against Kylo Ren’s gloved hand, he tells all. The torture. The ridiculous pride in being able to resist. The darkness, then the excruciating pain of Ren’s mind in his, the echoes in his nightmares right now. His unworthiness. He talks, and talks, until he reaches the Starkiller run. They let his words flow, never stopping him.

“When the planet blew up, a whole fucking planet,” he says finally, “the only thing I could feel was grief.”

They don’t understand that. They’ll cut it, later.

The spin doctor is looking impressed. “You’re a true hero,” he says, patting Poe’s back. “You did well, Commander.”

There’s no elegant way to wipe your nose or rub your eyes. Poe nods, doing both. A small mercy that the cam stopped running.

When they leave, he’s ashamed, shivering and nauseous. Trying to get the tears to stop. Stan, standing behind him, sets a hand on his shoulder. It only makes Poe shiver more. Stan sits beside him, throws an arm over his shoulders and hugs him.

“I didn’t know,” Stan says, his voice rough. “Force, Poe. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re a good guy,” Poe says. “Don’t you want to go back to porn, sometimes?”
“I do. But we’ve got to do our part, haven’t we?”

“You volunteering? You definitely have the body for it. But so you know, it’s not as enjoyable as it looks on the holo, uh.”

“Why not. To disconnect my mind and all. But you don’t show my face.”

“Now that’s a challenge, uh. But we know how to work around it, you and I.”

The guy Stan pairs him with looks a lot like Finn. Same skin hue, same strong build, same dreamy ass, probably a little taller. Obviously not the same attraction for skinny, badass, irresistible girls with three buns. The resemblance probably isn’t a coincidence, faces showing or not. Dark haired, tan guy with dark skinned guy. Trending. It’ll sell.

This top is a good one, genuinely enjoying himself and willing to share. Tender. Caring, during the shots and inbetween. It’s going to be the sweet, loving, cuddling kind of porn, his partner all but cradling Poe as he fucks him, caressing, kissing even though the camera doesn’t get to catch a lot of it. Poe lets go, never as much at peace with himself as when he’s got a hard, thick cock in his ass and a fist pumping his dick, even, as he discovers, when it’s uncomfortable, even when it lasts too long, even for an audience. And as Stan directs him with praises, encouragements and soft words, it feels like he’s as much in his hands as in fake Finn’s.

It feels truer than most of what he’s been doing in front of the camera lately.

In the first days, when Rey is still there, they have a discussion. Leia, Stan, Poe and Rey.

“We need you in front of the camera,” Stan tells Rey. “You’re our only hope.”

“That’s a quote,” Leia mumbles. “How things pass.”

“Never,” Rey says. She’s looking either apprehensive or disgusted. Also, very young.

“The First Order probably catches those vids,” Poe says. “And we have to hide Rey from them.”

He can’t help the feeling that Rey is above this. Their politic squabbles and the Republic factions. Who’s the best hero between the Resistance-bred one and the outsider. The glitter they throw in front of everyone with Poe and Stan’s little show. The soul baring to feed the crowd’s hunger.

“We should hide them,” he repeats. “Rey, and Skywalker as well if he decides to show up. From the First Order for sure but it also means from the public. They should be off-limits.”

“You’ve got an idea?” Leia asks.

“Rey died on Starkiller,” Poe says. “The planet’s crust was dislocating. Chewie found Finn but not her. He had to pull the Falcon off.”

“The D’Qar people will know,” Leia says.

D’Qar is compromised, unsafe, will be evacuated in a few days. But Resistance people will always be D’Qar people, sticking together. They won’t talk.
There’s a general election coming up to fill in all the empty senator seats from the Hosnia massacre. Poe speaks his mind, passionately, pushing hard for the faction that Leia leads from the side. “Of course we’re all afraid,” he says. “Yes, we’re under attack. You know what I do for a job, it’d be absurd for me to deny it. Or to gloss over the fact that our war may be as long and cruel as the old one. But it doesn’t excuse paranoia. We must stay open-minded. We can’t let space walls, curfews and identity checks become what the Republic is about. We can’t become our enemy.”

The Party for the Security of the Republic wins. A small constitution change allows for a new name, the Reformed Republic. Three Directors, among them the ex-admiral Statura, are named from the winning party to balance the Senate authority. Curfews are established. A sizeable part of the Starfighter corps is redeployed for patrolling the borders between the Republic worlds and the unaffiliated. Outsiders become suspect.

A small team of Stan’s people comes to interview Poe about it. They introduce themselves as the Public Relations team.

“My side didn’t win,” Poe says. “Voters needed to feel reassured, and the PSR provided that for them. I understand. Of course I’m not over the moon, but I understand.” He smiles, a confident, open smile. “What’s more important is that I have hope. The news channels are still independent, and you’re here asking for my opinion. It means that I can share my views, that everyone still can, it tells what needs to be understood about the Republic. I believe in the values we share, and won’t abandon what I fight for. Out common enemy is the First Order and I trust the people we elected to face them.”

It’s true that he trusts them, even when the policies that they set up make him cringe. Statura is among the winners, and he’s an honourable, trustworthy man.

“I want out of the program,” he nonetheless tells Stan. “I’m not the only voice you have. I don’t even know if I’m that important a voice now.”

“Is that election hangover?”

“Maybe. But they’re not censoring me, are they? It’s more that I feel burned out, I think. I’m exhausted. With the added patrolling, we’re doing faster rotations for the normal missions.”

“You know we need you, Poe. You’re – different. With Rey, uh, dead, you’re our only hope.”


Stan smirks, a little. “But you know I believe it.”

Poe goes on with the vids. He has to. Stan grows more distant. There’s no talk of porn anymore, and certainly no filming it.

Finn wakes up from his coma and tackles physical therapy like there was no tomorrow. For Poe, visiting Finn after missions as he’s doing whatever Medical deems useful, from walking in crutches to doing one-armed push-ups (damn. And wow. Was that really one of Kalonia’s ideas? Or just Finn’s?), becomes routine. Like an island of grounded realness in the middle of the flying and propaganda haze.
Finn is sitting on a bench in rather short shorts, his bare torso glistening with sweat. Poe decides he’s allowed to ogle.

“They keep telling me I saved the Republic,” Finn says, casually, as if his muscles and skin and gorgeous, slightly wet lips weren’t there at all. “I don’t know how to say I never cared about the Republic. I did it for my friends. For Rey, really. And Han. And for you, also, because you seemed to think it was important.”

Poe easily masters the grief at Finn’s mention of Rey and tackles the rest.

“You’re a good man,” he finally settles for. “And yeah, when you saved us you saved the Republic. Some guys I know would say you did even more than that when you held your own against Ren.”

“What is the Republic about?” Finn insists. “I mean, what I was taught is ‘a bunch of decadent profiteers who let chaos spread among the Galaxy,’ and, uh, I think I heard ‘alien kissers,’ too, and ‘rabble-pandering out of touch politicians.’ Obviously I realise that’s wrong, but –”

Politics. That’s the reality of Poe’s life rushing in with an unpleasant woosh.

“But?”

“Poe, I watch your speeches on the holonews. You’re so, so passionate about it, and sometimes, I’m not sure but sometimes I think they imply you’re wrong about some things, but they let you speak nonetheless, and you feel, I don’t know, so true about it all, like you really believe. What’s so important?”

There’s an odd warmth building in Poe’s belly. A kind of undeserved pride. Then anger. Finn shouldn’t fall for his old tricks, even when they’re heartfelt.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you see on the holonet,” he says.

“But I want to believe in whatever you do!” Finn nearly shouts, and Poe is reminded the guy is only in his early twenties. “I trust you!”

It’s endearing, and yes, there are things you should believe in. Maybe not because you heard them from a jaded starfleet poster boy, but he’s what Finn’s got. So Poe talks, with flashes of himself as a young boy on the knees of his abuela. Like she did once, he tries to speak about what’s important, what to fight for, and why it’s fundamental to learn to stop fighting. He hears big words spilling out of his mouth, equality, freedom, respect, solidarity. Complex words he’s not sure he’s explaining right, the voice of the people, equal representation, accountability, balance of powers. Words he realises he still believes in, plurality, the right for everyone to be heard, free information, free speech for all.

Finn remains silent for a long time, absently caressing the skin of his own thigh in a mesmerising, unconscious gesture.

“When you looked at me in the Finalizer,” he says finally, his voice dreamy. “When you talked to me afterwards in the TIE, gave – gave me a name, I thought you just had a good heart, I –”

Poe grins a little crookedly. “And now you know the truth,” he says.

“Poe, let me finish! Then I – when I got used to the Resistance ways, a little, after watching Wexley’s stack of romance holovids, you know the one, I decided, fuck it’s a bit ridiculous, but I imagined maybe you kind of liked me on the spot, you know, without knowing me, that there was something special – well.”
There was, Poe thinks. There is. But somehow he can’t get it out. The most he manages is to put his arm around Finn’s shoulders to encourage him to go on.


“No,” Poe says, “not only my beliefs, I mean —”

“Sure,” Finn says, smiling reassuringly. “It’s also all of these things, well the first at least, that you have a good heart. But in the Finalizer you looked at your enemy and you saw a person. Someone who deserved to be heard and cared for, like everyone else. That’s what you’re telling me the Republic is about. It’s a good thing to believe in, Poe.”

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Three days later Poe is very careful not to let Finn see how close he is to collapsing when he comes for his usual visit.

“Fuck these Core Worlds bases,” he only says as a means to apologise for his lateness. “They might be more secure against conventional attacks, but the transit time, fuck!”

“Apologies accepted,” Finn says, grinning. Poe is too late. Finn is fully clothed, damn. Already eating. “Want some? Looks like you’re starving.”

“Thanks.”

“Estagnol Montady came to see me today,” Finn drops, a fucking bomb. “He said you know him.”

“Stan, yeah, sure. What did he want to talk about?” Poe says, hoping he sounds casual.

“He said I could do what you’re doing for the Republic. The holovids and all.” Finn’s eyes are twinkling like the damn hazard warning lights of an X-Wing. “He talked about hope.”

“Let me guess, his words were ‘you’re the Republic’s only hope’?”

“Exactly! How did you know?”

“Nevermind. What did you say?”

“I want to do it! I see all the good you do with your podcasts. You’ve changed my vision of the war!”

“Yeah, thanks. Told you, don’t believe everything you see on the holonet. Who sent him? The General?”

“Statura. He said General Organa had taken a step back. They’re trusting me, Poe. An ex-Stormtrooper, and they’re asking me, on behalf of the Head of State, to talk on the holonews main channel!”

Poe doesn’t want Finn to get involved in the murky politics of the Republic. Not now, not with the PSR in power. Not ever, maybe. There’s a kind of filthiness that comes with mugging in front of a camera. Something that Poe will never be able to equate to Finn.

He suddenly feels cold as he realises he knows where Stan’s initiative originated from. That Finalizer podcast, when he tried to tell them about Finn, when they told him it was Poe’s story they wanted. Someone seems to have decided Finn’s story is good enough to cash on after all.
“I said yes,” says Finn, sounding much too excited. “Yes, if they let me make a regular feature directed to the First Order.”

“To the – what?’

“Think of it, Poe. I – I know I’m important for the Republic –”

“Yeah,” Poe can’t help interjecting. “You are. The ultimate moral caution. You’re the guy who had the courage to defect from a soul-crushing group of fanatics, and if you choose to align officially with the Reformed Republic, it tells something.”

“You say it better. That’s why I, ah, I’m just a symbol for them, as you say, not someone they need for my brains, I don’t really know what to say except to tell my own story. If I do what you do, they’ll have to give me scripts.”

Poe finds he’s still got his arm across Finn’s shoulders. He’s been squeezing Finn’s arm and pressing his unshaven chin against Finn’s other shoulder and Finn isn’t shying away.

“You’ve got brains,” Poe says. “You’re fucking clever, Finn. If they give you scripts, exercise your own judgement. Don’t just read everything they write on the teleprompter, hear me?”

Finn chuckles depreciatingly. “I’ll ask you about it, then. Because I certainly lack the background to judge anything in a Republic context. But if I manage to reach the First Order troops, then, then my story gains a lot of power. Imagine. Imagine, if the Stormtroopers hear me. All the lies I can destroy, all the things I can tell them about life here. All I can show them about how they’re treated. How the First Order deals, or not, with hurt troopers, how fundamental we were, are, for the First Order, how unimportant we’re made to feel. Imagine, Poe. It’s possible. Stormtroopers gossip, they hack channels, they have all this underground culture the First Order tolerates because they’ve this immense mass of people they’ve got to control. I know the channels I’d use, the language. The secret codes.”

Finn straightens and puts his hand over Poe’s, nearly crushing it.

“Imagine,” he goes on. “Maybe, just maybe, I can help others break conditioning. Maybe I can make them defect.”


Finn turns his gaze to Poe. He looks enthusiastic. Proud. So full of joy.

“What did Stan say?” Poe asks. “It’s not something he can agree to by himself.”

“He said he couldn’t, yeah. He commed his CO –”

“Stan’s a civilian, he’s got no CO?”

“Well, his boss, then.”

“But Stan is – ” well, maybe not anymore, Poe thinks. “What did the boss say?”

“That it couldn’t hurt to try. I’m beginning tomorrow!”

Possibly, Poe’s face doesn’t reflect enough pleasure. Or maybe Finn is just eager for his approval.

“But what do you say, Poe?”
Oh, Force. “Listen,” Poe begins. He’s got the strongest urge, suddenly, to add something soppy like Sweetheart or, the Force help him, Love. But he’s got no right. “Listen, buddy. It’s – the short version, go for it. The long – that job kills your soul a little, even when you’re doing it in earnest. All the little white lies, the way you have to present yourself in front of the crowd. How you have to make it look good. You’ll need to protect yourself.”

He sighs, lets his head fall on Finn’s shoulder. Finn lets him. Poe goes on. “Better than I can, at least. But let’s go back to you. I’ve always felt you were going to want to stand by our side when you’d get better. Whether because of Rey and Han –”

“And you, Poe. And the General. And now your pilots, too. And BB-8!”

“Yeah, yeah. How could I forget BB-8. So, whether for your friends or for some form of belief. I – if I’m not wrong, I’m also guessing that you’re not keen on killing people, uh?”

“You’re right.”

“Well, I always thought you’d end as some kind of medic – I hate that chuckle, Finn, you’ve got the brains, I told you, you’re young enough to learn. Poster boy is – well, it isn’t what I imagined, but the way you tell it… As I said, go for it. You could win us the war with that Stormtrooper program of yours. And in the short term you’re going to balance a lot of fucked up – going to do a lot of good to the Republic.”

“So you’re thinking it could work?”

“Oh yeah,” Poe smiles, finally contaminated by Finn’s enthusiasm. “Oh yeah, buddy.”

“You’ll give me tips?”

“Of course. If you need them, which I doubt. Oh, and one thing. They’ll probably want to transfer you away from the old Resistance people who’re staying at the Headquarters base. You’ll get quarters in Central, uh, in the upper central district of Drion, lots of fun, but the old faces won’t be around as much.”

“Oh. But you’ll come?”

“Sure. Stan’s studio’s there. Finn, the PR team, they’re a bit inquisitive sometimes. They’ve got no notion of private life. Goes with the job. Don’t go telling them everything, uh? Don’t tell them about Rey.”

“Course not! I got the memo. Poe, do you know where she is?”

Finn sounds so eager and Poe does know. Last time he talked to Rey was a few days ago, when his squadrons got engaged by an unexpected swarm of TIEs. Rey’s becoming quite good with the Falcon, even though it seems Skywalker would want her to spend more time with the Force and less with the pilots.

But Finn’s going to shack with the PSR. Poe hates that he doubts Finn, not his honesty or attachment to the cause, but his ability to dissimulate. So he gives him the truth. But not all of it.

“I know a little. She’s hiding with Skywalker. Even if she wasn’t presumed dead, she’s got no Republic registration and with the new laws she’s got no way to get one. She looks like who she is, someone from the Outer Rim, even if she doesn’t sound like one. But she’s all right. She asks about you.”
Yeah. Or maybe Poe’s just jealous.
Finn loves his new life. Like a fish loves water, like he was born for it, Stan tells him all the time. The camera loves him. The news channels love him. People love him.

The thing is, he loves people too.

Someone from Stan’s team – what’s his name? At least alphanumerical IDs had a logic and there are so many names being thrown around, but Finn has to do better at remembering them – so, this PR guy thinks up some publicity op with senior politicians. Finn is genuinely delighted to see Statura is among them. Not that he knew him that well when he stayed with the Resistance, but this is still a face from old times, and someone who seems truly happy to meet him again. They exchange the few memories they have in common – except about Rey, which makes Finn like Statura even more, shake hands a lot and even hug a little. The cameras are very close to Finn’s face when he smiles wide, but he’s used to it by now, and he’s truly happy.

But he ends up in the crowd like every time, leaving the baffled politicians behind because there was a kid who was shouting something to him and he couldn’t hear from the podium, so he jumped the fence and spent the rest of the afternoon shaking hands, kissing babies and hugging women (and men, and people of indeterminate gender from all kind of species, which should weird this former Stormtrooper but doesn’t anymore, which makes him proud. And happy, again).

“I love you,” he tells them all, “you look so happy, you look so free, you don’t know how free you look, it’s so great! You have babies!” he says, cooing to a particularly fine specimen. “In the arms of their parents! It’s – ah, Force,” and now he’s feeling tears well up, “take care of them, don’t let them go, ever, love them, I see you love them, Force, never stop!”

He knows he’s babbling but they all look at him with understanding and some sort of puffed up love and yes, he loves them too.

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Sometimes he has to do more conventional things, like those looking-straight-at-camera solo vids for which Poe is such a natural. Finn isn’t so sure about himself.

He refuses the teleprompter, because that makes him look like a seven years old reciting poetry (he’s seen seven year olds reciting poetry by now – it’s wonderful. But not what he needs to look like in front of the camera.) Thankfully he’s got a good memory and shows them he can reproduce word for word the longest of the speeches they write for him. Sometimes he’ll get them to change a few sentences, because of the music of his delivery – as for the meaning, those things have got all the words Poe used to explain, and some others, and it feels okay, quite close to what Poe says.
His job is to deliver those words to an audience, and he tries his best. They say he’s got a natural rhythm to his speech, and he lets himself being carried by it, cradled by the music. He hears his voice caress and shout and laugh, and often the cameramen will laugh with him, sometimes even cry. Once or twice in a speech, there’ll be some turn of a sentence, a word, an idea that will catch his attention and he’ll latch on it, improvise, lecture for the longest time.

“Safety,” he’ll say, eyes wide. “Another thing I didn’t have growing up. You’d fail, you were out. Literally. Safe begets weak, they’d tell you. Here, you can be weak. By the Stars, the weak are allowed to feel safe! What a marvel. The Republic provides safety for its citizens, even in times of war, that’s what they tell me to tell you, and Force, that’s so wonderful! Safety! That’s when you’ve, we’ve got all those starfighter squadrons in the air, patrolling our borders and being so good at it, I should know, I have a friend up there, the best, who’s leading a few, Poe Dameron, I think you’ve heard about him. Safety! That’s when the father I saw the other day cradling his infant boy can know that he can just walk to the nearest medcentre if his kid’s sick, and they’ll just check the kid, not, not, I’m not telling you what the situation would be in the First Order because you’d hate to hear it. Oh, Force, safety!”

Once, he spends a good five minutes singing the praises of desserts, because a thing they told him to say about some fruit harvest season made him think of it. He’s not dumb enough that he doesn’t know it was a metaphor, but desserts. He loves them. He already speaks at length about them in his Stormtrooper program. Sugar, fat, textures and tastes, an explosion in your mouth. Gratuitous and soul-warming and vital. Desserts deserve their moment in the spotlight as much as any metaphor.

‘Naïve’, the media call him, and in a Republic setting that’s for sure. ‘Unlearned’, they add, which he certainly is, but it’s obvious that at the same time they love his bursts of creativity. ‘Inspired’, they say, ‘an unerringly accurate artlessness,’ ‘lovely,’ ‘the real deal.’

“Yeah,” he calls back to the news reporters in his next interview. “I’m great! I’m the best! I’m a big deal, the biggest!”

He’d give his right hand for Han to hear him now, but he’ll have to settle for the incredulous, delighted laugh of the people before him.

“That’s true,” Stan tells him like he believes him. “You’re the best.”

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“Where is Poe?” Finn asks Stan when the madness of his new life has settled a bit – not that he loves it less, never! “He told me I’d get to see him because he works with you around here, but nope.”

“Oh,” Stan says, grinning a little. It looks false. “Poe likes you a lot, you know?”

“Yeah, I know, he’s a great friend.” Finn laughs, gestures at himself and at the covered camera. “A bit of a role model, too. Well?”

A shrug. Stan’s better at directing than at acting, Finn thinks distractedly. What is it? Awkwardness? Jealously? What for?

“I think it’s mostly that you don’t have the same schedule. Poe used to work at the studio at this hour but now that you’ve practically taken over for the live feed, he reworked his shooting time around his flying. He was exhausted, you know. For a moment, I thought he’d completely step out now that we have you. Anyway they pushed his main slot to late evening, so it works great.”

“Oh? Should have payed attention. But why pushing him so late? Aren’t there several channels
playing at the same time?"

A small chuckle. “No need to create our own concurrence, eh? It’s for the best. Poe likes the later hours, he does, they allow him more freedom. Right now you’re what the main audience wants. They love you, Finn.”

It’s great to hear. Poe will be proud of him, and he thinks he’ll never tire of the public’s adoration, of the way he’s allowed to give it back to them.

“They’re great, too. I mean, the public.”

“Sure. Are you coming down with the team for a drink? They’re thinking of checking up the new Keshian singer, he’s got a great voice.”

“No,” Finn says. “Sorry. That one-on-one with Director Tihhe Statura was a great idea but it left me drained. Man, such a brilliant mind! And kind, too.” There’s something clutching at his heart, like a kind of acute longing. An intimate feeling, but Stan is a friend, someone to confide in. Finn sighs. “Truth is, when I’m with him, I wonder if it’s what it feels like, having a father.”

“Yeah,” Stan says, but his smile is a bit sour. “Director Statura has this knack for making you feel loved. Well, the guys will miss you tonight, but get your rest, Finn.”

Finn makes a beeline for his quarters. Private quarters. Well, apartment, they say they’re called. He puts the holo on, waits as the evening drags on. Poe’s new hour comes up.

It’s canned and generic. Slices of life at the Starfighter squadrons. Glimpses of a smiling, harrowed Pava. Wexley and Kun, looking suitably heroic, comparing their winning shots in a dogfight. Poe stepping down the ladder of his ship in a jumpsuit that does wonders for his ass.

Poe isn’t in the central district right now. Or if he is, he’s not in front of the evening team’s camera. Nor in Finn’s quarters. Apartment.

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In the next days Finn shies the usual evenings downtown, to the despair of many of his fans, and becomes addicted to Poe’s holonet hour. He had forgotten – or had he? Is he just trying to find another reason to go back to it? He had forgotten that Poe so much needs to use his hands to talk, and that sometimes he becomes aware of it and tries to stop, and how endearing it is. How Poe’s hair, wet from the sweat, curls at the temples when he removes his helmet. How often he laughs, like raising his guard, like a defence, but always genuine. How it makes his eyes crinkles, laugh lines that urge Finn to follow with a finger. He had forgotten the sand in his voice when he softens it, the warmth, the invite.

And Poe, in messages that are still canned, is inviting everyone into his life at the battlefront. It’s a very small world, an impermanent one. X-Wings come back limping. Pilots, but techs or firefighters or medics too, are killed or maimed in battles, attacks, accidents. And through all of it they laugh, heaviness in their eyes, and then they stand up and step again into the fight. Finn sees faces he knows, misses them like he’d never thought possible. He longs to go back to them. To the squadrons, to the Resistance’s life. To the fight.

It’s good propaganda, he thinks, because whatever the media say of him, he’s not so naïve.

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One week, two days in and the messages are still canned.
“Stan, where is Poe?” he asks.

This time he hears nothing but the truth in Stan’s worried voice. “I don’t know,” Stan says. “It’s been fucking too long.” He pats Finn’s arm. “Hey, pretty guy. Just remember Poe’s main job never was propaganda. And that whatever else he’s doing, he’s good at it. And a damn luck magnet. He’ll come back.”

The next night, at the tail end of Poe’s program, Poe is at Finn’s door unannounced.

“Hey, that’s me on the holo!” he smirks when Finn welcomes him in. “Needed your Dameron fix?”

“Fuck, Poe,” Finn says, unable to emulate Poe’s lightness. “You’re not funny! Where the hell have you been?”

Poe’s right hand goes to his corresponding shoulder, an unconscious gesture and a strange one. Then, only for the blink of an eye, Poe’s cheerful façade slips. Finn glimpses sadness. Maybe guilt.

“I’m sorry,” Poe says, looking down. The movement reveals the hollow of his throat and part of his collarbone through his open shirt. There’s the edge of a major bruise there, maybe one that goes all the way to his right shoulder. “I’d have told you, if…” His voice falls.

“I understand,” Finn says, though he’s feeling hurt. They escaped the First Order together, for fuck’s sake, they came together to the Resistance’s highest command’s briefing. They trusted each other.

Poe furrows his eyebrows. “No,” he says. “That’s just. Ah. That’s not for public consumption, okay, Finn? I –” he pauses to pass a hand through his hair. The left, Finn notes. His hair is wet, not from transpiration but from a recent shower, and curls wildly at the nape of his neck and around his ears.

“Sit down,” Finn says, gesturing to the couch, because then they’ll sit side by side and he wants it.

“Only if you shut down the holo,” Poe says. “I’m not fond of watching myself.”

He lets himself flop on the couch and stays like that, eyes closed and head tilted back. “I thought my time doing Leia’s missions was up,” he says finally. “Too compromised, burnt out, done. Turns out there are ways. You don’t tell that to anyone, Finn, uh?”

“Course not.”

“Even then I can’t tell you the specifics. Only that, ah, how to – that the Unknown region is a fucking mess at the moment. I’d never have thought – ah. At least it might be good for your program.”

“Uh, what?” Finn says, his mind still with his interview with Statura and not seeing the connexion.

“Your Stormtrooper program.”

It feels like a cold shower, like all the glitter is washed away and only the important remains. “You think?”

“We’re all acting like the First Order was the Empire risen from its ashes, as if Snoke was some kind of Palpatine clone. I’m not sure it’s that kind of power he wants, though some others over there certainly do. The First Order might be all about total control but what it doesn’t directly rule is in chaos in the Outer Rim. Small lords. Big lords. Knights.” He shivers. “Free-standing Force users, or so it would feel from the First Order perspective. Rumours and myths about Ren. Not nice ones. I think this is what Snoke loves.”
“I don’t see what’s so good for us. It’s scary.”

“It is, when you think of the battle between the Light and the Dark. I fucking hope what Skywalker and Rey found at the Jedi temple what worth it. Had a long talk with them coming back.”

“With Rey?” Finn can’t help interjecting.

“She’s okay. She sends love. Come at the fleet headquarters to see BB-8 sometime, he misses you and she left a little something for you with him.” He pauses, shakes his head. “I don’t know what they’re going to do with the intel, I’m quite out of my depth here. But in the short term, the First Order is having a hard time recovering from Starkiller. They’re fraying at the edges, I hope our high command sees it and lets us strike. And meanwhile it’s the Stormtroopers who take the brunt of the blow. I think they might feel the strain and want out, conditioning or not.”

Poe stifles a yawn, then winces as he tries to raise up his arms to stretch.

“Your shoulder,” Finn says. “Did they catch you?”

“No. Not really. Like I told you, it was fucking chaos. Hard to figure who fought whom.” He yawns frankly this time. “Shoulder got worse because of four whole fucking days in transit flying back. In a single seat B-Wing that looked like they’d got her straight from the Jakku graveyard. At least I managed to hook the comm onto the Republic frequencies and treated myself with all I could find of your vids, Stormtroopers, Statura and all. You’re damn good, Finn.”

“You think so?”

“Oh yes. Your riff on desserts was a great one, buddy. As a whole, I didn’t understand half of what you meant in the Stormtrooper program and yet all I wanted was to flip the finger to my command and run to you.”

“Yeah, but that’s because you love me,” Finn laughs.

“That too,” Poe says, and then clears his voice.

“It’s late,” Finn says. “Where do you sleep when you’re in the central district?”

“I don’t. Too expensive. They might say they reintegrated me but my pay is still Resistance-sourced.” Poe yawns again and burrows deeper into the couch.

Finn looks at his hands, at Poe’s feet, at the mural clock. “Do you want to stay –” Finn finally tries, and then stops when he realises Poe has gone down, just like that, slumped sideways on his bad shoulder, head lolling on the armrest, mouth open and drooling slightly.

“I take that as a yes,” Finn says softly, fondly. “You silly man.”

He manages to shift Poe to a less contorted position on the couch, taking a good look at his shoulder in the process. It’s ugly. Not dislocated anymore but probably was at some point. Swollen, bruised black, torn muscle.

“You should have that checked,” Finn says. Poe keeps on snoring. It’s a soft, soothing sound and Finn doesn’t have the heart to wake him up. The air is warm, the couch soft, the cushions plentiful and Poe looks cosy.

“Sweet dreams,” Finn says.
With Poe back, it’s like something that Finn didn’t know was twisted set itself back into place. He stops staying alone in the evenings, goes back to hugging fans and enjoying life with his friends. He doesn’t really have the time to go down to the fleet quarters, which costs him a holomessage from an incensed BB-8, translation courtesy of Pava, but Poe visits as often as he can.

Life is good and there’s nothing better than telling Poe.

“Man,” Finn says, “I can’t believe it. All the things you can do here just because you want to!”

“Like eating desserts,” Poe smiles. “Have you recovered from your custard addiction yet?”

“Not when you can pour it over a crust and layer berries on top. Stan’s going to teach me how to make my own!”

“Stan’s a good man, yeah.”

“But seriously, Poe. The singing. People sharing music that exists just because it’s enjoyable, not because it’s meant to put you in the right mood for the next battle. And travelling. I got to fly to Lothal the other day, I told Statura of the orphaned kids from the mining collapse and all the people who had given them shelter and he just told me to fly there so that I could bring them relief. And then he told me to keep using the shuttle, I’ve seen forests, Poe, lakes so blue you couldn’t believe, not a grain of sand on the horizon!”

“Yes,” Poe says. “Freedom’s good, isn’t it, buddy?”

“And all the things you can own.” Finn stops to savour the word. “Own. I got myself a speeder bike, a pink Alpha-VS-3841 speeder, brand new. It’s glorious! Better than what they made us ride as Stormtroopers, we had the V-0 versions, in black and white of course. Can’t wait for you to try it! You know, when I asked them if I could buy it, they just laughed and told me to go ahead.”

“They laughed, uh. You know, Finn, not every citizen of the Republic gets to enjoy their freedom the way you do.”

“Everyone is equal, though. You told me so?”

“Yeah, but, own. You need money for that. We’re definitely not equal as far as credits go. Fuck, my father, Kes –”

“You have a father? He’s alive?”

Finn has never seen that twist on Poe’s lips. It makes him look bitter. “Yeah, he is. Lives in the Outer Rim, on Yavin IV. I haven’t seen him in ages, ’cause you know what? A shuttle and transport to the fleet quarters would cost him years of his income. Not accounting for the border taxes. Years!”

“But you fly! You’ve visited him, haven’t you?”

“Finn, what would the other pilots say if I were to tell them bye, thanks for your time, now I’m gonna burn the Republic’s, Resistance’s, whatever, fuel to pay a visit to my popa, see you, hope you know the way to the base? No. Haven’t seen Kes since I defected to the Resistance. And, and you were talking of safety the other day, of health, yeah, well, let’s take Pava’s mum now. She’s out of a job, because she crushed her leg moving in a freighter in port, and they don’t get any insurance for that, so she’s just stranded there with no cybernetic leg, no income. Fuck.”


There are still so many wonders of this new life Finn would like Poe to know about. The evenings with the team, the fans. The sex. Poe, it’s incredible, he would like to tell him. I knew about fucking back then, but this, this! All these guys, all shapes, all genders, coming in and never asking for more than I can give them, and still loving me. All the things you can enjoy with your body, and each other’s too! Looking all your fill, touching, nipples and cunts and cocks and all kinds of other appendages, and skin. Poe, isn’t it marvellous that it’s a girl who taught me how great it is, having fingers in your ass?”

But he doesn’t say any of this. Maybe it’s Poe’s strange mood. Maybe it’s that the way Finn loves to fuck goes well with his public persona, but not with this private, tight, – exclusive? – friendship he’s got with Poe. Poe would be glad for him, he tries to make himself believe. But he still doesn’t tell.

Sometimes he watches the holonews with Poe. It’s not so comfortable.

“You read their scripts, don’t you,” Poe blurts out once. “Finn, you’re great when you’re improvising, and the Stormtrooper program, I can’t stop trying to catch it even if it’s hard from the Republic side. Fuck, you get me flat on my ass everytime. But what you said about our borders, it was something they wrote, wasn’t it?”

“No,” Finn says, irritated in spite of the compliments Poe mingled that with. Finn knows he’s good, even with the team’s speeches. “I don’t read them.”

“No,” Finn says, irritated in spite of the compliments Poe mingled that with. Finn knows he’s good, even with the team’s speeches. “I don’t read them.”

“Okay,” Finn mumbles. “They aren’t. I memorise them. Hell, Poe, what can I do? Or are you going to help me write them? I’m not all learned like you, uh, but I can feel they talk about important things, or don’t you think the security of our borders is worth it? I don’t care that I don’t write them, my speeches are still important for me, and if you don’t understand that talking about family, or safety, when you come from where I come, that’s something I need to do, then you’re less clever than you seem to think you are!”

It doesn’t work. Last time they disagreed Poe backed down, but now there’s still that banked fire in his eyes and a bubbling anger Finn doesn’t understand. “Family,” Poe repeats. “And what kind deserves our notice? A father, mother and kid, like the Humans of Central like to think? Who gets to decide? Fuck, safety, yeah, but what kind of safety do you want? For your precious families? Your own? Was your safety the most important thing when you rushed to Rey’s help? Once again, who decides? Where do you place the border between those who deserve it and those who don’t? And the limit between your safety and your freedom? Fuck, Finn!”

Poe yelled the last words and now he’s panting, white in the face but for two red splotches high on his cheekbones. Finn can’t think of anything to tell him, just watches him, finding that he’s breathing hard, too.

“Shit,” Poe says. “Shit. Oh fuck. It wasn’t you I wanted to tell that.”

“But you did.”

“ ‘m an asshole. A fucking idiot of an asshole. And you had just told me you didn’t write that thing.
Fuck, of all the insensitive fucking pricks, damn –”

“Poe,” Finn says, trying to put a hand on Poe’s arm, hating the way he just looks down at it and doesn’t react. “I don’t understand what got you so worked up. But isn’t that why you should help me with those things? Write them for me, if you think they’re bad right now.”

Poe shakes his head, his fingers coming up to brush Finn’s hand on his arm, then falling back down. “No. You’re at your best when you tell things in your own words. I won’t put any of mine in your mouth. I’m not like them.”

Poe twists and takes Finn’s chin in his hand and for a moment Finn thinks he’s going to kiss him. But that’s just Poe making sure that they’re looking at each other, so, so close.

“They’ve built you a cage,” Poe says. “A pretty golden cage and they’re not letting you out.”

Finn jerks out of Poe’s grip.

“Fucking hell, what?”

Poe isn’t looking angry anymore, only very sad, but Finn feels angry enough for two.

“Sure,” Poe says. “They like their ex-Stormtrooper kid hero. Who looks good in 3D and says the silliest, cutest things. They won’t let you grow.”

“Silly?” Finn shouts. “That’s not what you said earlier!”

“No,” Poe says. “No. But that’s how they see you, don’t you know? They’ll never let you learn anything. Not if it means you can get rid of them.”

“Oh,” Finn says. “And who are ‘they’, uh? Care to clarify? The Republic Directors who listen to this fucking ex-Stormtrooper kid and are proud to show themselves with him on holo? The team who’s here to help me, every day at the studio, when I don’t know shit about what I should do? The guys who came here, each and every night, to cheer me up and show me around when I felt lost? They don’t let me learn? Shit, not everything you learn comes from memory banks! You don’t know a tenth of what I learned in Central, Poe! Of course you don’t, you weren’t there with me!”

Poe’s eyes are glinting, anger back, or some other equally strong, ugly emotion. “Yes,” he says. “That’s who they are, all of them.”

“Then get out of here!” Finn yells. “They’ve been better friends than you ever could! Get out!”

Poe opens his mouth to say something, breathing hard, and in the same moment raises his hand up and catches Finn’s jaw again. Finn grips his wrist and pulls it down, bringing them chest to chest. For a few heartbeats it feels like they’re on the brink of something, kissing, or hitting, or apologising.

Then Poe looks down, shakes himself out of Finn’s hand, turns on his heels and leaves.

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Three days later, much too early in the morning, there’s an unknown droid beeping insistently at Finn’s door. Some kind of tech. It fires out a new string of beeps when Finn opens.

What little binary Finn had begun to absorb back when he was with the Resistance is long gone and his present headache doesn’t help. He feels a twinge of guilt. That’s something Poe would have wished him to learn.
The droid beeps again.

“Sorry, pal,” Finn says. “I don’t understand binary.”

There’s a kind of spiteful raspy sound and a holo flickers on above the droid. Poe, hair in disarray, in the same shirt as when they last met.

“Fuck,” Finn says. “Sending a droid to care for his own business, uh. Didn’t have the guts to do it himself. Well. You better come in.”

The droid has enough power to project a life-size, if a little blueish Poe, sitting on the ground and looking up, unblinking. The shadows under his eyes are a darker blue.

“So,” he says, “it’s four am and I can’t sleep. In spite of that.”

He raises a glass of something to the camera and grimaces. Finn can’t help his gaze sliding to his own abandoned bottle of Corellian brandy. Still three quarters full after last night.

“Fuck you,” he says to the holo.

“Gonna regret this later,” Poe says. “I’m sure you don’t wanna hear ‘bout me right now. Fuck. Shouldn’t make it ‘bout me at all, uh? I’m the shittiest fiend, uh, Finn, I mean the shittiest friend ever.”

“Yeah,” Finn says.

“Fucking tits of a Huttese whore,” Poe says, then stops to sip from his glass.

“Wow,” Finn says. “Didn’t know that one. Hutts have tits?” He asks the droid.

The droid stops the holo long enough to bleep something that sounds condescending. Then Poe flickers back on. He’s passing a hand through his hair.

“Gonna erase this when I’m done. ‘m too wasted. This was all to say I’m sorry, Finn. You gonna want to push me as far away as possible but fuck I’m sorry and I still want to be your friend. Your shittiest friend ever, huh. Come on, buddy, call me? I promise I won’t talk about your speeches ever again.”

With that the holo flickers and another Poe appears. This one has his flightsuit on, the real, unadjusted one, and his hair is still mussed up from the helmet. He’s sitting on the ladder of his ship.

“Yeah,” he says. “Didn’t erase after all. I tried to find a better way to apologise but there’s no good way, uh. So you get to see me in all my grovelling, drunken glory of three nights ago. Maybe I’d have sent it earlier, uh, but then I thought I had no right and after that I was up in space for a border patrolling mission. Which is a fucking damn waste of time, but I probably shouldn’t breach the subject again.”

There’s a beep that sounds canned and Finn realises it’s probably BB-8 urging Poe on.

“Oh, BB,” Poe says. “Coming to the point. Finn, this shittiest of friend, I mean myself, very much hopes that things can be mended between us. I – I didn’t want to impose myself on you, and BB-8 seems to have decided that either you come to visit him or you’re out of his life. So I sent my friend OI-7 here, hope she made herself understood. Well. I’ll be at Central tomorrow morning, that’s today for you, uh, got some business with Stan and a friend at the studio. If you wish we can meet at the door at ten thirty, should be done by then.”
Poe smiles and Finn realises how much he’d been missing it. He checks the hour at the mural clock. Eight thirty, he’s got time.

“Why don’t you come with your pink speeder,” Poe goes on. “The VS series is a two seater, isn’t it? Actually I know it is, I just checked. We’ll ride down to the base together, you can make it up to BB while I abjectly make it up to you, and then I’ll get my own speeder out and we’ll race a little, what do you say?”

The vid flickers. That’s Poe, Finn thinks. A moment of honesty and then he’s back to smiling and cocksure. Then OI-7 whistles softly and Finn sees that Poe isn’t done. His smile is gone.

“Finn,” he says. “I’m sincerely, profoundly sorry. Like if I could go back three days I’d whack myself with my blaster butt sorry. If you don’t wanna see me, I’ll understand. And, uh. I think I’m done here. Hope you’re okay.”

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Finn is at the door at ten, pink Alpha VS-3941 parked nearby. He tried. He really tried not to be that early. But failed.

There’s movement inside, someone approaching the door, and Finn’s heart jumps. But it’s another guy that he doesn’t know, his skin as dark as Finn’s, some two inches taller and damn well built. The guy starts a little as he notices Finn hanging close and then smiles.

“Poe’s inside,” he says. “He’ll be done soon. Thank the Force you’re here. You can’t know how complicated it’s been working with him this morning.”

“Really?” Finn says, but the stranger is already gone. Finn can’t help wondering who the guy, who Finn is sure never appeared in any of Poe’s holovids, is.

“Finn,” Poe says, making Finn jump. He sounds intensely relieved. “I knew – no, no. No, I hoped you’d be early. But not by that much! I hope I didn’t make you wait too long.”

“I’ve just arrived. Actually, I met your, uh, co-worker? He said the work had been hard this morning.”

“Hard, huh?” Poe’s blushing and Finn could burst with the desire to know what it’s about. But Poe doesn’t elaborate and instead passes his hand through slightly damp, soap-smelling hair.

“I brought the speeder,” Finn says.

“Great! BB will be glad. I swear that droid was pining. And he’s still got the message from Rey, you know.”

Fuck. Rey’s message. Finn had been so caught in the turmoils of the Central life that he’d forgotten.

“Do I need to make holovid excuses to Rey, you think?” He asks.

Poe grins. “Not mine to tell, buddy. Hey, could I drive your speeder for the ride to the base? I’ve never tried this model.”

“Sure! Actually I think that’s better, I don’t know the way.”

//

Poe is a careful driver, which surprises Finn, and riding behind him is more enjoyable that it has
every right to be. Poe smells of recent shower and of the leather of his jacket. Behind it there’s the
faintest reminder of the reason why Poe must have showered, some tang on his skin that Finn can’t
pinpoint, perhaps sweet, perhaps not. It makes Finn wish he could lick it, just like that, the rough,
sweet skin of the bit of tan neck that shows under the curls, right below his ear. When he leans in and
plasters himself against Poe’s back, face burrowing into Poe’s hair, he could swear he hears a sound
out of Poe’s mouth, some kind of happy voiced sigh.

Finn has to remind himself they’re only friends, and maybe not even that, buddies, Poe says. Two
guys who like each other and are doing their best not to look at the gaping wound in their
relationship, Poe who doesn’t appreciate Finn’s work nor Finn’s friends, Finn who resents Poe’s
lectures, his mistrust, his unexplained absences.

//

Rey’s message makes Finn want to howl with how fiercely he misses her. Poe has excused himself,
pleading some last-minute repair he’s needed for. Another badly explained absence that makes Finn
feel a little hurt, like all Poe wants to do is skim the outskirts of Finn’s life.

“We’re catching your messages to the Stormtroopers here,” Rey says. “When all of this is over,
we’re going to have this dessert, you and I, the one with the crust and the custard, we’ll go to
Dandoran to find the right berries and put so many on top that our mouths are going to be neon blue.
And then we’ll find a place with a real stream to wash our hands and we’ll listen to the water
trickling.”

He wants to hold her hand and to kiss the dimple on her cheek. He wants to fight beside her. He
wants to tell her that she’s the strongest, that they’ll make it to that trickling stream of her dreams. He
wants to tell her all about his new life, his new friends, his speeder, his experiences in and out of a
bed, he wants her to help him make sense of Poe. He’ll try to assemble something, but later and not
through BB-8, who is, after all, Poe’s droid. It shouldn’t matter, it didn’t to Rey, but Finn feels hints
of a shyness he doesn’t quite understand.

//

Poe races Finn to the outskirts of the city, where the warehouses and the half-crumbling adobe huts
give way to scrubland and grassy floodplains. Finn wins.

“You chose well,” Poe says. “Your speeder’s the best.”

“I’m the best!” Finn answers, smiling wide, his blood still thrumming with the adrenaline of the race.
“You’ve got incredible reflexes and a good instinct, Poe, but I’m the one professionally trained for
ground action.”

“You so sure of yourself, bud. Ground action? Think you could take me at hand to hand combat too,
big deal?”

There’s a big grin plastered on Poe’s face and Finn can but take the bait. And the big grin is still
there even with the split lip and the blood on his teeth – Finn was rough, okay, they both were,
maybe they needed it – and Finn’s left hand hold on both his over his head, and Finn’s right arm
across his neck, and Finn’s knee over his thigh. With that shit-eating grin Poe looks, absurdly, like
he’s won.

Once again, nothing happens.

“Uncle,” Poe croaks, laughing.
“What?”

“I surrender.”

“Because you think it’d make a difference if you didn’t?”

“Ow, get off me!”

But that’s not what Finn will remember of this day. Afterwards, they wash up in the river and lie on the grass, backs propped on the rough bark of a tree, side by side. Time passes. The heat rolls down from the hills in herb-scented wafts, some large thing begins to circle over their head, smaller and smaller in the aerial currents. Poe fishes out a holopad, hooks in a datakey and gets lost in his reading.

“What’s that about?” Finn asks after a while.

“Field medicine,” Poe answers, pressing the button that displays the 3D figures – anatomy of a shoulder. “I have to brush up my skills. If I had remembered more the other day, my shoulder wouldn’t have become so bad. I remembered a method to set the joint back but turns out it’s the dangerous one.”

“But that’s basic training!” Finn exclaims, reading over Poe’s shoulder.

“Yeah, well, you don’t often see dislocated shoulders in dogfights,” Poe groans. “See how your training all goes to shit when you’re as ancient as me and don’t get to use it.”

They both keep on reading, shoulder pressed against shoulder. Poe flips through the beginner paragraphs and reaches more challenging parts.

“Hey,” Finns says, “I didn’t know that thing about the nerves!”

“Because you knew all the rest?”

“Of course!”

That grin is back on Poe’s face, like he won some challenge Finn didn’t know about. “I’m reaching the end of what I can memorise in one go, myself,” Poe says. “Would you like to keep the datakey and read the rest? You can take it now, I’m going to have a nap.” He yawns, settles on the ground and looks up to Finn.

“Sure,” Finn says, taking hold of the holopad and its key. “You want it back this evening?”

“No,” Poe mumbles, already closing his eyes. ”Keep it.”

Poe’s snuffling each time a persistent fly lands down on his nose but he doesn’t wake up. Finn reads on and can’t remember if he’s ever experienced such a feeling of peace before.

//

If the medical treaty had stayed an isolated occurrence Finn would have kept believing it was a matter of chance.

But as the weeks go by he inherits various datakeys, holos and files containing, among other things, ancient love poetry from the Sumitra sector, a treaty on the ethics of the domination over the expansion region, a dissertation on the dilemmas of the droid status (this one so badly written it falls down his hands several times, but Poe seems to love it, so he tries to persevere), an illustrated atlas of
the Outer Rim, three compilations of dessert recipes, and finally a subscription to the planet’s public databank.

“How didn’t I know about the databank before?” Finn muses.

“Yeah, why,” Poe retorts.

It’s transparent. But Poe never breaches the subject directly and Finn has become addicted to his new wells of knowledge.

//

They still race each other on their speeders, still roll together in the grass wrestling, still spend lazy afternoons at the river banks.

Finn still speaks someone else’s words in public, still has bouts of mad partying in Central, and develops a real, deep, nearly filial affection for Director Statura.

Poe often reacts to Finn’s speeches in his own podcasts and Finn becomes knowledgeable enough to understand their political differences.

Poe keeps disappearing for days, sometimes weeks, never warning Finn beforehand, sometimes hinting at the outcome afterwards, most often not saying anything at all.

They don’t talk about any of it.
“Stars, how do we spin that story?” Rannel says. Finn is better with names now, and that’s how they call the guy who’s always trying to find the angle for his speeches. Rannel Collona. “It’s about the First Order and you can’t not speak of it, but I haven’t got the slightest idea. What do you think, Stan?”

Stan looks tired and increasingly like he wants out of it.

“I’m here for the aesthetics of the thing,” he says. “Why don’t you ask Finn?”

Rannel’s eyebrows rise up to his hairline as he tilts his head towards Finn. He looks annoyed.

“Why don’t you just interview me?” Finn says. “No need for a spin. It’s a place I’ve heard of, in a part of the Galaxy I’ve trained in as a cadet, and I do know a thing or two about the First Order.”

Rannel is playing with the 3D device on his holopad, his eyes unfocused and his mouth pressed in a thin line.

“Not live, then. But why not. We can always direct the questions differently depending on how it goes.”

“Live,” Stan says. “If it goes well everyone’s going to talk about it.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Rannel says.

“Heh.”

“Yeah,” Rannel says, a condescending smirk twisting his mouth. “Easy to spin.”

It’s going to feel like a duel, Finn thinks, wondering why he feels such a surge of aggressiveness. I’ll show you I can think.

//

And he does. He tells them how the Rriiv’kat are going to feel under the First Order rule, now that Rriiv is openly affiliated to them. Speaks of the inability of his former command to recognise the value of non-humans, how Rriiv, for the First Order, is only free ground to expand and free cannon fodder to send to the front lines. His interviewers seem to like what he’s got to say, asking questions that make him think more in depth of what it means in terms of politics and government.

It’s a mistake, a big one, from the Rriiv’kaateen government, they say, and he agrees. They’ll get an imported administration, they guess, and he says it’s the most likely, spends time analysing what resources the First Order is going to wish to appropriate – not much, not a lot of mining goods there, and they’re unlikely to ever realise there could be any valuable merchandise produced by native non-
humans. A good thing, the interviewers agree, Rriiv isn’t an important ally to lose.

That’s a lesson to those attracted to the First Order, they say, you can find yourself on the wrong side of that order. He agrees, thinking of the Special Forces Stormtroopers, always despised, always separated from the main corps, and he speaks about the adult conditioning and the madness it brings, the modified armours for the non-human, the lack of shielding, the berserk fighters, the deaths. They let him talk. Don’t try to reorient his ramblings. He’s won.

“Our own forces will find many more mauve skinned bodies,” he says.

The audience is allowed questions, and he’s glad to have been able to reassure them, to tell them the new Stormtroopers aren’t a threat, just a bad joke from the First Order command, just a drop in the ocean of their armies, nothing the Republic hasn’t already been able to fight and win.

“They played,” he says, “and lost so much,” and then the camera cuts and everyone congratulates him.

He doesn’t want to have a drink with them afterwards. Doesn’t particularly enjoy Rannel’s strange, hungry, pleased, jealous expression when he looks at him. He feels raw, tired, and proud. He needs home, and a shower, and the holonet for Poe’s hour and Poe’s reaction.

He doesn’t even know whether Poe caught his interview, doesn’t know if Poe will be live tonight. He has to be, Finn thinks, he has to have heard Finn’s own words, has to feel proud of him and tell it on holo.

It’s far from being Poe’s hour when Finn switches the holo on but it’s Poe who materialises in the air, jumping at Finn in close-up.

It’s been one of his shticks before, the flyboy in his whole gear interviewed at the ship’s ladder, but right now it’s the real thing. That’s Poe’s real Republic flightsuit, not the too-tight thing they make him wear, and there’s a difference between artfully painted dark rims under his eyes and a truly exhausted face like the one Finn sees right now.

Somebody decided to get Poe’s reaction to Finn’s interview. Great minds think alike.

“It was live,” the interviewer tells Poe. “Finn’s own words. Aren’t you surprised, Commander?”

“Why should I be?”

“Come on, one can wonder if there wasn’t – Commander, you’ve known Finn the longest, but we’re used to his antics now. An in-depth analysis, from the guy who harps about desserts and didn’t know what a metaphor was?”

Of course, Finn thinks. A journalist who would think to interview Poe at the peak audience hour and have the means to catch him right upon landing would be on his side – not on Finn’s. There’s a Poe side now, opposed to Finn’s size. It’s horrifying.

Poe might be horrified at the thought, too.

“And do you think the First Order was kind enough to instruct its troops in the delicacies of metaphor use?” Poe grins, not entirely in a friendly way.

“No, I mean, of course not, but still, it underlines some lack of –”
“I wouldn’t be so sure about what Finn lacks. A wise man can act a fool, but a fool cannot act a wise man, don’t you think? You’re talking of a man who learned to use a gunner’s seat in, what, two milliseconds? A man who I just discovered knows enough about field medicine to pass the nurse tests with flying colours. And whose databank account is probably the most active this side of the Core.”

There’s a kind of vibrating quality to Poe’s stance. He’s angry, Finn realises. Something that goes deeper than a journalist’s poor question choice.

“A few words about the Rriiv situation, then, Commander? Then I’ll let you go. I can see you need your rest.”

“We were in hyperspace during the interview, I only caught the two-minute summary on the news. But yeah, I can say a few words about Rriiv.”

He’s got intel, Finn thinks. Rriiv’s been the hotspot on the Galaxy map this last week, which corresponds to the amount of time Poe has been away. And border patrols don’t make him that tired, only bored.

“I heard what Finn reckons about the Rriiv’kat. The consensus seems to be that it’s good news, or nearly so, isn’t it? No real damage, they won’t be a threat for the Republic. But have you really listened to what he said? A whole people, a whole species in chains, and we’re going to have to shoot at them.”

“They’ve chosen their fate, however,” the journalists says. “Our allies have turned coat, defected to the New Order.”

“Yeah,” Poe says, and the anger is now bubbling very close to the surface. “Seems it’s one of the interview sentences the media is very fond of repeating. Quote, ‘A mistake’, unquote, quote ‘they played and they lost,’ unquote. It’s good that we’re so much wiser and make no mistakes ourselves! They played, uh. Tell me, Zann, I know you’re quite keen on the geopolitics of the Unknown sectors. What other move could they play in that game?”

“I, uh, what?”

“Say, let’s play the game. You’re this small planet, the First Order’s looming tall above you, and the whole quadrant is in chaos. The routes you used for whatever the Galaxy bought you are decaying fast, and you don’t sell fuel or ships or anything that makes you valuable. You try to hold onto your independence and make treaties with the Republic, but what does the Republic do exactly?”

“I – they were our allies, weren’t they? They betrayed us.”

“Yeah, because we closed our eyes on each and every exaction the First Order committed in their system! They were so small, so far, not even really human, uh, and whatever we like to think humans are four to one in our senate today! And the Rriiv’kat were so far, already suspect because who really knows what happens in the Unknown regions, right?”

“It happened so fast. We didn’t know, we couldn’t know how deep the rot already was –”

“Rot. Go tell that to the government officials who’re about to hang, or get spaced, or whatever the First Order does to get rid of liabilities, and to all these new Stormtroopers we’re about to kill.”

“We didn’t know!”

“But we suspected, didn’t we, and so, what do we do when we’re called for help, right as the First
Order is choking the Rriiv’kateen into submission? We send a couple of Starfighters, uh, no more than four, with direct orders to – Force. Not enough, that’s what we did, not enough.”

The journalist jumps at Poe’s last sentence, obviously surprised by Poe’s lapse. It’s live, or they’d have cut it, Finn knows.

“Let it be our lesson for next time, then,” the journalist says.

“Sure, Zann. And let’s remember not every tragedies are to be measured by the threat they pose to the Republic.”

There are a few more polite goodbyes after that, some blabber that’s largely meant to drown the indiscretion Poe nearly let out. Finn shuts down the holo.

He’s got a bitter taste in his mouth. Some of it is because of the Rriiv’kat’s fate, he knows. But most of it is Poe. Who praised Finn’s intellect and knowledge, sure, and defended him, but only to better refute the political analysis Finn and his interviewers made. Poe paid homage to Finn’s independence, but the rift between them is only widening.

And it’s very likely that Poe compromised himself enough for an official reprimand. No more trips to Central and the studio for him, maybe. No more flying, if some higher-up is incensed enough.

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Poe falls on his bed, hard. And yet he feels calm, like he passed through rage and reached the other side. He’s breathing slowly, and his heart is beating steadily, but he can feel the trembling inside.

“BB-8,” he says, “if you wanna do any interesting flying in the next years, you’d better leave at once, ‘cause I can see a lot of border patrols in my future. Maybe in the tanker ship.”

“Of course you can. You’re Resistance property, got nothing to do with the Republic. Fuck it and its Reformed ass.”

“Yeah, thanks, pal. We’ll see if you still want to side with me after a month spent arguing with a freighter’s nav computer. Oh, shit, BB. Of all the unprofessional things I could say on camera, fuck! Is it because of Finn, you think? Since I can’t seem to keep sane when he’s involved?”

Poe stands back up. There’s still some Corellian brandy somewhere but he doesn’t want to make a habit of it, and he doesn’t even feel like he needs it.

He slams the holo on. There’s no better way to learn how they’re going to spin it. His recorder is blinking, offering the full Finn interview. On the other hand, the evening news are in two minutes.

Finn wins.

The interview isn’t that long. Finn is good, clever and composed, and measured, empathetic in his appreciation of the Rriiv’kat fate, but his fucking handlers appear to become warier of him in proportion of their new regard, and they’re still able to orient the interview the way they need. That leaves Poe, much too soon, with the news loop that took hold of the main channels.

*Obviously, Commander Dameron wasn’t in his right mind today,* Statura is saying.

“Fuck,” Poe says aloud, pacing the room. Serious enough to warrant a Statura intervention.

*Whether it was temporary exhaustion or a lasting deterioration altering his leadership abilities will*
have to wait for the conclusion of the ongoing investigation –

“Fuck you,” Poe says, because if it’s not blackmail right here it’s well imitated. He wonders how far he’s willing to go to keep on flying, and where else he could go, with what means, to fight on.

Poe Dameron, I’m afraid, still thinks he’s in the Resistance, where mouthing off to one’s senior officer is tolerated, and in his case was even encouraged with the blessing of militia general Organa. As for his, I quote, ‘reveal’ about the Republic’s doings in the Unknown sector, I’m afraid it was just Commander Dameron’s wishful thinking. The Rriiv’kat have proven themselves to be unreliable and false and therefore it’s a great relief that we never went as far as declaring them our allies.

And just like that, goodbye, Rriiv, nice to meet you, see you on the other side. Fuckers.

But I’m going to tell you something, and there of course Statura’s looking straight at the camera, looking honest and kind and polite and slightly nerdy, and everyone’s probably nodding with his words right now, it’s that Dameron is someone I admire. During all the years we’ve worked together, he’s proven himself to be an excellent squadron leader and the best pilot I’ve ever seen. Maybe we can hope to put his tragic misstep behind. A lot of it was youth, most probably, together with that, ah, shall we say reluctant, competitive obsession Dameron seems to have developed for our Finn. This too shall pass, as they say.

Now Poe really needs the brandy, only BB-8 anticipated his move and has just smashed the bottle. Fuck that droid.

And now he’s whistling in the saddest possible way, not even words, just that small, pleading, commiserating sound. Poe feels his heart melt a little and goes to kneel in front of BB to pat his dome.

“Okay, okay. No brandy. Anyway unless I’m lapping it out of the floor I’m out of stock, you fucker. You’re like a mother to me.”

“Okay, not really. But I love you all the same.”

Brandy or not the floor feels welcoming and Poe really has no other place to go at the moment. He finds himself sitting there, a quietly vibrating BB-8 lodged under his arm.

“Fuck, BB. I’ll have to face the squadrons tomorrow. What do I tell them? After a breach of trust of that magnitude? I nearly ratted out a secret mission on live holo, for fuck sake.”

BB-8’s scolding is scathing. And deserved.

“Statura isn’t wrong in putting my ability to lead into question, don’t you think? I definitely said enough for the Republic to have to do damage control. Force, no outsider world could wish to have anything to do with us after that.”

“Yeah, right. Not that they had any illusions before.”

After more than a year at the Republic’s base, the floor in Poe’s quarters is still bare concrete and the room feels impersonal, less of a home than the cramped cube at D’qar ever was. There are sand grains coming loose from the concrete and Poe helps them out. Behind him the holographic Statura still flickers on a loop, sound dimmed.

“They’re really working at widening the rift between Finn and me, aren’t they? And me, I damn fucking help.” He feels his throat constrict, forces the next words out. “I don’t want to lose Finn. I can’t.”
Poe tears a nail up to the flesh on the concrete and swears, sucking at his finger. Watches the concrete soak up a drop of blood. Breathes in and out, lies down on his back.

“Tomorrow’s gonna kill me. I’ll talk to the pilots first, and, and ah, shit, we’ll have to work from there. As for Finn –” He feels a sob coming up, fights to swallow it down. That’s the mission exhaustion screwing up with his mood, that’s all. “I’ll talk to him, too. Will have to ride up to Central. He has to know I’m on his side, that nothing I said was directed at him. It’s gonna kill me but since that’s my friendship he wants he has it. Unconditionally.”

He’s still in his flightsuit. He finds the energy to sit up long enough to peel it off and shuts off the lights with a vocal command. Shower will wait for the morning. Bed’s too far. He lies back on the floor, bunches the flightsuit under his head for a pillow, and savours the contrast between the cool concrete and BB-8’s warmth.

“I know I’m maudlin,” he tells the ceiling or possibly BB-8. “I’m hopelessly in love with a guy who’ll fall into Rey’s arms the moment she opens them. Which they both deserve. If she’s on board, I mean. Still. I’m stopping that porn thing with Stan as of right now. Fake Finn’s worse than no Finn at all.” He chuckles. “Tomorrow’s the first day of my new, virtuous life, where I talk about my problems and stop getting fucked to forget them. Must be getting old. Night, BB.”

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“Ultimately,” Poe tells his pilots, “that’s the High Command who will decide. But what’s important is between you and me. If you don’t think you can trust me to lead, I won’t ask you to follow. I’ll approve anyone’s request for a transfer.”

Some pilots set their jaw, nod and leave. Old Republic pilots, who don’t want to be associated with someone so politically dangerous and wish to see battle before the next decade. Guys with more anteriority who probably resented his fast ascend to Commander, too.

But the group in front of them is still large, even with all the remaining pilots huddling closer.

A very your Republic lieutenant steps forward. His gunner is discretely pushing him forward.

“Permission to speak, sir!”

“Oh, come on, Lewin. We’re not at officers’ school here. So?”

“I – we – we agreed with what you said, yesterday, sir.”

Foolish kid. Poe raises an eyebrow. “Tell you what, I’m not sure I agree with myself right now. Be careful, Lieutenant.”

“But we…”

“What the Commander’s hinting at is that you gotta learn to be discreet, kid,” Wexley interjects. “Poe, we’ll follow you, of course. And understand your little outburst yesterday. Could have happened to a lot of us.”

“Statura was right about something, though,” Pava says.

Poe can’t help the jerk of his head. What?

“Calm down, Commander. He’s right in saying that you’re better suited to the Resistance than the Republic. Poe, there’s still an independent Resistance corps. Away from these fucking core worlds.
Our pay is Resistance-sourced, our ships belong to the Resistance. The Republic can’t forbid us to move.”

Away from here. Out of the mind-numbing border missions, no more refugee ships to repel. Away. No more PR work, but he’ll be barred from it anyway. No more Finn.

Lewin, who retreated inside the pack, wears a betrayed look.

“Not everyone here is Resistance,” Poe says. “And I’m under investigation. The Resistance status within the Republic is unstable enough that I don’t want to put them in that kind of position. But I think you’re right.”

Pava’s smiling, Wexley and Kun are exchanging glances. He nods at them.

“The Resistance graft on the Republic forces isn’t taking, obviously. You guys should go back to the General and Ackbar. At least you’ll do a useful job.”

“Without you,” Wexley states.

“I can’t. But you should.”

“I’m going,” Kun says. “The last refugees’ freighter I incapacitated was one ship too many.”


“Captain Kun, ma’am.” That’s M’un Nbuzi. Lewin’s gunner. Sullustan. “We want to go too.”

“Are you mad?” Kun says.


“Isn’t that what you did once?” Lewin says, looking defiant. “Commander. I’ve been asked four times to switch my gunner with someone, they said, more appropriate. M’un is Sullustan, you know what that means for the PSR. We want to fight. The both of us, together.”

“You can’t leave with your ship. The Resistance would send you back. Maybe the best you could do is get a dishonourable discharge. Just be creative with the motive so that they throw you off and then I’ll write you a recommendation for General Organa.”

“Creative, sir, yes. I think we can.” Lewin’s grin is eating his whole face and it has edges. “I think intimate interspecies relationships are frowned upon these days. We can become very public, M’un and I.”

“You’ll need bodyguards, in case your public creativity works a little too well,” Pava says. “I’m your girl. I love to watch.”

“Force dammit,” Kun says. “The new generation is even worse than we were.”

“You,” Poe says. “Good kids. Well, thank you, guys. You can’t know what that means to me. And good luck to those who’re leaving.”

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Speeder is much better than public transportation when your face has become that infamous in the
span on one night. And while it’s a little slower, Poe still reaches Central much too fast, and still without the slightest idea of what he’s going to tell Finn.

A good thing that Stan is hurrying towards him then.

“I was sure you’d go to Finn,” Stan says. He went back to close-cropped hair, Poe notices. Last time it didn’t make him look older. Now it does.

“So,” Poe says, managing a crooked grin, “you finally fed up with me?”

“Not me. Poe, I rarely gave you advice, because you’re a natural, like Finn. But right now listen to what a professional’s gotta say. Lay low. Like, even lower. Forget the holo, even the canned vids. Refuse interviews. Ignore fans. Don’t even show up at Central.”

“Or I won’t ever fly again?”

“You’re still a war hero, the Force knows we’ve layered it thick enough on holo. They can’t erase you like that. Lay low, or you’ll be forever pushed far, far away from the front line, doing sordid police work in backwater systems. Together with all the pilots who associated with you.”

“I’ll desert. They’d follow.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“Then do as I say. Lay low. And don’t compromise Finn, for fuck’s sake.”

Poe nods to the entrance of Finn’s apartment. “Finn’s my friend. I can’t let him believe I think so little of him. Gonna see him right now.”

“Yeah,” Stan says. “He’s your friend. Be careful, please?”

“Stan. Talking of vids.”

“Yeah?”

“That porn thing we have. It’s finished.”

Stan sighs, his features taking a defeated look. “I thought you would stop. Even sooner. Ah. You know you’re a natural at that, too. No chance for you to change your mind? We could try other scripts, another partner if you’d like.”

“Nah. Your top’s great, but I’m done with porn.”

“Your scenes sell well, you know? The comments were wonderful. They think we’ve found the perfect fake Poe, that you, I mean porn you, would be a perfect match if you were a couple of inches taller.”

“That’s because your fake Finn is too tall. Tell him I had a great time working with him, by the way.”

“And the views skyrocketed tonight. Obviously they love the both of you together. Dunno if it’s because they have a hard time believing you’re on opposite sides of the political scene or if it’s because they love the idea of love, well, sex between enemies.”
“Stan, please, stop. I can’t – that’s why I’m stopping.”

There’s pity in Stan’s gaze. And something else, too. The same burning belief Poe noticed so long ago.

“Poe. Porn aside, people love you. Statura had to intervene last night because the polls showed that a sizeable part of the opinion was behind you. Not the majority, but much more than the PSR feels comfortable with. The people heard what Finn said about the plight of the Rriiv’kat, and then your anger at the Republic’s inertia, at the PSR’s specism – many share it already. I know I do.”

“Yeah, and what are you doing about it? Laying low?”

“Not everything has to be in plain sight. There are ways, Poe. A grid, a flow of hidden, shared information. We can still make your voice heard.”

“I’m tired, Stan. That’s the First Order I want to fight. And the Dark side, if I have the strength. Not the Republic. If – if something comes up, like that Rriiv affair, I’ll let you know. But don’t make me the figurehead of anything again. I don’t want to be a voice anymore.”

//

“Rannel!” Finn yells through the door. “You got another idea, you wait until the afternoon to tell me!”

Poe rings again.

“Hell, Rannel!” a silence, and then the sound of someone unbolting the door.

“Is that you, Stan? Fuck.”

Finn looks haggard, the white of his eyes bloody. Central’s life can’t agree with him on the long term, Poe realises for the first time. Can you get rid so easily of a conditioning that has you waking up at dawn? And Finn’s been following the propaganda team’s late brainstorming sessions and even later partying.

“No droid this time, Poe?” Something very cold is freezing Finn’s features. It makes the line on his forehead even more creased. Poe wants to smoothen it, feels much too paralysed to try.

“When did you go to bed last night?” he blurts out instead. *Fuck.*

“I – didn’t? Collapsed on the kitchen table, must have been four AM, I – Shit, Poe, you got no right to ask me that! *You’re* the one who fucked up! You’re the reason we had to stay up late! You’re –”

“Finn. Finn, please –”

“You’re the reason for my headache, you – I shouldn’t even be seen – Fuck. People are going to. Huh. Alright, come in. But this is the last time.”

There are pyramids of dirty glasses on the counter. The kitchen table is floured and covered with the abandoned remains of the beginnings of some pastry. Now that Poe can take a closer look, there’s also flour in Finn’s hair and on his right cheek. Force, his fingers ache to brush it off.

Finn is standing in the middle of the room, his absent gaze skimming over the mess. He looks both incensed and ready to collapse.

“Come on,” Poe says softly, taking his hand and pulling him towards the couch. “Sit down.”
Finn pulls out his hand but goes to sprawl on the couch. He doesn’t talk, just looks at Poe, jaw set and jutting forwards.

“Stan said the people heard what you had to tell about the Rriiv’kat,” Poe says finally. “I mean, really heard. It’s good – well, won’t change much of what’s happening to Rriiv, but at least the people here won’t hate blindly.”

Finn doesn’t move, doesn’t talk.

“I’m sorry if it sounded like I was attacking you personally yesterday. I mean. Zann, my interviewer, he’s a nice guy, he’s got a good mind, but he’s had a very sheltered life and he doesn’t know we’re friends – uh. That is, if we’re…”

No reaction.

“I watched your whole interview afterwards. Force, Finn, I’m proud of you! You could see Rannel and the others changing their mind about your abilities from one second to the next. They’ll respect you now. And you – whatever Rannel’s clique tried to engineer around your answers, you’re the only one who could give such insight into the Rriiv’kat enslavement. It’s good that you’re here.”

Finn is watching Poe, obviously listening, and maybe the line of his forehead has slightly eased. But he’s not reacting in any other way.

“Finn. Please. I’m gonna leave afterwards, I just want you to know that I hate how they’re opening a gap between us. I don’t want that. I mean –”

Finn has risen up from the couch and is closing the gap, the physical gap between them.

“I mean,” Poe repeats.

Finn hooks a hand in the curls at the back of Poe’s neck and kisses him. At first he’s questing, his lips just brushing Poe’s, but it’s an open, bold kiss, his face pushing forward, his tongue darting to touch and taste.

It feels gentle, but ineluctable, and what could Poe do except fall into the kiss, grab Finn’s head with his own two hands, dig his fingers in the dense whorls of hair and pull, pull until their mouths are fused together, their noses crushed, teeth clicking and tongues sliding.

Finn pulls off a little.

“Is that what you mean?” he asks.

“No,” Poe says. “I thought…”

Finn’s face closes at once, the line of his forehead creased again.

“No, but that’s what I want. Have wanted, for a very long time.”

Finn exhales. “Oh Force,” he says, and that’s Poe who resumes the kissing.

After a while they manoeuvre each other back to the couch, still kissing. Finn is already working Poe’s fly open and pushing his shirt up.


//
It’s exactly like in a script Poe acted for Stan, except it’s completely different.

Most of the fingers of one of Finn’s hand are inside Poe’s ass. It feels clumsy, or maybe very crafty. The little finger and the thumb are digging into his buttocks, the three middle fingers alternating between caressing his crack and pushing inside, exploring, sometimes grabbing at his hole, like Finn loves it too much, like he can’t completely control himself. Finn’s mouth and his other hand are working at Poe’s nipples, nipping and biting and licking, massaging his pecs, palming them, brushing lightly or pushing hard, and he can just see Finn’s open mouth, hungry, wet, his eyes at once open, upturned and dark, watching him, and then scrunched closed, lost in the sensation.

Poe wishes he could see more, more of Finn’s spectacular shoulders and strong back, more of his sides, of his abs, of the curves of his ass and his thighs, more of the thin long feet, because Finn has obviously never stopped working out and his body is glorious. Poe can’t have enough of Finn’s dark skin, of the scar, now faded, that bisects his back and slithers with the undulations of Finn’s spine. He can only glimpse the roundness of Finn’s butt, and has to strain to watch Finn’s cock, bobbing between their bodies, long and thick and wholly erect, flushed nearly black.

Poe extends a hand to test the firmness, the smoothness of the skin there, moulds his fingers along the length, twists at the head, cranes his neck to watch it bob back as he lets his go. Finn whines and stills his mouth over one nipple, his breath cooling the wet skin and making the nipple pebble again. Under the lens of Stan’s cam Poe has always been in control of what he felt. Could separate between cock in his hole, mouth biting his neck, hands in his hair. Could catalogue each sensation, each surge of pleasure, could see himself act out his pleasure. Fake Finn always played it a little unrefined, a little naïve, acting as the ex-Stormtrooper whose experience of fucking was made of fast poundings between two doors of a destroyer.

This is nothing like that.

Poe’s hand, circling around Finn’s cock, fondling his balls, is stroking and scraping, drawing out waves of budding pleasure that make Finn’s muscles ripple and Poe’s heart answer with an acute kind of joy. And it’s Finn’s skin he can’t have enough of, its heady smell, its slickness, the surprising sweet taste under his tongue, Finn who’s touching him everywhere but especially where he needs it, nipples and mouth and ass, but not his cock, not his cock that’s so hard it’s beginning to ache, heavy and hot against his stomach and damn but Finn is experienced.

“Didn’t realise,” Poe manages to pant, “how well you had taken to Central’s life.”

“Told you I was learning,” Finn grins, and then two of his fingers curve inside and hit Poe’s prostate well and hard.

“Fuck,” Poe says, “Fuck,” and he knows he’s thrashing, knows he’s spreading his leg wider, begging Finn in, can’t help the rhythmic extension of his fingers, the curl of his toes. “Fuck, that’s so good —”

“Think I can make you come?” Finn asks, his grin even wide. “Just like that, touching you like that?”

“You can try,” Poe exhales, and then he whines, oh Force, Finn’s fingers along his crack, around his rim, under his balls, everywhere but on his cock, Force. “Or you can touch my dick, look at it, fuck, never been so hard in all my life, look at me —”

Finn sits up, his gaze veering down, taking his time. He’s nearly tender as he palms Poe’s cock, curls his hand around it, thumbs the slit and lets go.

“Payback,” Finn says. He’s laughing, that fucker, palming his own cock, caressing himself lazily, two fingers still inside Poe’s ass. Watching Poe with hungry eyes. “Not gonna jack you up right now, Poe. Gonna fuck you, fuck your ass so hard.”

Oh, but Poe wants it, Finn’s gorgeous cock, long, thick, dammit, wants it all in him, pounding into him until he feels it in his throat. His ass is tingling, loose, yearning, empty as Finn removes his hand to slick himself up. Poe adds his hand on Finn’s cock to help him along, feel him, urge him on, and oh but Finn gasps, not as in control as he looks.

Then he’s in Poe’s loosened, slickened hole, oh so ready, and they both want it so much, slam into each other, each of them grunting, breathing hard, Poe trying to open even wider, keening, begging.

If it were porn there’d be a ritual, several positions, an elaborate gradient in the rise of rhythm and arousal. It’s not porn. It’s them both, face to face, wanting to see and taste everything of the other, it’s Finn, pounding in Poe’s ass so hard it’s going to bruise, and Poe, meeting him thrust for thrust. It’s Finn, wanting so much of Poe’s skin, pressing himself against him with all his weight, bracing with his arms around Poe’s shoulders, around his neck, cradling him, kissing his eyelids and his nose, eating his moans. It’s Finn, wanting so much to merge into Poe that his knees, and then his feet leave the ground at some point, all his weight on Poe, his hips bucking and undulating.

It’s Poe, curling inside and curving his neck to catch Finn’s nipple between his teeth, biting, pulling, revelling in Finn’s undone whines. Poe kissing his pecs, his collarbone, the hollow of his neck, pulling him in to bite at his shoulder, smell him, taste him. Poe raking his nails through Finn’s hair, down his neck, into the tender skin of his shoulderblades.

They can last, they’ve both trained enough to do so. And so Finn slows down, pushing himself up on his arms, watching Poe’s face with wide eyes as he takes his time to push back, sweet inch by sweet inch into his hole. And so when Poe begins to touch himself it’s languid, just the tip of his fingers on the underside, a twist and a light grip on the head, and when he shivers and bites his lip and clenches around Finn’s cock Finn shivers too.

They could last, for hours, but neither of them wants to. It’s too much emotion welling up and wanting out, their skin too hot, their lips tingling

“Harder,” Poe begs, “Force, harder, Finn, give it to me, give it all, I wanna come, now!”

It wakes something in Finn, something wild and loving, that wants to touch Poe everywhere, that makes him push his palms all over Poe’s torso, dip down to share a hard kiss, all open mouth and thrusting tongue, then rise on his knees, grab Poe’s hips and raise them up, bend down on Poe’s thighs and pull Poe’s ass hard around his cock, slam his hips, and yell.

“Come for me,” he manages to let out as he adds his hand over Poe’s as they frantically pump his cock, as Poe’s other hand comes to dig into his butt, “Come on, Poe, beautiful, ah, Force!”

And Poe comes for him, white ribbons on his belly, on the dark brown of Finn’s hand, on and on, and Poe watches Finn’s face scrunch and distort, Finn’s mouth open soundlessly, and feels Finn’s cock twitch and pulse inside him as it shoots, watches the heave of Finn’s chest and the tremor in his arms, pulls Finn flush against him.

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I love you, Poe wants to say. It’s so incredible that I’m here, that you’re here, warm and heavy on
me, and your cock warm inside me. I thought I’d be out of your life by now.

What he says, instead, is: “Good thing, all in all, that I can’t see a lot of sitting in a cockpit for me in the near future. Wow. What a pounding, baby!”

Finn pulls out and raises a little on one elbow, passing a light hand on Poe’s inner thighs and brushing along his crack. “You okay?”

“Never been better,” Poe says, lying back and closing his eyes. “Mmmh, Finn, your hands are delicious. Stars, don’t stop that along my leg, it’s soothing.”

“Soothing?”

“Do it again in ten minutes and you’ll get another reaction. Right now it’s soothing. And now come up here and kiss me.”

“If you’re thinking of round two,” Finn says, “well, so am I. And nobody’s supposed to come in before two pm. Which is why I was angry when I opened the door.”

“Yeah. Wanna take a nap before we get all frisky, then?”

“Sticky like that?”

“Okay, okay.” Poe eases Finn down on the couch and stands up. “Any towels I can use in the fresher?”

“Of course. It’s over there on the left. Wait, I’ll come with you.”

“You lie there. I’m coming back.”

//

“Your body is incredible,” Poe whispers as he cleans Finn with a wet towel.

“You think so? It’s so hard keeping in shape here.”

“Heh. Desserts come with a price. But really. You’re gorgeous all the way.”

Poe’s working at Finn’s balls and cock now, loving the weight of them in his hands.

“Now that feels good,” Finn says. “But not soothing.”

Finn’s cock is twitching, dammit. Filling in a little.

“Already?” Poe says. “Wow. Can’t follow you so soon, buddy. But I can blow you real good if you want.”

Finn sighs, something content and sleepy.

“Nah. I am tired. And I still feel all tingly and stuff. Nap’s good, if you lie down with me.”

//

Finn is moving restlessly on the too-small couch, tossing his head. Not falling asleep.

“You’re okay, buddy?” Poe asks.
“Yeah. I’m – I’m, wow, you know. Coming down slowly. You’re good, Poe. You were so good for me. I didn’t imagine… Are you, uh, also enjoying the Central way of life?”

Poe laughs. “Ah, no. Harder to do so when you become a commander. Occasions fewer and further between. It’s not a good idea to fuck down the chain of command.”

“How is it between Rey and you?”

“She’s – like the most important person in my life, and she’s so beautiful and strong, you know, and we saved each other’s life – well, mostly she saved mine and I love her, but. Really not like that.”

Poe laughs, hoping Finn doesn’t realise the depth of his relief. “Maybe my relationship with Leia is a bit more unbalanced, but yeah, basically it looks the same.”

“Come on, Finn!”

“And no fans either? You must have them.”

“No fan either. I – hero worship makes me uncomfortable.”

“But they love you, this kind of people, and if you love them just enough to make love once, they’re happy! It’s great!”

“I’m – I probably don’t have your heart. I don’t want groupies.”

“Then you’re celibate? How come you’re so good at bottoming if you’re celibate? I mean, the way you took in my cock …”

“I – uh.” Poe feels the blush creep up. “I had an arrangement. But it’s over. It was over before we made love.”

“Oh? I’m sorry.”

“Oh no! Don’t be. I wanted it to stop. And right now I’m glad I did. I – I like having you only. If you want to make it a regular occurrence, I mean.”

“Really? I’m flattered. Of course I want! Poe, does this mean I should do the same? Ditch the one night stands?”

What do you answer to something like that? Please oh please yes I’d really like you to I’m discovering I’m jealous? Love me and me alone let’s get married let’s elope to the Outer Rim?

“Not my place to say, buddy. What do you want?”

“I’ve never done that, being exclusive. It was unthinkable in the First Order, and here at Central I had no reason to until now. I’ve seen people who are, though. I’d like to try. You’re really so good for me, Poe.”
Poe feels his throat constrict.

“Then I’ll try not to let you down, Finn. I’m honoured,” he says, his voice sort of creaking. He pulls Finn’s head onto the hollow of his shoulder and presses himself against him. “Now sleep.”

Finn’s eyelashes are really long, even on the lower eyelid, Poe notices. Curly. And his lips are really gorgeous. He got himself a tattoo, something small on his chest, a kind of flower. Force, Poe thinks. I love him. Please make this fragile thing between us last.

Chapter End Notes

Poe's line about a wise man playing the fool is a real line from Malcolm X talking about Muhammad Ali. The way Finn is going to use it much later in the fic (the second use, don't know if you'll still remember by then!) is also lifted straight from something Ali did.
Finnd's victory

Chapter Notes

Two chapters uploaded at once, don't miss the previous one!

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Last part of this chapter is explicit (again). And by the way it's this scene that got me stalled for a while and caused this post on tumblr.

Finn would love if his relationship with Poe could be more public.

There are couples in the PR team, people who kiss and pet each other during their late evenings at the pub, who sometimes stand up and slow-dance to the music, and while Finn had never particularly noticed it before, he does now and he wants that with Poe. Eyes to witness their bliss. The memories of others to make their closeness more real. A better reason for his constant shunning of fans, which makes them nod knowingly and wish him happiness while some of the journalist begin to add questions about his private life in interviews.

If, at least, Poe could ride up to Central again, come up to Finn’s apartment, even in secret, like he did the first time. If Poe could spend the night, if they could wake up in bed together. Finn dreams of simple things, Poe’s golden skin in the morning light, his bed hair that has to be ridiculous, learning about what he eats for breakfast. Making him pastries and feeding them to him, bite by bite. Bitching about who takes the fresher first and ending showering together. Mundane things. Domestic things that he hears about and never had before.

But Poe fucked up, not as a propaganda figurehead, which is always relative, but as a senior officer, which is dangerously absolute. He’s lucky that he’s only grounded. That the Republic’s High Command isn’t the First Order’s.

And all things considered riding down to the base is surprisingly enjoyable.

At first Finn was concerned that the people there would give him the cold shoulder. They’d resent him for abandoning them and leaving to Central, they’d be on Poe’s side, and not on his, because the Force knows at Central you can’t be both.

But it turns out that here at the base you can. Poe’s pilots smile to him, welcome him back, call him poster boy with a kind of benevolent irony. It’s not that his relationship with Poe is out in the open, but a lot of people seem to know, or guess, and it doesn’t make them less friendly.

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Finn and Poe take what they can. The quickies under Black One, now relegated to the gloom at the back of the hangar. The angry sex after one of Poe’s auditions. Longer morning sessions in Poe’s quarters after everyone else on duty has taken off, and Finn takes care to be extra-gentle then, because it’s when Poe feels at his most brittle.

//
Later things seem to go back to some measure of normal. Black One gets dragged out of the hangar and flies again at the point of the squadron. Finn likes it better, maybe, because while it’s the end of their mornings fucking Poe feels more whole – and he’s not back to week-long missions anyway.

“Yeah,” Poe says. “We’re mostly in-system these days, or at the farthest in the Expansion regions. The worst space cops that ever were, that’s us. I think we okayed a whole unregistered convoy of, what was it? Some kind of corn? But I’m sure there was spice hidden somewhere. I knew the Captain, she’s from Yavin.”

“Poe! Isn’t that some sort of crime? You’re Government forces, by the Stars!”

“Yeah, they ask a Starfighter squadron to do their dirty job, they gotta face the consequences, uh? We’re bad at it. I’ll go to my grave still proud to have been the most inept cop ever. But hey, what should we do? Board them? With X-Wings? We don’t even have tractor beams. Shoot them?”

“Maybe? Warning shots, non-deadly?”

“Tell you what, Finn. Since we’ve said we’d trust each other. What I’m sure was in that convoy beyond grain and maybe spice is refugees who were trying to enter the Republic-controlled territories. And I’m glad they managed it.”

“Director Statura says a lot of them aren’t war refugees, though. They’re attracted by the superior opportunities of our economy and the Republic can’t welcome all the destitute of the Galaxy. We’re at war.”

“But we still welcome their fuel and ore, uh. At very, very advantageous prices. Tell me, isn’t Statura the son of a Huttese slave?”

“He is! And he fought all the way to the top, never relied on anyone but himself, isn’t that impressive?”

“Say, Finn. I’ve changed my mind. I know I began this round but I’ll stop lecturing you on the imperialism of the Republic and you stop telling me about Statura, okay?”

“Truce?” Finn says, smiling, because it’s not the first time they went astray like that and they’re getting better at defusing.

Poe is drawing circles on Finn’s naked belly, playing with his bellybutton and looking enamoured of it. Or maybe of his abs. It tickles. Poe is also half-lying on his belly on the low bed, with one knee down on the floor, and is, slowly, very subtly, humping the mattress.

“Okay,” Finn says. “I stop, but only if you fuck me.”

“Oh. Feeling lazy?”

“Nah. Raw. Not my cock or my ass, I mean. My –”

“I know, baby. Your heart.”

And that’s the thing. Finn will never be as comfortable bottoming as Poe, who could do it all day. But Poe, as a top, really knows how to get Finn off and more importantly is at his most caring and adoring, and that’s what Finn needs right now.

Poe kisses him and it’s everything he needs, passionate and tender and it doesn’t make everything better but it makes things good, good enough for now.
“Poe?” Finn asks some time later. “When are you going to be free from the investigation?”

“Oh. But I already am, or I wouldn’t be cleared for flying. They gave me an official blame, for which I couldn’t care less since I don’t particularly plan to become anything higher than commander.”

“But you’re not back to the fighting missions?”

“That’s different. It’s a matter of waiting for the unofficial ill-will to abate. I think they’re going to cave in soon, because they need our squadrons at the front lines.”

“If you’re not under suspicion now, then why aren’t you coming to visit at Central?”

“And be seen together? No.”

Fuck but it hurts.

“Oh no, Finn, No! I’m sorry, I swear, I love that people know we’re together. I’m not ashamed of you, your politics don’t refrain me from being with you, and if anyone of my acquaintances suggests it they’re going to get a fist in their face. I’d go whisper that I love you in Statura’s ear if I thought it’d help. But I’m dangerous for you, don’t you understand?”

“How.”

“Ask your friends, uh. Finn. You can’t be seen with me. Not in your situation.”

“If you say so,” Finn says, but it mends nothing.

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“Take care of him,” Wexley tells Finn as he leaves.

“Of course.”

“I’m serious. Don’t hurt him.”

“Why are you saying that?” Finn asks, feeling bitter. “He’s just told me he’s the one who’s a danger to me.”

“And I’m saying you can hurt him.”

“If you say so,” Finn says, and wants to howl, suddenly dreams of some grand gesture where he’d hug Poe live on the holo and then they’d talk and agree to everything.

//

It’s Rannel who catches it on the news.

“Oh fucking hell, guys, look at that.” Rannel never swears. Everyone converges to the large holo in the briefing room. “Dammit, he’s spinning it back to himself. Why weren’t we in the loop? Just look at him.”

And, sure, Finn looks at him, larger than life on the largest possible holoprojection. Poe Dameron, in his real flightsuit, looking sweaty, unshaven and unwashed and swaying on his feet and damn happy.
He’s hugging Karé Kun, then Snap Wexley, then Kun again. A joint Resistance-Republic mission, then.

The camera zooms out and pans and it turns out the three pilots are flanked by Stormtroopers, helmetless Stormtroopers. Some are smiling a little while looking at Poe, but most look bewildered and all look exhausted. A group of four, huddled in a corner, aren’t mingling with the others. They carry different ammunitions on their belts, they wear a thin red line on one side of their breastplate and their skin is mauve.

The focus is on Poe again and someone must have asked a question because Poe’s got a mic under his nose and he’s looking straight at the camera.

“Tell Finn we need him here,” he says, a little breathlessly. “Force, I was beginning to doubt it’d ever work, we’ve been careful for so long, never shooting blindly, always offering them to surrender, and here they are walking towards us, never firing and throwing away their weapons, the whole platoon! Finn, you did it, you incredible man, you did it!”

“Fuck,” says one of Rannel’s collaborators. “And they’re not even planetside yet. That’s the moon station. Dunno what we can do.”

“Fuck what we can do!” shouts Finn. “Don’t you see? Stormtroopers have defected! Of their own free will! Stan, did you see that? I can’t believe it, a whole platoon!”

Stan falls into his arms. “Yeah, baby, you did it, it worked, it worked, by the Force! Come on, get a bag, we’ve got to find you a shuttle to fly up there!”

Finn runs to the door, following Stan.

“Yeah, it’s good publicity,” he has the time to hear Rannel say.

“Fuck publicity!” he shouts happily, slamming the door.

//

“FN-2187? Or, uh, Finn?” That’s the lieutenant. The lieutenant damn well defected with his troops.

“That’s Finn now,” Finn confirms, wanting so much to hug the guy, knowing of course that it’s the last thing to do. “But if you feel more at ease with my ID that’s okay too. You made them defect?”

“Oh no,” says the lieutenant, grinning. He hasn’t stopped grinning since Finn has begun watching him. The guy’s fucking happy. “They stole my blaster, told me they were going to defect and asked me what I was going to do about it. I said I wanted to come along. And then I had to listen to their chatter for the whole flight. Pastry recipes and openly falling in love. Ugh. They’re young.”

“But you still followed them.”

“I did. Eight– huh, Finn. What’s the next step? Are we going to be debriefed? Interrogated?”

“Interrogated – certainly not. Debriefed – hey Poe, do you think the higher ups will want them debriefed?”

Poe looks apologetic. “That’s unavoidable, I’m afraid. But Finn, you could convince the intel officers that what you can get from them here is enough, I think. Provided it’s properly recorded and all.” He walks up to the lieutenant and slaps him on the arm. The poor guy only jumps a bit, probably having been already somewhat Poe-desensitised. “And then you’re free. Real free.”
And so Finn spends his – what time is it, up here under the artificial lights of the station? He’s become so used to sunlight – probably his whole night, next morning and a sizeable part of his afternoon talking to ex-Stormtroopers.

“Where should we go?” They ask when they’re all done. We, because they need to be in groups, had a hard time with Finn’s gentle one-on-one questioning. “We trust you,” they say, and he thinks, of course, I’ve made sure you do and I work with a propaganda team, and then he feels bad because he’s genuinely, completely happy that they’re here. And is sure they made the right choice.

“The high command won’t impose you anything. I’ll make sure of it.” He hopes he can. “When – when I defected, I was offered passage to the Outer Rim free-standing sectors, away from the Resistance or the Republic as much as from the First Order.”

“But not from the Knights, now,” the lieutenant says. “Maybe not from the Knights anymore.”

“Yeah. Poe told me a little about that. Sounds scary. Well, you’ve got two other choices. Resistance, which is nominally under the Republic but largely an independent force, or any world of the Republic. Possibly even here at Akhios, which is the capital planet.”

“Commander Dameron told me the Resistance would be more welcoming of outsiders,” one of the Rriiv’kat says.

Finn thinks. “Ah, I. Yeah, I’m afraid that’s true. For non-humans at least.”

There’s something wounded in the Rriiv’kat eyes. “Here, too,” Finn hears one of them mumble.

“Now the Resistance,” Finn says, “it’s mainly a fighting force. Though they take care of their own in every possible way. I’m evidence for this, because they saved my life when I was wounded after my encounter with Kylo Ren.”

“What?” the same Rriiv’kat says. “You fought Kylo Ren?”

“He did,” says Poe who crept up behind them and puts his hands on Finn’s shoulders. “Sorry if I intrude, it’s more than time for you to get something to eat. All of you. Finn fought Kylo Ren with a lightsaber and lived to tell the tale.”

“You’re Force-sensitive?” the lieutenant asks with some awe and a bit of mistrust.

“No, of course not!” Finn exclaims at the same time as Poe says: “Well, maybe he is.”

“You’re mad, Poe,” Finn says with a grin, then turns back to the pack of Stormtroopers. “So, if you go to the Resistance, you’ll be among people who fight against the First Order.”

“Not necessarily fighting yourself, though,” Poe says.

“But still. The Republic is just a form of government over a fuckload of worlds. Yeah, okay, it’s got a lot of big words and big values to go with it, you should go ask Poe, that’s commander Dameron here, when he’s in the mood. But the thing is, there are a lot of possible lives you can have there. That you create for yourself. There are libraries and databanks and schools and you choose what to learn.”

“I think I’m still going to ask for a lift to the Outer Rim,” says the outspoken Rriiv’kat.

“You sure?” Poe asks, brows furrowed. “The lieutenant is right, the situation is very unstable.”
“Yes. I – before I got pressed into the troops, my kinj, I understand you’d call it my clan, was making plans for escaping to the Sanbra sector. I – held onto it through the conditioning. There’s a Rriiv’kateen diaspora there.”

“That’s the D’qar sector,” Poe says. “Not a bad idea, actually. We’ve made it pretty clear that we’re not there anymore and it’s far enough from the Western reaches to be mostly out of harm from the Knights. Best would probably be that I fly you there with the transport we used. No need to go down to Akhios. Are any others interested?”

He’s looking at the three other Rriiv’kat. After a while, one of them steps forward and salutes.

“Force,” Poe says, shaking his head. “At ease. We don’t go for such niceties around here.”

“We don’t have any remaining kinj-keej we can hope to find, Sir,” he says. “We’d like to go to the Resistance, if you please.”

“It’s not about what pleases me, uh.”

“I think I’d like to fight. The First Order. Sir.”

“Yeah, well, if I know Leia at all she’ll ask you to rest first, and probably to look around to see what you like before she puts a blaster in your hands again. But if you want to fight you will.”


“The Republic, yeah,” another Stormtrooper says. Most others add their voices and those who don’t appear ready to follow along.

“That’s great,” Finn says. “I guess we’ll have to set up something for you at Central, or, well, in some district of Drion if not precisely in the central one. And when you get used to life there I’m sure you’ll know where you want to move.”

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“Finn,” Poe says when they’re alone. “If you want to be sure the Stormtroopers are free to move around Akhios, not put into custody for their own good or the like, you’d better be very convincing in front of the media. So that the government can’t make a move first. Present them with a fait accompli.”

There’s an unsaid question here. Poe isn’t sure Finn will rebel enough for that.

“Tricky,” Finn says. “Will you stand with me in front of the camera?”

“What?”

“That’s what they’ll want to see. The ex-Stormtrooper who talked them out of the First Order and the daring Commander who brought them back. Poe, I didn’t realise that all this time you were looking for deserters. Thank you.”

“You did all the work. All they could talk about in the transport was you.” Poe twists, takes Finn’s head in his hands, plants a kiss on his lips and smiles even wider. “Force, you’re incredible.”

“You’ll talk to the media with me?”

“I’ll stand by you. If you’re sure you want it. You can do the talking, unless you need me to add something.”
The improvised press room on the main station dock is packed and the atmosphere is wild, not entirely nice. Stormtroopers have been the stuff of nightmares for so long on the Republic side. And Finn can see there’s also a zoo vibe, the thrill one gets when watching a dangerous animal, translated into nervous, shrill laughter each time the vid loop shows the young, bewildered faces and the still armoured bodies.

“They’re going to want one of them to show up,” Poe mumbles as they take a look from behind the dock gate. “I don’t want to force anybody, the crowd’s mad. The lieutenant, you think?”

“No,” Finn says, watching the crowd. “Don’t chose the apparent leader, just because he looks like one. He isn’t, and even if he were the media doesn’t need to think that what we have here is a bunch of mindless drones who followed orders once more.”

Poe doesn’t answer. When Finn turns his head he sees Poe watching him with eyebrows up to his hairline and a slowly widening grin.

“I’ll go ask for volunteers,” Finn says.

In the end, one of the Resistance-bound Rriiv’kat and a dark-skinned Human that the others call Triple agree to show up.

“It’s going to be alright,” Finn tells them. “There’s going to be a lot of noise, they might yell, they’ll shout questions. You don’t have to speak if you don’t want to.”

They don’t seem to measure what’s up, at least don’t show anything on the outside.

“It’s strange not to have a helmet when facing a crowd,” is the most he gets out of them, from Triple. As for himself Finn feels the sweat run along his spine and begins to hear the swoosh swoosh of his pulse, so strong, too fast.

He feels the end of Poe’s fingertips just touching his lower back. “You’re a pro,” Poe says. “You can do it.”

Finn passes his hand – moist, it’s so moist, fuck – behind his back and squeezes Poe’s fingers.

They step in.

The crowd hushes. Then the first rows notice the Rriiv’kat’s skin colour and begin to chatter excitedly. It builds up for a while and then someone openly yells: “Rriiv!” and everyone follows. “A Rriiv’kat!” “Are you a Rriiv’kat?” Someone stands up, then another, and another, and like a wave, from the front to the back, the whole dock rises.

“Welcome!” a journalist shouts, and he begins to clap, soon followed by many others.

“Oh thank fuck,” Poe whispers from behind Finn. “They’re not afraid. They’re with us.” Finn hears him exhale, long, controlled. He tries to do the same.

“Any of you guys want to talk?” Poe asks the Stormtroopers.

“I can try,” the Rriiv’kat says.

They step forward into the mic field. “I am a Rriiv’kat,” they say. “My name is Lrool. I remember it because I – because I was conditioned as an adult, so it was imperfect.” They shiver. “Violent but imperfect. Many of us went mad. Others died. Those who remain want out. All of us. Commander Dameron told us we four were the first who did.”
Rannel will be mad, Finn thinks. Here comes the Rriiv situation that he hopes to have completely buried under the rug, and Poe is standing in the middle. He’ll be mad. Finn couldn’t care less.

The Human Stormtrooper breathes in and steps forward.

“I don’t know my name,” he says, “because I was taken as a young child, and my conditioning took everything away. They call me Triple, because of the three threes in my ID. Once I saw a civilian, he was shaping parts for a speeder, with his hands on a machine. It was beautiful. I thought that I’d have loved doing that instead. I don’t know if he survived. We burned everything. Then I heard Finn, who is – who is one of us. He said there was a place where I could become what I wanted.”

Triple gulps, stops, looks at the crowd and blinks several times, breathing hard. “Finn,” he says, looking on the edge of bolting. “I don’t know what to say now.”

“It’s all right,” Finn says, watching his own panic echoed in Triple’s eyes. He makes himself sound sure. Soothing. “You don’t have to say anything. They understand.”

The crowd hums and whispers and moves like waves and Finn isn’t sure they really understand. He hopes they didn’t focus on the we burned everything line.

“Friends,” he tells the crowd. Behind, hidden from all eyes, there’s Poe’s hand on his back. “Thank you for being here to share this. Triple and Lrool volunteered to meet you, but we all can imagine how bewildering it must feel. Man, when I defected, I met people one by one and it already felt mad. Please don’t follow them as they leave, give them some room to move, thank you. I’m going to stay here with Commander Poe Dameron to answer your questions.”

At first they’re just asked the bare facts, the number of defectors, their species, the circumstances of their defection. Finn gets in the mood, feels lighter, better, catches the rhythm of the crowd. This is going to work, he tells himself.

“No offense,” a journalist says, “but you’re trying to tell us that there’s been this program addressed to Stormtroopers for nearly one year, and that it’s you, Finn, who led it? Who did it all by yourself? While you were, I’m sorry, while you were, everyone can agree I think, looking pretty on holo repeating other people’s words?”

“You fucker,” Poe articulates, well out of the mic range. Finn extends a hand behind him in the vicinity of Poe’s chest to prevent him from intervening.

“A wise man can act a fool, Mister, but a fool cannot act a wise man.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” Poe whispers, chuckling.

Behind his back, Finn gives a thumb up. He does like to repeat good lines.

“It was all me,” he continues. “Completely, totally me. Do you believe I needed someone else to write me big words to call them here? Do you think I could trust anyone else to understand Stormtroopers? Or to know how to reach them? I wanted to do this. This program is what convinced me to become, huh, a public figure in the first place.”

Finn hears Poe step forward, feels him standing close, closer than necessary, their shoulders nearly brushing, so close he fancies he can feel the radiating heat of Poe’s body.

“He set up this program,” Poe says. “It wasn’t offered to him. That’s his baby. Many pilots know about it, you can catch it sometimes when you fly close enough to the Unknown Regions. Stories about the Republic, what he loves, how it links to his past, how other Stormtroopers would see it.
Things from his imagination too, dreams, hope, bedtime stories, things you could imagine being whispered between bunks after the lights went off.” He chuckles. “Force knows I wasn’t the intended recipient, but if I hadn’t already been serving the Republic I’d have deserted to follow this guy.”

There are answering chuckles in the crowd. The back of Poe’s hand brushes Finn’s.

“Yeah,” Finn says. “That was my dream. I dreamed, I hoped that I wasn’t an anomaly. I told myself that there had to be people like me in those armours, standing under the artificial lights, there in a Starship, and dreaming of the sun, you know? Guys who were wondering about elsewhere, who didn’t want to be a cog in a war machine. Only they were like I’d been, too afraid and too lonely to act. Not everyone gets a Poe erupting in their life.”

Finn is quite sure the corner of Poe’s mouth twitches. What did he say? Oh, damn. He’s going to hear about this erupting and soon.

“So he set up things so that they’d have a Finn in their life instead,” Poe says. “Which is probably nicer.”

“With the help of the Republic.” Finn says. “The Republic’s highest officials, from the beginning, supported and encouraged me. That’s what helped me speak on in that mic, ’cause well, you see, for one year I have been wondering if I was a fool. And the Stormtroopers I was trying to speak to didn’t get holo, just sound, most of the time. They couldn’t see how pretty I am.”

Renewed chuckles in the crowd. Good. Also, Poe’s grin is showing quite a lot of teeth.

“There were times when it was other people who made me go on. People like Director Statura, can you believe it? One of the three most important people in the Republic and he comes to visit me and tells me what a good job I’m doing. This is why I knew, this is why I could tell these people that defected to us that the Republic would welcome them like it welcomed me. I knew I could tell them, because Director Statura tells me all the time that the Republic demonstrates what free choice is and would offer them all the opportunities they never had before.”

Someone raises their hand.

“So they’re going to settle in the Republic worlds?” they ask.

“One of them has requested safe passage to the Outer Rim. Three others, the remaining Rriiv’kat, want to fight alongside us against the First Order. The others want, well, they said they want the same as me. Which, I guess which they know means the Republic, because I’ve been harping on and on about how great it is. Our duty is now to educate them in everything the Republic can become for them.”

“What does it mean for the First Order?” someone else asks.

“Well, for now we’re only up to twenty-seven people, but it’s going to be more,” Finn says. “They’re going to fear their own troops. And unless they radically change their ways of treating them, they’re going to lose a lot of them.”

It’s bravado, Finn thinks. Who knows if more are going to defect? But they wanted to hear it, and they like it.

“A question for Commander Dameron!”

“Yes?” Poe says.
“For some time, the media narrative appears to have been that there is some, let’s say tension, competition, maybe, between you and Finn. And it’s quite obvious that you’re standing on opposite sides of the political scene.”

“– I’m sorry but I’m certainly not learned enough to stand very firmly on any side of the political anything,” Finn interjects.

Poe elbows him in the ribs.

“Hey, buddy, that was my question!”

“Okay.” Finn says, grinning. “It’s just that everyone here should know I’m helpless with politics. A good thing it’s your question, Poe.”

“Go ahead,” Poe tells the news guy.

“So, we thought you were nearly political enemies, well, rivals, alright, Finn, and now you’re telling us you’ve been working together from the start, looking for Stormtrooper defectors. And, uh, the present interview certainly makes it look like you’re very close.”

“Finn saved my life,” Poe says. “The first thing that he did when we met was saving my life. It makes you close. And I saw him defect. I helped. If he thought others could do it too, I had to help.”

“Is it all there is to it?” asks one of the guys who’ve been asking personal questions to Finn recently.

“No,” Poe says, putting his hand on Finn’s biceps. Finally, Finn thinks, realising how much he’s been craving Poe’s touch. The tips of Poe’s fingers press subtly, then release. “Whatever the nuances of our political stances, Finn has, always had, always will have my entire admiration, respect,” – his nostrils flutter as he breathes in, “and devotion.”

The crowd begins to chatter, louder and louder. Someone cheers.

“Devotion?” yells another. “Isn’t that word a bit strong?”

“I think it’s one you’ll get used to associate to Finn in the years to come.”

Finn snorts and can’t help the laughter bubbling out of him.

“He’s tired,” Poe says. “That’s why he’s laughing. Because I’m entirely serious.”


“In all seriousness,” Poe says, “Finn is tired. He spent the last thirty-six hours debriefing the Stormtroopers. Maybe we could stop this here, guys?”

There are a few protests, a few more minor questions, and polite thanks all around, but the dock finally empties.

“It’s the first time I cheered inside when you talked of Statura,” Poe says, which makes Finn groan a little. “That, was, masterful, Finn. Masterful. You’ve completely tied the Government into welcoming the defectors in. Masterful!”

Finn is feeling dizzy. He’s just standing there in the deserted dock, his shoulder frankly propped
against Poe’s now.

“And they didn’t even ask once about the safety of letting them in, by the Force. That question about our relationship at the end, it was the best timing ever. Made them forget about the rest.”

“Yeah, and there’s gonna be gossip now,” Finn says, hearing his own voice from very far away.

“Do you mind?” Poe asks.

“I thought you were the one who minded.”

“I still think you’ll make enemies, associating with me. But it was great, standing side by side with you today.”

Poe shifts to extend his arm across Finn’s shoulders and exclaims.

“Fuck, you’re freezing! And shivering. And you’re sweating buckets, too. Finn, are you alright? Is it always like that when you talk in public? Come, sit down.”

Poe guides Finn down, helps him sit, pushes his head gently forward until his forehead rests on his knees. Then he settles behind Finn, his legs and arms encasing him.

“It’s not always like that,” Finn says, teeth chattering. “But, shit, never had such high stakes in a public meeting before.”

There’s the steady up and down of Poe’s chest behind him, Poe’s breath over his right ear, the flutter of Poe’s heartbeat against Finn’s back.

“It’s not panic,” Finn says. “I don’t think so. I’m not afraid. Panic slipped off sometime after Triple finished talking. It’s the aftershock. The realising. I – I don’t even know how I should feel.”

“It went well. I promise you it went very well. I feel relieved, and I think you should feel proud. Finn, what can I do to help?”

“Is there a room where we could be together, just the two of us? A small room?”

“Yeah, in the transport.”

“Then I want to go there with you, and I want you to fuck me.”

Poe snorts and kisses Finn’s head. “Gladly, but wouldn’t you rather sleep? We can stay together. I can spoon you.”

“I’ll never sleep, Poe. I want you to fuck me.”

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“Raise your ass,” Poe says, pulling Finn’s underwear off. “There. And now let me help you lie back. You warm enough?”

“Mmmh.” Finn hopes he sounds assenting but can’t bring himself to say more. They’re in the captain’s quarters, which are cramped but well insulated and with a real bed, and Poe cranked up the heating on high. Finn’s warm, but he’s still tingling and shaky inside, and he needs, needs, wants –

Poe is kneeling beside him, equally naked, stroking himself slowly to hardness. He’s got his other hand on Finn’s forehead, brushing along his hairline, smoothing his skin.
“I’m not fucking you right now,” he says. “Never seen you like that. Every bit of you is tense. Even your toes.”

Finn cranks up his head to try to look down, curves his feet up. How do you relax your toes? His shin seizes a little.

“Let me,” Poe says

“Tickles.”

“Wait.” The touch of Poe’s fingers deepens on the sole of Finn’s feet, and Poe is also moving Finn’s feet, rotating lightly, folding them, pushing the toes up. Stroking his shins, deep enough to reach the muscle, light enough not to cause pain. Then he’s just arranging Finn on the bedsheets, handling his limbs, bending the knees, pulling his arms up, making him feel how heavy they are, how limp.

There’s a rustle of sheets and Poe lies down alongside him, running the heel of his hand up Finn’s torso, pushing strong against his pec, curving and caressing around the neck, pulling himself towards Finn’s mouth for an open, slow kiss. He’s stroking Finn’s shins again, then his bent knees, pushing them higher, open, exposing Finn’s hole and his half-hard cock.

“That’s touch you need,” Poe says, pressing his body against Finn and a hand, firmly, on the muscles of his chest, then along his ribs and on his abs. Then Finn is in Poe’s arms, half-turned so that Poe can reach and massage his back, long, slow touches, a firm kneading of his skin, up and down and up again, mesmerising, until Finn finds himself on his back again with Poe adding a wet, hard mouth to his hands on Finn’s skin, kissing and licking one shoulder, the hollow of his neck, a nipple, an armpit, the length of his arm.

“Yeah,” Finn manages. “Touch. Touch me. Then fuck me, I need –”

“Yeah, baby,” Poe says against his skin. “All you need. All you want. I’m here. For you.”

Poe opens Finn’s legs wider and settles in between. He bends to mouth Finn’s balls and lick up the length of his cock, goes on to kiss the coarse, wiry hair of his lower belly, trails his face upwards, stubbled cheek rough along Finn’s skin, mouth wet and soft to soothe the burn. His abdomen presses on Finn’s cock, sliding and scraping, making Finn’s cock fill in further. Hands hook behind Finn’s shoulders, pull down and press against the muscles of his arms, travel back up.

“I need –” Finn says.

He can’t see Poe’s face, only the top of his head, his too-long curls, blacker than Finn’s skin, softer than silk, tumbling on Finn’s chest. Finn raises a hand, so heavy, buries it in Poe’s hair, scratches the scalp a little and pulls – Poe gasps, as always – then tries to push down.

It’s a weak attempt but Poe follows the push, stubble scratching as his mouth trails back down, a kiss on Finn’s navel, another on his cockhead, a hungry mouth along his cock, down sucking his balls, a tongue lapping at his hole.

“Poe, Poe! I want –”

“Yeah,” Poe exhaled, his breath cool on the wet sensitive skin of Finn’s hole. “Wait.”

Finn’s hand goes limp in Poe’s hair as Poe resumes his work at Finn’s entrance, unhurriedly, sometimes stopping to mouth his balls or cock, then coming back to circle the rim or dip the tip of his tongue in. His hands are still roaming on Finn’s body, stroking, pinching, scraping, pressing down, anchoring Finn in the moment, in this place, pulling him back into his own skin.
At some time – Finn doesn’t know when, he’s just waiting now, lying there, his cock swollen so
crude, strands of Poe’s hair entwined in his fingers, touches everywhere on his skin – at some time,
Poe’s slicked fingers replace his mouth, breaching him, caressing him inside and out. Finn’s hole
clenches and clenches again and Poe takes his time, so much time, to relax him. His fingers curl and
stroke inside, attentive to every shiver of Finn’s skin, every moan, every reflexive jerk of his hips,
slide in and out, scissor until Finn feels loose and open and yearning, and then even beyond, floating
around the rhythmic strokes of Poe’s hand inside him.

Poe bends down to kiss him again. “Now you’re ready,” he says. It’s not a question. His voice is
low, soft, soothing. Caring. And underneath Finn can hear the breathlessness, the need, the
adoration. “All open. So good. You’re so good, Finn! So beautiful.”

Finn still feels like he’s floating when he feels Poe sheathing himself inside him. He doesn’t have to
move, just has to be, no purpose, no past, just the feeling of his own cock, achingly good, curving up
on his belly untouched, just Poe, bending as close as he can, so much skin to touch. And finally he
doesn’t feel empty anymore, Poe’s cock filling him so good, with no place to spare, so thick, and it’s
not-painful and overwhelming, like he can’t stop breathing in and can’t exhale, but it’s okay because
it’s Poe.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Poe says, “You’re good, took me all in, gonna fuck you now – ah, Finnn –
Force – gonna fuck you deep and slow, you’ll feel it all –”

And Poe is going to do it, Finn knows, that deep slide in and out of his ass, that slow, invariant,
sustained rhythm, making him even more aroused, wanting, yearning, teetering on the edge. In other
instances Finn has begged; in yet others he took things into his own hands, touching himself,
buckling his hips, fucking himself on Poe’s cock; on more than a few occurrences he’s managed to
make Poe’s control break, made him pound wildly and shout and come first.

But this time Finn needs Poe’s hand around his butt, guiding him, holding him, needs the
maddening, repeated stroke of Poe’s cock on his prostate, needs his hole filled and burning, needs to
be slowly taken apart,. And so he lets Poe fuck him, and lets Poe know how much he loves it,
beyond coherent speech but not beyond half-words, moans, gasps and sighs, his back arching
uncontrollably as Poe spears him.

“So good,” Poe says. “So beautiful.”

Poe is grunting and his breathing is rough, his nails digging into Finn’s sides, his thighs trembling,
but he keeps his pace steady, burying himself to the balls with each thrust. A moan breaches through,
high pitched and breathy, and another, and another, and in time with the movement of his hips. His hands
begin to clench rhythmically, uncontrolled, burying into Finn’s back muscles.

“Wanna come now?” Poe asks, voice faltering.

“Fuck,” Finn croaks, “fuck yeah.”

“Oh Force – oh, Finn –” Poe whines, before bending down to kiss and bite Finn’s nipple, and then
to take his mouth. He lodges his hand between their bodies, working Finn’s cock, and his pace
switches at once to frantic, his pounding ever so deep into Finn’s body, his moans turned into some
incoherent shouting. It breaks some kind of spell, releasing Finn from his trance, and now Finn feels
he can move, pushing his ass up, his arms and hands going everywhere over Poe’s shoulders, on his
back, his head, his butt, his face.

When Finn comes it’s silently, his whole body convulsing and then freezing still. Poe rears at that as
if he’d taken a blow, face painted in a pleasure that’s so acute it looks painful. The noise he makes is
short and gasping, an exclamation of wonder delight pleasure, and then he shoots inside Finn.

“Finn.” Poe says, so tenderly, as he collapses down on him.

Finn feels drunk on lovemaking, limp, panting, spent. His eyes sting and then they’re wet.

Poe’s face is so close to Finn’s and his expression is raw. “I –” he begins to say, then looks lost, mouth open, wordless. He blinks, shakes his head and passes the heel of his hand over Finn’s eyes, lightly.

Afterwards Finn doesn’t sleep for what seems like hours. But his lover is beside him, and he can feel his heartbeat under his fingertips, and he’s still sort of floating, and they’ve done good together.

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“I wouldn’t have done it that way,” Rannel says, looking like he’s just bitten into something sour, “but –”

“He was sort of jumping up and down while you were talking,” Stan says. “Keeping notes on all the things we’d have to twist right again.”

“But you have, you have something. I don’t know what, I don’t know how you do it.” Rannel continues. “People love you. They believe you. Minutes after the end of your interview, the polls showed a tremendous rise in popularity for the government and especially Director Statura.”

“That’s great!” Finn says and he really thinks it. Director Statura will be proud of him, and he’s surprised to discover how much it matters, especially for something that’s so important.

“Well,” Rannel says, patting his shoulder. “I hadn’t realised how popular you had made the Rriiv’kat, and you used it very well given the circumstances. And by the stars, you’ve succeeded in pushing Dameron out of the spotlight. I couldn’t believe the way you took centre stage!”

“I didn’t –” Finn begins.

“Oh but yes you did, and masterfully! And bringing the Republic and Statura in the focus of the media in the process. You still need some refining, Finn, but we’ll make someone out of you, I’m sure of it!”

“Thank you,” Finn says, but Rannel’s compliments feel forced when he remembers Poe’s unbridled enthusiasm.

Poe, he realises. Rannel didn’t address Poe’s behaviour towards Finn. Didn’t say anything about his declaration of, what was it, devotion? At all. And the man is too shrewd not to have noticed their closeness. Well, Finn thinks. He probably thinks it’s unimportant, or unreturned.

“And there are what, thirty Stormies on this planet now?” Rannel asks.

“Twenty-three. They were twenty-seven total, but the four Rriiv’kat chose either the Resistance base or a place of their own in the Outer Rim.”

“Oh? All the Rriiv’kat?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, well. Can’t be changed now. Twenty-three, uh. Not too many, thank the gods. Easy to contain. Not likely to go murder our wives and daughters in their beds, eh?”
“Uh, what?”

“Come on, Finn. These guys learned to be killers at the same time they learned to walk. You can’t tell me they can shed it like that, just by smiling to Dameron and throwing away their weapons. And the First Order is festering with that Dark Side shit. What if they’d gotten some Sith thing with them?”

“I’m an ex-Stormtrooper too, Rannel. Is that what you think of me?”

“Oh, no, of course not, Finn! You’re different! I know you!”

“I’m sure you do,” Finn says.
What would it change, now, to keep his relationship with Finn secret? So, Poe goes to Central again. So, Poe visits Finn openly. So, the most sordid kind of holonews have begun to ponder the nature of their relationship.

One shady outlet even dug out a still and slapped on some syrupy caption about true love before releasing it. Poe is sure all the news guys were in front, but the holo is there, probably taken by some station tech. Finn watching Triple talk, looking half proud, half worried and entirely lovely, and Poe behind him, watching Finn with an expression Poe isn’t sure he wants to think about, his hand raised and resting lightly on Finn’s lower back.

Poe is more certain than ever that he’s bringing disaster into Finn’s life. Finn will fall in love and then Poe will leave him to die somewhere in the void, all alone in an X-Wing cockpit, like all ace pilots end sooner or later. Or, even sooner, Poe will rebel, disobey once too many, will finally get to know exactly how rotten and dangerous the PSR really is, and will drag Finn down into disgrace. The fall, for someone whose Stormtrooper past scares so many, will be deadly.

But then Poe tells himself it’s the darkness that Kylo Ren left in his mind speaking. That it made him jaded, cynical, paranoid, scared. That it’s Finn’s optimistic take on life that is the truth.

That he’ll break Finn, someday, but that right now what he sees is Finn’s happiness, Finn’s bubbly joy at being openly with him, and he can’t have enough of it. That he’s too weak to leave, because he can’t bring himself to destroy this.

And then he wakes up in Finn’s bed because they forgot to close the curtains last night and the sunshine hits him square in the eye, and Finn is already up.

“Here’s for you,” Finn says, and feeds him a bite of something that’s crumbly, not too sweet, tangy with the taste of berries just unripe enough.

“Mmh, good,” he says, sitting up in bed and opening his mouth for more.

“Like it?”

“Tell you when I get more.”

Finn groans, smiles and gives him another bite. “Aw, shut up, I know you like them. I cut half the sugar from the original recipe and added Rognacian spice.”

“You made these? Wow. So you really do something else than looking pretty on the holo – mmmph _-_”

The next bite comes with two of Finn’s fingers in his mouth, which he sucks dutifully.

“Mmmh,” Finn says. “Wanna suck something else?”

Of course he wants, and he does, and then it dawns on him that somehow he is happy too, and in love.

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But it’s still love in a time of war and it’s not easy.
Poe’s rotations are piling onto each other, his resting off-times few and far between. The High Command seems to delight in affecting his squadrons to border patrol and it’s not a coincidence.

If the border is a bit more porous to refugees, and if some Starfighters use a very elastic definition of where exactly the border is, taking the opportunity for a few Organa-planned recon missions to the other side, well. It’s exactly what Poe wants and by now all his pilots are trustworthy.

Sometimes they meet opposition, in skirmishes, even in real battles. It’s always the First Order pushing in, when the Republic would have the superior strength to push out – but for how long? And so Poe and the others are left watching their comrades die, for nothing.

When he comes back to Finn they’re both too high-strung and angry, unable to really talk for a few days. So they fuck. Finn’s kisses are possessive and rough, and his hands on Poe’s body take and don’t give back. They grip his throat when they face each other, they pin his hands behind his back when he lies face down. It’s an arm across his neck to make him twist and to take his mouth, it’s teeth sinking into his shoulder, a dick entering him as he’s not quite ready, it’s Finn pulling out of his mouth to come all over his face. Fuck, it shouldn’t be, but it’s a turn-on, and Poe lets him, because he deserves this. There’s so much he doesn’t tell Finn, so little he does for him.

“It’s been sixteen days,” Finn says when he can talk about it. “Where were you?”

“Border patrol.”

“Border patrols don’t last for sixteen days.”

“They stacked three upon each other, just for us.”

“And nothing more?”

“Finn, fuck, if I could tell you I would!”

“And you can’t, uh.”

“No.”

“Hell, Poe!”

“It’s irregular, Finn! Not in my orders! If I’m caught I get more than a blame. I can’t tell you! Not in the position you are!”

There’s anguish in Finn’s eyes, and still some banked-up rage.

“Tell me, Poe. And let me come with you. I’m sure there are things I can do. What I’m doing here, its – it’s, shit, I’m going to burst from living in that fucking cage, smiling for the camera and coming home to no one at all or to you looking so, so beaten down!”

Poe would love for Finn to go back to the Resistance. He’d give anything for them to find again the easy comradeship they had in the beginning – for, what, a couple of minutes between the escape from the Finalizer and the crash? For some stolen time during Finn’s recovery? For the post Stormtrooper rescue interview, certainly.

“You feel like that,” Poe says. “But you’re doing better and more than all of us, getting Stormtroopers out. Our cage is larger but it’s still a fucking cage. And meanwhile the First Order and the Knights are getting stronger.”
“What’s the matter?” Poe asks, on one of the rare days when they’re both home.

“Triple and the others, dammit. They party, drink too much, break things, fuck people they shouldn’t fuck, answer slurs with worse slurs, get themselves thrown out of lodgings. And the lieutenant is the worst. Shit, I understand freedom is hard, but I wasn’t like that!”

“There was Starkiller, not much time to go partying. And Rey. People to cling to. And then you were out of it for a while. And you’re – not to say that the others don’t deserve our help and our respect, but, but you’re amazingly resilient. Rey told me you were hugging her, holding her hand, asking personal questions, everything, the day you met, and I – am I wrong to think that the others are still very uncomfortable doing that?”

“Yeah. I don’t quite know why, but yeah.”

Poe bends to kiss him, slow and sweet and maybe a little heated. “Because you’re incredible, that’s why.”

Finn’s lips are plump and firm against Poe’s. His cheeks are perfectly smooth, much more so than Poe’s already raspy ones, the First Order’s meticulous grooming habits a part of the conditioning that Finn never shook away. When all is finished, the both of them torn apart for ever, Poe will miss this, Finn’s morning rituals, the touch of his lips, the softness of his cheeks. Miss it more than his own soul.

“You okay, Poe?”

“Sure.”

“You looked very far away for a while. As I was saying, even Triple! I thought he was the easy one, had some kind of plan, wanted to become a metal turner. But now he says he doesn’t have to go to work every morning at six if he doesn’t want to, and that his master is too hard on him. It’s the third time I had to come to his help and he’s gonna get fired anyway.”

“And is his master? Too hard on him?”

“Wanna know? I think he is. They’re not helping, your Republic citizens. Triple’s boss, he’s acting like Triple is some kind of working machine, saying that he’s been conditioned to obey and work and should remember how to. And he’s not the worst, some other potential employers refused to consider take Stormtroopers in. They’re afraid of the Dark Side, they said. Fuck them.”

“Maybe we could try to scatter them? Or even displace them all on a planet where they’d be less conspicuous and the temptations less strong?”

“Impossible. Security dictates that they stay here.”

“Security? Whose? Who says that?”

“Some government agency or other, they say they can’t guarantee the Stormtroopers’ security elsewhere.”

“I see.”

“Poe, they’re even having trouble finding lodgings! Nobody will rent them anything, and they have a hard time coming up with the credits anyway. Shouldn’t the Republic do something for that?”
“Don’t ask me.”

“Poe, stop that. You did tell me the state provides for those who can’t.”

“Yeah, might have said something like that. But the politics of the PSR, now…”

“Oh, politics! Fuck politics. I’m gonna ask Director Statura. He’s a great man, Poe! He’ll help.”

“Oh?”

“He’s the one who made sure everything was settled for me here, you know. He found me the apartment, helped with my citizen registration and made sure I was paid.”

“I’m sure he did. Hey, Finn, since you’re so close to him, could you try to talk to him about something?”

“Depends, what?”

“I – the Force knows I tried to see him about it, but – I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t want to be reminded of his Resistance past or it’s just that it isn’t good publicity for him to associate with me. But dammit, someone in that government needs to hear it before the menace crosses our sacrosanct borders. There are Knights, Finn.”

“What, in Republic territories?”

“No, further outwards.”

“And that’s new? How?”

“They’re not where we expect them to be, that’s the problem. One here, the other there, not many, but Rey and Skywalker are having a hard time. The Knights are creating their little rotting, foul kingdoms in places they shouldn’t be able to reach. They’re passing our defences, Finn, through, around, I don’t know. I don’t know how they do it.”

“Our defences? I thought it was outside the borders?”

“Yeah, the Resistance’s, then. But do you think the Republic’s are that much better?”

“Okay. I’ll tell him. Is Rey alright?”

“They’re – she’s. Fuck, she’s trying to be everywhere at once. She’s tired. But she’s okay. Unharmed, as far as I can say.”

Poe doesn’t even know if he wants Finn to realise how dire the situation really is. They’re in this small bubble of peace, here at the centre of the Galaxy, and Finn’s got a right to experience it, dammit, to learn what carefree means.

“Meanwhile,” Poe says, hoping to catch some feeling of normalcy again, “maybe we can set up something for your guys, here at the base. Some place where they could work at their own pace. And maybe a military base would be less of a cultural shock for them?”

“Poe, they’re civilians now. And it’s not as the military forces can babysit twenty-three lost Stormtroopers.”

“That wouldn’t be charity, that’s my point. See, there are all these crumbling old Starfighters, things older than myself, T-60, B-wings and the like, rotting in hangars. We, I mean the Navy, won’t do
“anything with them. But we don’t do anything currently anyway, certainly nothing useful for the war. And believe me we should.”

“The Twenty-Three don’t want to fight, Poe.”

“I know. But maybe others, somewhere else, will, and they’ll need ships.”

“The Resistance?”

“Eventually. If we, I mean they can find more pilots. But really, anyone who wants to fights. Worlds like Rriiv, I mean, threatened like Rriiv was. We gotta prepare them, Finn, we have to. And that’s something you could tell Statura about, too. The Republic shouldn’t abandon its Outer Rim allies, and I even think it has a duty to protect the independent worlds if they’re attacked by the First Order. Ah. Well. So Triple and the others could work at our clunkers, at their own rhythm, make them spaceworthy again. They’d learn all kinds of skills.”

“Who’d pay them? Not the Republic, is what you imply. And they wouldn’t let the Resistance do it, it would make them look bad.”

“See? Politics aren’t so hard. But there are ways. We could set up some kind of tech school. The Resistance would donate, but it can be made obscure enough. I mean, I’m not great with the administrative side of things, but I know a few people who can help.”

“We can try, at least. Poe, I wonder if some of them aren’t beyond that kind of help. The lieutenant, I think he gave a few orders too many. His fascination with other species, like Sullustans, a few others, is, dunno how to say it, a little extreme. Dangerous.”

“Yeah. Well maybe that school would be the place where we can adapt to whatever their triggers are, huh. Oh, and say, Finn, would you like me to fly you to the Resistance base? To meet the Rriiv’kat?”

If Poe had hoped to cheer Finn up, he’s failed. Finn’s expression closes and his shoulders slump.

“Where is the base now?” Finn asks.

“It’s – ah – classified. Not in the Republic space anymore. With all the restrictions, the border had become too much of a hassle to cross. Too many ships waiting, a shitload of forms to provide – anyway. I can fly you, no problem.”

“Didn’t you once tell me that the cost of flying that far is prohibitive?”

“Oh, come on, Finn. The Republic can pay. A hero of the Republic meets the Rriiv’kat he rescued from the enemy. Nice story, that. The opinion loves the Rriiv’kat, thanks to you.”

“No,” Finn says. “I’m supporting a path of Stormtrooper redemption through the Republic. In fact, I’m embodying it.”

“Uh. Are these your own words?”

“Oh, fuck you! No, if you wanna know they aren’t, they’re Director Statura’s but I think he’s right! It’s the Republic that gives us the freedom to become who we really want to be. And whatever the opinion thinks, the Rriiv’kat have chosen differently. I can’t be seen with them.”

Poe should challenge this. Even a month ago, he’d have. Right now he still wants to, a little, wants to remind Finn all that he owes to the Resistance. And how he contradicts himself, how he was
supportive of the Rriiv’kat decision when he laid the choices down for them.

But he won’t. Finn has enough on his plate as it is and they don’t need another fight, one that Poe would lose. There’s Statura again, and that makes Poe cringe inside, but what can he do? Finn has been at Central long enough to understand a lot about families, and to grieve for everything the First Order stole from him. Statura isn’t the worse parental figure he could have found, and Poe certainly can’t give him that, a father, not when he hasn’t seen his own in person in years, not when he isn’t even sure whether Kes would see the man in Finn or only the Stormtrooper.

“Okay,” Poe says. “Sorry to have brought this up.”

But Finn’s mouth is twisting, his eyebrows furrowed, the line of his forehead creased again. It’s guilt, Poe realises.

“How are they?” Finn asks finally.

“It’s hard for them, too. Well, Llrool is doing okay. They’re a lot like you, very resilient. Laugh often, speak of their past but don’t appear weighed down by it. They’ll be a Starfighter gunner soon.”

Finn doesn’t hide the flinch well enough. “With you?” he asks.

“Oh no. You know I prefer flying solo, well, with BB-8 of course. And I’m fighting for the Republic these days.”


“The others two are – fuck, I don’t want to say broken, but Force dammit it’s hard. Jrowt is forbidden to fight, because they’re going berserk even in training. And the last one, they’re just working their hardest at patching up their own memory back to a functioning level. They don’t even remember their name.”

“Fuck,” Finn says. “At least we regular Stormtroopers had some kind of frame, rules. I don’t know, normalcy. I can’t even begin to imagine how the Rriiv’kat must have felt, being conditioned as adults. They used to say it made people mad.” He’s looking wary as he raises his gaze up to Poe. “Maybe it’s closer to what they did to you. You still have nightmares, after all this time.”

“Oh Force no,” Poe says, feeling ill. “What – what they did to me, I mean they didn’t even try to condition me, only wanted intel, and it lasted less than one day. The Rriiv’kat had what, weeks of that? But yeah. Yeah, I see what you mean. I guess I can begin, only begin to imagine, and Force, what these guys went through. Force.”

“Ah,” Finn says, wrapping his arms around Poe. “We’ll do the best we can.”

Poe digs his face into Finn’s neck and clings to him. He wants so much to tell him that he loves him. But he can’t, not when it means he’ll break Finn’s heart even more completely when this ends.

“Kiss me,” he says instead, but it’s not the same.

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Poe is on call at the base and misses Finn like crazy. Still, it’s not a common occurrence for him to keep the holo on at this hour, at what is now Finn’s hour. It drove him mad too often before.

Maybe it’s the fact that Stan is the interviewer, a rare occurrence these days and a refreshing one, that
makes Poe watch on.

There’s been some kind of trouble and the Stormtrooper lieutenant is in jail. Nothing major, at least for a sane mind, but that’s what Finn and Stan are talking about. Damage control.

“I am a Stormtrooper too,” Finn is saying.

“You’re an ex-Stormtrooper, I think we can safely say,” Stan says, chuckling.

But Finn doesn’t smile.

“It’s a part of who I am. Twenty years of my life, Stan. I’ll always be a Stormtrooper.”

“But you – you’ve shed that completely! We all know your story. Without you, Starkiller would still destroy worlds! You, you refused to kill for them! You made a choice!”

Now Finn is smiling. “Yeah, and that’s why –” oh, that smile is blinding – “that’s why I’m gonna shock you and say that I’m proud to be a Stormtrooper. Proud!”

“You’re shocking the audience,” Stan says, echoing Finn’s smile. “And now pray tell us why.”

Is it rehearsed? Certainly not Rannel-approved but Stan and Finn are obviously enjoying themselves. Maybe just a case of mutual respect and shared opinions. In any case Poe is hooked.

“Yeah,” Finn says. “That’s because I proved them. We, the twenty-three and myself, we proved the First Order that you can’t erase what makes us human. We were told all our life that we were made to obey and kill, and look at us! We disobeyed them. We’re not killing anyone. Yeah, I’m proud. We’re young, and they made us strong, and skilled, did I tell you I once beat Poe Dameron in a speeder race? Yeah, we’re good at what we do, but are we killers, Stan? No, we ain’t. We were cogs in a killing machine but we proved the cogs can be stronger than the machine.”

“Proud to be a Stormtrooper. Now that’s something. Still, Finn, you can’t deny you’re not like the Twenty Three?”

“And why so?”

“Because you’re a hero who saved a lot of lives? Ah, because you’re a respectable citizen, doing an upstanding job in the news, that’s why! You’re not brawling in the seediest pubs at four in the morning, you’re not being fired from job upon job, and neither are you in jail!”

“Do you know why the lieutenant is in jail, though? Because he couldn’t stand the slurs that were thrown at him anymore. Every man has his breaking point, and we’re human, yeah. But tell you what, I’m a lot more like them than you think.”

“Come on, Finn!”

“Yeah, you know what? I’m not brawling in pubs, you say? But until, huh, until not too long ago I partied in pubs every night until I fell down, because it’s hard not to when you can and it’s all new. And then, then because I’m a Stormtrooper, like them, I’d wake up at 6 the next morning because I can’t shed the compulsion to do so. Imagine how coherent that made me.”

“But you do so many interesting things! You cook!”

“Yeah, and I’m good at that, too. But then something will happen or I’ll just be tired, and I’ll sit with a ration bar, you know, the kind that’s just nutritive everything and the blandest sugary taste ever,
because it’s comforting and familiar, because it’s what I’ve had for all my former life, and sometimes life here at Central is just so terribly overwhelming.”

“I didn’t know,” Stand says. “Force knows I’ve spent hours and hours with you and I didn’t know. Are we so scary?”

“Freedom is scary, yeah. Too many options, and you think there aren’t rules, but they’re everywhere and you don’t understand them. The difference might have been that I’ve had friends from the beginning.”

Don’t mention the Resistance, Poe thinks. You’re walking on very thin ice, don’t alienate the PSR even more. Don’t mention me either.

“Rey,” Finn says.

“- who’s dead,” Stan interjects.

“Yeah, who died fighting the First Order, Rey was a friend and I miss her every day. And Director Statura, as mad as it may sound, I think he’s my friend. Poe, too, of course. Who are the Twenty-Three’s friends? I know I am, but I’m too much like them, I can’t tell them the rules.”

“You’re having a point there. Still, there are things they could learn by themselves. They could read, watch holos, educate themselves! Wasn’t it Dameron who said nobody uses their databank subscription more than you?”

Fuck, Poe thinks. Keep me out of that, will you, Stan?

“Yeah, well, if you wanna know Poe keeps nagging me to stop watching so much trash and go back to reading about useful things. Like medicine or, I dunno, learning binary.”

Damn. Poe thought he was more subtle. Still, it’s a shame that Finn’s not building on all that medical knowledge he already memorised.

“Does he, now?” Stan says, with a smirk that’s entirely too knowing.

“Stars, Poe never reads anything that’s not useful. Spacefighting tactics, manuals on droid programming, navigation theory and whatnot. Ah, no. He reads poetry, too. Syrupy, elaborate, flowery love poetry.”

You fucker, Poe thinks fondly.

“But all in all that was Poe who tricked me into reading,” Finn continues. “And who also set up my databank account. Who’s doing the same for the Twenty-Three? And it was Director Statura who okayed my integration into the PR team. I’m nothing special, Stan. I was just lucky. Let us try to give the same kind of luck to the Twenty-Three, shall we?”

“Give them books, teach them the rules, help them find jobs, that’s what you mean?”

“Yeah. Although concerning jobs we might set up some kind of rehabilitation centre, further away from the Central life. But actually, just really seeing them, us, as we are would help. Look into our eyes when we pass, smile, talk to us with kindness. Trust us when we enter your shops, don’t twitch when we sit close by. We’re humans, sentients, not monsters, Stan.”

Poe shuts down the holo, feeling proud, overwhelmed and possibly afraid.

“The kid’s gonna lose fans,” Wexley, who sits close to Poe, says. “Proud to be a Stormtrooper, really? He’s got balls of steel.”

“Yeah,” Poe says. “Dunno if I’d have found that kind of courage in his position.”

“Sure, revealing all about your disgusting reading habits, now that takes real courage.”

“Asshole.”

“I mean, kiss me again, re-kiss me and kiss, give me one of your most loving, give me one of your most – ouch!”

“Your translation is abysmal.”

“Because the source material is unsalvageable.”

“Fuck you, Snap. Let’s be serious for a second, uh? Have you seen that? He’s standing with the Thirty-Three. Fuck, demanding to be counted with them, when –”

“Poe, you’re crying?”

“Shut up. When it really matters, and shit, no I’m not crying, I’m just, I’m just, I dunno, choked? Fuck him, I know he did it because he felt he had to, but right now it was the most dangerous thing he could say.”

“He’ll be alright, Poe. Sure, he’s gonna lose some support, but he was as lovable and charming as ever. They’ll keep on loving him. It might even do good for the Twenty-Three.”

“He’s the best. The best! He kept telling Stan he’s like them, just an average Stormtrooper. Snap, I’ll go to my grave saying it’s false. He’s much better than them, ‘cause you know what? Very few people, if any, are better than him.”

“Man, you got it bad, uh? Really love him. It’s sweet, actually.”

“It’s not just because I love him, fuck.”

“Okay, true. But have you seen him? He wouldn’t stop talking about you, Poe reads this, and Poe did that…”

“Yeah, well, I still wish they’d kept me out of this.”

“Damnit, still your old tune, ’I don’t deserve him I’m gonna break his heart?’ Because it’s getting old, and I’m tired of telling you that you deserve to be happy too.”

“One of us is going to break the other’s heart, Snap. But my problem here is with the PSR and their goons. They don’t know what to do with the Twenty-Three and they won’t like a word of what Finn said today. And since they really, really don’t like me either they’re gonna think I was behind Finn’s interview today and resent him even more. Wanna bet I’m getting a comm call very very soon from the PR team?”

“Hey, Commander,” someone yells from the door. “A comm from Central for you! It’s Rannel from the PR team!”

“Perfect timing,” Poe groans. “Do I tell him to fuck off right now or do I wait until I’m really mad?”
“I know you. You won’t do anything that could hurt Finn so you’re going to explain very politely that Finn is his own man and then you’ll go destroy each and every sim record to blow off some steam – fuck, what’s that?”

“Oh, shit. An all pilots to their ship alert, right when I’m the senior officer on call. Hey, Jando, you tell Rannel to fuck off for me? Politely, and with an explanation? Thanks, sergeant!”
There’s something in space close to the Core region, unidentified, curiously flickering on the long-distance scans, possibly multiple, shapeless, sizeless, but definitely there.

Everyone should be up in space, Poe thinks. I’ve made a mistake in dealing with the alert by flying with a scouting force. That shapeless thing is unfriendly, threatening, the very reason there have been Knights in unlikely parts of the Galaxy in the last months.

But he couldn’t have left the Core Worlds without protection, and if this is the armada that’s going to cause the fall of the Republic at least the worlds and their inhabitants deserve to have as many squadrons as possible dying to protect them. Because who could fight successfully something you can’t even see?

“Aurek One to Wing Leader, I see them,” Snap comms.

“Copy that, Aurek One,” Poe says. “Where? My screens get only that weird flicker and BB-8 can’t make anything of it.”

“Same with me. Got them on visual. On your six, high.”

“Fuck. Wing leader to everyone, 180 turn. Attack formation, wide spaced.”

Poe sees them now. The view is enough for him to know he made the right decision in ordering most of the pilots to stay on base. It’s much, much too small for an invasion force. Big enough to be a diversion, which makes him try the long-distance comm.

It works, well enough. “Black leader to headquarters. Keep on maximum alert, what we’ve got here might be a diversion. Visuals on small enemy force, definitely First Order. Looks like two heavy frigates and accompanying TIEs, but the TIEs are weird. Aurek One, what do you make of them?”

“Aurek One here. Yeah, they’re massive for TIEs. Heavier armament?”


“Aurek One to Black Leader, R6C1 says it makes no sense. Can’t see anything at all.”

“Yeah, same with BB-8. But he says there’s a pattern in the not-seeing. Droids in there, blurring the signal. Anyway we’re too close to disengage.”

Poe checks his data, runs another scan. Mass sensors work, barely. The other instruments are incoherent.

“Black Leader to all pilots. Guys, we’re gonna have to face them blind. Droids can’t see shit. Proton cannons on manual, nobody opens fires before my command, be sure to get a good visual.”
Poe could still order retreat. He’s aware that they are too close, that their chances of entering hyperspace unscathed are scant. But they’re probably better than the odds of staying alive in a blind fight. What will happen, though, if they let that nightmare pass through to the Core planets?

He’s already mentally tracing his path through the TIEs to the frigates. The pilot of the second one isn’t that great. They’ve already fouled the path of one of their TIEs twice and their course is strangely parallel to the first frigate, to the point that Poe wonders if some towing isn’t involved. An easy target, relatively speaking, and one that might hinder the movements of the other frigate. As for the TIEs, their armament has obviously been upgraded, but at that range any shot can be deadly anyway. And whatever was added to their structure makes them clumsy.

Yes. They’ve got a chance to make it work. The pilots he took with him might not be numerous enough but they’re the best, he made sure of it.

Still. Poe shifts to a private channel. “Black Leader to Aurek One, we need someone to witness and report. Step back.”

“Fuck, Commander!”

“Captain. You step back, watch us engage, and when you’ve seen enough you go back to the base. Acknowledge.”

“Why me?”

“Cause I trust you to make it back by yourself.”

“Fuck you.”

“Acknowledge.”

“Copy that, Black Leader. Don’t do anything you’ll regret later, uh?”

“Heh. Thanks, pal.”

Poe shifts back to the general channel.

“Black Leader to all ships. Okay, guys. We’ll target the second frigate first. They’re either wounded or inept. Watch the TIEs’ starboard turn, there’s a lag that we can exploit. On my command – no, hold!”

The TIEs should have deployed into battle formation by now but they haven’t. They’re actually moving to form tight rows that mean Poe could take four or five with one cannon shot, and they aren’t covering their frigates, opening a clear path to the first one.

“BB,” Poe says. “Could you scan the open channels for communications from these guys? I’ve got a feeling that – yeah, here they are. You’re the best, BB.”

The voice coming out of the comm makes Poe break in a cold sweat. It’s feminine, cold, with the metallic distortion of a Stormtrooper’s helmet. He gets an unwanted flash of himself bound and kneeling in a First Order shuttle, Kylo Ren breathing nearby, and a towering Captain in shiny armour barking orders in the same voice.

“Captain Phasma, formerly of the First Order Stormtrooper forces, speaking. Republic, I’m requesting to talk with the leader of your squadron.”
Poe has to clear his voice and swallow before he switches the comm back on, forwarding the channel to all pilots. He’s got sweat in his eyes. “Commander Poe Dameron, wing leader, speaking. That’s not a squadron. Well, you could say we’re the skeleton of a wing, but rest assured that these pilots are very much able to take you down. You didn’t die on Starkiller, Phasma?”

“Dameron. Fancy finding you here. Not making my task easier. I’d have preferred someone without that much, ah – baggage.”

“State your purpose now. My fingers are getting twitchy.”

“I’m defecting to the Republic, isn’t that obvious?”

“With two frigates and a swarm of modified TIEs? Did you order them to?”

“Of course. They’re mine. Loyal to me alone.”

“But is that what they fucking want, Captain? Or is the idea of a choice completely alien to you?”

“What they want is following me. Is the idea of loyalty alien to you, Commander? I’ve heard you already defected once.”

“Phasma, this is not going well. Tell me something that means I can trust you somehow.”

“Have you seen our formation? You could shoot us all like that, blurring droids or not.”

“And that second frigate? Why so clumsy?”

“Not so easy to find trusty frigate crews.”

“Not everyone under your command was so loyal, uh?”

“If you want to know, we had to fight to flee the First Order. That’s what you wanted to hear? My troopers here were offered a choice. They knew where we were going and could have betrayed me. Shot me, even. I guess they liked what Eight-Seven had to say.”

“Eight-Seven? Finn?”

“FN-2187. I don’t care what you call him. But we’ve heard his message. What he offers on the Republic’s behalf is better than the asinine orders of the First Order’s present command.”

“Yeah. The Republic might feel a little scared, what with you incoming with that much firepower. They might not be so nice about it.”

“I figured. But I’m bringing some chips into the bargain. You didn’t spot us correctly until you had a visual, Dameron. I’ll be surprised if the Republic isn’t interested in the technology.”

“Okay. I’m going to risk it. But we’re stopping on the Daragon-Hydian crossroad station to transfer you and your whole crew into a transport. The TIES get docked for inspection and the droids come with us. Or am I wrong for thinking this new technology is droid powered?”

“No, you’re right. Harsh terms, Dameron.”

“I give you my word the droids won’t be dismantled or wiped if they collaborate.”

“Why should I care? They’re machines.”
“Well, I do. They can’t be anything else than high-level astromechs. Sentient.”

“The First Order doesn’t see it like that.”

“But you’re defecting.”

“All right. May we keep our personal weapons?”

“No. You’re gonna scare everyone, me included. You’ll have to look as innocuous as possible.”

“Personal revenge, Dameron?”

“No. I’m protecting you and your men. You want to have some choice in what happens to you afterwards, you don’t come in like an invasion force. Now, are we in agreement?”

“We are.”

“Then welcome to the Republic. And, Phasma?”

“What?”

“Finn will be glad. And he can be proud. So many defections at once, it’s a great victory for him. And probably for us all. But if you touch one hair of his head I’ll kill you myself.”

Something flickers and shifts on the X-Wing’s screens and suddenly the position of Phasma’s forces appear in plain sight. Some token of collaboration. Behind him, BB-8 is connecting with the First Order droids, initiating transfer protocols.

Poe realises only now that he’s nauseous and shaking. But that’s one of the advantages of flying solo, nobody has to know. He comms Headquarters and then initiates the trip back.

//

Finn can’t stop shaking. It’s anticipation. Nervous joy. Some, no, a lot of fear. It’s Phasma that he’ll meet again. The same Phasma who haunted his nightmares for so long. And who now chooses to follow him. If she’s sincere, then she’ll be loyal to him to the end.

Poe found her. He’s still with her. Last time they were in the same room, she was ordering troopers to escort him to a torture chamber. Hell yeah, Finn’s scared.

There won’t be any live cameras, no grand reception. The government is wary. Happy about the blow to the First Order, discretely panicked about the six hundred and seventy nine Stormtroopers, the ninety-two pilots and the one captain. There’s still a duo from the PR team coming to record, but Finn is there as a First Order specialist on Statura’s request – an honour.

Finn didn’t need to fly up in space this time. He’s to meet them in a discrete dock at the fleet Headquarters’ downworld base, thanks to Poe who negotiated lodgings for the Stomtroopers there, an occupation, the timid beginnings of the tech school they imagined. Finn steps in and it’s just another dock, he tries to tell himself, one without any news anchors in it, only Stormtroopers gone rogue and Republic forces guarding them. And Phasma. And Poe, who’s still waking in a cold sweat sometimes because of the Finalizer.

When has Finn begun to look at Poe with this kind of worried protectiveness? Once, Poe felt too strong for that, someone to be admired and emulated, to be sought as a mentor, but that’s a role that he made clear he doesn’t want as far as it concerns Finn. There’s some resentment left from that,
maybe more than a little anger, but Finn doesn’t need him like that anymore. He’s grown and he’s got Director Statura, whose guidance is always kind and expressed clearly, who never hesitates to help Finn know where he should stand. Director Statura feels at once familiar, like someone out of his old life, and comfortable, like no one from that time.

So different from Poe, with whom he often feels like he were standing at the edge of a cliff, and were asked to jump first.

And yet. The way his heart jumps when he looks at Poe over there, he’s never known something so painful, so violent, nor so exhilarating before. Finn still doesn’t know what Poe wants of him, nor, not really, what he does when he’s away, but he knows how Poe gives himself so totally and so recklessly when they’re together. Poe is *his*, and Finn is surprised to realise how primal, how nearly perverse in its possessiveness that feeling is.

Right now, Poe is certainly uneasy. Most probably afraid, likely trying his best not to have flashbacks of the Finalizer, and yet nobody who doesn’t know him very well would guess it. He’s in full commander mode, standing in his flightsuit easy and relaxed, not five paces away from Phasma, looking small so close to her. In contrast with the Republic troops, he opted out of a blaster, like Phasma and all the Stormtroopers had to do. He smiles while chatting with the Republic captain and nods happily when he spots Finn.

If his head happens to swivel a bit too fast when four still-helmeted Stormtroopers approach Phasma, nobody but Finn seems to notice it.

“FN-2187,” Phasma says, voice distorted under her helmet.

“I’m Finn now,” he says, smiling. “I can see how it could destabilise you, though.”


“You’re defecting. Means you’re betting I don’t want revenge.”

“You’ve grown, Eight-Seven.”

“Phasma, remove your helmet.”

“What?”

“Most of your Stormtroopers are doing it, look at them.”

That’s true. The Stormtroopers are wandering in small groups, helmets off and eyes wide open, watching the Republic troops, sometimes even engaging in conversations with the other side. There’s laughter.

“Do it,” Finn insists. “You’re scaring everyone.”

“Is that so bad? I won’t have them think I’m weak at the moment I’m handing myself to them.”

“The situation is tense enough as it is. Remove it.”

“Finn is right,” Poe interjects. “I’m scared. And I’m possibly one of the best disposed toward your bunch.”

Phasma turns to Poe, her head tilting a little. She nods, lifts her hands to her neck and undoes the helmet lock. Bares her head.
Poe’s and the Republic captain’s eyebrows shoot up at the same time.

“Wow,” the Republic captain says.

“Care to explain what you mean by ‘wow’, Captain?” Phasma asks, looking as remote and cold and formidable without a helmet as with one.

“Uh,” the captain says. “No. Sorry.”

Poe smiles wide. “I’m not sure you’re scaring me less without a helmet, Captain Phasma.”

“As it should be,” Phasma says.

Poe smiles even wider. “I’ll get over it.”

The fingers of his left hand, which is lying alongside his thigh where Phasma doesn’t see it, are worrying at the skin around his thumbnail. He’s sweating, but everyone is, so many people in an enclosed space.

“Finn?” someone calls. “Mister Finn?”

It’s a Republic trooper, waving to Finn and looking starstruck.

“It’s our Finn,” the Republic trooper says to the Stormtrooper standing at her side. “He’s – wow, Finn, my brother will never believe me when I’ll tell him I saw you!”

“Got something I could sign, then?” Finn asks. “So your brother believes you.”

The woman’s eyes light up. “My helmet? You’d sign my helmet? Wait, I think I’ve got a pen somewhere.”

Finn half-waves to the captains and commander row and plunges into the crowd with glee. Now that’s a situation he feels at ease with.

“Your Finn?” The Stormtrooper neighbour asks Finn’s fan. “He’s FN-2187. He’s one of ours!”

“I’m Finn,” Finn smiles to the Stormtroopers, giving back her pen to the Republic trooper, “and I am one of the Stormtroopers’. And I was directly under Phasma’s command, too.”

“Really? And you escaped?”

“I had help,” Finn says, nodding to Poe. “From this guy. But you escaped too!”

“She gave us a choice. To follow her or to stay behind. I thought she’d kill the others but she didn’t. Just made sure everyone who chose the First Order wouldn’t be in the way. We still had to fight. Which means the ones who stayed behind might not be sent to recond.” The Stormtroopers blinks, touches the side of his face, obviously not used to being bare-faced in such a crowd. “She said we’d fight for the Republic now. But I – I heard your broadcast, you talked of so many things we could have in the Republic. Own. So I followed her.”

“Yeah,” Finn says. “Anyone can own things here. But you know what? We’re also free to be, to be whatever we want. You don’t want to fight, for the Republic or anyone else, you don’t have to. You can become a, I don’t know, a mechanic or a painter or a doctor or maybe a cook and live in peace within the Republic borders.”

A sizable crowd of Stormtroopers have gathered around Finn.
“Yeah,” the Republic trooper says, seemingly unfazed by the press of black-and-white armoured bodies. “My brother is a librarian.”

“I still want to fight,” the first Stormtrooper says. “I’ll follow Phasma.”

“I – I’m – I think if I can,” another says, “I’ll lay the blaster down. I’ve always dreamed of being a mother. There were mothers on the world we were stationed once. They didn’t go in the way, we left them alone for the most part. They kissed their children. Hugged them.”

This particular Stormtrooper is big and obviously male, with dark hair and a pale skin upon which the five o’clock shadow is particularly conspicuous. Finn opens his mouth to explain, or to tell him that mothers aren’t the only ones to be allowed kissing and hugging. Then he thinks better. Stormtroopers are as aware of biology as any others.

“Yeah,” he says. “There are ways.”

“And you,” another says to Finn. “What did you choose? Do you still fight?”

He’s walked to Finn and now raises a hand and brushes, just brushes Finn’s arm, but in public, coming from a Stormtrooper it’s so unexpected it gives Finn goosebumps. The guy is looking at Finn like Finn used to look at Poe, or maybe at Statura.

“I don’t –” Finn begins to say, then halts, realising how guilty he feels that he’s not up there with the likes of Poe or Pava or Major Ematt. “I don’t fight with blasters. I feel like I don’t fight at all, though Commander Poe Dameron over there, the pilot who brought you in, tells me what I do with words might be more important. Not having to fight, being in a place where you don’t have to, it’s – peace is – ah. I really think you guys should have a right to experience it. But there’s the First Order over there and – and I don’t know if that’s, if I have to impose that view on you, but I feel the First Order is truly evil.”

“Commander Dameron is right,” a Republic trooper says. “You’re doing a lot for the war, Mister Finn. After Hosnia, there was such despair here. And you, I don’t know how to say that but you, you give us hope. The First Order, I saw it as some monstrous, soulless entity, and now we see it can be weak, it can lose men to us, ah, I don’t know.”

Everyone is talking at once, Stormtroopers with Stormtroopers, Stomtroopers with Republic troopers, and everyone tries to talk to Finn. There are stories exchanged, even names and nicknames, experiences, advice. Groups form and merge and mutate and Finn walks in the middle of it all, feeling at home.

He looks up, crossing Poe’s gaze, then Phasma’s. There’s such pride in Poe’s and such puzzlement in Phasma’s that it makes Finn laugh aloud.

Then there’s some kind of growl and a metallic sound, and Poe shouting: “Finn, on your left!”

At the same time Phasma barks: “Eight-Seven! Down!”

It reaches Finn at an instinctive level and he falls down, then looks up to what was his left. Other Stormtroopers have flattened down or have been knocked out and it opens some kind of corridor between him and a still-helmeted Stormtrooper. They’re raising a blaster – small, non-standard, a Republic model, probably stolen on the spot, Finn’s mind provides on automatic – at him. He rolls over, tries to keep on moving.

Somewhere Poe is cursing, and then the Republic Captain shouts and from the corner of his eye he sees Phasma brandishing a heavy blaster, Republic standard issue.
“Phasma! No bystander casualties!” Finn hears Poe shout.

Why should she care, Finn thinks idly. She never did before. But she’s not shooting – neither at his attacker, nor at him. “Hell!” she yells. “Get down, you fools!”

Some other Stormtroopers do, but the Republic forces mill around, blaster at the ready, not understanding the threat and standing between Phasma and the helmeted guy. Finn begins to push himself up, sees the Stormtrooper aim, rolls once again – searing pain in his left leg, wasn’t fast enough.

“Catch!” Phasma says, not even shouting, her voice bearing easily.

Her borrowed blaster flies above the Republic troopers’ head, right into Finn’s hand. It’s easy. Crouch – his left leg isn’t answering, – security off, target close and impossible to miss, aim –

“Non-lethal!” he hears, Poe’s voice.

*That’s harder*, he thinks, heavy blaster, close range, and what are the settings of that thing? And he has to keep moving, rolls again to avoid another shot to the head, but he complies, aiming for the dominant arm, hitting full on.

After that everyone around begins to move – Stormtroopers tackling his attacker, working together with Republic troopers, he notes, pinning the guy on the ground. The PR cameraman is filming, somewhere on his right, probably got the full thing on holo. His leg hurts – is that a good thing, he can feel it, he remembers to look down, leg still there, but so much blood – his head spins and he lies back down, vaguely glimpses some commotion on one side.

Then there’s Poe hovering over him, fingers pushing hard on the compression point of his upper thigh, and Phasma behind him.

“You’re lucky that trooper was unsure of himself,” Phasma says. “You’ve become slow, Eight-Seven.”

Poe snorts. “Slow, uh. Finn, how do you feel? Medics are on their way. Looks like you really want them in your life, don’t you?”

“Why?” Phasma asks. “It’s not the first time?”

“Don’t you know?” Poe asks. “A lightsaber wound in the back by your pal Kylo Ren on Starkiller. Could have died.”

“He’s not my pal,” Phasma says, looking disapproving and faintly disgusted. “I didn’t know.”


“A mistake,” Phasma says. “I thought I had weeded them well. I was wrong.”

The cameraman is behind them, filming – that’s not okay, not at all. “Poe,” Finn says, but he feels light-headed, struggles to articulate what he needs to say. He tries to nod toward the man, moves under Poe’s hand, feels his fingers slip – blood squirting on the ground, then pressure again – and hears his curse. “Poe,” he tries again.

“It’s alright, buddy,” Poe says. “Just a few days in a bacta tank and you’ll be like new.”
“No,” Finn croaks. “No, Poe, they’re filming us, they need to turn, the Stormtroopers have caught
him, that’s what they need to show –”

“Hear him?” Poe says, raising his head to look directly into the camera. “Phasma helped Finn shoot
the attacker down and Stormtroopers pinned the guy down with the help of the Republic forces. Go
film that.”

Still, it takes a very long time for the cameraman to turn away.

“Not good for the Stormtroopers,” Finn manages to say. “Poe, make sure –”

“I will,” Poe says. “They’ll stay here at the base, no innocent will be made to pay. Promise, buddy.”

Finn sighs and leans down, against the comforting warmth of Poe’s legs. Poe’s other hand comes
down to wipe the sweat off his face. The hand on his thigh is red. Everything hurts. He can’t help the
gasp of pain.

“I know,” Poe says. “Thank the Force it wasn’t a heavy blaster at this range, but still, there’s quite a
lot of burned flesh and damaged muscle in addition to the artery wound. But you’ll be alright, love,
you’ll be alright.”

Finn wonders why Phasma’s face registers such astonishment since he’s quite sure he hallucinated
the last words. But then there’s just too much pain, too much dizziness, and the med team is there
injecting him with something, handling his leg, moving him, and he lets himself drift away.
It’s strange, Finn thinks. Stormtroopers are uneasy when bare headed in public, but then Republic people behave all awkward when they’re in presence of a naked guy. The way Statura’s eyes studiously avoid looking at his bare torso emerging from the bacta tank is quite remarkable. And a little entertaining.

He lets himself sag into the harness, giving in to the exhaustion.

“Bacta feels weird,” he tells Statura. “It doesn’t hurt, doesn’t even numb, but then you don’t feel pain anymore. Only weakness. Stars, I’ve never felt so weak.”

“Yes,” Statura says. “It pulls onto the body’s reserves to mend flesh and bones. But the droid in charge told me it’s your last session. If there’s a scar it’s going to be minimal.”

Finn looks down into the tank, and sure enough here is his own leg, looking healthy and brand new, the growing skin paler than the rest. He moves it a little, testing the muscles. It works fine.

“I’m given a bacta tank to heal a leg,” he says, flashes of months of physical therapy coming back. “But I got nothing for my back. How comes?”

Statura chuckles. “Ah, but in the Resistance we never had the funds. People died because of it. The Republic is much, much larger, and much, much richer too. And in the Republic, we take care of our own.”

“You don’t know,” Finn says, feeling a little choked. “You don’t know what it means for me.”

“Ah, but maybe I know,” Statura says, a soft smile on your lips. “Never let anybody say you don’t deserve it.”

“By the way, how are Phasma’s Stormtroopers? Life on Akhios isn’t too hard on them?”

Statura’s smile vanishes.

“They’re – not experiencing the full swing of it, you could say. We deemed it safer.”

“Yeah, I remember how it was for the Twenty-Three.”

“Safer for the citizens, I mean. Someone shot you, Finn.”

“You didn’t – I mean, Poe promised – Can I see them?”

“Oh yes, he promised. Well, they’re staying at the fleet base, under his supervision. Seems he wants to set up some kind of group home for them. And he’s also making a lot of noise about the droids he
salvaged from these modified TIEs, can you believe it? Seriously, Finn, while it appears your
attacker did it all by himself and was obviously unhinged, how many others like him are in that
group? Citizens are afraid. Believe me, it’s much better that they’re seen with Dameron than with
you. Or any of us for that matter.”

“But –”

“Finn, you don’t want another one like your attacker to go on a killing spree in the central districts,
do you?”

Statura has a point, Finn guesses. Flashes of a madman in black and white armour discharging his
blaster among the partying crowd at Central send shivers to his spine. He nods.

Statura pats his arm, looking awkwardly away from his chest. “And not everyone has your aim nor
your reflexes, Finn. I saw the holo, they didn’t lie when they said you were a great shot!”

Finn shakes his head. “I was too slow,” he says. “It took me too long to figure out that blaster.
Phasma said so, she was right. I’m out of practice.” He gulps in a large breath, tries to catch Statura’s
gaze. “Director Statura,” he begins.

“Call me Tihhe,” Statura says with a smile. “Please. It makes me feel weird when a hero such as you
uses my honorifics. We’ve been in the same command room before, haven’t we?”

Finn feels himself grin wide, a little hysterically maybe. Calling an admiral, a head of State, by his
first name?

“Tihhe,” he tries, the name awkward on his tongue. “I want to go back to fighting. The Republic
troopers, Poe, his pilots, they were all up there in space, fighting the First Order. I feel useless. I’m
beginning to lose my edge.”

“Finn, kid, believe me, you’re doing much more by showing yourself on the holonet than by
wielding a blaster.”

“But Poe always did both, when he worked with the PR team!”

Statura’s smile takes a strange, forced slant. “Yes, he did, for a while. But there’s only one of you,
Finn, and the Republic would suffer greatly from your loss. People like Dameron, flyboys, ace pilots,
always acting before they can think, they are – well, Dameron is eminently replaceable, you know.
You aren’t.”

Nobody could replace Poe as far as Finn’s concerned and he wonders why others can’t see it. But
that someone as powerful and kind as Director Statura, Tihhe, thinks that of him, like he’s wanted,
like he’s exceptional, like he’s not just a number anymore, makes him stand taller in his tank,
prouder, overwhelmed by the attention and admiration.

Even when the two unknown guys, military, Finn guesses, who came in with Statura look at each
other and exchange gazes that he can’t parse.

“Thank you,” Finn tells Statura - Tihhe.

“Besides,” Statura says. “You don’t really want to fight. You’re a man of peace, I know that.”

“Yes,” Finn says, surprised to realise how true it is. “I hate the killings. I hate to see the dead. The
pain, I don’t wish it for anyone, to have to fight, and the Force knows that with Starkiller I already
killed more people than nearly everyone in the armed forces, and I’m tired of it. More than that. It
weighs on me. But we can’t let the First Order take over!”

“I mean it, Finn. When I say that you’re doing more for the cause by talking than by fighting. And I mean it when I say we don’t want to lose you.” He chuckles. “Actually, I very much hope you won’t have to use these combat skills of yours in the future. We, I mean the three Directors, the head of security and a few other people have discussed it and well, we think it’s time for you to have bodyguards. You like meeting crowds a lot, son, and while it’s good for your image it always makes me shiver a little, thinking of what could happen to you.”

“Bodyguards?”

Statura nods to the two military guys, who step forward.

“Lieutenant Auderd,” Statura says, gesturing to the olive-skinned, pale blond male one. “And Lieutenant Sebvaux –” the huge, dark woman. “Detached from the Special Forces.”

The woman nods and smiles. “We’re sorry for the inconvenience,” she says. “But we’re requesting that you help us settle in your apartment at Central. There’s a guest room, I think? Tomorrow or the day after, we’ll have to figure some kind of schedule so that you’re never left by yourself.”

Oh. Finn doesn’t really know what to say. Bodyguards, for him? Settling with him in his marvellous, too big apartment? At least he won’t feel as much like there’s so much waste of space.

“Auderd,” he tries. “Sebvaux. Core worlds names, aren’t they?”


He’s smiling and probably trying to play along with Finn’s small talk, but there’s something cold in his eyes.

“Or maybe,” the woman says, meeting Finn’s gaze, “a lot like you. Special Forces to Special Forces, you could say. I’ll be interested to hear about the First Order training regimen.”

Finn smiles back, nods, hopes he looks tired enough that his non-answer won’t register as insulting.

“You’re tired,” the woman says. “We’ll be downstairs, and then we’ll leave for a while to make the necessary arrangements. The medcentre is safe enough. See you tomorrow?”

“Oh, Dir – Tihhe.”

Finn floats, literally, for a while. He sleeps, maybe. He gets woken, or just stirred, or shaken out of his reverie by loud voices reaching him through the open, sunbathed window.

There’s a knock at the door and then Poe enters, his mouth drawn into a thin line and the crease between his eyebrows deeper than ever. Phasma steps in behind him.

“I came to visit several times,” Poe says. “But it was late at night, when I could afford the time for a ride to Central. They said you were asleep. I’m sorry.”

Phasma doesn’t say anything. She’s taking in the light of the orange sunset in the room, the ergonomic tank, Finn’s naked form in it. Her cold stare betrays nothing, recoils at nothing. It feels surprisingly comfortable. Familiar. Poe, meanwhile, looks at the floor. At his hands, at Finn’s. At Finn’s face, and resolutely not below.

“Come on,” Finn groans. “Poe, not you, too? How often have you seen me naked?”

Stars, Poe is blushing, and Finn catches him sending a very fast sideway glance at Phasma.

“Yeah, well,” Poe mumbles. “Not in, uh, such public company.”

“Republican neuroses,” Phasma utters.

“Fuck, I could tell you about –” Poe’s voice has raised and then he halts abruptly, exhaling loudly, nostrils flaring. “I’m sorry. Too much tensions these last days, and then these two goons at the door, fuck. Phasma, you’ve got to learn about social niceties.”

“Well?” Phasma asks.

“If anything, so that you don’t get turned away at the doors of medical centres, uh.”

“You really think it’s because I didn’t smile to Finn’s guards? Come on.”

“What are you talking about?” Finn asks. “What happened?”

“Two Special Forces goons guarding the entrance,” Poe says. “They wouldn’t let Phasma visit you. Even when she showed up the special permit she got issued.”

“Permit?”

“Permit. Stormtroopers are under house, well, fleet base arrest. Except for Phasma because of that special permit.”

“If you ask me, because they think I’m the most suspicious of the bunch and they want to see how I’ll compromise myself,” Phasma says.

“Possibly,” Poe says. “Or the idea of you close to the other Stormtroopers gives them nightmares. Anyway, the two heavies wouldn’t let her pass.”

“She did in the end, though.” Finn says.

“Yes. I pulled rank. Dunno how long it will work, though. These guys don’t like me either.”

Phasma snorts. “Your, huh, friend here is full of great beliefs,” she tells Finn. “Fighting for me and the troopers’ freedom, right to choose, I don’t know, well-being. When it’s obvious he doesn’t like us at all, and shouldn’t either, given our common history. Blabbering about the droids’, droids’, Eight Seven, free will. Ha. Throwing himself head first against his own high command when he thinks they’re wrong. And then what works is exactly what does in the First Order. Pulling rank.”

Poe’s face is a study in repressed anger, with some shame mixed in. “Having second thoughts about your defection?” he asks.

She directs one of her most scathing looks to him. “Of course not. Believe me, Dameron, life here is much, much more comfortable than anything in the First Order, even in the present situation, which,
by the way, is ridiculous. If we scare them that much, why are they keeping us on the central
government’s planet, and all together?”

“Control?” Poe says. “Some people here are obsessed with control. To the point they don’t
remember to what end anymore.”

“Still,” Finn says. “Why did you change sides, Phasma? Not that I’m not happy about it, but you
don’t strike me at the usual defecting profile. Strife at officer level in the Order? Obviously, you
don’t believe in anything the Republic stands for.”

“Obviously. Strife? You could say that. The power is shifting over there, from Empire nostalgics and
promoters of a superior order in the Galaxy to something else. And tell you what, I don’t believe in
much, trooper. I was one of yours once, our conditioning aims towards loyalty more than belief, and
you can learn to redirect loyalty. Towards your own. Strife. Yes, there’s strife among the highest
levels. I can’t stand Ren. He’s an unreliable, dangerous spoiled child. He’s come back with a host of
Dark side users and they scare me.”

“Finally something we agree on,” Poe mumbles.

“The new blurring technology was setting you at a disadvantage,” Phasma continues. “There are
already too many Knights’ nests in the Galaxy. I thought I’d restore some balance.”


“Or just to the fight. Too bad your Republic doesn’t seem to think I can help more than that.”

“A lot of your troopers just want their life for themselves, though. No more fighting,” Finn says.
“That’s why they defected. That’s why I defected. For a chance at peace.”

Poe’s grin has taken an admiring, sort of sappy quality, and Phasma is looking at Finn like he’s some
strange sort of unknown life form.

“I can’t believe it took us so long to realise how defective you are,” she says. “Maybe we were
blinded by your abilities.”

“Finn’s defects are a proof sentience is above conditioning,” Poe says. “And they saved my life.”

“Anyway the other troopers aren’t like him. They’d follow me,” Phasma says, voice harsh. “Even
the Rriv’kat, as mad as they all are.”

“They’ve got a right not to, here,” Finn says.

“Really? What rights do they have, exactly? Anyway the point is moot. They can’t follow me
anywhere. And maybe it’s better that they learn to be something else than troopers.”

There’s an edge to Phasma’s voice. Some sentiment. Loss, maybe. Still, Finn can’t remember ever
talking with her like that, equal to equal. It’s draining.

A hand comes to rest on the nape of his neck, then trails gently to his shoulder. Finn opens his eyes –
he’d closed them?

“Hey,” Poe says softly. “Hey, buddy. Want us to leave?”

“Oh,” Finn says. “No. No, please stay. ‘s good to have you here.”

The hand leaves his shoulder – why? – then there’s the sound of a chair scraping the floor. The hand
comes back, stroking his skin lightly.

“You’re falling asleep,” Poe says.

“Stay,” Finn says.

“I’m inferring this doesn’t apply to me,” Phasma says.

Finn forces his eyes open, looks at her. “Captain,” he says. “I’m glad you’re here. I mean, here with the Republic. I – I’d never have thought – what you did – I admire you.”

“Thank you,” Phasma says, then her face distorts strangely. She’s smiling, Finn realises. Trying to.

“Eight Seven, whatever else I think of you, I’m – proud of you, I guess. And I’m glad this madman of a trooper didn’t kill you. You did well.”

“Where is he? My attacker?”

“In jail,” Poe says. “Being interrogated. I don’t even know if they’re interested in bringing him to trial.”

“I misjudged him,” Phasma says. “He followed because he was afraid of the consequences of staying behind. And afterwards he tried to kill you as a means to reintegrate the Order without reconditioning. If there are others like him –” she looks at Poe, her gaze evaluating. “I trust you, Dameron. You and your men here at the base. I’d like you to go through my troopers and evaluate them, with my help. But nobody else, and no one from, how do you call it, from Central.”

“That’s not my job,” Poe says.

“Then find people you trust whose job it is.”

Poe winces and scrubs his eyes. “That means convincing Resistance people to come back here, some whom the Republic won’t see as competitors, or worse,” he says. “I can try. Thing is, I don’t have that much time. Finn, I won’t even be able to visit you for a few weeks. I’m up in space in two days. The Stormtroopers will need you to – ah, you do as you want, uh.”

Finn is too tired to guess what Poe means exactly, but him leaving hurts. “Why?” he asks. “Why so soon?”

“I was due some downtime, that’s what I’m using right now. I can’t ask for days to take care of you because, ah, because we’re not – official. And I’ve been made to understand that being official would be frowned upon right now.”

There’s shyness in the way Poe’s gaze evades Finn’s. A glint of hope. But Finn can’t understand why. If Poe is ordered up, he got an order, and that’s it.

After a while, Poe stirs and says: “anyway I’m here right now, buddy. Hey, Phasma. Dunno about Finn but as for myself I’d really appreciate if you could leave us to ourselves. Just wait for me in the corridor? There are chairs and some caf dispenser. No offense, uh. Call it Republican neuroses.”

Phasma nods and walks to the door, then turns and shakes her head. “I can’t believe you’re giving away so much control, the both of you. Giving the other so much power over yourself. Republican neuroses indeed.”

She manages to make even the sound of the closing door disapproving.
Poe’s shoulders sag and then he smiles. Finn extends in the harness, trying for a kiss, and Poe meets him halfway.

“What about a handjob?” Finn asks when they break the kiss. “Bacta is weird, man. I really wonder how it’d feel.”

Poe makes a small sound in his throat, laughter, fondness. “Hey, are you delirious or already asleep? Your head’s nodding and you can’t even keep your eyes open.” he bunches up a sleeve and follows the side of Finn’s hip with one hand, then the shape of his thigh, but the caress is sweet more than heated. “And you’re not even hard.”

“I can be if you help.”

“What you need is rest. I’m serious.”

“Aw, Poe.”

“I can kiss you goodnight if you wish.”

“But when I’m better, can we try? In a bacta tank?”

Poe shakes his head. “Finn, do you know how expensive bacta is? I – I don’t wanna imagine what noxious mix it’s gonna create if you come in that thing nor what the medics will do to us if they find out. Come on here. I’ll kiss you goodnight for a very, very long time.”

//

Up in space, hell is below. With core worlds. Headquarters. High command. Politics. Above, the limits are only those Poe sets himself, and if he’s wrong, that’s only a matter of seeing himself back in hell later.

Hell is below, and very, very far away, beyond the Republic border Poe crossed alone to fly far enough into some obscure hyperlane of the Outer Rim. If he’s caught disobeying orders he’ll be the only one, his squadrons secure and obedient inside Republic space.

But the Republic won’t divulge beyond its own worlds the newly-cracked secrets of the blurring technology. What if, they say, some other group perfects it and uses it against us? What if we need to use it against an aggressor, only to find they can counter us? And meanwhile the First Order destroys the unaffiliated worlds it can’t submit, and Knights of Ren are everywhere and all around.

Poe has a duty to witness it, even if all alone like he presently flies there’s not much he can do. Except that he’s faster than most, well-versed in the most arcane arts of space navigation. Except that he can transmit the intel to the Resistance. Except he can’t stay there watching and doing nothing.

He’s got a signal on his brand new sensor monitors, a cluster of blurred-not-blurred ships circling around a civilian baleen-class freighter. In the Tolonda system, so far from any major route and on the opposite quadrant from the First Order’s usual area of nuisance, it’s something new, and the attackers are so close to the freighter’s homeworld, so numerous, obviously shooting at the civilians, not to capture but to destroy, that it chills Poe’ blood.

They don’t see Poe. He’s blurred himself, although he’s sure they’d find him if they thought to activate their sensors. But they’ve grown negligent along with the Republic’s inaction, and he’s coming from a route that’s so faint, so bumpy, so challenging to navigate that they’re not looking. And he’s small. Much smaller than them.
He’s good, too. Good shot and better pilot. Much better than them. And so they still don’t see him as he comes into the blind corner of the two frigates, manages the repeated plasma shots that disable their shields and shatter their command rooms. They see him, but too late, when he downs three TIEs, damages a fourth and retreats behind the floating, blind hull of their flagship. See him, but not where they expected him, when he speeds out, loops, downs the fifth and sixth. See him, shoot him, hit him but not severely enough to disable as he takes a wide turn to check out the freighter – still responsive – and the remaining TIEs – they aren’t the modified, hyperspace-faring models. They’ll exhaust their fuel in a few days, a few hours if they weren’t careful. If they’re clever, they’ll retreat now, try to find some in-system station that will take them in before they die.

Eight of them do, disappearing from Poe’s screen and out of BB-8’s range. The other two he sends spiralling into the frigates.

“Commander Poe Dameron, Republic navy, to unknown freighter,” he comms into the dump channels. “Any damage?”

“K-naann freighter from Pannlaal, first aid kits and Omwatian corn cargo, to Commander Dameron,” Poe hears. “You have our deepest thanks. Our hyperspace engines are out, the rest answers. We can limp home. Commander, we’re the first to manage to pass through the blockade since two moon cycles. On behalf of our world and our people, thank you.”

“Hear that, BB-8?” Poe says. “What’s two local moon cycles?”

BB-8’s answer is puzzled.

“What do you mean, you didn’t hear? You’ve been hit?”

“What? Of course they commed!” Poe presses the comm button. “K-naann freighter, acknowledge, please. Looks like we’re having a comm malfunction.”


“My astromech isn’t catching your signal,” Poe says. Then he thinks. Did he really hear their answer? Or did he feel it, somewhere inside? Somewhere BB-8 can’t go? “How are you transmitting?” he asks. “Are you using the Force?”

There’s silence, deep inside his own mind. The feeling of a presence retreating. It wasn’t deep, it wasn’t aggressive, but it was there, alien, intruding, waking up old traumas. Don’t touch me, he nearly comms, but instead shouts, shivering, inside his own mind. They hear anyway.

We’re sorry, they convey, the lightest possible touch at the surface of his mind. Our comm was totalled in the fight. We don’t usually advertise our skill. And focusing that much on a single mind with only the barest Force-using ability isn’t easy.

“You’ve got the Force,” Poe comms, keeping the panic at bay with that semblance of normalcy. “Several of you use the Force. And you’re First Order enemies.”

Our whole planet, they convey. We live within the Force and by it, though we don’t fight with it. We hoped to stay out of your war. But now we see the First Order has chosen for us. Help us, Republic Commander. We’re under blockade. We’re starving. Dying.

You and several dozens of worlds in the Outer Rim, Poe can’t help thinking, a flash he hopes is fast enough, deep enough inside himself for the others not to have caught it.

“BB-8,” he calls. “General system scan? Looks like a lot of our First Order friends have set up camp
nearby.”

What BB-8 reveals is dire. A chokehold several systems wide, several layers deep, route nodes patrolled, wings upon wings of TIEs at each entry point. Not one civilian vessel flying the insystem space.

“I’m here against my orders,” he comms to the freighter. “You have to know that the Republic doesn’t help unaligned worlds these days.”

*Please*, comes into his mind, so fervent, so fast it has to be uncontrolled.

“I’ll do all that I can”, Poe says at the moment he decides it. “Some of my friends have been looking for people like you for a very long time.”

*Friends*, the voice in his mind says. *Who.*

“A girl called Rey,” he says and thinks with all his mind, but doesn’t comm, afraid of other ears listening. “Very strong with the Force. And Luke Skywalker.”

*Skywalker*, many voices echo in excited answer.

“The Resistance will help you directly,” he says, “But their forces aren’t strong enough. They’ll buy you some time, that’s all. I’ll have to try and get the Republic to react. Meanwhile, shall I escort you downworld?”

That’s where he meets them for the first time, on the surface of this world they call Pannlaal, his hosts massive but strangely skittish and jerky moving in the low gravity, slimy looking. Four limbs but ever-curving, swaying and shivering, never human-like. No expression he can parse. To human eyes, they aren’t easy to admire, to love, to sympathise with. Not like the Rriiv’kat at all. Damn.

//

“Your two goons,” Poe says as they walk back to Finn’s place, Auderd and Sebvaux a few paces behind. “They creep me out, and they know they do, it’s on purpose.”


“Yeah. Guards. Finn, you know your whole apartment is bugged? Your bedroom is bugged. They watch us, even when we fuck. I won’t become their evening entertainment, I won’t eat my breakfast with them hovering around and I’m not coming up there anymore.”

“Shit, Poe, what?”

“I – you know, sometimes I feel like we’re going nowhere, the two of us. We’re just – well, just fucking, and going on with our parallel lives. Nothing intersects. And I’m, huh. I mean. I – that’s alright, buddy. I still want to go on. If you want it too, let’s do it at the base? They’ll probably follow you but they’ll be easier to lose there. And they won’t get us on camera. Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

End of Poe’s tousled hair on Finn’s pillow in the morning. End of pastry sharing, of over-the-shoulder reading, of shaving side by side in the too-small fresher. End of petting and kissing late in bed, too tired for more, falling asleep. Does Finn want whatever could remain to go on? He finds he does.

Poe’s eyes are huge and boring directly into Finn’s, the line between his eyebrows creased, his
mouth thin and twisted.

“I’ll come,” Finn says. “If only because I’ll go on visiting the Stormtroopers. But, Poe, it’s a military base. I can’t disrupt – they won’t let me – I won’t see you as often, will I?”

They already lost their bouts of speeder racing and their lazy afternoons out of town, a side-effect of the heightened security around Finn. It has made their relationship more strained, more discontinuous, more clandestine. A night affair.

“No overnights,” Poe says. “Yeah. No civilian lives in the base proper, unless, in rare cases, when they’re, ah, official.”

That word, again, that Finn doesn’t know how to understand, and which means something Poe doesn’t want, doesn’t dare, won’t spell out. Which means Finn should say something more, something that would erase the bitter-but-sort-of-hopeful twist of Poe’s mouth, but he doesn’t know how.

Finn reaches to Poe’s face, smoothens the corner of his mouth with a thumb. “Will it be enough?” he asks.

“If that’s what you want,” Poe says, his forehead still creased. “It will be.”

He loops an arm around Finn’s neck, squeezes his shoulder. His hand is warm, and his head heavy where it’s nuzzling into his neck.

“Can’t be easy walking like that,” Finn says with a smile.

“But I like it,” Poe says. “Sit down? There’s a bench.”

It’s good that Poe still wants them to be seen in public like that. Good to know that they’re not back to their clandestine beginnings.

“Lieutenants,” Poe says to the approaching bodyguards. “Give us a little privacy.”

“But the threat –” Sebvaux says.

“Isn’t that high. There’s another bench over there. Perfect for you.”

They obey. They’re not happy about it but they obey.

“Kiss me,” Poe says.

They’re clinging to each other. Grabbing at ears, hair, jaws. Thrusting with their tongues, hard, biting, licking, making passers-by witness their thirst and their arousal. Is it always going to feel like that from now? Finn wonders. Like each kiss could be the last?

Poe pulls away. His erection is very obvious, straining against the fabric of his pants.

“It’s not the best way to bring that on,” he says. “Believe me, there are lots of things I’d rather talk about.”

“But?” Finn says. Poe’s hands are back on his own knees and his knuckles are white.

“But it’s important. Finn, have you spoken with Statura about what I told you?”

“meaning?” Finn asks, but he remembers. The attacked worlds outside the Republic. The call for
solidarity, for help. He’s been meaning to breach the subject, he really has. But Statura is a very busy man, and a better teacher than a listener. And when Finn finally found his opening he’s been met with laughter and a lesson on foreign politics and hare-brained flyboys.

“The responsibility of the Republic towards those attacked by the First Order, of course.”

It’s hard, meeting Poe’s eyes. “How do we know it’s the First Order?” Finn asks, remembering Statura’s words. “Strife is endemic in the Outer Rim. Non-humans, factions, strange alien cultures. How could we understand what drives them, how could we intervene without destroying more than we mend?”

Poe grimaces. “You know I hate that,” he says.

“What?”

“The way the PSR twists perfectly honourable notions into ugly things. Their words in your mouth.”

“ Fucking hell, Poe! They’re right sometimes, you know?”

Poe opens his mouth, closes it. Takes in a large breath. Exhales. “In that particular case they’re wrong. I know because I saw them. The First Order.”

“That’s not in your orders,” Finn says. “Weren’t you supposed to stay on the border?”

“I saw them in the Outer Rim, eastern quadrant, and I won’t tell you more so you can’t be charged with complicity if they happen to discover that I bypass my orders. Finn, that’s not the point. Yes, they’re alien, and strange, a very difficult subject for your PR team. But they’re also being choked to death by the First Order. To the point that the Resistance forces aren’t enough.”

“What are they,” Finn says. “One world? One system? Can we take all the fights of this Galaxy upon our shoulders?”

“They’re not one of us, uh. But when each and every world that’s not ours has fallen, we’ll fall, too. But this particular world, they could save us. Maybe – we still don’t know, but maybe they could stand against the Knights.”

“They’re Force-sensitive? Then why do they need our help?”

“Listen, Finn. Please. They’re dying right now. They’re no warriors. Talk to Statura. Please.”

And why aren’t you doing it yourself, Finn thinks, since it’s that important? Are you just using me to reach him? Kissing me beforehand so that I feel more inclined to do it? That’s all I am for you?

“I can’t,” Finn says, feeling annoyed and sad, and maybe a little betrayed by Poe’s refusal to come to his apartment again. Feeling like he needs to riposte. “If you wanna know, I have enough on my plate as it is, trying to advocate for people. There are Stormtroopers to help, if you don’t remember. People who are my responsibility. I’m still trying to get them some basic rights, to make the government understand they’re no threat! And you know what? Each day it becomes a little harder, because you’re in the middle! Making them work in your tech school, where they’re in contact with military technology! Never consulting with Central when you teach them only the Force knows what! Letting Phasma wander all around, letting her keep a blaster on base, fuck! And you should have communicated the results of the Resistance’s investigation on her troopers weeks ago!”

“Her troopers are alright,” Poe says, his voice blank. “She took care of it. What do you want? You want me to abandon them too?”
“No,” Finn says. “I want you to stop calling attention to yourself! I want you to shut up! You can’t stop blabbering about people’s rights, like everyone except you is wrong, and worse of all, blabbering about droids’ rights, when nobody, nobody, Poe, gives a bantha’s fart for them! You’re angering the directors, each day more, oozing dangerous ideas through illegal holo channels, as if I didn’t know it’s you!”

“Droids,” Poe says. “They deserve someone to advocate for them. Now that the special services have extracted all the data they need, they want to wipe them. To dismantle their bodies in the hope of understanding the First Order’s technologies better.”

“They’re just machines!” Finn says, surprised to hear his voice rise so high. “They don’t have bodies! Only, I don’t know, outer cases and a lot of wire inside!”

“Is that what you think?” Poe says through clenched jaws. “Is that what you really think?”

“Ask Phasma. Ask Statura. Ask anyone! They do what they’re told! They’re programmed!”

“Oh. Something that never happens to organic sentients, huh.”

“Low. Low, Poe, fuck you!” Finn knows he’s getting mad, and not even rationally. The world is reeling around him, and it’s not really panic, or maybe it is, or maybe it’s rage. He breathes, in, out. Steadies his voice. “They – they’re not in the Force flow!”

Why is Poe so devoted to droids, aliens, even other Stormtroopers’ psyche and feelings, and is only using Finn like that, not even sensing his mood? That he’s controlling himself right now, making an effort, fuck him, like Finn was some kind of fractured, precious vase you have to handle with care, makes it only more infuriating.

“Finn, do you know how they pity us because we don’t perceive the data flow? The stream of binary they constantly exchange, and the marvels they can do with it? They’ve got their own Force, only theirs and ours are incompatible. I thought you were friends with BB, how could I be so wrong?”

“BB-8, yeah, it’s sweet. Programmed to be cute and round and whimsical. I like it, yeah, it’s like a sweet pet.”

Finn knows he said that to hurt. Poe dotes on that droid, loves it maybe a little too much.

“Pet? It? It’s he, fuck. Not that I know why but it’s how he says he is, and if you wanna know, BB’s intellect is eons above ours, and he’s got an open programming that means he’s more aware and more able to exercise free will than many of us!”

“I don’t care. That’s just numbers. Lines of codes. Projections of the human mind onto their creations. You’ve got to set your priorities right, Poe. Stop getting in my way! And stop using me to get at the PSR! They don’t care! They still don’t agree with you! And they’re stronger!”

Poe is standing up. His face is very pale, these two red blotches back on his cheeks.

“All right,” he says. “I won’t stand in your way. You can ask your two friends over there to walk you back to your place. I didn’t want to go in anyway. I’ll just take the next ground shuttle to the base, uh. After all, I’ve got some networking to do. Because the Force damn me if I let the K-naann down.”

“Poe,” Finn says, suddenly scared. “Don’t go against the PSR. The government. They can break you.”
“Who cares,” Poe says, “if the whole Galaxy falls?”

He’s standing still, his arms down at his sides, one hand slightly twitching as if he were thinking of reaching to Finn, then stopping himself.

The distance between their bodies – two feet? Three? – feels suddenly like parsecs. Finn’s neck, so recently nuzzled by Poe, is cold.

“Is that it,” Finn asks. “Are we –” it’s hard, so hard to let it out – “are we two done?”

Poe sways like he got hit.

“No,” he whispers, then louder: “No. Maybe hurting is all we’ve got left for each other, but – I can’t. I want – I still want you. But I’m going, Finn. If you still want me, come to me. I can’t reach for you anymore.”

“Poe,” Finn says. “No –” but his voice is breaking, and he knows he’s crying, and Poe is walking away.

Chapter End Notes

I’m going to post the next chapter later today. I just need to edit it a little more!

Thank you for still being there :) I love you!
Sacrifice for the K-naann

Chapter Summary

It's not getting better.
(sorry?)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The gossip holochannels can’t stop talking about their breakup. Some holovid a passer-by recorded, something low-quality, grainy, twitchy and soundless, turns in loops on their feeds. Them kissing, Poe standing up, talking. Finn shouting. Poe’s whole body so tense it’s nearly vibrating. Poe leaving.

Stan’s eyes are accusing, but he doesn’t act upon it. Rannel is happy even if he tries to hide his glee. He spins the story into what he thinks best, and soon everyone speaks of the bitter, damaged, unstable pilot and the PR golden boy who got away before it was too late.

Finn watches Rannel do it and doesn’t protest, nor does he accept any interview on the subject. It’s good for you, they tell him. Dameron is a dangerous man to be seen with. He’s showing up more and more on the illegal holochannels, poisoning the opinion with his madman droid theories, his idealistic, human-centric views on alien psyches and his suicidal calls to holy war on the First Order. Don’t reach to him, don’t forgive him, he’s the bad guy.

Each day, Finn feels dirtier. Sadder. Lonelier.

One day it becomes too much and he rides to the base, bodyguards in tow. He ostensibly visits the Stormtroopers, bringing Auderd and Sebvaux to tears of boredom while the three of them inspect, in detail, each and every one of the ships the Stormtroopers are rehabilitating. Finally, he manages to leave the bodyguards to their drinks at the officers’ mess when he makes known his intention of going back to the rehabilitated ships in the afternoon.

He fucks Poe on a pile of discarded cockpit upholstery in the corner of a hangar. Fucks him, because it’s all they’ve left. Fucks him, because it’s all he wants. Because he tried with others, a few times, more notably with Sebvaux who’s gorgeous and big and black and nothing like Poe, and he couldn’t even come.

Wexley corners him when he’s about to leave the base. Looms over him, taller and broader than ever, hands closed into fists, rage etched into his features. Then he steps back and growls, turning his back to Finn: “Poe would hate it if I did anything to you. Fuck him. Or you.”

//

One month passes, then two. The gossip holos can’t leave Poe and Finn’s story alone, spin wild tales upon wild tales around it. They’re lurid and detailed and nothing like the truth.

Finn manages to catch one of Poe’s unauthorised podcasts and shuts it in the middle, so violent the attacks are against the government, and so chilling the tales of the Outer Rim war.
Rumours begin to circulate about young men leaving the Republic, even about pilots defecting with their ships. Nothing is officially told about it. Finn’s orders are to deflect any hint of question on the subject in interviews.

He still fucks Poe, hiding in cockpits, in hangars, occasionally, even, in Poe’s quarters. It brings out things he’s not sure he likes in himself. He can’t help the possessiveness and the near rage, the need to fuse their bodies together and make Poe his and his alone in their coupling as he’ll never be elsewhere. The need, also, to punish Poe for all that he’s made that makes Finn’s life feel wrong.

He can’t help grasping his hips so hard he knows it’s going to leave bruises. Can’t help biting, can’t help clutching his neck, pressing his palm hard against his face, twisting Poe’s head to take his mouth in a hard, devouring kiss. He pins Poe down, blocking his arms behind his back and watching the painful twist of his shoulders as he sets to pound his ass too deep, too fast. He pushes his head down into the X-Wing seat they find themselves in, watches him head down, ass up, immobilised and moaning.

And Poe, Force damn him, Poe doesn’t stop him. If he said no, even once, Finn would halt there, at once, mid-fuck, even. But Poe is turned on, so turned on that the physicality of the fucking was never that good before. Poe bucks and fights under him, and moans in ecstasy when he’s made to yield. If Finn slaps, hits even, Poe howls in pain but it becomes pleasure and the sounds he makes grow even louder. Poe begs for more, harder, faster, arches his back and bares his teeth, “make me come,” he says, “make me come so hard, Finn,” and then he does, like a comet, and falls back down boneless on the seat, clutches at the sides to steady himself as Finn finishes inside him, wild and heavy over Poe.

But then they rarely kiss. They never cuddle and Poe never waits before standing up and putting his clothes back on, Finn’s come still inside him or splattered on his skin, marks of their hard fucking just blossoming.

“Is it worth it?” Finn asks one day as Poe is sitting up, absentmindedly fingerling a spreading bruise on his collarbone. “What I’m doing to you.”

Poe doesn’t even hesitate. “Yes,” he says, unsmiling. “Of course.”

He raises a hand to cup Finn’s cheek, tenderly, trails his fingers slowly over his jaw, across his lips.

It’s the sweetest gesture Poe has made in a very long time and it makes Finn realise how much they’ve lost. Poe spooning him as they both fall asleep. Poe taking his time to kiss a trail from lips to neck to nipple to navel to cock. Poe’s tongue in his ass, his fingers, his cock there, Poe, intense and passionate but tender, ever so tender.

He misses it, so much, and doesn’t know how to ask for it anymore.

Another day Poe twists to look behind, seconds after Finn has come, his dick only beginning to soften inside.

“But have you spoken to Statura? They’re dying over there, the K-naann. Dying of hunger and illness, routes closed, and the First Order is winning.” Then he bites his lip, grimaces and shakes his head, saying: “I’m sorry. This is not about it, isn’t it? What we have here, out of time, out of war, nothing to do with the rest of our lives. I’m sorry.”

Maybe by now Finn would talk to Statura. He’s been reminded how Poe can burn for a cause he
deems right, however hopeless. And these people, these Force-sensitive, pacific people *are* dying at the hands of their common enemy.

But Statura doesn’t call as often as before. It’s Rannel Finn sees now, here to tell him what to say, how to look on holo, how to serve the Republic. And if Finn still manages to do it with his own words, even to slip in one of his own thoughts sometimes, why do they feel like they’re being dirtied by the rest?

But Rannel, whom he’s beginning to despise, still talks for Statura who’s done so much for him and who’s the wise one. And the public, the fans still love him, and the love he gives in return still buoyed him. He goes on.

“Dameron has been seen in Central, more than a few times,” Aunderd confides one day.

Finn didn’t know. It hurts.

“He was seeing Estagnol Monady, it seems,” Sebvaux chimes in. “Did you know Montady used to make porn before?” She chuckles. “As a filmmaker, of course. He hasn’t got the physique. Now, your friend Dameron…”

“Come on, he’s not his friend anymore,” Aunderd says with a leer. “And of course what they were doing together might be much darker than, huh, innocent porn. Those damn illegal vids have to originate somewhere, don’t they? And the way they spread, some professional has to be involved.”

Poe and Stan, Finn thinks. Porn? Sex on camera? He wants to howl. Doesn’t know the word for the ugly, twisted feeling that rages inside.

//

The lieutenant of the Twenty-Three dies.

Here is how it happened, they tell Finn afterwards. He was getting out of jail for the third time, and Dameron should have been there to take him to the Stormtrooper rehab school. But he wasn’t, and the Lieutenant managed to slip away.

These Stormtroopers, they’ve got a knack to find the seediest places in the city, they say. They hook up with the worst kind of people. It’s good that they’re locked in the rehab centre. That’s for their own good.

“They own good,” Finn echoes, a bitter taste in his mouth.

“He killed himself,” they say. “He was too damaged. Didn’t know how to deal with freedom.”

They show him holos of the corpse. Lips coloured orange, even in death, by continuous abuse of Seppa sap – he must have picked up the habit in jail and used makeup to conceal the marks, because Finn didn’t notice them before.

“He took a very high dose during his last hours,” they say. “The brands you find out of jail are much more potent. But he didn’t overdose. Seppa might have helped him strengthen his resolve, though.”

He slit his wrists. That’s how he died.

The Lieutenant, Finn thinks. Finn never knew his ID. And he never picked up a new name. Nor was he given one.
“FN-0156,” Phasma says when Finn gives her the news. “As a Lieutenant, he could have picked up a name, but he always seemed reticent.”

“He was in the Finalizer, then? Under your command?”

“For a while, as a cadet. I never knew him that well. He bled to death, you say.”

“He killed himself.”

“Huh. Did you witness it?”

“No, but it seems quite obvious.”

“Are you sure? I’ll give you that he was unhinged. Freedom’s not easy. You both had something in common, you know?”

“Really.”

“You and him, you had a conscience, even after we tried our best with conditioning. Only you’re strong enough to know what to do with it. Fifty-Six, it only made him hate what he had to do. And hate himself, of course. Here, it made him amenable to the most extreme beliefs. Violent, anti-Human ones.”

“Yet you don’t think he committed suicide?”

“Eight-Seven, if there’s one thing we make sure is internalised after conditioning, it is the strongest possible sense of self-preservation. You don’t belong to yourself and so you don’t kill yourself for selfish purposes. Even now, whatever happens, would you take your own life?”

Finn searches inside, catching the thread in his mind, realising how he turned that particular compulsion into a sense of self-worth. No, he wouldn’t kill himself, not even if he couldn’t – if Poe – fuck. He hates to even think about that, and he hates to find that his psyche, even now, is shaped by what the Order wanted of him.

Phasma nods. “Once you know they’re here, all the things they did to you,” she says in a voice that’s nearly soft, “you can turn them to your own purposes. I think you manage it quite well.”

“So you think he was murdered?”

She remains silent. Her eyes are hard, watching something behind Finn’s shoulder, and he remembers that Auderd and Sebvaux are here.

If Poe had been where he should, Finn thinks, the Lieutenant would still be alive. And if he was here right now, he’d make someone Finn could turn his anger on. They could have a row, lance the wound, and then, maybe, Poe could help him make sense of this mess.

“Where’s Poe?” he asks. “Why wasn’t he at the jailhouse?”

“Right now he’s in space,” Sebvaux says.

You fucker, Finn thinks. You fled and you didn’t even think of telling me. You coward.

“He was ordered up,” Phasma says. “This morning. And he wasn’t at the jailhouse because FN-0156 got released a few hours early.”

“Stormtroopers keep doing things they shouldn’t,” Auderd says. “Going where they shouldn’t.”
Speaking of things they don’t know. It’s a pity that lieutenant died. Could happen again, another death.”

//

Stormtroopers keep defecting from the First Order. Not in a massive, Phasma-like wave anymore. A trickle, a squad here, a platoon there, two troopers hidden in a freighter the next time. It still totals up to impressive numbers on Akhios.

They always ask Finn where to go.

“It would look bad,” Rannel tells him, “if they refused the security of the Republic worlds when the Resistance is acting so recklessly.”

“If the new defectors went to the rehab school,” Sebvaux says, “it would benefit all the Stormtroopers.”

Finn complies, even though the school feels more and more like a prison.

//

And then everything goes to shit.

“Why didn’t you tell us!” Auderd yells. “Fucking hell, Finn, something of that magnitude, that’s treason!”

Auderd was never polite and has never really understood how to be friendly, but Finn never saw him lose control like that. He’s red in the face, his shirt is inside out and he looks like he’s been drinking, or like he drank so much caf he can’t refrain his hands from shaking. Or both.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, forcing himself to calmness. “Lieutenant Auderd, speaking of treason is a serious matter.”

“Fucking hell! Where’s that fucker?”

“Who, Auderd.”

“Dameron! Siths in the Void, right now you’re with him or with us! Choose!”

Finn feels suddenly nauseous. Or scared? Both. “Poe? What’s happening?”

“Come on. You really don’t know? He didn’t tell you?”

“He’s at the base, I imagine. He was supposed to, last time he shared his schedule. He isn’t? Or he’s in space? Wait, yes. I think he told me he’d fly up soon.”

Now that Finn thinks about it, there was something strange in the way Poe told him. A last-minute modification, he said, something that would keep him away for a long time. They’d gone back to a sweeter kind of lovemaking afterwards, and when they were done, Poe kissed him, lingering, clinging to him like he never wanted to let go. He seemed on the verge of saying something, then shook his head and went back to kissing.

“Well didn’t you say!” Auderd yells, startling Finn.

“Well should I tell you? You’re not his bodyguard and even if you had any reason to care I’m damn sure the high command knows about his missions!”
“You don’t know, uh. You really don’t know. Not even about the broadcast?”

“What broadcast? Auderd, that’s enough. You know I don’t watch the illegal holo.”

“And the legal?”

“Not tonight, no. I didn’t. I was sleeping right now, if you wanna know. It’s not even six, for fuck sake.”

“Fuck,” Auderd says. He’s massaging compulsively his receding hairline and looking harrowed. “I think you’d better watch.”

He gets a datakey out and connects it to Finn’s projector. Poe jumps out, lifesize, the image of professional quality. Poe is in Republic blue, in his whole flying gear, the Commander insignia very apparent on his collar and on the helmet he keeps under his arm.

“They hijacked the holo last evening,” Auderd says. “All channels, which takes skill and a lot of security clearances. I’ll kill the motherfucker who managed that.”

Far away in the Outer Rim, holo Poe is saying, there are whole planets dying. Same old tune, you’re going to say. Dameron and his crusades for aliens and droids, when everyone would rather care of the threat on the civilised people of the Republic. Still, they are people. Listen. Watch. I won’t lie, I’m hoping it’s going to make it harder for you to ignore.

At first it’s only audio, with a close-up of Poe’s tense, silent face as visual. Something that sounds like a ship comm. ‘We hoped to stay out of your war. But now we see the First Order has chosen for us. Help us, Republic Commander. We’re under blockade. We’re starving. Dying.’

“A made-up voice,” Auderd says. “Human. We don’t know why Dameron didn’t use the aliens’ real ones. Because the K-naann certainly exist, we have proof.”

Then the images come. A civilian freighter inside a swarm of TIEs and two First Order frigates above, the freighter being taken to pieces, bit by bit. And suddenly the frigates bursting up, a TIE exploding, others, one by one, annihilated or disabled, and it feels like the camera is doing the shooting. Finn finds himself cheering inside.

“That’s what I saw, the first time I found them, Poe says. That’s me shooting at the First Order. Against the Republic’s orders, to be clear. I shouldn’t have been there at all.

The visual shifts to an astroport, and then to close-ups of some strange-looking, ash-coloured non-humans.

Here they are. The people who’re dying. K-naann, they call themselves. Not that easy on the human eye, are they? And whatever we like to say, it’s Humans who control the Republic. Humans of the Republic against Humans of the First Order. Poe sighs, appears to hesitate. I hope I’ll still convince you. To tell you the truth, I had a hard time parsing their expressions the first time I landed. Couldn’t even tell they were starving. They look huge, don’t they? Look how they dwarf my astromech.

“That fucker,” Auderd says. “That’s a fucking good touch. That astromech of his is the cutest little asshole of a droid I’ve ever seen.”

Sure enough, BB-8 is making nice with one of the huge non-humans, letting himself be prodded by the tentacle-like limbs, extending all sorts of tools, whirling and beeping giddily.

When they look lumpy like that, Poe continues, they’re very young. Look at them. They’re like our
own kids, like the kids of all intelligent, open-programmed species, really. Very curious, always prodding and exploring. Ta-myoe here fell in love with BB-8. But here’s the thing. Ta-myoe, they might look lumpy but they’re not fat enough. And see how their limbs shiver? At first I thought it was just how they are. But they can’t even follow BB-8’s pincers, look. That shiver, it means if nothing gets done they’re dying. Because they’re lacking some necessary nutrient the K-naann can’t produce in this system.

The camera zooms in and the way BB-8 is being extra-careful, extra-slow, becomes obvious. To Finn it’s heartbreaking.


The Resistance has been doing all it could to break the First Order blockade that strangles them. All it could. But they don’t have one hundredth of the Republic fighting power. Nor its funds. All they could do is postpone the inevitable, and right now if they remain alone they won’t postpone it for long.

The image goes back to Poe and zooms on his face. The lighting and the three-quarters pose are perfect to set off the angle of his clean-shaven jaw, his strong nose, the perfect wave of his hair. He’s so gorgeous, Finn thinks, knowing half the holo-watching population must have thought the same yesterday evening. That jaw, those sinuous, kissable lips, the front teeth, slightly uneven, barely showing but making him look younger, more innocent than he really is. The dark, focused, intense eyes.

I’ve tried to tell the high command for so long. Pleading. Begging them to intervene. I’d have thrown myself at the feet of Director Statura, who was once my superior and a comrade in arms, if I could only have reached him. The thing is, I couldn’t. Tolonda is but one system among so many others, they tell me. Don’t bother. We can’t save them all.

But when shall we decide we should save some of them at least? If we’re closed on ourselves, never helping anybody, who’s going to come to our help? And I’m not calling for a Galaxy-sized assault on the First Order. I’m just saying we should give a species the means to feed themselves, to heal in peace. I’m just asking for help in breaking a blockade.

He blinks, shakes his head and looks straight at the camera. He seems tired, Finn notices. It’s a good look for what he’s trying to achieve.

Same old thing, again. I’m like a broken projector stuck on a loop. Here’s a last argument, however. You think you’re safe, here inside your heavily guarded borders. Well, everywhere else, there are Knights of Ren. You’ve heard of them? Dark Side Force users, well-trained. Oh, they’re not interested in reinstalling the Empire, they don’t want the hassle of the everyday ruling of a whole Galaxy. But they’ve built small festering bases everywhere, hard to find, as numerous as the stars, which they don’t rule, don’t administrate, but where they exert their power. They like power. Chaos. I don’t think it’s a good life, life under the Knights. It could happen, even inside the Republic. They’re strong. They’ll breach our border, sooner or later.

He smiles, a sad smile that nonetheless manages to convey hope. The camera zooms out and reveals another figure beside him, robed and hooded.

The K-naann, the so-called aliens we’re trying to save, they could save us in turn. And I’m going to let someone else explain.

Please don’t expose Rey, Finn thinks. She doesn’t deserve to become a target.
The figure at Poe’s side steps forward and pushes back the hood. He’s bearded, grey-haired. Finn exhales. Skywalker, and everyone in the Republic will know him because of the cybernetic hand and the Jedi-reminiscent attire.

I’m Luke Skywalker, he says. And I bear the responsibility of the loss of so many Force users. Because of my mistakes, so many future Jedis were killed by Kylo Ren. And for the longest time I thought I was alone, the last with enough training and Force-sensitivity to fight the monsters he was creating, his Knights. Who knows if there are others like me? I thought. I how could I resent that they’re hiding, after all that happened? But it turns out Poe Dameron found the K-naann, I won’t say by chance because I very much believe the Force guided him. And the K-naann, all of them, are Force-sensitive, trained, and leaning towards the Light.

There’s a lightsaber at Skywalker’s belt and he’s now laying his mechanical hand on the hilt.

They’re not a warfaring species, as you surely understand. Maybe lightsabers will never fit them. But it’s not warriors we need the most. We need Light to balance the Dark, and that’s what is at stake. If we don’t let them die alone.

He nods to Poe, who dips his head down, breathes in a large gulp of air and then looks back up, the camera focusing again on him alone.

People of the Republic, he says. Maybe all of this, me invading your quiet hours with that holo, was because I needed your absolution. No. Your adhesion. I don’t want to be doing it just for myself, for my personal beliefs. We need to stand united, and yet this is not a call to arms. Not anymore, because there’s no time. I’m acting right now, against my orders and against all the political decisions the Directors have taken in the name of the Republic, even against a military man’s basic code of conduct. When you’ll be watching this, a strong Republic fleet will be flying towards the Tolonda system under my command. We’ll meet with the Resistance forces and put everything we have to try and break the blockade and secure the area.

“You didn’t know?” Auderd asks Finn. “You can swear, under truth serum if needed, that you hadn’t even an inkling of what Dameron was doing?”

“I hadn’t,” Finn says, a bitter taste on his tongue. “He must have thought I wasn’t trustworthy enough.”

It hurts, even when he doesn’t know what he’d have done with the knowledge. He can’t help seeing again Poe’s pleading, searching, pained expression when they kissed for the last time. What was he looking for, that he didn’t find?

“Yes,” Sebvaux says, chiming in for the first time. “You look heartbroken. He really let you down, uh.”

The Republic is still secure, holo Poe is saying meanwhile. The forces I’ve left in the Core Worlds bases are strong and skilled enough to patrol and protect the borders.

“Is that true?” Finn asks.

“Yeah,” Sebvaux says. “But he’s calculated his move very well. We can’t both protect the borders and go after him.”

The squadrons going with me were ordered to, Poe says, either directly when they were under my command or by a falsified order. I hope I chose them well, among pilots, gunners, crewmen and techs I have a chance to convince we’re doing the right thing. Because, let me tell you, I need people
who fight with belief right now. But I didn’t ask them to choose, and they won’t appear in this holo to tell you what they think of it, because if someone is responsible for this it’s me, only me. All they know is that they were ordered there.

“False orders. He might lose some sympathisers here,” Auderd says. “Dunno if it will be enough.”

“Yes,” Sebvaux says. “And he’s admitting to what could be interpreted as a military coup. Any court martial would convict him. If we catch him he’s dead.”

“I think he’s lying, though,” Auderd says. “I’m betting his officers knew. We were underestimating his influence in the navy.”

Another zoom to Poe’s face, to his furrowed eyebrows, to a grin that’s a little too toothy to feel completely nice.

You’re my witnesses, you, citizens watching this holo. None of my pilots are to answer for this. If I don’t die up there, I’ll come back to whatever trial awaits me. I know the least that can happen is that I lose my commission. I’m prepared for much worse. Let the others come back home without a blame.

So you were saying goodbye, Finn thinks. You fucker, whatever the outcome I lose you, and you didn’t even let me know.

But Poe’s not done.

However, some of our forces aren’t Resistance nor Republic. They’re the only ones who were told, who were given a choice.

It chills Finn. I know, he thinks. Who you’re talking about. I wonder if Phasma followed you.

Ex-Stormtroopers, Poe says. Ex-First Order pilots. Some of them only want peace, some are too scarred to fight. But others kept insisting for me to find them a place in the fighting forces and I explained them everything of the present situation. If you’re watching this holo, it means that those who refused to come among them chose not to betray me. The others are with us, some of the pilots flying their TIEs when we could recover them, with their own astromechs, and the rest using the ships they rehabilitated and tested. They’re good pilots. They’ll fight well. We need them. And if they survive, they’ll be given another choice, because choice is the most important thing we can offer them, a choice between going back with me, although I’d be surprised if they wanted to, going to the Resistance, or getting lost in the Outer Rim.

He pauses. His mouth has turned soft, sad. Please, he says. Respect their right to choose. Respect them. They’ll be dying for you, too.

“You fucker!” Finn can’t help bursting out. “Do you know, do you only realise what it means for those you’ve left behind?”

Because there’s no chance anyone in the Republic will hear Poe’s last sentences. Because it means persecution, prison, maybe death for the thousands of Stormtroopers who are still on Akhios, for all these people Finn convinced to come here. Poe had no right, no right at all to offer such a poisoned choice to people who had so much to lose.

“Exactly,” Sebvaux says. She’s watching Finn, cold, evaluating. “How can we trust your people now?”

My people, Finn thinks. I’m not immune.
Wish us good luck. Wish the K-naann good luck, Poe says, and the holo shuts down. He ended his speech with the Stormtroopers, calling attention to them. A fucking damn mistake, unless it is a callous calculation.

“The ones still here are those who didn’t follow him, me included,” Finn says. “The last thing the Republic needs now is a witch hunt.”

“But the citizens are afraid. Dameron let TIE pilots loose, pilots who know the inside of the Republic worlds. What’s more, among those who stayed some refused to betray him and we don’t know who they are.”

How low will you make me bend, Finn thinks. Because I’ll do anything for them.

“Those who followed him are under his responsibility. He’ll answer for them. I’m answering for those who chose to stay.”

“We need you to do more than this, Finn. You’ll have to condemn Dameron’s actions officially. Make the holo as spectacular and heartfelt as his own.”

“I will,” Finn says. “Believe me, it’s gonna be heartfelt.”

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It never was Poe’s ambition to become an admiral. Not even an acting one. Commanding whole fleets was never his dream. Being an admiral means you don’t lead, not in what matters. You stay at the rear, in ponderous destroyers you don’t even pilot. You let others die for you.

You delegate rotations scheduling and order the movements of whole wings. You put the most reticent Republic pilots to a kind of extended patrolling duty, because there’s still the threat of First Order forces diverting themselves from the Tolonda sector and understanding the weakened state of the Republic. You try to ignore the guilt. You try to compensate for the loss it causes in the forces escorting the K-naann freighters.

You think of Finn, and the temptation to step into your X-Wing and give yourself the worst, most dangerous mission becomes stronger. You type a letter, realise how much it reads like your last will and erase it.

What you do instead is forgoing sleeping in exchange for long hours spent on maps and diagrams, trying to untangle the rats’ nest of the blockade. Every hyperlane exit, every gravity well, each node is booby-trapped. There are destroyer clusters behind every gas giant. Blurred ships cruising the sector’s routes in non-linear patterns you have to decipher.

At least Poe’s not alone, and the help is the best he could have. He’s got a whole entourage of adoring droids now, the ex-First Order astromechs having made a bid through BB-8 to be accepted on the deck with him. Their combined calculating power is like nothing Poe ever encountered, better than his own flagship’s tactical computer. And they know the enemy’s algorithms.

“We’ve isolated the most likely Knights’ base locations,” Poe says. “Thanks to you, guys. And contrary to what I thought, there is a main base in the sector, well, a web of five, not the hundreds of little interconnected points we imagined at first. Still, theoretical models aren’t enough. We need recon.”

He hates that. The most likely base is so close to the event horizon of a moderate black hole it’s a
damn suicide to send most of the usual Republic scouts. Some of the Resistance’s seasoned pilots, Snap, Karé if she can be spared, will be going, but that’s not enough.

And they have to act fast, because there’s some evidence of hostile landing on Pannlaal. In a matter of weeks, one of two months in the least pessimistic simulation, nobody remains to be saved on the ground.

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“Poe, you’re not going,” Wexley says, predictably. “Acting Admiral, remember? You’re done with suicide missions.”

“If you can find anyone skilled enough to take my place I’ll step off,” Poe answers. A few of the TIE pilots would fill in the requirements, but Wexley doesn’t know them well enough to realise it. Poe’s won.

“Thank the Force for X-Wings dashboards,” Poe comms as they take flight, through the private channel only Kun and Wexley can hear. “I was getting mad in that Destroyer.”

“I shouldn’t encourage you,” Wexley says, “but I sympathise. Remind me to retire before I’m promoted to admiral. I don’t want the same tragic ending as yours. A Destroyer deck, urgh.”

“Fuck you, Captain.”

“Nice to have you back, Acting Admiral,” Karé says. “We’re going to cocoon you so well, you precious snowflake, no TIE will come close enough to shoot you.”

“I hate you all. And now let’s shut up, that’s where it gets tricky.”

He makes sure every astromech and nav comp of the group got the nav right, and plunges in.

Tricky.

Disorienting.

They’re all there, all his scouts, still hidden.

Still blurred, an improvement on the First Order’s algorithm, but what’s blurring when all data are dancing, distorted by the pull of the black hole?

Tempting.

Who knew black holes were sirens?

It pulls at him.

It pulls at the others.

It pulls at his will. It’s just there, beautiful and terrible, spouting light from its centre, swirling and calling, the event horizon so tantalizingly close.

Maybe he’ll fly in, no more Finn no more PSR no more Poe no death that he can feel just a distortion of everything so extreme he won’t be himself anymore.
“BB-8,” he whispers. “Do you feel it too?”

He’s never heard BB talk like that. Distorted, too, singing in rhythm with the black hole’s pulse. Of course, it’s an alteration of the data flow, something Humans barely grasp but that makes the droids’ entire existence.

“Leader to everyone,” he tells to the comm. “Beware, the droids feel it worse. Sending the edge coordinates manually. Watch them.”

He’d fly in, even while he’s trying to prevent the others to, if the distortion felt whole, if there wasn’t that tiny artefact, floating just there, stable. The Knights’ base.

“Here they are, guys. On our three high. Sending the coordinates. Dunno how well the scans will work in such an environment.”

They work. He has to rouse up BB from his trance periodically, has to fine-tune and regularly reset the probes, but they work. Now that he’s got an objective, it’s easier to focus. Black thing over there, not seeing them, giving away its size, the size of its crew, its armament and its shields. Step by step, already half-way done.

It’s beautiful, he realises. Sleek and black and scary and beautiful. Cold. He must be tired, because it’s almost like he can feel it breathing, that raspy, enhanced breathing of the Knights’ – of Kylo Ren’s mask.

It seeps into his mind, that breathing, makes him cold inside, and yet it calls to him. He’s had the same kind of headache after the Finalizer, he remembers absentmindedly, his brain pounding and shrivelling, or so it felt, from Ren violating him. But he’s stronger now, he can approach and they won’t catch him, it’s not Ren, it’s his Knights, weaker, unprepared.

Yes, he’ll go see them closer, he’ll ignore the freezing cold – he’s pushed the heat on high, why doesn’t it work better? He’ll ignore the strange numbing of his senses, the loss of – what was his name, the guy he loves?

“Poe,” his comm blurts. “What are you doing? You’re entering the limit of the blurring efficiency. Poe!”

“I’ll go see them closer,” he says.

“Poe! Answer me! BB-8, what’s the matter with him? Is that the black hole?”

BB-8’s still wonky, Poe thinks. He’s the one affected by the black hole, I’m not. Did he press the comm button to say that aloud?

“BB-8! Stop him! Fucking hell, Poe, you’re flying straight to their base! Wake up! Answer!”

What’s happening. Why is it so hard to think. He’s been through this already. Couldn’t resist. Let everything out for Ren. Again?

“Poe!”


“Aurek one,” he says, remembering to press the comm on. “Stiletto.”

“Thank the Force! Falcon’s coming in, Poe. Hold on.”

“To tow you out of here. Tractor beam. What are you doing, fuck?”

“Dunno. Easier that way.”

“Listen, Poe, BB-8. Disable the shields.”

“What?”

“Shields. Disable. Falcon’s tractor beam is too weak with your shields on. Ah, fuck, Falcon, it’s not working! Can’t you do something?”

Poe’s mind clears, for some measure of clearing. He checks out his scan, horrified at how close he’s to the Knights base, and initiates the U-turn.

*I’m shielding you from them*, seeps into his mind. It’s Rey taking hold of his mind, well-meaning but vaguely nauseating. *Trying to. It’s not easy. Ren seems to have carved some path into your mind for them to use. Disable your shields, Poe, while your mind’s still clear enough. I won’t be able to ward you that well for that long. Your mind isn’t easy to navigate without inflicting damage.*

He disables the shields, hating the naked feeling, then tries all he can to resist the renewed onslaught of darkness upon his mind. Now that he sees them, knows what they’re about, he can fight them. The easiest way to do it is make himself blank. Pass out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for reading along! I told you it was a weird fic.

Please consider saying hi in the comments if you’ve read that far! Let me know what works (if any). <3
“At least we got a better understanding of what their main weapon is,” a female voice says close to Poe. “There was this tale of a world where they keep some kind of small rodent in their mines, because the rodents are highly sensitive to the noxious gases. I think we’ve found our rodent. Dammit, you laser-brained flyboy, you can’t help it, can you?”

He moans.

“Heads hurts,” he says, keeping his eyes closed. “Please, too much noise. I’m gonna –”

“Shit,” someone else says. “He’s gonna throw up again.”

Small hands catch him by his shoulders, direct his face sideways, hold him through the tremors and the puking and the heaving.

“Leia,” he says.

“You’re coherent, Dameron?”

“Huh.”

“Somewhat responsive, at least.”

“Lower the lights, please? Wanna t’open m’eyes.”

“If they were any lower, we’d be in the complete dark. Here, try that.” A cool, wet cloth on his forehead. He tries to lift his left eyelid, the more reactive. Okay. He’s okay.

There are at least two people chatting somewhere in the room and it makes his head spin.

“Noise,” he says.

They stop.

“I think there are too many people in this room,” Leia’s voice says. “Kalonia, Rey, is he stable?”

“Nothing scary beyond these ugly scars in his mind,” Rey says. “But they’re not new, he doesn’t need me anymore. The headache is a disproportioned defence. It’s going to pass.”

There’s a feeling of great power, restrained, touching his mind. A soft caress that could break him if it tried. It’s tender, though. Attentive. Take care, it says into his mind.

“Physically, he’s alright,” Kalonia says, which makes Poe snort, and then moan in pain.
"Then I’m going to stay alone with him. Everyone out, please."

There’s some kind of peace seeping through him. The headache is still here, but not that important, and he feels his shoulders relax, his heartbeat wind down.

"You’re using the Force," he says. "Right now."

"I’ve always found it easier when I don’t have too many people around," Leia says. "Poe, son, that decision to lead the recon flight, was is rational Admiral thinking or a suicide impulse?"

Poe forces himself to open his eyes more frankly, fights the nausea to take a look around the room. They’re alone.

"Both," he says, too tired for the niceties. "That black hole made it necessary to use an excellent team of pilots. Individually skilled and working well together. There were very few options that didn’t include me."

"And if it weren’t for you, everyone might have ended beyond the event horizon, as I was told. But…" Leia prompts.

"But I probably could have switched with Swift, one of the TIE pilots. He’s very good and does well in a team. Kun could have led. Her trajectory close to the event horizon was sane, she took over R5-H1 when the droids began to disconnect. And now that I’m thinking of it, Rey would have filled in the slot very well, too, although she’s much less expendable than I am. Thing is, I hate that leading an army job, General. I’d have given anything to feel the commands of my ship in my hands again."

"Except that you are not expendable right now, Acting Admiral. Not at all."

Poe groans. "Guess you’re right. If only because we’ll need a scapegoat later for the Republic."

"Not because of that. You’re a good leader."

"But I hate it. It’s the ordering people around, without doing anything yourself – ah, I mean the physical work, no offense intended. How did you do it for so long?"

"Leaders who love power too much are to be feared, you know. It’s good to feel reluctant. But yes, I probably enjoy the political fight and the leading people around more than you do. You’re a better wartime tactician, though. When you manage to hold that masochistic streak at bay. Hold on? We need you."

"Yeah," Poe says. "So, how do we do it? Looks like at close range, I’m not going to be the only one affected by the Knights. We need the K-naann on our ships to ward us as Rey did for me. Or even better. Am I wrong in thinking a team, a higher number of Force users together would mean a better protection?"

"You should ask Luke, or maybe Rey. I’m told I’m strong with the Force but I’m not well-learned. But if I use my personal experience to answer, I think so."

"It means fishing the K-naann out of Pannlaal, through the blockade."

"You’re forbidden to try, Dameron."

Poe smirks. "Force dammit, I’d really have loved doing it. I even had a bet with Pava, how many breaks we could manage. Okay, okay. I’ll remain sitting on that fucking deck. The TIE pilots, now…"
“You trust them?”

“Ah. I’d think they’d already have betrayed us if they wanted to. Honestly, though, I miss Phasma’s expertise on the subject. Too bad she chose to stay at Akhios.”

“She’s the reason the others who stayed kept mute on our movements.”

“Yes, she is. And it reassures me that she’s there, for Finn as well as the others. Things are very volatile right now. Well. TIE pilots, with all due respect, are a bunch of madmen. Some of them very skilled madmen. Stop that, General, I know what you’re thinking, no need to say it. Anyway they’re ideally suited to individual flights around enemy patrols. Their modified TIEs aren’t the best, but at least they’ll accommodate a passenger. And if necessary I’d even lend Black One to Swift if he wasn’t so enamoured of his fucking TIE.”

“You really trust him.”

“I do. He’s that rare kind of First Order soldier who got away with quirks but without damage. Like Lrool or Finn. And by the Stars, what a pilot! I’m glad we never faced each other in a fight. But I trust the others, too. They’ll do well. And, Leia?”

“Poe?”

“When we’re all set up for the blockade break, I’ll lead the attack, if Rey can ward me.”

“Is that the admiral’s decision, or just another way to court death?”

“Piloting Starfighters is what I do best. And that’s where they all expect me to fly. I’ll leave the destroyers to people who know how to handle them. Are you having fun with the suicide questions?”

“The way you left the Republic, you basically sacrificed yourself. Pardon me if I’m a little worried. And you didn’t deny thinking of it during the Knights’ base recon.”

The headache is coming back with a vengeance. Maybe Leia’s Force control is slipping.

“I don’t have much hope left for myself, that’s true,” Poe says, struggling to meet her eyes. “Maybe that’s the scars in my mind Rey was talking about. Sometimes it’s easier, not to have to plan too far into the future. Decisions become more open. But I don’t actively try to kill myself.”

“Look at me and say it again.”

“I won’t commit suicide. Not even suicide by X-Wing.”

Leia’s stare is direct, boring into his eyes. It lasts.

“And suicide by Republic trial?” she asks finally. “They still have a death sentence.”

“It’s a possibility, but we’ve already talked about it. Let’s hope we can sway the opinion enough that they see me, us, as, what was the word Stan used? Saviours?”

“If the Republic decides to make you hang, I’ll acknowledge you as one of us publicly. So that they have to choose between their revenge and their links with the Resistance. I won’t let go of you easily, Poe.” She smiles, shakily. “As for swaying the opinion, there’s something I should tell you: we holorecorded you when we got you out of your ship and during the hours that followed. Luke was by your side and it looked scary. We need to make them understand what Knights are about,
and you’re more photogenic than the K-naann.”

“Even when I’m puking my guts out?”

“Even when you’re puking your guts out and convulsing, trying to stand even though you can’t, and yelling you’ve got to go back there.”

“Shit. Record all you want, uh. The K-naann, too, as long as they agree. There are things all sentients can empathise with.”

Another probing silence. Leia appears to be weighing something. The headache reaches a new high.

“Speaking of holo,” she finally says, “we’ve caught Finn’s new one today. General broadcast on all Republic channels.”

“So he’s free,” Poe says. “It worked.”

“And it looks like he managed to keep the other Stormtroopers out of harm. He was allowed to make a clear difference between those who came here with you and those who stayed. Conveyed quite strongly that the latter are all about peace and a quiet life.”

“I trusted him to do it. He’s great, especially when the subject is close to him. How – how did you think it went?”

“He was excellent. He’s got real leading qualities, this kid. I don’t think the PSR realises it yet, partly because Finn has become quite good at advancing masked, but they’re going to find themselves with a Stormtrooper political faction inside the Republic, a faction with a very charismatic, universally loved leader.”

“But you’re not offering me to watch.”

“You know the deal he would have to do with the PSR was to bring you down. He’s done it, quite violently, and with his own words. He felt genuinely angry. Are you up to watching that?”

That’s for the best, Poe tries and fails to makes himself think.

“I’ve never seen you so sad, Poe. Come on, he’ll come around. The kid can think by himself, that’s evident.”

“Yeah, so he’ll know I’ve manipulated him. And he’ll get tired of us mending the wounds we inflict each other.”

“Does he know you love him?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t tell him.”

“I don’t even know if he’s very clear on the concept, fuck! Ow.”

“Headache? I’m sorry, I don’t have much practice. Come on, Poe. Give Finn more credit. He’s been out of the First Order for a long time.”

“Long enough? What I know is that he isn’t clear at all on the concept of commitment. That or I fucked up so much he’s not interested.”
“That or you weren’t clear enough on your intentions.”

The on and off headache and the remnants of nausea aren’t making Poe’s mood better.

“Anyway I pushed him away. Now that I think of it I’ve kept doing that for the whole time we were sort of together. I – Leia, what did he say about me?”

“You’re sure you want to hear?”

“In your own voice. Not in his. Not right now. I’ll probably be weak and cave in at some point, watch the damn holo. I fucking miss him.”

“Basically, he called you a coward who abused your dominant situation to impress your ideas on the weakest minded Stormtroopers. A snake coiled in the very bosom of the Republic, but if that’s not something he picked up from Statura then I’m a Huttese crime lord. Oh, and he said you were a hypocrite who talks of choice when it’s in his interest, but doesn’t offer the same choice to his own troops or to people close to him.”

“He said that? To people close to him? Fuck.”

“What else could you do, Poe? You tried to protect everyone. Except yourself.”

“Leia, I’ve always tried to preserve his freedom to choose, and when it was the most important, I denied him a choice.”

She doesn’t say anything but there’s a small, dry hand on his forehead, pushing him back onto the cot, helping him close his eyes, and her Force presence becomes more noticeable. She’s not imprinting words into his mind, like the K-naann or Rey, nor, thank the Force, is she trying to read him. She’s just conveying love, sympathy and sadness.

“We are what we are,” she says, as much with her voice as with her mind. “We make choices. Sometimes for others. That’s what leading means. And – I’m sorry about that, son. I’m in the perfect place to tell that it doesn’t always bring happiness.”

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After that it’s but warfare.

Poe makes himself stay on deck for most of the operations.

When his capital ship attacks the main Knights’ base he’s there, in the middle of a whole group of Force-skilled K-naann. He’s there to move the ship through the perils of the black hole, piloting the behemoth by hand when the computers fail, too close to the event horizon to calculate straight. He’s there to order the opening fire, and it’s a question of firepower against firepower, mind power against mind power.

Two K-naann die of exhaustion, possibly of starvation, during the onslaught. But they win.

One by one, each First Order node, each Knights’ nest fall. Kun is sent spinning, S-foils shot, into a star, but ejects on time. Her droid is fried.

“Wellcome,” Poe smirks when she’s safe on board and they’ve hugged for a long time. “You get to enjoy deck life now. Have fun.”

The TIE pilots keep swirling in and out of Pannlaal, braving blockade crossfire, their losses
soberingly high. It doesn’t appear to slow them.

Finally the only obstacle remaining is the thick swarm of Starfighters and frigates all around Pannlaal. They know they’ve lost, without supplies nor bases left, but they don’t surrender.

Black One and BB-8 are waiting, and Poe’s never felt the call of the chase so vividly.

“Black Leader to all wings,” he calls as he takes flight, his blood thrumming in his veins, never wilder. Rey is behind him in the Falcon with Chewbacca, sheltering his mind as she promised. It feels alternatively like the brightest, warmest fire, and like the softest, coolest sunset after a warm desert day.

“Stiletto five to Black Leader,” someone calls – it’s Lewin, Poe remembers, now in a Resistance squadron and still with his Sullustan gunner M’un – “welcome home, Commander.”

Yes, it feels like home. Home isn’t in a place but in the flight, the chase, the moves and the dance, not only of his own craft but of all the wings together.

There aren’t many Knights left in the system, and by now they know they can’t do much against the K-naann warding. Outnumbered, outfighted, the blockade collapses.

“Woah,” Rey says suddenly in Poe’s comm. “Woah. I’m not blocking that. Not sure if I can anyway.”

There’s a surge of something in Poe’s mind, joy, he realises. Gratitude. Grief, underneath.

Thank you, Republic Commander, the words form inside his mind, more careful than they’ve been in the past. Poe looks down, and as he’s skimming atmo there are already ships landing. Large, heavy civilian freighters, more than everything that managed to pass through in several months.

They record everything on holo.

The charred remains of the community centres, where Knights landed and demonstrated the whole range of their darksider powers.

Bodies. Ritual cremations. So many bodies that ritual cremations are made into collective, hasty ones.

Youngsters, pressed tight to each other, their limbs quivering.

Youngsters, coming back to life, eating with that strange smooth slurping motion of theirs. Youngsters with their limbs supple and accurate, slide-running after astromechs and pilots alike.

Adults, their moves more ponderous but no less fluid, trying the commands of a TIE for the first time, then an X-Wing. Pilots of both laughing and egging each other on.

The shock, wonder and joy of a TIE pilot realising she’s Force-sensitive. The same pilot, standing in the centre of a youngsters circle, lifting one, then the other, and another, with the Force.

K-naann, Rriiv’kat, Humans, Sullustans, Mon Calamari, Keshians and so many other species, rebuilding a world together.

Poe, squeezed in Black One’s cockpit together with a sizeable k-naan, teaching them to fly.

Poe, stepping down from Black One’s ladder, hugging pilots, whether Resistance, Republic or the
most touch-ready of the ex-First Order. The ceremony for their fallen comrades, a jagged fragment of
a hull planted into the ground as a memorial, so many names, nicknames, IDs etched on it.

“More than half of our TIE pilots are named here, side by side with Republic and Resistance pilots.”
Poe says to the camera. “Swift is among them, who learned to fly with the First Order, defected, and
was a friend, and the most promising pilot I’ve ever met. Our TIE pilots took the most dangerous job
of all, passing through the blockade every day to ferry supplies and people. Without them there
wouldn’t have been K-naann to ward us against the Knights. We’d all be dead.”

Poe, taking his Starfighter up for an aerobatics demonstration, the awe and pride of his pilots,
watching.

Poe laughing, walking, flying, back to the basics of a propaganda poster boy.

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Each day Resistance pilots are leaving, back to their bases. The Republic squadrons are preparing to
do the same, and some of the TIE pilots, those madmen, decide to follow them, “because commander
Dameron is going with you.”

Rey takes Poe aside.

“Don’t go back to the Republic, Poe,” she says. “Come with us. You’re Force-sensitive, you know?
Or the K-naann couldn’t speak so easily to your mind.”

Poe chuckles. “Yeah, such a high skill level, I’m Force-sensitive like about half of the Human
population. Nothing to brag about.”

“Then come with us to heal. The scars in your mind, Luke says they can get better. It would be less
easy for Ren and his minions to enter, and easier for you to feel good, too.”

“Luke also said that it would be a long, difficult process, didn’t he? Exercises in meditation and self-
awareness, not just bacta for the brain. I don’t have the time.”

“Why are you going? They’ll put you in a cage.”

“At least they won’t sentence me to death.”

It worked, what Stan set himself to do back on Akhios. He decided against another holo storm on the
official channels, settling instead for a steady, subtle flow on the leisure grids, snippets about the K-
naann war going viral, the K-naann soon as well known and loved as the Mon Calamari once were.
Everyone knows about their Force use and the hope they bring to the fight. Everyone is ready to
welcome the fighters who saved them as heroes.

“Nonetheless, they don’t like you. You demonstrated how easy it is to turn the Navy against them.
They fear you.”

“I know. That was the deal. I’d be the scapegoat so that the rest of the military could go home and be
welcomed.”

“Then don’t be! Go to the Resistance! The Republic pilots love you. They’ll follow you there.”

“I’d deny them the choice to come back, after denying them the choice to stay home? No.”

“You pidgu-headed son of a – Poe, they’ll cut off your wings.”
“I know. Or worse.”

“And, and if you’re doing this because of Finn, dammit, you, you should have thought it better before, because you’ve wounded him enough as it is, and you shouldn’t dream that he’ll come back!”

Of course he shouldn’t. And of course some of what he’s doing is because Finn is there. There’s a difference between knowing the two of them are done and yearning with every fibre of his being to see him again, once, even only once.

“You have no right –” he begins, then halts. “I’m sorry. You have every right, he’s your friend. Not mine anymore. And maybe you love him, want him too? Because you both would be great together.”

“Oh,” she says, blushing – blushing? “I – I haven’t talked to him in such a long time, even through canned holos. I love him, sure. Truly, if I was interested in this kind of things, the only one I could think of would be Finn. But I’m not, not really. And I know he doesn’t love me like that. No, Poe, it’s just that I see you willing to let others make you suffer, and – it’s not right, you know, not right at all!”

“It is. It’s the right thing to do. Rey, it’s not easy and you’re not making it easier, so please, let’s stop.”

Later the same day, she challenges him to a run, Black One against her, alone, in the Falcon. Her route, so that the Falcon’s mass can be used to her advantage in gravity wells and long curves. He still wins, because it’s his job to fly. She’d win if she trained half as much as he does.

They step down, exhilarated, laughing. She falls into his arms, both her joy and her grief overflowing into his mind.

“I have so few friends,” she says. “I don’t want to lose you to that place like I’m losing Finn. Please, Poe.”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “It won’t be forever. And Finn will come back to you. He misses you, I know it.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, uploaded in the next minutes: back to the Republic and Finn. I sort of want to tell you not to be too harsh on him... I hope I managed to convey how little leeway he has.

I wrote this fic in one go and separated it in chapters afterwards, and now that I’m rereading it chapter by chapter I realise that this middle part is really heavy on the angst and quite oppressive. It’s going to get worse but I promise that it goes better at some point!
Finn's bonds

Chapter Summary

Between a rock and a hard place

Chapter Notes

As usual, two chapters uploaded at once. Don't forget to read chapter 9!

There’s a kind of official ceremony the day the Republic fleet comes back. What else could they do? They know by now that the war won’t be won without the K-naann. And it’s better to welcome back the young pilots as heroes than to watch them defect, one by one or even massively, to the Resistance.

“They amount to one third of the active fighting fleet,” Statura lets escape in front of Finn as they watch the holo in the official room. “We can’t do without them and their goodwill. Now we just have to make them forget Dameron.”

They found some flight lieutenant willing to play the hero in front of the cameras.

“The K-naann might look strange,” the lieutenant is saying. “A lot like four-tentacled sea – well they look like seafood from my homeworld. But they’re a good people. Joyful, creative – you should see their sculptures! I’m proud to have fought to save their lives.”

The interviewers’ questions, of course, have been carefully vetted, most of them coming directly from the PR team. There aren’t many references to the K-naann’s Force sensitivity even though it’s what makes the Republic care for them, nor to their own participation to the fight. They’re made into those exotic, vaguely primitive aliens the Republic-Resistance coalition came to save.

“Lieutenant Ujelmin, you managed to maintain the Republic squadrons’ identity as well as their highest standards,” the interviewer says, “while you were flying alongside such diverse forces, and even though you were brought there by someone whose loyalties are, shall we say, muddled. Was it hard?”

“It’s true that we were dismayed at first to discover Commander Dameron had falsified his orders,” the Lieutenant says. “I have to say he exposed his motives frankly once we were on the theatre of operations. He kept those who disagreed away from the front, on patrol missions, although a lot of us changed our mind when we witnessed the Knights’ exactions. The discipline and unity of our squadrons were never questioned.”

“Do you excuse Dameron’s crimes, then?”

“He’s proved himself to be an excellent leader, one that I’d have followed everywhere during his campaign. And beyond his charisma I admire his tactics, because our losses were pretty minimal when you realise whom we faced, and how. But on a military and legal standpoint, I have to reprove
his methods stringently. We can’t just have any adventurer using the Republic’s army as their private militia. We all know Dameron has been pretty critical of the PSR actions in the past. What if his next move was to order his squadrons to attack republican targets? To topple down the State?"

“He’s coming back to answer for his actions. In light of the good they made in the course of the war against the First Order, do you think a pardon should be in the cards?’”

The lieutenant’s eyes shift a little. He looks young, fetching, a nice face for a holo close-up. But he isn’t that good, and the way his face blanks when he’s trying to remember his lines is a bit too obvious. He’s also sweating and most probably wishing he were elsewhere. He fought under Poe, and Finn knows very few people managed to avoid hero worship in that situation.

“The positives should definitely be taken into account.” The lieutenant says, mouth drawn in a tight line. “If they weren’t, Dameron could face a death sentence. As it is, I don’t think it would be right to pardon him. There’s no place for adventurers like him in the Republic forces.”

After that they leave the flight lieutenant to his sweating and pan up to a ballet of Starfighters aerobatics, each and every of them from Republic squadrons. They land, finally, and Finn gets a glimpse of a small, separate group of TIEs landing in a corner. So few. He knows some decided to switch to the Resistance, but of the sixty-two that followed Poe, he’s been informed that thirty nine died. Minimal losses, the lieutenant said, but he obviously he wasn’t talking about ex-Order pilots. Cannon fodder, were they, Poe?

The holo doesn’t linger on them, but Finn still sees the heavy ground vehicles circling the landing track, and it’s easy to guess that the pilots will be taken to the Stormtroopers’ quarters at the base, under lock, like the others. Fuck you, Poe.

“Ah. Finally,” the second of the three directors, Yvonk Gilles, says. He’s wearing an angry, giddy expression, related, Finn realises, to the holo zooming onto Black One, landing alone. There are ground troops aligned at the edge of the track, blasters out, framing a datapad-wielding officer in dress uniform. Behind them all, two pilots in the Resistance’s orange flightsuits are standing. Poe steps down the ladder, then waits for BB-8 to disembark. One of the Resistance pilots jogs forward, pressing through the lines. Blasters swivel and aim. Poe shouts, an order that manages to freeze the troopers.

It’s Kun. The holo zooms on her contorted face – anger, anguish? Poe says something, sighs so deeply the sag of his shoulders is unmistakable. He turns to look at Black One, then pats Kun on the back, gets an arm squeeze in exchange, sigh again and steps towards the troopers and the officer in front.

Kun climbs up Black One’s ladder. An unknown astromech takes BB-8’s place.

“Why?” Gilles asks angrily. “How can the Resistance put its hand on Dameron’s ship? I’ve been told she’s a modified model, a costly one.”

“But an old one,” Statura says. “And I’m afraid we can’t get in their way. They own that ship.”

“At least we get to keep the droid.”

“I’m afraid not. It’s Dameron’s personal property, though it’s a bit murky. Formerly, it was Resistance equipment, but the Resistance lets their high functioning droids choose.”

“Ah. Well. Dameron himself will not escape us, let’s take comfort in the thought. Look at that.”
Poe stops one pace from the officer and removes his lifesaving gear, handing it to the officer’s aide. Then he takes the officer’s datapad, keys something in and gives it back. The camera they’re using is obviously a high-performance one because while they’re very far from the scene they’re recording, they’re still catching Poe’s drawn face and the way his lips are pressed thin. He grew out a short but thick, silver-streaked beard that doesn’t hide the fact that he’s lost weight and possibly sleep if Finn judges by the circles around his eyes.

“What are they doing?” Finn asks, because the tension is nerve-wracking, both in the room and from the silent holo, the commenter having kept mute since Poe’s landing.

“Dameron’s keying in his personal code, so that all his clearances can be wiped. He’s lost his commission and his right to pry into our systems with it.”

“Already?” Finn asks. “I thought there’d be a trial. Isn’t that what the lieutenant seemed to imply?”

“There’s been one.” Gilles says. “Ujelmin didn’t know.”

“But I thought – of course I’m not a specialist, but I believed the accused had to be present for a trial to happen?”

“Not when the evidence is abundant enough for a trial and the accused has fled. Dameron confessed his crime publicly and you can’t do better than a third of our fleet missing as far as evidence goes. Definitely enough for a conviction. The rest was a matter of negotiation, of course.”

“Negotiation? In a court martial?”

“The Resistance weighed in,” Statura says, looking ill at ease.

“Look at him,” Gilles says. “Finally. We’re finally breaking him.”

Poe’s standing at attention, perfectly. Finn, who witnessed him slouch in front of admirals, can’t help feeling something’s wrong. The officer steps in, grabs at Poe’s collar, tears off the Commander insignia. It’s thorough and nightmarish. Everything gets removed, methodically, from head to toe, not only the marks of rank but anything that linked Poe to the Republic forces, the Starfleet badge, the corps insignia, the colours of his wing. His standard issue wrist nav comp. His personal tracker. The coloured strips on his sleeve that Finn knows stood for medals awarded in combat. Some sticker on BB-8’s dome.

The cameraman is merciless, zooming on Poe’s face as close as he can go, aiming for the eyes, hunting any hint of wetness, any mouth twitch, roaming to his hands, catching the bitten nails. Poe’s face remains blank.

“Force,” Statura whispers. Finn looks at him but can’t meet his eyes.

Finally, Poe is standing in a flightsuit that belongs to the navy only by its colour, the blue darker where it was shielded from the harsh suns of space by the insignia. The commenter finds his voice again to list the counts on which Poe was found guilty and to explain the action they’re filming.

High treason, Finn catches, but he has a hard time focusing on precise words, watching Poe’s face, so real on the high-quality holo. Illegal use of the Republic’s equipment. Reckless endangerment.

Attenuating circumstances, the commenter mentions. Partial Government’s grace.

“Very partial,” Gilles smirks. “And now for the kill.”
It was only the beginning, Finn understands, that stripping of Poe’s whole identity. The camera zooms out, pans across the row of troopers, goes back to Poe. His shoulders sag. He extends his right wrist, palm downward and closed in a fist. The knuckles are white and Finn guesses he’s trying not to let the hand tremble.

The officer snaps some kind of heavy metallic cuff around his wrist, activates some contact on it. It gets a reaction out of Poe, a twitch of his jaw muscles, a convulsive bobbing of his Adam’s apple.

Finn doesn’t know if he still feels anger at Poe’s actions, or if there’s only horror at that public humiliation.

“Do you know,” he asks, “when I last saw him cuffed like that?”

“Please, Finn,” Statura says, his voice low and expressionless.

Finn can’t stop. “In the Finalizer. When I freed him from that torture chair.”

Gilles smirks. “We’re not torturers. That’s not the First Order at work.”

The third director, Myrtas, grins and nods in answer.

Poe has let his arm fall down and is just standing there, no longer at attention, stroking the skin along the cuff edge. Make it stop, Finn thinks.

“What is it, then? Is he under arrest?”

“That’s the result of the negotiation,” Statura says. “No death sentence of course, even if the Resistance hadn’t pushed the K-naann would have gone mad. Not even jail. But he’s grounded here on this planet, literally grounded. The cuff is an electronic monitor. If he goes further than the second moon’s orbit, either piloting or as a passenger, an alarm goes off. If he insists the device is equipped with a strong taser function. Crippling at best, sometimes deadly.”

“He can’t fly,” Finns says, and he should feel relief, because however strong the resentment he harbours towards Poe, a death sentence would have destroyed him too. And he’s been praying nonstop to whatever deity listening to Stormtroopers for Poe’s sentence not to be jailtime. But Poe can’t fly.

“Tihhe, Finn, I know you both still have a soft spot for him,” Gilles says. “But come on, what a relief! He’s done. No more heroics. No more hijacking the grid. He’s a traitor in the eyes of the opinion now! Of course, we can’t do anything about that school of his, turns out it’s mostly sponsored by the Resistance and the ships they rehabilitate will go to the K-naann, but who care if he flies a few atmosphere tests? Not the opinion, for sure, and not me.”

Myrtas, who’d remained silent until then, stirs. “I wouldn’t be so sure Dameron is completely harmless,” he says. “I still wonder whether it was that wise to make his decommission so public.”

“Come on,” Gilles says. “We had to make an example.”

“Possibly. Ah. The opinion is fickle, isn’t it? And as you said, no more heroics for him. At last. Now if we manage to find the traitor in the PR team, we’re all good.”

There is a traitor, of course. A professional who took care of Poe’s publicity and who had the knowledge and access to hijack the main channels. Are the Directors aware enough of the team’s internal politics to realise how obvious the answer is? Or are they casting a wider net? Finn is not a suspect, or he wouldn’t be here. But it’s chilling, how they speak of it. Not at all what he imagined
the Directors’ meetings would feel like. And Poe’s public humiliation makes him ill.

“I guess I should go,” he says. “My apologies. Speaking of PR, I’m sure Rannel will want to talk with me.”

In the background the holo is still going on. They’re bodyprinting Poe, or something like that, in the middle of that fucking landing field. Eye scans, DNA probe, fingerprints, teeth and bone history. Everything. Shut that damn holo, Finn thinks, but instead of saying it he leaves.

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Like every day, Finn wakes up at six and fucking wishes he could unlearn the Stormtrooper’s schedule. He spent twelve hours with Statura and Gilles yesterday, working towards a solution for his people but the compromise they reached is very far from what he hoped. Of course, Stormtroopers aren’t under obligation to stay at the school anymore. It was Finn’s baseline, the exigence he’d made clear he wouldn’t compromise on, but he knew he’d get it – they’ve become scared of so many of them in the same place. But citizenship is out of the picture, when it seemed attainable before. Nobody will be allowed to leave the planet without a permit – fat chance. On planet, the areas in which they’re allowed to settle beyond the base are the furthest from the city centres, close to where raw workforce is needed. He’s seen pictures. Forsaken, derelict collective compounds built on windy mesas or mouldy, badly drained swamps. Collective bunks with torn doors, leaking faucets at the rare drinking water points.

“Maybe they’ll elevate the standard here,” Gilles had said, with a grin to Finn that he might have thought was friendly. “Finally some Humans among all the aliens and the Outer Rim curs.”

Aliens, Finn understood, was a slur in Gilles’ mouth.

“Are we in agreement?” Statura asked.

“We are,” Finn said, shaking hands and meeting their evaluating gazes with an open-eyed look of his own. Images of the dead Stormtrooper lieutenant had gone through his mind.

“Caf?” Auderd offers.

Finn takes the cup from his hands mutely. He should give thanks. He can’t.

“By the Stars,” Auderd growls. “What’s that?”

Someone activated the call on the house comm, which is abnormal at that hour and of course disturbs the bodyguard.

“I’ll go get a look in person,” Auderd says.

“Hey,” Finn begins. It’s my home, he wants to say.

“You stay here,” Auderd says over his shoulder, already going.

Finn stays. Waits. Begins to muse on what he’d do if Auderd were killed on duty while protecting him. Finn doesn’t own a blaster and has no weapon in the house. A few kitchen implements could find some use, perhaps. Or maybe an intruder killing Auderd, or Sebvaux for that matter, wouldn’t necessarily mean harm to Finn.
Finn plans, imagines retreats, remembers that his complex only has one exit, whose brilliant idea was it, works out a way to use a window, realises only at that point he’s not even thinking of the grief he’d feel at his bodyguards’ death. Maybe there would be none.

Auderd has been away for too long and Finn wonders if he should worry. He’d probably have heard the shots, at least some kind of noise, if there had been some violence. He stands up and switches on the transmission on the house comm.

“Come on, you sheep-brained idiot,” a voice says, distorted by the comm. Auderd and the newcomer are out of the camera range, probably too far on one side. “Let me in. It’s my duty. I was their commander.”

“You’re not a commander anymore, Dameron,” Auderd says, the glee apparent even through the comm. “And now get lost. You know what? I'll help you out.”

Some indistinct noise erupts through the comm, grunts and a short, pained yell.

“Shit!” Poe exclaims, sounding out of breath. Something is hitting the wall repeatedly, close enough to the house comm that Finn can hear it. The camera transmits some blurry movement. “Ow! You fucker. You like that, don’t you? Ow, get off me!”

“Been waiting for it long enough,” the reply comes.

More commotion, a curse in Auderd’s voice, then Auderd’s face on the vid display, indistinct and pained, the dry sounds of a sequence of blows connecting on flesh, clear enough.

“That’s going to cost you a lot,” Auderd says. “Hitting an officer of the Republic. There’s a tracker on your cuff, I’ll have no problem proving it was you.”


“You’re an enemy of the Republic. How would I know you won’t harm him?”

“You – because I – fuck!” Poe is yelling, saturating the comm. “Of course I won’t –” he stops again, breathes in, goes on in a more quiet tone. “Auderd, you know why I’m here for. I told your pals at headquarters. Fuck, they debriefed me long enough, and none to gently!”

Finn switches the voice on. “Auderd, what does he want?”

“Finn!” Poe yells.

“Nothing of interest,” Auderd answers.

“Auderd,” Poe says, “just give him that. Take a look, Finn, and let me in if you wish.”

“I’ll have to check the contents of the box,” Auderd says. “What is it?”

“Personal possessions,” Poe growls. “Give him the holoprojector at least.”

“Yeah,” Finn says. “It’s early and I’m tired. Just give me that projector and we’ll see.”

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Auderd is already digging into the box. Finn glimpses more of the same kind of cheap, portable holoprojectors, the kind you put on a desk or a windowsill to display a sequence of stills or a short holovid loop, a watch, some kind of colourful handwoven scarf. He switches on the holo he was
A young man steps down from a TIE, laughing, looking wild. He stops, appears to listen, comes back up and helps someone else out, a greyish, tentacled non-human. K-naan.

The same man sits on a bench with other pilots, everyone still in their flying gear. There are Republic uniforms, those heinously orange Resistance flightsuits, plus a few other Finn doesn’t recognise. They’re drinking something and the first man makes a face. More laughs.

He runs on a destroyer deck, shouldering on his flying gear at the same time. He stops to hug briefly another TIE pilot. Climbs in. Grins wide through the transparisteel of the cockpit, salutes the camera and takes off.

That’s Swift, one of the TIE pilots that followed Poe. He’s dead.

“Poe, what’s that about?” Finn asks through the house comm. “Are you trying to apologise? Because if you think you can get away with it, you’re mistaken.”

“Not trying to get away with anything,” Poe answers. “But I can tell you about his death if you wish. And the others’, too.”

Death, Finn begins to understand, is a much more complicated affair in the Republic that in the First Order, where it just meant that you didn’t speak of the person anymore. Grief is a word he began to learn with Han’s death, and he’s still learning. But yes, it feels good to be allowed to grieve. He wants to know about their end.

“Come up,” he says. “I’m letting you in.”

Auderd stands up, his chair scraping the floor. “I’ll go get him.”

Poe stands on the threshold, in civilian clothes. The same kind of open-collared shirt he wore on Jakku, but crisply ironed and paired with a vaguely military-looking jacket. His pants and boots are similarly neat. He’s shaved the beard. He must have slicked his hair back at some point but his encounter with Auderd left marks, curls gone loose, a bruise on his forehead and a small bloodstain on his jacket. He won’t meet Finn’s eyes.

“So,” Finn says. “Swift’s death. Why did you speak of duty to Auderd?”

“I was their commanding officer. I sent them to their death. It’s my duty to meet their next of kin to –”

“Next of kin. They can be family, genetic or not, close friends, loved –” Poe halts on the word and his eyes shoot up to Finn, then go back down. “loved ones. They’re the ones who get a call if you’re incapacitated or dead. If you’re someone’s next of kin, you get a say for their medical treatment, you can visit the person in intensive medical care, and you – you’re told about their death, you get their personal possessions.”

“I was Swift’s next of kin?”

“All the ex-First Order listed you. Some listed me, each other, or Phasma. But all listed you. So,” Poe says, sighing and smiling apologetically, “I’m here. If you’re okay with it. I – I’m not trying to
find excuses. But I can tell you how they were. How it was fighting alongside them. They were good people. Incredible pilots.”

“Alongside them,” Finn says, feeling bitter. “Why aren’t you dead then?”

Poe looks up to him then, really looks into his eyes, and Finn sees – feels? It’s trite, like those cheap holomovies where Luke knows Leia on some heightened Force level, but it’s true. There’s more than just eyes, for only the time of a heartbeat it’s Finn looking down into Poe’s soul, and he sees despair. Grief. Guilt.

“They said –” Poe begins. “No, not *they*, Leia, fuck, no, I agreed, I decided that I had to be their leader. Not their comrade. So I stayed behind, I gave the orders, and they died. I still think I did the right thing. It saved the K-naann. It might, someday, save the Galaxy. Do you still want to know more about how they fought? From me?”

“Tell me,” Finn says. Maybe Poe’s tale will make them live a little longer, in memory. Maybe Finn wants to prod at the wound, understand how Poe could be so heartless. Maybe that way Finn will finally be done with him.

Poe gulps in a breath, takes a look around, and goes to sit on the couch, as far as possible from Auderd sitting at the kitchen table, still absorbed in the exploration of the contents of the box – personal possessions, Poe said, the dead pilots’, then.

“I’ve shot TIEs for so long,” Poe says. “But I’d never really wondered about the guys that piloted them, until now. You know, it’s only the pilots who died in such high numbers. The ex-Stormtroopers, techs, gunners – we affected the gunners to other pilots, you know, we had to keep their seat for the XXXians in the TIEs – well, the non-pilots have a loss ratio that’s close to the general one. You didn’t see them because they massively chose the Resistance.”


“I don’t kn– ah, maybe I do. I never met fighters with such disregard for their personal safety before.”

Really, Finn thinks.

“I don’t know if it’s a result of their conditioning or if they were selected for that trait. I think it’s the latter, and then the First Order built on it. They’re skilled, some of them incredibly so, and what attracts them is forward, forward, attack all the time. They love the chase. The Starfighter’s dance is their drug.”

He smiles. Looks down at his hands, at the cuff on his right wrist.

“You know,” he continues, “in other circumstances I think I’d have made a great TIE pilot. We *understand* each other. It means I understood what I was doing when I ordered them to fly across. And they knew it. Fuck, they loved me for it.”

“If you understood,” Finn says, “maybe it was your duty to avoid putting them in situations where their mindset would kill them.”

“They were the best suited for the task. A few other Resistance pilots could have done it, Pava, I think, lolo for sure. But not many. Another squadron would have either balked away or died in even greater numbers. They did great, Finn. What they did saved lives. It meant our forces didn’t go mad anymore when they were confronted with Knights. Believe me, they’re heroes. Everyone loves them.”
“But they’re dead,” Finn says. “Thirty nine of them. Did – did the other pilots really love them? Or were they just thankful?”

“Ah,” Poe says, sounding at once admiring and reticent. “You know them, us, well, don’t you, Finn. Sometimes, socialising was – well, not something that came easily to them, uh. But they were learning. Are. And then there are people like Swift.”

“Who’s dead,” Finn says, not knowing why he’s insisting that much, because each time he mentions the TIE pilots’ deaths Poe twitches and grimaces.

“Yes,” Poe agrees. “He took more blockade breaching missions than most, and he was so good. He still managed to emerge from the last one unscathed. You asked me whether the others loved the TIE pilots, well, they loved Swift. Look at him.” Poe nods towards the holo loop, still running from the low table. “He was a good comrade. Everyone was astonished at how he could laugh and have fun, and he was handsome, too. Half the troops running after him, and quite a lot getting what they wanted.”

Poe’s eyes are glinting and Finn feels suddenly suspicious.

“You too?”

“Told you. Never good to fuck down the chain of command. Besides I don’t think he liked dick. But he was a friend. A good one. You know, you and him had a lot in common. Both very fast learners, both loving knowledge. I was teaching him to become a leader, and he’d have made a great one. And then he died trying to fly a damaged freighter.”

So he was a pet project, Finn thinks. A social experiment. Like I was for you? Only with me you had the additional bonus of fucking me on the side.

“We held a ceremony for them,” Poe says after the silence has stretched too long. “You’ll find the holo record somewhere in the box. They – ah, they didn’t have that many personal things.”

He stops, looks up briefly at Auderd, looks back down at his hands, fingers the cuff and the skin around it in what Finn begins to think is becoming a tic.

“Does it hurt?” Finn asks.

“What?”

“The cuff.”

“Oh,” Poe says, his eyes shifting to the side. “No. There’s a low force field, it doesn’t chafe. Doesn’t really touch the skin.”

“Good to know,” Finn says. “At least something your TIE pilots can be thankful for.”

“What?” Poe has jumped up. “Finn, what? I didn’t ride down to the base yet – to the school. What did they do –”

“Didn’t go see them, Commander? Didn’t care enough?”

“Oh Force, Finn. Please.” Poe sits back down, looking tired. His left hand, the uncuffed one, goes up reflexively to his left cheekbone. There’s a bruise there melting up into the dark rims under his eyes, too faded and yellow-looking to have been caused by his altercation with Auderd. “I was detained at Central. Debriefed, uh. By his friends.” A nod at Auderd. “They wanted to make sure they can still
trust the fleet.”

“And?”

“If that’s names they wanted, they got none. But I guess they decided I’m harmless enough since I’m here. Finn, what happened to the pilots?”

“All ex-First Order were forbidden to move on the planet, at all, for as long as your campaign lasted. I sort of reached an agreement with the Directors yesterday on that. But I couldn’t make them budge on the TIE pilots. They’re too close to you. They got the same cuff as yours, only theirs keeps them on the physical ground. They take off, that thing zaps them down.”

There’s horror in Poe’s eyes. “Finn, do you know how much these guys live to fly?”

“I can imagine,” Finn says, dryly.

Horror shifts to disgust. “And you’re siding with the Directors.”

At the other end of the room, Auderd shifts and smiles, not pleasantly. A flashback of the dead Lieutenant’s holo passes through Finn’s mind.

“You caused that situation, Poe,” Finn says.

Poe’s right hand is balled into a fist and his left is gripping at the cuff.

“I caused?” he says, voice rising high. “By the Force, what about the government? Your precious Directors? I’m not the one – oh fuck. Finn, I didn’t come here to justify myself or to have one of our rows. I’m sorry. I think it’s better if I leave now, isn’t it?”


Poe stands up but stays rooted on the spot. He’s looking at Finn.

“I should tell you,” he begins, then has to clear his throat. “There are many things I didn’t. Tell you. On time. I should have – ah. I’m. Ah, Force. Finn, during this campaign I had you listed as next of kin, together with my dad and Leia Organa.”

His eyes are on Finn, evaluating, pleading. What they see probably hurts, because he blinks, grimaces and hurries to say: “I’ll remove you. I was going to anyway. I’m a dangerous man to associate with, especially considering what you’re trying to do.”

Finn thinks of his negotiations with the Directors, of everything the Stormtroopers still stand to lose.

“Yes,” he says. “Remove me, please.”

There was a time when I’d have been thrilled that you thought of me like that, he wants to say. I’d have listed you as next of kin, too, he wants to say. I want you to remove me but it’s not about the two us, he tries to let out.

He doesn’t say any of this. Just remains seated, his head between his hands. He hears the door click when Poe leaves.

I should run after him, Finn thinks. I should take him in my arms, hug him, ask him how he really feels, tell him he’s mad to have sacrificed himself like that. I should tell him that if he’d asked me to follow him, when he was going to save the K-naann, I’d have gone. I should tell him watching Swift in that holo, with the others, it makes me miss that life like I never thought I would. Even if it cost
Swift his life.

He hears Poe’s retreating footsteps in the staircase – he’s never once used the lift.

I should go and stop him, Finn thinks. Make sure he’s still got something to live for. I should tell him that I hate him because he used me and used my people. And then I could tell him I love him. I want to kiss him and I want us to make love.

The general alarm of the complex buzzes once, a setting Sebvaux programmed to indicate that a non-resident left.

I’ll wait, Finn thinks. Then I’ll go down to the base and talk to him. We can make it work.

“You’re thinking of running after him,” Auderd says.

Finn looks up at him, probably more sharply than he intended.

“What?” Auderd says. “Did you think we didn’t know about your little escapades? The sordid little fucks in hangar corners, you pounding the traitor’s ass?”

It takes Finn all his control not to stand up and break Auderd’s nose.

“Six months ago you’d have hit me,” Auderd says, smirking. “You’re learning.”

“Traitor?” Finn asks. “That’s how you’re calling him?”

“Sure. Defected twice, didn’t he? You know, we had fun watching you. Seb and I actually had a running bet guessing how long you could go between fucks. Hey. Hey, don’t break my nose, pretty boy. Your position with the Directors isn’t secure enough for that. Or would you rather ask me to say it’s your precious Poe who did it?”

I could kill you, Finn thinks. With my bare fists, because I’m betting my training was better than yours. He backs down instead.

“Yeah,” Auderd says. “We had fun watching you as long as we thought Dameron was harmless. That son of a bitch. We’re lucky that he didn’t trust you, uh? Listen, Finn. From now on, you don’t fuck him anymore. You don’t see him. You don’t even talk to him. Or, you know, there are a lot of dead lieutenant situations waiting to happen.”

“I understand,” Finn says.

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“Finally,” Rannel says. “You’re there.”

“It’s incredible,” Finn answers. “Ground transportation between the workers’ compounds is slower than trans-system shuttles.”

“Yeah, because whoever goes there, huh? Not me, that’s for sure. Evil weather, nothing to do but drink cheap local alcohol, and nothing you could call music to help it down.”

“There is good music, if you know what to look for. The Wiirk’ts, they do things with their elytra you wouldn’t believe.”

“Wiirk’ts? That’s those insect-like hives that moved in, what, ten years before Hosnia? Were so radioactive when they came in they had to be quarantined for years?”
“Their homeworld had been burned down. Now they’re working at the holopad factories, among others. Together with a sizeable group of Stormtroopers, that’s how I met them.”

“Yeah, well, if I were you I wouldn’t let my men mix with insects. Their minds are so strange you never know if they’ll use you to incubate their larvae or something.”

But they’re incredibly well-organised, and I’ve never seen a compound work so well, Finn thinks. Everything locally repaired, individual rooms with doors and insulation, a system to help the wounded and the weak. And who among humans would understand them better than Stormtroopers? Hive-like, the both of their societies, where sometimes an intelligent drone will shine brighter, will create art or rise higher than everyone around. Where such a drone can sometimes rebel, sometimes lead, sometimes reshape the community into something new.

“I think their larvae eat mould,” Finn says instead.

“You really have a knack for learning about the most trivial detail,” Rannel laughs. “Well, now that you’re here, here’s what the Directors want you to say. Nothing about your Stormtroopers, huh. Stick to the script.”

The shock of Central life is violent after having spent days in the dust winds, waiting for his turn at the communal freshers, doing his part at the factories, taking his turn at the communal water pumps. Central feels fake, the studio even more. The Director’s script feels absurd.

Finn puts on his best smile, steps into his public persona. He’s good, he knows it. He has to be. He blabbers about the necessity to watch every stranger, to make the borders even tighter so that no Knight passes through.

It’s dumb, he knows. It means that all the people that need passage will be seen as suspicious, and he doubts that any defence could be tight enough to prevent one Knight in.

Outside, far away, the Resistance is fighting. Inside, close, so close, Poe is rebuilding ships for those who need them and teaching how to fly them.

He smiles and talks about safety inside the Republic. Of defending its border and the ideas it stands for against aliens of all kinds.

Inside, Stormtroopers and aliens alike are working so hard it kills them, and nobody stands for them.

Safety, he says. And smiles to the camera.

Then he’s back home to a personal apartment larger than a whole hive basic unit, with a personal, water refresher, a personal kitchen with a working preservation unit stuffed with exotic, expensive goods, a personal security perimeter around, in a secured area, in a secured city. He’d pound his fist through the door in frustration if he didn’t feel the need to keep it together in front of his bodyguards.

There’s a message for him on the house comp, encrypted. Droid-level work, something Auderd and Sebvaux couldn’t break, which means they know who it is from. Droids are faithful. Fuck you, Poe.

He logs in, keys in the necessary words, the ones Poe gave him so long ago. Auderd and Sebvaux don’t even bother with reading over his shoulder. They’ll see the holo anyway.

“Oh, Poe,” Poe says, short and to the point. “I know you won’t talk to me but maybe you still care for the TIE pilots. Do something about their status, please. I’ve had some of them attempting to deactivate the cuff, but today Blade didn’t even try before she took off with a refurbished X-Wing. I think she hoped it’d kill her. It didn’t, but the shock was bad enough to send her to medical. We
don’t know what her brain will look like when, if she wakes up.”

“How many of these pilots are left?” Finn asks aloud. The comp camera is blinking above his head, recording the message. “Twelve? I can’t care for those twelve if it means I harm the rest. They’re your responsibility now, Dameron.”

Touch the screen, encrypt, send.

Take the longest shower ever, turn the music at its loudest to dissuade the bodyguards from talking.
tragedies and manipulation

Finn uses the atmo shuttle to visit the Stormtroopers now. Sometimes even the orbital one. Much more expensive, but incomparably faster.

The pilot, this time, invites him into the cockpit. When Finn enters he’s pushing something away from his personal screen. A half-blurred image lingers and it looks like an illegal.

“Finn,” the pilot says. “It’s an honour to meet you. My name is Gustev. Kruit Gustev.”

“Thank you, Kruit,” Finn says, smiling. “It’s always a pleasure to meet a fan.”

Kruit swivels his seat, turning to Finn, his back to the dashboard.

“Can you do that?” Finn asks. “Won’t the shuttle – I don’t know, fall?”

“What, if I don’t look at the dashboard?”

“Sorry. I’m being irrational. I do know autopilots exist.”

“Are you afraid? I mean, you’re the guy who got Dameron out, who faced Kylo Ren…”

“Yeah, well, I was ground troops, you know. Ships – uh.”

“Commander Dameron said you’re a great gunner, though.”

He said? When? This guy is a civilian pilot, isn’t he?

“Give me something to shoot with and I’m your man,” Finn smiles. “Don’t let me stand idle in something that flies, that’s all.”

“And you’re friend with Dameron?”

“I – yeah, I am. In spite of that piloting thing,” Finn says with a smile. It feels good to say it. “Tell me, are you in touch with him?”

“Ah,” the pilot says. “No. Too dangerous. He’s monitored constantly, cameras, trackers, everything. I don’t want to imagine what they’d do to him if they found we’ve tried to contact him. Dishonourable discharge, that’s how we guys got out, the special services don’t like us so much. You?”

Finn looks down. “No. I can’t.”

“Fuck. I hate that. Hey, Finn. Gonna get better, uh? When we were in the Tolonda system, he couldn’t stop talking about you. He loves you, you know?”


Silence stretches. Finn would really love it if Kruit turned around and did something with the commands of his shuttle. He’s sure she needs something, a prod, a check.

“So you don’t like starships?” Kruit asks finally, grinning. “For someone who doesn’t enjoy flying, you’ve been travelling a lot, in quite an unusual pattern. We keep tabs. Unauthorised ones. They say everywhere you go, the compounds are in a better shape afterwards. You’ve been helping Wiirk’ts
move around, too.”

“Who says?” asks Finn, trying for innocent and wide eyed.

Kruit smiles even more frankly. “My brother, for one. He’s a medic in one of the compounds you visited. Says he’s got the means to feel useful again.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“Listen,” Kruit says. “I was in the fleet before. I did the K-naann campaign under Dameron but left the service afterwards. I couldn’t stand what they did to him. And patrolling the borders isn’t what I enrolled for.”

“Oh. You know I stand with the PSR on that point.”

Kruit laughs. “Generally speaking, it looks like your actions speak louder than your words, Finn. Say, would you like to visit other compounds on other worlds? There are quite a lot of them, even in the Core Worlds. They’re in sore need of the kind of work you do for your Stormtroopers.”

“They’re not mine. I just help them.”

“I’d be curious to know how they see it themselves. So, about these other worlds?”

“Hyperspace travel? I don’t have the funds.”

“Come on. There’s quite a lot of us scattered around in freighter companies and the like. Former Dameron’s squadrons. We’ll take you up.”

“I’d have to lose the bodyguards somewhere. Not easy.”

“Ah, yeah. Of course. They’re in this shuttle, aren’t they? Dark big woman and even bigger blonde man? Do they always follow you to the compounds?”

“They do, but then they hole themselves in the most comfortable place they can find until we take off again. Hard to pick me up from a compound, though.”

“Not impossible. Some of the small freighters land there to pick up the manufactured goods.”

Finn thinks of how Auderd seemed to know each of his moves, even when he thought he’d hidden them well.

“Forget it,” he says. “They probably have a tracker on me.”

“You think it’d resist an astromech-level blurring? Hey, GG, get out?”

Something beeps from under the dashboard.

“Of course he’s a friend, cutie. Didn’t you hear him?”

The ugliest droid Finn has ever seen limps and hops out. It’s a dull grey, apparently without a shape that could have been designed for any purpose except being crammed into some rectangular lodging, made of bits of wire and additional casing. Its locomotion apparatus appears to have been added as an afterthought. And it’s not even got something you could call a head.

“Finn, meet GG-12. She was one of the TIE astromechs. You wouldn’t believe all the things she can do.”
Kruit is beaming. By the Force, he’s looking proud of that monstrosity.

“Wow,” is all Finn manages to say.

“She was Swift’s, actually. She chose freedom. GG, baby, can you find Finn’s tracker?”

One day, Finn will find the time to learn binary. It’s not today. GG-12 is talkative and she probably comments on bits of Finn’s anatomy as she probes him, but her tone is less expressive than BB-8’s

“She says it’s internal. In a muscle somewhere. Injected. But she can blur it if needed, easily. And could make a lure to leave where you’re supposed to stay, although it’s gonna take some time to figure out every detail of the code. So, Finn, is that settled? Ready for your grand hyperspace tour?”

“That’s settled,” Finn says, shaking the pilot’s hand. He feels more useful than he has in a long time.

When Finn comes back home, he disappears into the fresher, the only place where he’s sure neither of his shadows will follow.

There’s a home comp plug in there and he wants to look for the picture Kruit was watching when he entered the cockpit. It takes some navigating on the leisure grid, but it’s not that hard to find. Another illegal going quietly viral.

Kruit’s image was the last shot of a holo, but Finn keeps it 2D to watch on his datapad. More secure this way. It’s short, very efficiently cut, shot with yet another professional recorder. A couple of K-naann taking off in refurbished ships, the perspective of the shots very efficient in showing the Akhios landmarks and the Republic fleet logo behind barbed wire fences. Poe stepping down from another ship, helping another K-naan up. Squeezing their upper tentacle, the cuff very apparent on his arm in spite of the obvious distance from which it was filmed. Poe, evidently unaware of being on camera, turning his back to the rapidly climbing ship, taking off his lifesaving gear and hurling it on the ground. Walking slowly back to barracks, BB-8 bumping gently on his leg. This is what the Republic does to its heroes, the hovering text reads.

When he steps out both Sebvaux and Auderd are well settled in his kitchen, drinking mugs of his best caf and eating the purpleberry pie he’d made for himself. They’ve got the holo on, projecting the very same illegal vid he was watching. Sebvaux grins a very toothy welcome.

So even in safe mode, Finn thinks and doesn’t even bother to say, even if I wipe my history and encrypt my data, you know what’s going on in my comp and my pad.

“We need to address our snitch problem,” Auderd says. “Someone keeps leaking the Grid’s security codes.”

“Yeah. And they know what to do with the access, too,” Sebvaux answers. “And maybe we could address our Dameron problem too? Even tethered like that he’s still a nuisance.”

“He didn’t know he was filmed,” Finn says.

“The result is the same,” Auderd answers.

They make Finn address their Dameron problem. They find some antique frigate to gift the K-naann, and Finn is there to transmit the paperwork in a stuffy official ceremony.
“That’s not frigates they need,” Kruit tells him later. “They’re not a warlike people, they wouldn’t know what to do with them. Freighers, yes. Starfighters, also, because Dameron is teaching them. They’ll probably gift the frigate to the Resistance.”

They make Finn retell parts of the Starkiller battle, belittling Poe’s role. They put him in front of that vid from the K-naann campaign, when Poe fell victim to the Knights, and the voiceover he has to read turns it into some story of ridiculous incompetence.

All his scripts have lines attacking Poe’s views and actions, from droids to military tactics, from his first defection from the New Republic navy to his present stubborn defence of the eleven TIE pilots that still cling to him.

He complies. Poe will have to fend for himself, and maybe sometimes he deserves the blame. What’s important, now, is Finn’s travels all across the Core and even beyond, from non-citizen compounds to factories to industrial farms to garbage dumps. What’s important is that workers organise, that the state of their health isn’t left to chance, that the refugees’ youngsters go to school and the oldsters aren’t left to die when they cease to be useful.

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“How do you list someone as next of kin?” he asks Sebvaux one day.

She chuckles. “What made you think of that? I’ll admit the mud was something else, but it’s still far from life-threatening!”

Finn is covered head to toes in that foul-smelling viscous mud from the third equatorial compound, enough that it makes his pretend three weeks stay there believable. Sebvaux and Auderd, who really spent the best part of the last month there, fare better, but not by much. They mostly stayed indoor in that brothel, Finn guesses. Even though the employees weren’t in their price range.

“Of course it’s not the compound,” he says. “Dull, damp, smelly, but not deadly. I just hope the workers there can build that above-ground structure, and soon. It would solve a lot of the mud problem. Nah. I think of that next-of-kin thing each time I come back here because of the TIE pilots’ holos. The only difference today is that I asked.”

“It’s easy,” Auderd says. “You just connect to the planet database and enter the name you want in your personal file. Who are you thinking of? Statura?”

“Not Dameron, that’s for sure,” Finn answers to buy himself time. He hopes he’s not overdoing the wide-eyed innocent look. “Tihhe Statura, I don’t know if I’d presume too much. What if everyone who admires him asked him?”

A few months ago, he’d have written Statura in there without a second thought. Now he won’t. Poe is out of the question, and he won’t try to dig too deep into his own mind to know exactly why.

“That’s the problem,” Finn says finally. “I feel like I should have a next of kin but I don’t know who.”

Actually he knows, and Auderd and Sebvaux will too as soon as he put the name in. Earlier, if he asks her about it, which he guesses would be the polite thing to do, since she’s most certainly as closely monitored as Poe is. But he doesn’t see why he should discuss it with them. She’s kin, whatever else they think of each other. The only kind of kin he’ll ever have.

“Well, don’t ask me,” Sebvaux says. “I don’t particularly want to be burdened with your collection of measuring cups and other kitchen appliances if you die.”

The house comm ringer, with a tone Finn never heard before.

“Again with your twiddling with my house comp?” he asks.

“Ah,” Sebvaux smiles, all teeth. “That’s a special one. You want to take it? Dameron’s calling.”


“Your guess.”

She knows something. She’s too giddy, not worried enough about a call from Poe. Almost like if she’ll revel in what he’s got to say.

“I’ll take it,” Finn says, switching on the holo display and stepping into the camera field.

“Poe?” he says. “What are you playing at?”

“Finn.” Poe eyes widen as they take in Finn’s appearance. “Fuck me, what happened? You alright?”

“I’m okay. I just came back from one of the non-citizen compounds. A muddy one. You know, the kind you more or less sentenced the Stormtroopers to live in.”

“You’re okay, then. Unharmed?”

“Course I’m okay. Perfectly alright! Poe, what’s the matter?”

There’s something off with Poe. The tip of his ears is dark red and his eyes are glassy, unfocused. Finn looks at Sebvaux, sitting at the bar. She’s grinning wide.

“You’re drunk?” Finn asks. “Dammit, Poe, you’re calling me home and you’re drunk?”

“What if I am?” Poe asks. “Not even flying today, ‘f you can call that fucking atmo crawling flying. Your goons are home too?”

“Only Sebvaux, why do you care?”

“Hi, Lieutenant,” Poe says, or rather shouts. “I know you’re watching. Thought I’d call Finn so that I could tell you to go fuck yourself, preferably with an old, rough, meteorite-impacted proton cannon. Or just with one of the spikes from that railing, uh?”

“Stop that,” Finn says. “Poe, if you don’t want to spend the next years in solitary confinement stop that right now, go lie down and ask for some hangover medicine because the Force knows you’re going to need it and soon.”

Poe chuckles. It’s ugly. “Come on, Finn,” he says. “You don’t wanna punch her in the face, even a little?”

Finn has thought of it, sometimes. But never, ever said it aloud. “Are you mad?”

“You don’t know, uh. You’re just back from the butt end of nowhere and you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

“Stan’s dead, love.” Poe raises up a bottle of something and takes a swill. “May he rest in peace.
How does it feel? Or you’ve already forgotten him? Were you instructed to?"

“Feeling bummed, Dameron?” Sebvaux asks, loud enough for the comm to catch it. “You lost your access to the Grid?”

“Fuck you!” Poe yells. “I lost my friend!”

Something whisles out of the holo field. Poe looks down.

“Yeah, BB,” he says. “I know. Shouldn’t have called. Should shut it off. Finn, tell me you’re sorry. Tell me it hurts. Tell me he was your friend too. Tell me something!”

There’s a crash as Poe’s bottle lands somewhere. He’s still looking down, overlong curls falling into his eyes.

“Force,” Finns says, feeling the bile rise into his throat. He knew it would happen. Stan probably knew, too. “Of course I’m sorry. Of course it hurts. How did it happen?”

“A deplorable accident,” Sebvaux says. “The security settings on his house comp malfunctioned. It unlocked the emergency settings of his lounge window, so that it opened when he leaned on it.”

“Stan loved to look through that window when he was brainstorming, d’you remember?” Poe asks. “The view was breathtaking.”

Finn remembers. The window is high enough for a great view of the skyline.

“He could have survived the fall,” Poe says. “There should have been lots of trees with thick branches immediately below, that is, if they hadn’t got that decorative railing installed, only days before. Very ornate, spiky, sharp plastisteel. Right under his window.”

Finn stands up.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m gonna end this call. Poe, go lie down. Try not to talk about that too much, uh? Not publicly. Actually, don’t talk about it at all, you know that’s what Stan would have told you to do. And drink a lot of water. I’m sorry.”

Poe is about to yell something but the holo shuts off before Finn can hear. Sebvaux is smiling.

“Fuck you,” Finn says.

“As long as you only say it in private,” she says. “Be glad we know you weren’t a part of Montady’s schemes. We hacked enough of his data to know. You’re a good soldier, you know? Obedient. I’m thinking it’s a Stormtrooper trait you never completely erase.”

“Fuck you,” Finn repeats.

“Go scrub yourself of that mud and then go to sleep. Rannel will need you tomorrow.”

//

Auderd is once again doing something with his datapad, head bent and nose nearly touching the screen.

“Stars,” he says. “I’ve been rediscovering the Grid these last two weeks. What a feeling! A clean Grid is a thing of beauty.”
“Yeah, well, aren’t you supposed to watch my back instead of that screen?” Finn asks. “You’re my bodyguard after all.”

“Don’t worry,” Auderd says with a lopsided grin. “You’re safe here. Besides, you’ve got the both of us today and Sebvaux is watching.”

“Yeah,” Sebvaux says. “I’m not such a Grid addict. Hey, Auderd, what’s the matter?”

“Fuck. There’s another leak. Someone uploaded an *in memoriam* for Montady.”

“Force damn! Dameron, you think?”

“From the tone, it’s all him. But we changed the codes and I don’t think that son of a bitch has the skill to pass our securities. Not even his droid could do it alone.”

“Shit, shit, shit. We’ll have to deal with that, Aud.”

“Deal with it all you want,” Finn says, “I’m leaving you here.”

“Hey!”

“Statura specified he wanted to see me alone.”

“Oh,” Sebvaux says, the ghost of a grin playing on her features. “Sure. See you later, then. I’ll have the corellian brandy ready at your place.”

Brandy, Finn thinks as he identifies himself to Statura’s security. Why?

There’s a bodyguard who wants to take a holo. He specifically requires Finn to smile, because “my mother loves your smile, she’ll freak out when she’ll see!” Finn complies, then signs a hand blaster, then a datapad case. “For my daughter,” the woman indicates. “Her name’s Ullix.”

“Pretty name,” Finn says, an automatism by now, adding it above his signature.

“Finn!” Statura says hurrying from his office door to take Finn’s hand. “Still as popular with our people, I see. Welcome! I’m sorry, ladies and gentlemen, I’m stealing him for a while. Do come in, son!”

“Tihhe,” Finn says, managing to retrieve his hand from Statura’s grip. “It’s nice to see you.”

“We’re not seeing us often enough, son. How have you been?”

Finn is still pondering exactly what he should let out in the face of such beaming attention when Statura breaks the silence, patting him on the shoulder.

“I know it’s been hard for you too,” he says. “You’ve been seeing the Stormtroopers more, and it’s harder for them to adapt than we thought.”

Sure, Finn thinks. Why don’t you go see for yourself?

“It’s nice to know that you still care,” he says instead. “To be completely frank, I wasn’t sure. The bodyguards…”

“Ah, Finn. Of course I care! What about the bodyguards?”
“No, forget it. They’re bodyguards, not personal counsellors, of course they’ll say…”

“Tell me.”

“They’re – well, they’re making me feel like they’re giving me orders, like they, the government, I dunno, the state uses me as a commodity, ’cause the public loves me and it helps with the polls.”

“Stars, Finn!”

“And they makes themselves at home in my place, a little too much. Is that the same with your own security? They’re eating my food, helping themselves to things I got for myself…”

“That’s not normal, son, not at all. But it’s not easy, finding the right distance. Maybe you were too familiar at first? I’m afraid you have to learn to order your people around. I’ll teach you if you want. And meanwhile, I’ll have a word or two with Auderd and Sebvaux. They’re the best for your security but they’ve got to learn to stay their place.”

“Thanks. Maybe I was too close to them at first.”

I did try to bed Sebvaux, Finn thinks. It was a disaster, but it’s possible that they still think I owe them something because of it.

“And about feeling used, I’m sorry if you feel like that. Politics, you know. We all have to learn to put on a face in public and we’ve been too direct, maybe, in trying to help you with that? I really care about you, you know. You’ve got such potential.” Statura guides Finn to a couch, looks into his eyes as they both sit down. “Finn. You really matter. Don’t let anybody tell you otherwise.”

Statura looks tired, Finn notices. Thinner than he was. Greyer.

“What about you, Tihhe?” he asks. “You don’t look well.”

Statura chuckles. “Yes,” he says. “Thank you for asking. Politics, as I said. It’s tiring. A three-headed directorate requires a lot of work. You know, I’m surprised, but I find myself to be the voice of moderation in our trio.”

Really, Finn thinks, and the doubt must be apparent on his features because Statura feels the need to explain.

“Oh, not on our core values, of course. You and I know that such deep beliefs cannot be easily swayed. But my two colleagues sometimes bend towards means I – well, disapprove is too strong a word. Maybe think of as inefficient? Messy? Leia taught us all well, whatever our political differences. I believe in the course of the law and in democracy.”

He looks sincere, Finn discovers. Maybe, also, slightly worried for Finn. For the blink of an eye, Finn feels compelled to open about everything, the lack of political representation for the compound people, their appalling living conditions, the blackmail Finn is subjected to.

But that’s not something he could speak of without consulting others. He stays mute.

“About your bodyguards,” Statura says. “I made you come here for specific purposes, not just to enquire about your well-being. There was something their team dug out after the Montady tragedy, they thought you needed to be told. I insisted I had to be the one to do it, because I think it was capital for you to have a friend at your side when you’d hear it. Seen from the outside it might look trivial but I knew you’d care. I’m sorry, my son.”
“What?” Finn says. “What is it?”

“It’s about Dameron. Ah, Finn. Maybe it’s better that we clear the air at once. It will help you move on. I can see how it breaks your heart, what he’s done to himself, and to tell you the truth it breaks mine a little, too. But seeing what he’s really like, it might help you?”

“Tell me,” Finn says, cold seeping into his heart.

“I’ll show you. It’s a stack of holovids we found in Stan Montady’s data. Not even encrypted, he probably didn’t think much of it. I’d bet it was for his personal enjoyment since it’s, ah. Of the adult kind. Not something out of his work or his illegal activity, even though he obviously made use of his professional tools, without telling the team. A strange character, Montady. Not that hindered by morality.”

It’s Poe. Of course it’s Poe, even though there are only glimpses of his profile showing through the curls. Poe’s body, naked for most of the first holo, his unmistakable hair, the fast hidden line of his strong nose. His shoulders, his ass, his scars. The curves of his offered neck and the underside of his jaw as he curses with each thrust into his hole. His hand on his erect cock, and Finn has seen both of them often enough to be sure.

Fuck, he’s beautiful.

Everything is beautiful, not only the shape of his body, but the way he moves, indecent, debauched, glorious. The way he meets the other’s pounding, the way he writhes under him. His open legs, his open ass. The way he clutches onto that hammock for his dear life – is that an imitation of a starship sleeping quarters? – head buried in the fabric, one leg planted on the ground, ass high. His moans. His shouts.

He’s more vocal than he ever was with Finn, making his pleasure known, urging the other on, begging for more.

And the other takes and takes, uses Poe for his own pleasure, his face, because unlike Poe his face is shown, his face a mix of ecstasy and greed. He’s young, gorgeous, too, more strongly built than Poe, a lot like himself, Finn realises, wider and bulkier, taller, though. His hair is short, woolly and black, cut military-style, and his skin is dark.

“Montady seems to have worked a lot on that first one in post-production,” Statura says. “The second one is rougher, unfinished. I think there was a problem in the sound take. You can hear him ordering them around.”

“Order –” Finn’s voice comes out so strangled he’s got to clear it. “Ordering around?”

“I’m afraid so. Apparently he was telling them what to do and filming on. Curious little perversions, aren’t they?”

Statura is right. Finn can hear Stan’s voice, directing them, cooing, praising them in the crudest words he’s ever heard. And Poe, that fucker, gets off from it, his arousal more evident each time Stan speaks.

“Getting aroused in such, ah, public settings. Stars,” Statura says, sounding half disgusted and half – troubled.

That fierce, ugly feeling in Finn’s chest reaches a new high. And Poe isn’t faking, Finn is sure of it. Finn has delighted too much in managing to make these goosebumps erupt on the skin of Poe’s buttocks to have any doubts left.
They watch in silence for a long while. Why aren’t they stopping?

“The next is – ah, such a perverse display,” Statura says, his voice strained. “Hard to watch, maybe, but as I say, lets clear the air for once and forever.”

“Force,” Finn says. “How many people were in the room? Four, at least?”

“Probably more. Three men having intercourse in front of a camera, and at least two behind it. You can hear them talk at one point.”

They’re using Poe, manhandling him on a table, and Poe’s getting off from it so hard, his erection shown in close-up. One of them, the Finn lookalike from before, is pounding his ass, while Poe’s deepthroating the other’s cock, face turned away from the camera, making obscene slurping sounds. Number three is still partly clothed, an orange flightsuit bunched on his ankles. A closeup on his face, his gaping mouth, his open eyes, reveals he’s Keshian. He vaguely looks like Arana.

It’s fascinating. Arousing. Revolting.


Statura doesn’t hesitate, switching off the display at once. He pats Finn’s hand, makes a shushing sound Finn has heard mothers do for overwhelmed children. Fuck, he needs it.

“I’m sorry,” Statura says.

“When,” Finn says. “Did they record that?”

“Not sure. It seems to have gone on for a long time. There are many other vids and you can see Dameron’s hair varying in length. The vids were in Montady’s recent files, that’s all we know.”

“It was after the Finalizer,” Finn says. “I’m sure of it. I know these scars.”

“Was it,” Statura says, his voice very soft, his hand comforting on Finn’s own, “was it after you began your, uh, relationship?”

“I don’t know!” Finn yells, voice rising high. “Ah, Tihhe, I’m not sure. If it wasn’t it was damn close.”

“Isn’t there some scar, some mark that could help you pinpoint it?”

Finn thinks of Poe’s hand on his own cock in one vid, of the gash across his phalanges.

“Yes,” he says. “I think there is. The cut on his hand in the first vid. He did it when he was still confined to inside patrols after his fuck-up during the Rriiv affair. He was working at Black One’s engines settings and got impatient. At this point we were definitely – ah, Force, I thought we were together. Tihhe…”

“I know,” Statura says. “I know. I’m sorry, son. That’s why I said I’d be the one to show you. I couldn’t let those unrefined bodyguards break the news.”

“Thank you,” Finn says. “It helps. You know, our relationship had turned sour in the end, or that’s what I thought. Fuck, turns out it was sour all the time.”

He should feel angry. He feels empty. Like something that has shaped his life for so long doesn’t exist. Never did.
“Tihhe,” he says. “I can’t – can’t leave it like that. I – I don’t know what to do with it! I need – let me see him.”

“Do you want him to make amends? Give apologies?”

Finn chuckles mirthlessly. “We’re way past apologies, I’m afraid. No. I want him to acknowledge what he did. Maybe it will feel more real. Help me move on.”

“Closure,” Statura says. “Yes, I think you need it. I’ll deal with Security. Go confront him, he needs to be shown the consequences of his actions.”

Poe is running towards him, BB-8 rolling at his side.

“Finn!” he shouts, even before they’re eye to eye. “They told me you’d ride down to see me. Officially! You nerf-herder, aren’t you mad? What are they going to think of you?” He might try for stern but he’s laughing, eyes crinkled, his smile open and making him looks younger, happier, innocent. Then he sees Finn’s expression and stops dead.

“What’s the matter?” he asks. “Finn, who died this time? Is Phasma alright?”

“You should know, she’s one of the few who’re still at the base.”

“School.”

“Oh?”

“She’s at the school. I’ve been instructed not to use ‘base’ when I’m referring to this place. And not say prison or camp either. The, huh, school is completely distinct from the base and neither the government nor any Republic official instance has anything to do with it. As the barbed wire shows. You still look shaken. Who died?”

“Nobody died. Got a place more private than a tarmac, so that I can show you what’s the matter?”

“The common room in the hangar. Nobody’s there at this hour. Just the both of us, physically at least. You know I’m monitored all the time.”

“Yeah, the ones doing the monitoring know about it anyway.”

“Fuck, Finn, what happened?”

“This,” Finn says, showing his pocket holoprojector.

“A vid?”

“Several.”

“Oh, Force. That’s because I was in Stan’s illegals? You care that much?”

“Definitely in some of Stan’s vids. I don’t think they’re illegal.”

Poe stops at the door of the common room, blinks, turns pale. Doesn’t say a thing, which is the most telling.

Finn comes in, pushing Poe aside. There’s a table, a few dingy chairs. He sits down and sets the
projector on the table. Switches it on.

“No need,” Poe says. “I know what’s in there.”

“You’re not denying?”

“What for. You’ve seen me naked often enough. It’s me alright, getting fucked.” He snorts, which infuriates Finn even more. “Metaphorically and otherwise.”

He’s fingering his cuff again. Aside from it, he seems to have recovered from his earlier emotions, looking cool and composed, the colour back in his face.

“What was it,” Finn says, “the thing you told me in the beginning? ‘I like having you only?’ ‘I like us being exclusive’, or something?”

There’s some strange twist to Poe’s mouth. Wistful more than bitter, if Finn can still read him. “Yeah,” he says. “I said that. I very much liked it.”

“You asshole! Liar! Speaking of, of wanting me, only me, and you were getting fucked by how many guys at the same time? Two? Three?”

“No,” Poe says. “It wasn’t –”

“And what’s that?” Finn asks, gesturing to the table and the holo on it. “Propaganda work?”

“Porn.”

“I don’t care how you call it! You were enjoying yourself getting fucked and filmed, filmed at the same time, you fucker!”

“Not always enjoy –”

“What’s that? Poe, what’s that! I know you! I fucking damn know your body! Look at yourself there!”

“It was porn, I told you. Artisanal, of a kind, but plain old commercialised porn. Lemme tell you, sometimes it’s hard work, less pleasant than you make it look.”

“Look at your skin! At your cock! Fuck, how your breath hitches! Watch that and tell me you’re not getting off when Stan praises you!”

Poe stands up and shuts of the holo.

“I know I’m getting off there. I did these vids. I wouldn’t have if there hadn’t been some pleasure involved. No need to rub my nose in it. You’re hurting yourself, Finn.”

“I’m hurting myself? Fuck, Poe!”

Poe isn’t getting mad. Not even defensive, not really. It’s like all fight has left him when he entered the room. He’s already beaten, watching the drama unfold, passive, fatalistic. It only makes Finn’s blood boil hotter.

“Commercialised porn,” Finn says with a sneer. “Did the navy commander need so much money? Was it blackmail?”

Poe looks up from the table. It’s despair, Finn realises. The fatalism in his eyes. “If you wanna
know,” Poe says, “it was something Stan and I needed after all these fake propaganda vids. Call it a commentary on our day work, uh.”

“You fucker. You pretentious, lying fucker. And how did you call it, what we did together? A commentary on the First Order fight? An aside? An innocent idiot, here to relieve you of all that pounding you took, that’s what I was for you? A fuck buddy? Fuck, I should have known, with the way you loved to call me that. Shit. Buddy.”

Poe flinched at the term, looked like he was about to say something. But he’s changed his mind, looks mutely at Finn.

“What did you like in me? My body? ‘Cause you obviously have a type, huh. Younger, darker, bulkier. Shit, is he better than me?”

“Oh, stop it!” Poe looks pained more than angry, but his voice is rising. Finally. “Cale is a pro. Of course he’s good. I don’t think he’s better than you. And don’t go look for him, for fuck’s sake, he just did his job. We were paired together because he looked like you and it sold, if you wanna know. Fuck, you weren’t exactly celibate when we began fucking, were you?”

“Not the same thing. I stopped seeing other people afterwards.”

“Yeah? Me too!”

“I don’t believe you!”

“I told you! Shit, Finn, I told you about it!”

“You didn’t.”

“I didn’t? Remember! Told you I had an arrangement. And I said I had stopped.”

“Well, you didn’t! Stop lying, Poe, I have proof!”

“Oh. Proof!”

“Proof. I – I remember now, I saw him, that guy, uh, Cale. The morning you told me to wait at Stan’s studio. I arrived early and he was there. Fuck, I thought you loved me back then.”

“Okay. When I told you I had stopped, I didn’t say how recent it was. But I had made my decision, Finn, I swear. Stan knew, Cale knew.”

“Stan is dead! And I don’t know who your Cale is!”

“Please, Finn.”

“There’s evidence in the vids, Poe. That it went on while we were supposed to be exclusive.”

“What?”

“Look,” Finn says, searching the vid. “Look, here. Your hand. I helped you tend these cuts. We were well into our first or second month being, huh, together.”

“I never fucked anyone else while we were together.”

“That’s what you say! I don’t believe you!”
“Fuck you, Finn! I stopped! About this hand, I don’t know! I don’t remember all the times I had cuts! I keep hurting my hands when I work on Black One, I hate putting on gloves, ask BB!”

“I know these cuts, Poe.”

“Then the vid was doctored! Fuck, who did you watch it with? No friends of mine, I’d bet!”

“Statura. I watched it with Statura, and tell you what, all in all he’s told me the entire truth more often than you! You’ve always, always hid what you were really doing!”

“Fuck Statura!” Poe yells, and months upon months of humiliations, bad treatments and repressed anger come out with it. “Fuck you!”

Finn can’t help it. He grabs Poe’s collar, pulls him up, raises his fist.

“Okay,” Poe says, his eyes open wide, his mouth suddenly slack. “Hit me.”

It makes Finn stop.

“No,” he says. “You’re getting off on me hurting you.”

Poe snorts. “Not in just any circumstance, believe me. Right now I’m not turned on at all.”

“Then why are you telling me to hit you.”

“Because I deserve it?”

“You’re admitting to that fucking on the side!”

“No! I don’t! Shit, Finn, doesn’t mean I don’t hurt you all the time. I deserve anything you wanna hit me with.”

“You fucking masochistic asshole!”

“Well, you seemed to enjoy the masochistic asshole, didn’t you? Fuck, you gave as much as I begged for!”

“Fuck you! You’re so tangled in your lies you don’t even know how to get out of them! Lemme tell you what I really want, right now.”

“Go ahead.”

“I want you out of my life. For ever.”

Yeah, now Poe’s hurt.

“That’s easy,” Poe says. “Just stop coming here. The Force knows I can’t move to Central right now. If you wait long enough I’ll probably displease your masters, sorry, your friends enough that I’ll be even less able to move. I’m told I’m but one step away from jail right now.”

“Then leave!” Finn yells. “I keep hearing about you at Central! Your vids, your fans, your politics, your mistakes! I can’t stand it! If you were staying because of me, it’s not worth it anymore. I don’t want you to. Leave!”

“As if I could,” Poe says, still not yelling, holding up his cuffed wrist.
Finn has to blink. His eyes are wet. He’s crying?

“Finn,” Poe says, his voice breaking.

But Finn doesn’t want him to make it better, doesn’t want apologies, fears yet another patching up.

“Listen, Poe,” he says. “I cared for you once. So listen. If you stay here it’s not jail you’ll get, it’s death. They’ve killed the Lieutenant, they’ve killed Stan. Do you think they’d hesitate to kill you? Leave.”

“I can’t.”

“Come on, are you telling me BB-8 can’t work at that thing?”

“He might. But even if I could deactivate the cuff, I’m full of trackers and there are cameras everywhere.”

Shit, Finn thinks. Cameras. Recorders. He looks around. There’s a flimsiplast stack in a corner and pens on the table.

*I’ve got a tracker*, he writes, hiding the flimsi in the crook of his arm. *Had friends help me deactivate it, make a lure. Remember Kruit Gstev?*

Poe nods.

*GG-12?*

A wide, happy smile. Poe snatches the flimsi from the table and shows it to BB-8, who whistles giddily.

“Then get lost,” Finn says aloud. “Go to jail, get yourself killed, I don’t care. You and I, we’re done.”

*Any means to contact them?* he writes. *K. flies shuttles from the commercial spaceport.*

*Can try. BB good at encrypting,* Poe writes.

*Then go away,* Finn writes.

*You?* Poe writes.

*I really don’t want to see you anymore,* Finn writes.

Poe nods, takes the flimsi. Hesitates, adds thank you at the bottom. Then *sorry*. Then *I know I always say that.*

“Sorry,” Poe says aloud. He crumples the flimsi and holds it to BB-8’s torch.

Then he looks directly into Finn’s eyes and bites his lower lip. By now Finn knows that’s an unconscious gesture. He’s seen it often enough when Poe was unsure of himself.

If he stayed any longer he’d kiss Poe, so he leaves.
turning point

Chapter Summary

Poe's enemies strike.

Chapter Notes

Remember the wise man/fool line from earlier? The way Finn uses it here is lifted from the way the real Ali said it in not so different circumstances.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

These days when Poe initiates check-ups for the ships he’s testing he finds himself making check-ups for his own life too.

S-foils – okay. They’re what he’s going to test in atmosphere configuration. They’d better work.

Hyperspace engines – okay. Someone else will have to make sure they’re adjusted to the mass well enough.

Secondary thrusters – orange. Curious, he’s worked on them yesterday. The nav comp seems to be dealing with it okay, probably some of today’s dust winds in the sensors.

Atmo engines – okay, they’d better be or he’s dead. BB-8’s making a second-level check. Good.

“Everything good for you, BB?” he asks to make sure.

It seems there’s some kind of discrepancy between the nav comp’s readings and BB’s. Curious. He tries the throttle. Seems to work.

Comm – who cares. He’s on his own with these tests. Ground comm seems to work, the tower hears him.

Contacting Kruit – initiated, four days ago. There’s hope of deciphering the cuffs codes, he’ll make sure all the TIE pilots can alter them and remove them as they please before he thinks of leaving.

Planning his own escape – it still feels remote. An abstraction. He’ll have to finish testing the last batch of refurbished ships anyway, because they’re more important than his own freedom.

Making sure his jailers aren’t too angry with him – he’s done what he could. Won’t touch the Grid again. Begged what remains of their hidden propaganda cell not to involve him anymore. Excused BB-8 and the sorority of interconnected nav comps from working at hacking the Security system. Will have to do.

Dealing with Finn – fuck. He’ll get around to erasing him from his next of kin list. He promised. It’s just two clicks on his datapad. He’ll do it in the evening. Or tomorrow. Maybe the day after because there’s another ship to test tomorrow.
Take off.

He finds himself close to a Starfighter squadron. There aren’t any barbed fences in the sky to prevent them from merging.

They mixed the squadrons and reworked the chain of command when they demoted him but these guys are mostly from Aurek. All of them did the K-naann campaign or they wouldn’t fly like that. They’re still his, he thinks with a surge of possessiveness. He could make them defect.

No.

They play together for a while in a mock dogfight. Sure, they’re good. Poe is still better, and he’ll be damned if he doesn’t use the occasion to train.

They close and open their S-foils as a salute when he’s finished showing them how it’s done. Then they pass atmo, cross the second moon limit and are out of his reach.

Okay. Back to that T-60 he’s got to test. Behaves well enough for what it is. BB-8 keeps sending in his measurements. S-foils are lazy, he says, but they’ve greased the transmission as well as they could and a ship so old will always feel her age a little bit.

Atmo engines answer well, great coupling with the lateral thrusters, but BB says that strange lag in data transmission is still there. There’s nothing wrong with the stick and when you’re piloting that’s what matters, Poe tells him.

BB-8 whistles his worry.

They’re passing over the commercial spaceport. He comms his position but they don’t acknowledge him. Who cares, they still have him on their screens, they’ll tell him if there’s a problem. The tower guys aren’t enemies.

That’s probably what he’ll have to do to land there and reach Kruit physically, he thinks. Fake some malfunction and pretend to need an emergency landing.

He flies further away, high enough to get some leeway and initiate a series of loops. Whatever Swift used to say, X-Wings are the best for atmo flights. Better gliders, great turns while remaining stable enough.

Fuck. Half-power on the engines. The third loop very nearly ends badly.

“BB-8,” he comms, “can you switch us to the hyperspace engines? I’m losing power.”

No reaction. The ship comm is malfunctioning, all channels, internal and external. He shifts to his lifesaving gear comm. BB answers, can’t do anything. The data lag is worse, he says. I’m losing control on the ship’s comp.

Fuck. It’s some ship comp bug, but it’s affecting all engine transmissions. No thrust, no power, nothing, not even the ejection. The only thing that remains for Poe to use is his mechanical control on the foils.

“I can manage to lose altitude very slowly,” he tells BB. “We’re high enough for an unstable orbit. But if I want to preserve our chances to land down engine-less on some manageable area, I’ll have to circle down and we’ll fall faster.”

Working on the bug, BB says. It’s not as old as the comp, very recent, actually. Clever. Lots of sub-
routines affecting every part of every transmission.

“Can you send a message across to the tower? I don’t have the power on my gear. They’ll need to make sure we don’t crash on something valuable.”

Sent, BB says. Don’t count on me solving the comp problem. I’d need more calculating power. GG could have.

“She’s not there,” Poe says.

I miss her, BB whistles sadly. And Rey. Even Finn.

“Me too, buddy. Come on, X-Wings glide. I can still land us alive.”

They glide very fast, BB says. I’ll save my core unit. Yours is more fragile.

“BB, if I don’t make it, you tell Finn I loved him? Tell him I swear he was the only one? Ah, shit. Only if you feel like he needs to hear it, uh. Okay, okay, I’m not dead yet. Working at keeping it that way.”

There’s something he can do. The parking engine isn’t connected to main comp and he probably can transfer its power to the secondary thrust. It’s not much, just a small push he’ll have to try at the last possible moment, but it’s something.

“Gonna try the swamps close to the spaceport,” he says. “They’re soft enough. And then medical can be there fast enough if they think I’m worth it. Tell the tower?”

At first their downward spiral feels lazy, gravity still light enough for them to feel more like a feather than a stone. Then they accelerate. They’re not falling, Poe tells himself. Gliding. It’s gliding. There’s forward movement, manoeuvrability, he can turn, pull her up using her momentum. She’s a nice little ship.

But fuck it’s fast.

Fast is good. Fast means he’s storing power to make her buck up before they make a splashing crater in that swamp. Fast means he can fly through the evil-looking clouds without getting toppled over or swaying too far from his ideal trajectory. Fast means he’s got to be very, very precise in his figure eight turns to get her exactly where he needs her.

He’s got two T-85 flanking him now. He gets a glimpse of one pilot. A thumb up, no smile. Their astromech is calculating probabilities, he knows. If they don’t think he can reach the swamp, he’ll get shot down before he threatens some inhabited or valuable area.

Another thumb up. BB confirms, trajectory still good.

I know, he thinks. I know I’m good. The question is, do you droids know I’m good enough?

How weird, he thinks. In a few seconds I’m either dead or just safely landed and very shaken. Dead is more likely.

Thumb up. The two Starfighters clear the way.

Here comes the swamp. Engine on, there’s some weak thrust. BB-8 whistles his congratulations. Poe laughs. He pulls everything down, gains as much power as he can, pulls her nose up. With only the mechanical transmission he’s got to stand up and pull on the stick with both hands, bracing on the
dashboard with one foot. Means he’s undone his harness.

He pushes open the landing gear, the s-foils, everything that could work as air brakes.

Lets go, falls back into his seat, manages to get one point of the harness fastened.

Contact. It’s violent. He can still pilot, closes the S-foils to avoid a tumble, waits, waits as they skim the mud, a bump, a second one, pilots the rebound, hears something squealing and a rush of air, he’s still alive, BB’s still transmitting, they’re alive, fuck, lateral wind, rolling them aside, and X-Wings can’t do much once they’re on the ground, something shakes the ship at his left, the foils torn off, mud rushing in, plastisteel folding and pushing inside, pressing at his leg, at his side, hard to breathe.

He’s still alive but there’s an unbearable weight crushing his left side, his left hand caught under the mass of folded plastisteel, wetness making his flightsuit cling to his body, doesn’t want to look, ship slowing down, he’s still alive, ship’s halting, slowly sinking into the mud, BB’s okay, can’t breathe, fuck, it hurts –

Finn –

//

It hits Finn like a wall.

Pain. Overwhelming, anguished pain. A surge, a desperate will to live. A call for help. His name. And then nothing.

That’s how Leia Organa told him she felt Han’s death.

“Poe,” he shouts. Poe!

“What’s happening?” Auderd says, rushing into the kitchen. “What was that noise?”

Finn looks down. The cake batter he was working on is splattered across the floor, the bowl overturned and miraculously intact. The batter was red, it looks like blood.

“He’s dead,” he says, noticing the red stains on his pants legs.

He sits down on the floor.

“Poe,” he says.

Auderd doesn’t tell him he’s mad, doesn’t ask how or what he knows.

“You’re Force-sensitive, Finn?” he asks.

“He’s dead,” Finn repeats.

“Shut up. I should think he is, yeah. I’m surprised you know. Not such a great loss, is it? After all, the only thing the traitor did was lying to you. Let’s watch the news, we’ll learn more.”

Finn follows him. What else is there to do?

“Seb!” Auderd calls. “Looks like the show is on, come and watch!”

It takes them half an hour of channel hopping before they admit defeat. The possible death of a former navy commander doesn’t appear to be newsworthy enough for a live feed. Finn’s hands are
shaking but he won’t let either of his bodyguards touch the controls.

“Maybe I just hallucinated,” Finn says.

“Let’s wait for the news to reach Central,” Auderd says. “We’ll get vids in a few hours.”

“I’ll go take a shower,” Finn says. “I’m covered in bl– in cake batter.”

They get images after exactly five hours that Finn spends trying to understand what happened inside his head, and trying to replicate the experience. Poe, he tries to think, as hard as he can, or send, whatever he might be doing with the Force. Poe!

“Shit,” Auderd says. “He landed his ship?”

The holo shows the carcass of an X-Wing in a swamp. Her left side is a mass of crushed metal, the s-foils folded and torn. She reminds Finn of a crushed insect.

“Landed?” he echoes.

“Why do you think the cockpit is mostly intact?” Sebvaux says. “Dammit, he was supposed to lose all engine power and he lands her?”

“Means we’re left with a droid problem now,” Auderd says.

Controversial ex-navy pilot Poe Dameron was fatally hurt in a flight test accident today, the commenter says. Our team was at the site when his body was recovered. As you will see, Poe Dameron found himself at the heart of his last squabble.

They show a bad, blurry image of Poe on a stretcher, his body covered by a blood-stained blanket but his head out, hair matted, an oxygen mask on his face, medics milling around.

“What,” Auderd says. “Didn’t you say he was dead?”

A mad, tenuous hope tugs at Finn’s heart. “I don’t know,” he says. “I felt him call, and then nothing. I’m not even sure it was the Force. I just felt him.”

“Or maybe what the Force feels isn’t the heartbeat, it’s, what do you call it, the soul leaving the body,” Sebvaux says. “I got confirmation from Central. He’s dead, but there was some suspense for a while. Look at that.”

The feed cuts to a shuttle landing nearby, the Resistance’s starbird stamped on its flanks. Two uniformed Resistance colonels step down – one of them is Caluan Emmatt, Finn realises – together with a team of four K-naann.

One of the K-naann rushes to Poe’s side, pushes the medics away and extends a tentacle towards his body. After a while the cuff falls on the ground.

“They were very fast,” Sebvaux said. “Our analysts think they had a ghost team stationed inside the Core, possibly in the system. They must have been plotting to recover Dameron at some point.”

“Looks like they did,” Auderd growls. “His body at least. Hey, that colonel is speaking.”

“The Resistance was informed of the crash by a Republic squadron,” Emmat says to a row of mics. “When we had confirmation of the wounded pilot’s identity we decided to act. The Resistance,
through its Republic citizens, if officially requiring an investigation on the circumstances of the crash. Meanwhile, Commander Dameron will be taken to a Resistance medical facility, out of the reach of possible harm, beyond the Republic borders.”


*The Resistance doesn’t appear to have met any opposition while stealing away a convicted criminal,* the commenter continues. *They were accompanied by a team of K-naann, who can manipulate the Force and might have done it to their advantage. Such a ruthless guerrilla operation will add to the strain to the relations between Resistance and Republic.*

Another cut, this time to a body being wheeled out of the Resistance shuttle, completely covered by the same bloodied blanket, head included. Then a shot of Poe’s face, maybe a still, or maybe it’s that the holo hasn’t got any movement to catch. He’s very pale and the marks the oxygen mask left into his skin are bluish. His eyes are closed and sunken. They washed the blood from his hair and face but abrasion marks remain on his left cheekbone, open, not bleeding.

*But whatever the Resistance sought to achieve regarding Dameron, it was a failure,* the commenter says. *An immediate transfer to the nearby Republic medcentre could have saved him. But with half his body crushed by the whole weight of a starship he wasn’t stable enough for hyperspace travel. Resistance officials confirmed his death, showing physical and medical proof half an hour ago.*

“No,” Finn says. Tears are running down his face and he doesn’t care. *Poe.*

“Your Resistance pals killed him,” Auderd says.

“He *was supposed* to lose all engine power,” Finn quotes. “Somebody else began the work.”

“You’re surprised?” Sebvaux says. “You even warned him the last time you saw him. Come on, is that such a loss? He was a traitor and a liar.”

“No,” Finn whines, unable to follow a coherent conversation anymore. *Poe!*

Auderd stands up.

“Come on, Seb,” he says. “Let’s leave him to his bawling. He’ll come around, he’ll have to.”

//

Finn breathes deep and plunges in, projectors in his eyes, the teleprompter flashing. There’s an interviewer somewhere pretending to ask questions. Finn doesn’t know if it’s fooling anyone.

“No,” Finn says. “Poe Dameron, like me, was among the team of heroes who got us rid of Starkiller,” he reads.

Who wrote that, he thinks. They know I hate talking about Starkiller. I witnessed Han die. I couldn’t help anyone. I was nearly killed. Starkiller was a nightmare. I’m not a hero.

He glances at the next line, turns his expression to appropriately commiserating.

“It’s been sad to witness how he squandered the public’s goodwill with his actions afterwards.”

What a sentence. Finn has never felt so dissociated in front of a camera before. What he sees is himself with Phasma, earlier in the day.

“I wanted to tell you,” he told her then. “They said they’d kill you if I don’t show up in the news studio.”
She chuckled. “You love offering choices, Finn, don’t you? You want to burden me with this one?”

“I hate it,” Finn said.

“It’s fascinating, what conditioning can miss. You’ve become – sentimental? In my opinion, a
useless, tethered ex-Stormtrooper captain isn’t worth much. I’d sacrifice myself easily if I were in
your place, if I thought there was a need.”

“But I like you.”

“See? Sentimental. You even put me on that next-of-kin list. I’m not your mother.”

“But you were my captain.”

“And now you’re my leader, don’t think I don’t see it.”

“And your role in organising the Stormtroopers’ communities is fundamental. I need you.”

“Ah, finally some argument I can get behind. As I said, I’d sacrifice myself. But really, your lover’s
dead. He’ll remain dead even if you do some idiotic grand gesture in front of the Republic’s
cameras.”

He probably had flinched at that point. He knows he thought of Poe’s legacy and of the power of
words.

“You didn’t even love him anymore, did you?” Phasma had said in that cold voice of her.

“What?”

“Because of that porn thing.”

“How do you know?”

“He told me.”

“What?” He had chuckled. Force, it was ridiculous. “Captain Phasma, ex-Stormtrooper, was Poe
Dameron’s confidante?”

“There were precious few people who talked to him, lately.”

“And you did. What did you call me? Sentimental?”

“He’s dead, Eight Seven. Do that speech on holo. Say exactly what they want to hear. You were a
Stormtrooper, you know how to obey.”

He looks back to the prompter. Obey.

“He had a tremendous personal courage,” he reads. “Bordering on reckless. He’d seduce you with
great surges of idealism, great words, spectacular charges. He seduced me, I’ll say it here.”

Fuckers.

“But he lied. He hid. You never got the whole truth.”

They’re keeping him on audio but they’re cutting the visual to – fuckers. It’s shown with taste and
restraint, torsos, hair, hands, no cocks or asses of course. But it’s Poe, being fucked.
The next sentence is the cruelest they ever gave him and yet it’s easy to let it out with the required amount of sentiment.

“I loved him. I know the news speculated extensively about our relationship, so here am I, telling you we were together, or, or so I thought. Because he lied to me, on a personal level. He used me. He led a double life, Dameron, the Fleet’s golden poster boy by day, a porn star by night. He never told me.”

They want genuine rage from him. They got it. He’ll give them what they want now, it’s easy. He’ll use his own words, make them stem from his own frustrations and anger. Fuck the teleprompter.

“He was like that in every part of his life, not only in intimacy. There’d be great words, he’d make you dream, push you towards the hardest path, and when you needed him to help, woosh! He wasn’t there anymore. Everyone fell to his tricks. I did. You did. Stormtroopers did. He made Phasma’s TIE pilots dream of great deeds, he used their addiction to flying for his own personal purpose. Sixty three percent of them died.”

“You could argue that they weren’t citizens,” the interviewer says. “Not really humans, not in the conventional meaning. They were conditioned, self-sacrifice was in their blood.”

Finn should react to that. He always did it the past. That’s not what they want today. Obey.

“He did that with everyone. In every situation. His double life extended to his flying. He’d leave the border patrolling to explore the stars, against his orders. He’d do spy work for the Resistance when he was supposed to fly for the Republic. Dammit, he tricked the Republic squadrons into following him, he falsified orders on an army scale! What kind of madness is it? What kind of self-adoring fool thinks his personal convictions allow him to steal a whole fleet? To steal the life of so many young people?”

The interviewer looks uneasy. Finn isn’t following the script.

“You’re quite passionate about it,” he says. “And you seem to have thought about it in detail. Actually, I didn’t know you could speak like that!”

Is it some warning, a reminder he should read the prompter?

“A wise man can act a fool, Mister, but a fool cannot act a wise man. Maybe I could speak like that for a long time, only you didn’t notice.”

Fuck. That’s Poe’s line from long ago.

Poe.

The interviewer chuckles, trying for friendly.

“Now that’s a great line,” he says. “Did you make it up?”

Obey.

“Ah, I didn’t. Heard it – I don’t remember where, it was floating around, I think.”

“You said he was reckless,” the interviewer prompts, trying to steer Finn back to the script. “But in that last campaign he stayed mostly behind the lines.”

“He did. Maybe he was changing as he grew older, beginning to feel more interested in his personal
safety. Or he was just becoming more adept at manipulating others from behind. He was always so critical of the PSR mission to make the Republic safer for the citizens. Attack, attack, attack all the time, that’s what we heard. He even hijacked the news to promote his message. So foolish. And when he realised what it could cost he changed his mind, but only for himself.”

It feels hard to breathe. Or it’s his heart beating so madly he can see the blood wooshing inside his eyes. Finn hates what he says, doesn’t know anymore where he’s directing his rage, towards Rannel smirking in a corner, towards Poe, towards those who killed him and those who gave the order, towards the Resistance who used him as a pawn and himself who didn’t do enough.

Poe was ruthless and a liar, he wants to say, but he faced the consequences of his actions, to his death. And right now I’m as much a liar as he is, and I’m hiding even more than he did. And you should all be crying, not smirking, because fuck, he was so much better than you, and he’s dead!

Poe.

Poe!

“Did you approve of his sentence after the XXX campaign?” the interviewer asks.

They’re showing that reel of Poe being stripped of his marks of rank again.

Obey.

“I thought the Republic was very kind with him. To be frank, kinder than towards people who were guilty of less, such as the surviving TIE pilots. They let him free to walk around. He could even fly. He received a partial pardon. Maybe he shouldn’t have. What did he do with his freedom? Hijack the grid again. Overstep his boundaries. Die in a crash. We’ll never say he didn’t die like he lived.”

//

They’re rushing to him. Smiling, laughing, shaking his hand, patting his back, hugging him. You were good, you were great, you told it like it is, you’re so great, they say in a thousand voices.

“I’m sorry” he says. “I need to go to the fresher. Please.”

He throws up, head reeling, his whole body shaking. Throws up again.

He can’t stop shivering. He refrains his teeth from chattering long enough to tell Sebvaux: “Can’t stay for the party. I’m not feeling well. I’m going home.”

They follow him there, his two shadows. Of course.


Poe.

He has so many reasons to keep on going. So many people counting on him. So many forgotten, forsaken communities slowly getting better because of some immaterial thing it seems he knows how to do. Just because he’s showing them they can organise themselves.

He has people who love him. He’d bet Phasma does, in her strange way. Gloria does, the Stormtrooper who wanted to become a mother and who is. Her kids. Taq’kiiirt, the Wiirk’t drone who plays such a good music and loves criss-crossing the galaxy with him.
So many people.

He can’t go on, not like that.

“I’m going out,” he tells the bodyguards. “I need to pay a visit to Director Statura.”

“Does he know about it?” Sebvaux asks.

“I’ll try my luck.”

“Then I need to bodysearch you,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

She always had more manners than her partner. It makes Finn hate her more.

//

The guards at Statura’s office are the same as the other day. They smile at Finn, pat him awkwardly on the back, talk briefly into the office comm.

“He’s waiting for you,” they say after a minimal waiting time.


Statura is not a very tactile man, never a hugger. But he takes Finn’s hand and squeezes it, searching into his eyes. It feels comforting, not inquisitive.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he says.

My loss, Finn thinks. Mine? Such a strange Republican expression.

“Did you order Poe’s death?” he asks.

Statura’s forehead tenses. It’s shame, Finn realises.

“You know I don’t like these kind of methods,” Statura answers. “I didn’t. Dameron was becoming, pardon me, a pain in the ass, but I was advocating for prison.”

“I want to see his body,” Finn says.

“What? We don’t have it, you know it. We have holos, yeah, medical scans, but of course it’s not the same. It’s been sent somewhere in the outer Rim, Yavin, we’ve been told. His father asked for his remains.”

“I need,” Finn begins – what was the word Statura used the other day? “I need closure. Please. I need to talk to the people who saw his last hours. To his droid. If I’m allowed I want to see him one last time. Let me fly there.”

“Out of the Republic? In Resistance-controlled territory? Do you want to defect, Finn?”

“I want closure. That’s all.”

“It’s a tremendous favour you’re asking me. Politically, it can’t be spinned into anything valuable. My own friends aren’t going to like it at all.”

“I’ll hide. Nobody’s going to know.”

“I need more reassurance than that, Finn.”
“Take hostages. I’ll come back. I swear.”

“All the Stormtroopers communities. There’ll be destroyers over them the whole time you’re away. If
you don’t come back they get eradicated. And that’s something we won’t have any problems
explaining to the opinion.”

“Okay,” Finn says. Was that how Poe felt, playing with the life of so many people at once?

“Well. I can’t promise anything, you know. Ultimately, the Resistance decides if they want to let you
in.”

“I’m sure you’ve got means to contact them. You’re not at war with the Resistance, not yet.”

Statura nods towards a cabinet in a corner. “Personal comm, all three Directors have one. It’s not
bugged.”

He leans towards Finn, throws an arm over his shoulders.

“You’re a good man, son,” he says. “When you come back, I’d really like you to consider taking an
official political function. I can take you as my personal assistant.” He smiles tiredly. “To tell you the
truth, I’m seeing the moment when I’ll need allies to confront my two colleagues. They’re bending
the Republic values into something I don’t really like.”

Finn nods. ‘I’ll consider it,” he says. “It might be a hard bargain. I care for the Stormtroopers more
than you do, Tihhe.”

Statura grins wider. “That’s why you’re so valuable, Finn. You’re a natural at political negotiations.
You’ll do great.”

Yeah, Finn thinks. I should side with you because Poe’s political line ended with his death. And
then, when Gilles corners you and kills you, I’ll side with him because he’s a less dangerous asshole
than Myrtas. And when Gilles dies I’ll have to side with Myrtas and he’ll kill me because he’s not
one to share the power for long.

“Here’s your comm,” Statura said. “The connexion’s on. Who you get on the other side varies.
They’re one or two steps removed from Leia Organa, so behave.”

“Who’s that,” a sleepy voice says on the other side. “Fuck, you could check out the time cycles
before calling, for once. Hey, you’re not Statura’s aide?”

“No,” Finn says. “Jess Pava, you’re doing headquarters work?”

“My T-70 got pummelled in the last skirmish. We’re waiting to see if it can be repaired. It’s beyond
my technical skills.” He eyes widen. “Fuck me. Finn. Came to apologise?”

“I’d like to see Poe.”

Her whole face twists in anger. “He’s dead, haven’t you heard?”

“His body. Please. I need to see him one last time.”

“And what makes you think we want you to see him, you asshole? We all saw your last interview.
You’re great at character assassination, you know that? Hell, Kes Dameron saw it. Do you think he
wants to have anything to do with you right now?”

I understand, Finn nearly says. I’m sorry, he doesn’t say, because it won’t erase the interview and it
won’t resuscitate Poe.

Poe.

He needs to see him.

“He listed me as next of kin,” he begins. He meant to add ‘once’ but Pava is already pulling a datapad towards her.

“She’s okayed it,” she says. “I’ll check. If you’re in there I guess we’ll have to okay a visit but if not get lost, Finn.”

He’s fucked.

She looks up. She’s furious.

“We won’t pay for your transfer,” she says – wait, what? “Get your own ship. He’s on Yavin IV and you’d better hurry. I’ll warn Kes and the General. Say hello to your friend Statura for me, Finn. Bye.”

“I can arrange for your passage,” Statura says. “There are pilots we can trust in the fleet. And remember. There’ll be destroyers above the Stormtroopers’ compounds and your tracker works at any distance. You’ve got one week. I look forward to your return.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m not such a fan of cliffhangers and yet I keep writing some. Sorry!

This is the turning point after which I couldn’t follow the Muhammad Ali & Malcolm X storyline. So if I got you scared, look at the tags!
Chapter Summary

Things getting better: a timid beginning.

There’s a single K-naan waiting for him on the tarmac. Finn guesses they’re the only one who were willing to see him.

“Welcome to Yavin,” the K-naan says. It feels strange, the physical words leaving an echo directly in his mind.

“Thank you,” Finn says.

“You’re the one who never stopped calling for Poe Dameron since the crash,” they say. “We heard you. It’s said that such Force reaching helps sometimes. In that case we’re sure it did.”

“I don’t understand,” Finn says.

“Yes,” they say. “We can see your use of the Force is very child-like. Ah, sorry, that’s not the word. Uncontrolled. Follow me.”

They embark on some surface vehicle, drive across a forest the like of which Finn never saw, trees higher than the highest building. They reach some kind of settlement and finally a tall, square building.

“That’s Kes Dameron’s house?” Finn asks.

“No. That’s the medcentre. We’re at Yavin’s capital.”

The settlement is smaller than a single district of Drion. The medcentre isn’t that impressive, but Finn guesses it provides what a house wouldn’t. Poe died four days ago and a body doesn’t hold well by itself.

He’s led across corridors, his guide sliding on their four tentacles beside him. Finn realises he’s often seen death, but bodies, never that much. In the First Order, the death of a cadet during training was a regular occurrence but you thanked your stars it wasn’t you and kept on. The blood wasn’t even turning brown and the limbs were still supple when the dead were disposed of.

How will Poe’s body look? Will Finn see something of the man in what remains of the flesh? Will there be decay? Do they preserve the body in some way? Are there some rituals?

Will they kill him on the spot? Will Kes Dameron feel fit to avenge his son?

“Some of Dameron’s comrades disapprove of your coming here but we’re glad you did,” his guide says. “It will help. We can still hear you call him inside your mind.”

Help what? Finn realises that some species can use a grammatically perfect basic and still be absolutely confusing.
“I don’t understand,” he says.

“You will. And here we are.”

*Oh, Poe.*

The room is plain, a simple medcentre room. BB-8 sees him, lets out a shrill string of beeps and rolls away to hide on the other side of the bed.

Leia Organa stands there, face unreadable. There’s a man beside her, his skin the same tan hue as Poe’s, his hair steel grey. He looks sad, worried. Hostile more than angry.


He should offer his sympathy. Apologise. He doesn’t find the words.


Poe looks deceptively normal. Shouldn’t the room be cooler? There’s probably some kind of force field at work, like a small shield, because his skin isn’t mottled or greenish like Finn thought it would, and if the room smells strange it’s mostly of antiseptic, not of death.

They laid him on a plain bed, covered him with a sheet except for the head. The five o’clock shadow is very apparent on his too-white skin. Does hair keep growing after somebody’s death? Finn thinks he read something about that somewhere. What is strange is that the people who made Poe presentable let the hair grow but applied some kind of cosmetics to his face. But he’s read about that too. You add pink to a dead man’s cheeks, hide the bruises and marks if there are some. Make him look alive. Make the living forget how he died.

He hears a small, strangled moan. Realises it came out of his own throat. He’s going to cry.

Poe looks like he’s sleeping. Like he’s going to resume breathing.

*Poe*


The sheet *is* moving. Tiny, imperceptible up and down shifts.

Finn rushes to Poe’s side. “He’s alive?” he tells Leia. “Force, he’s alive.”

He has to kneel, his head reeling. *Poe, Poe!*

“You’re gonna want to touch him,” a male voice says. Kes. “Scrub your hands first.”

He complies, and then pushes the sheets away to take Poe’s left hand. Recoils when he sees the cast, the bandaged, mutilated hand.

“No –” he says.

“Three fingers,” Kes says. “He lost three fingers.” He pulls out a chair, sits heavily at Poe’s other side. Strokes his son’s forehead lightly.

“And his right hand?” Finn asks, suddenly afraid of the smaller bulk at Poe’s right side.
“His right side is alright. No breaks, nothing. The X-Wing collapsed onto his left side, not his right.”

“They said he’d been crushed. That he wasn’t stable enough for hyperspace travel.”

“Well,” Leia says. “The Republic tends to forget we’ve got an extensive experience in emergency war medicine. And they aren’t the only ones able to doctor holos and medical scans. They nearly succeeded in killing him, Finn. They’d have attempted it again. We weren’t going to take any chances.”

“Yeah,” Kes Dameron says. “And if you happen to spill this out to your friends from the other side of the border, well, let me tell you that the Republic isn’t the only one with definitive ways of dealing with inconveniences.”

Leia makes a kind of appeasing noise. “Our K-naann friends were a great help,” she says. “They could maintain his vital functions and hide his breathing and heartbeat while the Republic envoy was checking out his body. We do want the Republic to keep believing he’s dead.”

“Maintain his vital functions?” Finn asks. Poe had an oxygen mask on when the Resistance retrieved him. “What’s the damage?”

“It’s true that we were afraid for his life,” Leia says. “They weren’t exaggerating when they said he’d been crushed under his ship. His ribs snapped, which led to a collapsed lung. He’s been breathing by himself only since this morning.”

“Oh thank the Force,” Finn says. He’s getting better. He’ll live. Three fingers aren’t such a high price to pay.

But Kes doesn’t look happy, even without taking Finn’s presence into account.

“What’s the matter?” Finn asks. “He’s going to make it, isn’t he? He’ll live?”

“Yes,” Kes says. “He’ll live. Poe, you said you wanted us to show him, that’s still okay?”

Poe’s eyelids flutter. Open. Squeeze down once. Open back to slits.

“Poe!” Finn exclaims. “You’re conscious! Oh Poe, I’m so sorry!”

He doesn’t know what part of Poe he can touch without hurting him. Settles for a hand in his hair. Poe’s lips twitch, try to shape around something. A very small sound escapes from his throat, maybe the beginning of Finn’s name.

“He asked us to lower down the painkillers,” Kes says. “Told us he wanted to be coherent when you’d be there.”

There’s the ghost of a smile hovering on Poe’s lips.

“You can talk, Poe?”

“Right now he’s in too much pain and he’s exhausted. Earlier this morning he was able to speak a little.”

“It’s not just the fingers,” Finn says. “Or even the broken ribs, or the arm.”

“It isn’t,” Kes agrees. “Gonna move the bedsheets, son, you ready?”

Another eyelids nod. A hiss as the sheet brushes his leg.
“Oh fuck,” Finn says. “Poe, take those painkillers. I don’t care if they make you high as your X-Wing.”

A minute shake of his head.

“You masochistic asshole,” Finn says, and the corners of Poe’s mouth extend slightly. “You take them. They’re what, injected?” he asks Kes. “I know how to do injections.”

Another tiny smile. Poe was always proud of Finn’s medical knowledge. A breathy sigh, another eyelids nod.

“You can add them directly to the drip,” Kes says.

Poe raises his right hand an inch above the bed.

“What,” Finn says.

Force, he’s trying to talk. Finn approaches his ear to Poe’s mouth.

“Kiss me first,” Poe says, loud enough for the others to hear too.

Kes facepalms. Leia smirks.

“Son,” Kes says, “have mercy for him. It has to be the worst introduction to in-laws in the history of the whole Galaxy.”

“You know you’ve got some explaining to do,” Finn tells Poe. “When you’re better.”

Eyelids nod. Kes frowns. “Aren’t you the one with a lot of explaining to do?” he growls. “I happen to have watched quite a lot of your recent holos, kid.”

“Dad –” Poe’s lips form, although there’s not much sound coming out with it.

“Don’t ‘Dad’ me, son.”

“You’ll explain and this time I’ll listen,” Finn says. “And then I’ll apologise. If – if you still want to hear.”

Finn thinks. He’s rarely been the one to apologise in their relationship. Poe always did, sometimes for trivial things. And Finn usually thought he was within his rights to hope for an apology but he wonders if it was really the case. Right now, it’s Poe who’s owed a big one, and not for a trivial thing, and Finn realises he doesn’t really know how to do it. Well, probably by beginning. “I know it doesn’t erase anything that has happened,” he says. “But I’ve told you some horrible things, both to your face and on holo. And I’m sorry.”

“And you let him all alone, and he nearly died,” Kes Dameron says.

What else could I do, Finn thinks, with the Stormtroopers’ well-being, their lives, even, in balance? And then remembers when Poe could have tried to bring up the same kind of rationalisation, back when he visited Finn to talk about the dead TIE pilots.

I did try to help him escape, he thinks, I gave him Kruit’s contact, I told him to go.

But it wasn’t enough in the end, and Finn is guilty, and he doesn’t know how to admit it. He looks to Poe.
“You can’t know how fucking sorry I am,” he says.

Poe reacts only as he did before, with an eyelid acknowledgement. It doesn’t make Finn feel less guilty. “Okay,” he says, because he needs to do something. “A kiss, and then the drip.”

He bends and touches his lips to Poe’s. Presses a little, feels Poe feeble attempts at answering. That fucker is trying to add tongue. Finn smiles into his mouth.

He stands up, checks out Poe’s medical data. The painkiller dose he’s allowed is truly monstrous. He’ll sleep.

“Do I need to go ask a medic?” he asks.

“Go ahead,” Leia says. “We trust you.”

“Okay,” he says. “Sweet dreams, Poe.”

Then the only thing left is looking at Poe’s leg.

“Fucking hell,” Finn says.

“Yeah,” Kes echoes.

The leg is encased in some kind of open splint to accommodate the unholy swelling. There are several sutured wounds, some long and regular, others jagged, all covered in gel. The skin is scraped and bruised black, transitioning to an angry red at the hip.

“They’ve been trying to save it,” Leia says. “They already operated twice. It’s – we’d better amputate.”

“No,” Kes says.

“Kes, look at his hip.”

“If you cut it,” Finn asks, “will he get a mechanical leg?”

“With what money?” Kes asks. “These things are worth a few planets, and that’s not an exaggeration. He can afford the fingers. Not the leg.”

“The Resistance will do something,” Leia says. “We owe him that. But it’s going to be Outer Rim technology. It won’t be good enough for him to keep on piloting anything more complicated than an atmo shuttle.”


“We don’t have bacta,” Leia says. “Not in a tank. Most Outer Rim worlds don’t.”

“Then get him back to the Republic!” Finn shouts. Poe, his beautiful Poe, missing a leg and unable to fly. No!

“They’ll kill him,” Kes says.

“Finn, can you find us a bacta tank?” Leia asks.

“What, by asking the Republic? I think they’d be suspicious.”
“Find a way,” Kes says.

They rehearsed this. Finn is sure of it. It came up too smoothly.

“That’s why you let me in,” he says. “Because of my contacts in the Core worlds. Well, my only contact is Statura and the only reason he allowed me out is because he positioned Destroyers above the ex-Stormtroopers compounds. He’s blackmailing me, General. He’ll kill them if I don’t go back, and I can’t do anything for you. I can’t find you bacta, not even a jar of gel.”

“I don’t give a damn about Stormtroopers,” Kes says. “My son will lose his leg.”

“I’m a Stormtrooper,” Finn says.

“Yeah,” Kes says. “So you’ll obey that asshole’s orders, fly back to your Republic, like the nice brainwashed soldier you are. Sorry we asked.”

“Fuck you!” Finn yells, months upon months of slurs coming back to him, images of cannons shooting and compounds burning added into the mix. “You don’t know how many orders I disobeyed! You don’t know how many lives your son’s leg could cost!”

“Dameron,” Leia says, and Finn doesn’t realise at first she’s not talking to Poe. “Calm down. You’re not helping.”

Kes appears to deflate. And Finn feels suddenly calmer, too. Leia is watching them both, a slightly pained smile on her lips.

“You’re using the Force?” Finn asks. She nods.

“Witch,” Kes says, but he’s smiling.

“Blockhead,” she says.

“Stormie,” Kes tells Finn.

“Uncon,” Finn tells Kes. “Sorry, that’s how we used to call the non-conditioned, even some of our officers. I mean the family-raised guys, like Hux. It’s a slur. We were supposed to be proud of our upbringing.”


“Not really,” Finn says. “Mostly, we loved imagining us some parents.” He sighs. “I suppose I’ll have to steal that tank”.

“I’d help you, kid,” Kes says, “but –”

He nods down to his side and for the first time Finn notices his right sleeve is empty from the elbow down.

“I’m sure you’ll find some volunteers here,” Leia says. “Do you think you need many people?”

“How much time do we have?” Finn asks, then looks down at Poe’s leg. “Okay, none.”

“We’ll find you a faster ship,” Leia says. “So, how many?”

“Not many. A small squad. What we need is stealth, not a frontal assault. I have contacts I can use in the Core Worlds too.”
“Let me guess,” Leia says, smiling. “Kruit Gustev?”

Finn smiles. They understand each other. “Among others,” he says. “But that’s him I’m gonna need and most of all his droid. She’s got my tracker figured. Is it possible to ship them both here? Fast?”

“Yes, I think I can have them here by tomorrow morning. They implanted you a tracker, Finn? What’s the Republic up to?”

“Poe had a few, too. Did your remove them? If they begin to move, some Akhios people will become suspicious.”


Finn shrugs. Kes looks back down to Poe. He caresses his jaw, the gesture soft, incredibly tender. Poe’s father, Finn thinks.

“I’m gonna shave him,” Kes says. “He asked me to this morning when we removed the oxygen mask. Says it itches. Or do you wanna do it, Finn?”


“I’ll wait for you outside, Finn,” Leia says. “Ask for me when you leave. I’ll walk you to the guesthouse, it’s better if Poe’s friends see you with me.”

“He can sleep at my place,” Kes says.

“It’s too far, Dameron. If Finn’s group leaves tomorrow morning, we’ll have to do some brainstorming this evening. But I’m sure he appreciates the gesture.”


“Kes.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You kissed my son in front of me, you can call me Kes.”

“Even if I’m a brainwashed Stormtrooper, sir?”

“Ouch,” Kes says, smiling crookedly. “Maybe you’re not that brainwashed finally.”

“All right, I’m going,” Leia says. “See you this evening, Dameron.”

“See you, General.”

Kes stands up and begins to busy himself with the shaving kit. He’s doing quite well with one hand, obviously used to it, so Finn doesn’t try to get in the way.

“Here,” Kes says. “I can show off quite well with the one hand, but it’s still easier with two.”

Finn sprays on the shaving cream, begins to busy himself with Poe’s jaw. Poe isn’t completely out, making small noises, grunts, sighs, some tension leaving his shoulders.

“His beard is coming out grey,” Kes says. “Here on the jaw. I can’t believe it.”
“There’s a tiny bit of white in his hair too,” Finn says. “Close to the ears. I like it. It shines.”

“Force. Last time I saw him, I mean physically, he was about to defect to the Resistance, not that any of us knew. He was coming back from some long-ass routine mission and had grown the blackest, most spectacular beard I ever saw. And now he’s turning grey.”

The razor scrapes at Poe’s stubble. His cheeks are hollower than Finn remembered them.

“Seven years,” Kes says. “We haven’t been on the same planet for seven years. You know, when it became obvious that he’d inherited Shara’s gift with spaceships, I still tried to tell myself there were plenty of insystem flying jobs he’d enjoy. Ha. As if. You know what the first thing he said when we removed the mask was?”

“No,” Finn says. “Something about flying?”

“Sure. He said, ‘I landed her,’ that son of – of mine. And by the Force, he did.”

“Made the Drion security goons mad,” Finn says, grinning. “They didn’t know it was possible.”

More razor scraping, now at the fragile skin of Poe’s neck.

“You can’t see the lines around his eyes so well on holo,” Kes says. “That’s another thing I had to get used to when they brought him in.”

That and the possibility of losing a son, or of his son losing a limb, Finn thinks. But Kes appears to have decided to stay on the light – or bittersweet? – side of things.

“You used to watch him on holo?” Finn asks.

“We holo-commed each other when we could. But yeah, I liked watching him. Poster boy Poe Dameron, heh.” He looks up across the bed, catches Finn’s gaze. “Means I also watched you these last three years. Tell you what, I didn’t like you that much. We’re not really fans of the PSR around here. They’re shutting us out with the Knights. And my son has such a history of catastrophic dating, I thought you were the next one on the list.”

“Catastrophic dating?”

“As a young man, Poe was an unholy mix of party animal and irredeemable romantic. Made for some awkward dates. Later, I guess his job got in the way of his partying but he still alternated between crushing hard on the wrong guy and finding the most meaningless fuck he could, for comfort, he’d say. You love him, Finn?”

Force damn, damn that man, what should Finn say?

Kes grunts. “Hell, I’m sorry, son. I shouldn’t go around asking questions like that. I can see you care a lot. And, huh, I also watched your last interview.”

Oh fuck.

“No need to look that way. To tell you the truth, I wanted to punch you into your chair for a while, but I understand. Ah. Leia Organa had to explain me a few things and now I understand. Some. Not all.”

“I don’t think he loves me,” Finn blurs out.

Kes squints at Finn. He doesn’t look that much like Poe but they’ve got the same eyes. The same
lines around them, deeper set in the father than the son. The corner of his lips twitches.

“You know he said the exact same thing this morning?” he asks. “Before trying to explain why he still had you on his next-of-kin list.”

Something whistles behind Poe’s bed and BB-8 rolls out, stopping a few meters from Finn. He rolls backward, forward, backward again in a shaky, hesitant motion. He bleeps.

“I’m sorry,” Finn says. “What?”

“You don’t understand binary? After so long in Poe’s vicinity? Wow.”

“I – ” I think BB-8 resented me for not visiting more often and then hurting Poe, Finn doesn’t say. And also for saying horrible things about droids. So I was a coward and stopped interacting with him. “I always told myself I’d learn but never got around.”

BB-8 blaarps.

“Well, he’s saying he’s got something to tell you.”

“Oh?”

“And also that not learning binary is despicable. In not so many words. He’s not being polite.”

BB-8 beeps and whistles.

“He says it’s something Poe told him when they were about to crash.”

Another string of whistles, BB-8 rolling to stand against the bed, between Poe and Finn, and oscillating there. It looks like a protective stance.

Kes chuckles. “You’ve got your answer,” he says. “Poe told him to tell you, if BB-8 thought you wanted to hear it, I guess that’s why you’re hearing only now, well, to tell you that Poe loves you and that you were the only one, whatever that means. Actually, after having seen that interview I have an idea of what it means.”

Finn still has the razor in his hand, having abandoned his shaving work half way. It makes Poe look ridiculous but pretty, the shape of his lips emerging from the foam.

“I’m an idiot,” Finn says.

“Of course you’re not,” Kes says. “You’re in love, that’s all.”

“I am,” Finn says. “Of course I am. Kes, I’ve spent nearly three years with the PSR’s propaganda team and when they decide to use their tricks on me I still believe them.”

“Of course you’re an idiot, or of course you’re in love?”

“Both,” Finn says.

After a while, Kes clears his voice. “You know,” he says, “when Poe’s jealous he does strange things. He gets angry and snaps easily, no surprise there. But then he steps back. It’s strange, actually. For someone whose job is to attack people, and who’s so good at it, to let go so easily. He’ll just withdraw into himself and either drink or fuck, uh, someone else.”

“I’m sorry,” Finn says, “when Poe is what?”
“When he’s jealous.”

“Uh.”

“You don’t – oh, fuck me. Stormies – sorry, Stormtroopers mustn’t get a lot of occasions to – of course. Jealous, Finn, it’s when you envy someone for something they’ve got.”

“Yeah,” Finn says, “I know. Don’t see what it’s got to do with –”

“Oh, but in – in intimate relationships, it means you get, how can I say it, jealous of what the other has with other people. You become possessive, you know? Want the other only for yourself. Only, with Poe, it sort of makes him react the other way around. He’ll cut – ah, damn, won’t use that word. He’ll distance himself from what’s gonna make him suffer too much.”


“Didn’t realise Poe was jealous?”

“That, too. But mostly I didn’t realise I was.”

Kes sighs. Snorts. “Oh, Force. Bringing it to the next level, uh?”

Finn winces and nods. Goes back to his shaving.

“He’s not too warm,” he says after a while, feeling Poe’s forehead to be sure.

“Thank the Force,” Kes says. “Or his leg would have to go.”

“We’re bonding over your son’s unconscious body,” Finn says. “That’s weird.”

“I’m hoping we’ll have better occasions when he’s awake,” Kes says.

I won’t be here anymore, Finn thinks, but it feels cruel to say it aloud.

//

They’re all here. All of Poe’s pilot, all of his friends, old and young, his longtime D’Qar comrades and his adoring ex-Republic youngsters. Nien Nunb and Leia and Kun and Arana, Pava and Wexley, Lewin and M’un Nbuizi and Lrool and the four K-naann who have been hovering around. They all want to board the Republic’s most heavily guarded planet, all want to avenge Poe, all want to get in a fight for the bacta tank.

Some look fervently believing, like Lrool, others look patient and hopeful, like Wexley, a few look wary or even defiant, like Pava. But they’re all waiting for him to talk. I’m not Poe, he wants to tell them. I’ve never lead an assault, I’m not an officer, certainly not a war tactician. Why are you looking at me like that? I don’t have the slightest idea of how you steal a bacta tank.

Well, how do you?

“Do we have an inventory of where the bacta tanks are on Akhios?” he says, thinking aloud. “I don’t want to deprive a whole area of their means to heal people. I know there was at least one at Central, that’s where they took me when I got shot.” He thinks further. “And my own wasn’t the only one, I think I saw at least one other. So I guess the Central medcentre would be a good start.”

“Not the easiest,” Pava says.
“But at least I know my way around,” Finn says.

“Force, how do you steal something as big as that? Like in the requisition wars between competing Stormtroopers corps, of course. That’s how. Making it official, bluffing your way around. Oh, he knows how to do it.

“I don’t see how we could slip in a force big enough to steal anything,” Pava says. “Everything at Central is so well protected. No weapon could pass through.”

“Sure,” Finn says. “That’s why I don’t need guerrilla fighters for this stunt. I’m sorry, guys, and no Starfighter pilots either. What we need is the fastest freighter ever, and for the rest, ah, non-humans would be the best. If Humans are unavoidable, a hint of an Outer Rim beaten up refugee look would work.”

“You’re Human,” Pava grumbles.

“Yeah. Which is why I’ll need to change the colour of my skin. Mauve, I think.” He grins, big. “At Central, nobody really sees the non-humans, worst of all when they’re non-citizens. They do the work nobody wants. Cleaning, garbage disposal and the like. They’ve even been employing Stormtroopers recently, illegally. Stormtroopers can’t protest when they aren’t paid.”

“So I can come and be a Stormtrooper,” Pava says.

“You’ll never look beaten up enough,” a human woman says. She’d been standing on the side, in a group of silent, unsmiling people. She’s one of the TIE pilots who chose the Resistance after the K-naann campaign. Wasp, Finn thinks he heard the others call her he’s never been as close to the TIE pilots as he is to the troopers. “No offence, Jess. You look fierce all the time. You couldn’t act well enough. But I know I can, and I want in.”

“Why not,” Finn says. “You really know what I was talking about.”

“Oh yeah,” she says. “Fuck them all, I know.”

“But there won’t be anything thrilling, uh. No heroics,” Finn continues. “We’ll be doing the annual cleaning and conformity checking of the medcentre’s tanks. After all, they are highly valuable items whose malfunctioning could cost lives. I’m sure there are a lot of official standards involved, and if there aren’t I’m sure I can think of some.”

Oh, it seems that Wexley loves that. “Of course,” he says with a slow, sly smile, “any tank not meeting the standards would have to be removed for maintenance before they become a threat to public safety. Finn, let me forge the official forms. I’ve been fighting with regulation standards for so long, I’ll love creating them for once. There’s a couple of meddroids I know who can help with the technical side.”

“Are you accustomed to the people who enforce them too?” Finn asks.

“Alas,” Wexley says.

“I think you can be the token Human in the group,” Finn says. “The self-important, law abiding, form wielding boss. What do you say?”

“Yeahhhh,” Snap says.

“But you need to shave the beard. You’ve appeared a bit too often in Republic holovids.”
Pava smirks. “So that’s it? The end of The Beard? Fuck me, I never thought I’d see the day.”


There’s still so much to do. Forms to forge, uniforms to gather, the logistics of moving a tank to figure out. Mauve synthskin to find for Finn as well Lewin who won’t be separated from M’un. Other group members to select.

“I find it hard to believe,” Leia Organa says, “that Nien wouldn’t be recognised in the Republic territories. Children watch his face in school vids, by the Stars.”

“No,” Nien says, his accent as thick as ever. “In Central I’m just another alien. I want to go.”

“Please,” Pava says. “I want to go too. I can be another Rriiv’kat, you’ll already have Finn, Lewin and Lrool, why not me as well? Or make my skin green and scaly, cut my hair, put me in whole body makeup, I don’t care. Let me go.”

“We all want to, Jess,” Karé Kun says.

“But you still have your ship and missions to fly. I don’t even have that!”

“That’d make eight of us,” Finn says. He doesn’t know if he’s making a mistake. Pava is better suited to dogfights than to a stealth mission and right now she doesn’t like him. Well, he deserves it, doesn’t he? And she deserves a chance. “Jess, you could be Snap’s intern. You look young enough.”

//

The night air is warm, moist and smells of mould. It’s not unpleasant. There’s life everywhere. Plants burying down and reaching up, small animals scurrying about, people milling around even at the late hour. Somewhere behind them, at the medcentre they just left, Poe sleeps on. Alive. Poe.

Leia walks beside Finn, small and slightly bent. She nods to the uniformed Resistance people they pass. Finn smiles. Some answer, some don’t. Some look down or away and some curse.

“I’m afraid the guesthouse is packed,” Leia says. “Lots of people came for Poe’s memorial. We’ll be waiting for your return with the tank to set it up. It gives you a plausible reason for not going back to Akhios right now.”

Leia is right. The building is brilliantly lit, full of life, noisy. Finn feels like he’s stepping into a wall of sound. Music, conversations, the chatter of so many people.

“You’re alright, Finn?” Leia asks.

“Must be tired,” he answers, grimacing. “It’s like everyone was speaking, no, dunno, not words, but living inside my head.”

“Oh,” Leia says. “Wait. There are benches at the bridge, we can sit there for a while. Less people.”

“Here,” she says when they’re seated. “Want some?”

She’s stuffing up a small black pipe and offering another.

“Is that spice, Ma’am?”

“Ma’am, Finn?”
“Oh Force. General?”

“Dammit, Finn. I’m Leia. Yes, it’s spice. My own personal rebellion since – ah, I can’t remember. When I was young I thought I was sticking it up to the, ah, Man, Establishment, Empire, everything I was composing with every day. And, by the way, was a product of. Now I find it helps me disconnect from the Force flow when it becomes overwhelming. So, want some?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Hell. Stormtroopers are really something else, you know that? If I have to spell it out, it can help with the people inside your head. You’re Force-sentitive, Finn, and obviously your mind doesn’t really know what to do with it at the moment.”

“Uh. Well, if I’m to lead the bacta mission tomorrow, I don’t want to smoke spice. But thank you for offering, General.”

“You’re welcome.”

“General, why are you being nice? I, uh, I know I’m responsible for Poe’s situation.”

The General takes the time to pull on her pipe and then she smiles to Finn, a bizarre, open smile that sits strangely on her features. “The Republic is responsible for Poe’s situation,” she says. “You did admittedly very little to help him. But now you’re here, aren’t you, and we need you to save his leg.”

“You could steal that tank without me.”

“Listen, Finn. You’re doing good. Your Stormtroopers need you, Poe needs you, and I’m the first to see it’s been mutually incompatible at times. That your people haven’t been executed en masse or even jailed is a testament to your political abilities, and that you’ve decided to put their lives in the balance to see Poe, when you thought he was dead, is a testament to true love. I think you’re the best suited to lead the tank mission and you have all my support.”

“I could have helped him earlier.”

“Yes. You could have. We all make mistakes. You also have my sympathy, kid. Huh. You sure you don’t want some?”

“No. Thank you. General, can I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“Am I really Force-sensitive?”

“Finn, you’ve been calling Poe across the Galaxy and I think everyone with any small degree of sensitivity heard it. And that includes Poe, so thank you, because it helped him a lot. But first, you need to become aware of it and stop, because it’s damn tiring to hear you all the time, and second, you have to learn to deal with your talents because they’re not small and right now they hamper more than they help you.”

“Uh. Learn. When?”

“You don’t want to stay here for long, do you.”

“I can’t. The Force knows I want to, because, because –” oh, Poe. P – no. Finn tries again, thinks of Poe on his hospital bed, sends his thought with more purpose and more direction, something without
words, a sheltering, cradling thought. *Mmmh,* he feels back from where he sent it.

“That’s better,” Leia says with a smile. “Finn, do you really think they’d destroy the Stormtrooper compounds?”

“When I took off for Yavin, they made sure I could see the Destroyers taking position.”

“Of course. But they live in factory workers compounds, don’t they? And the factories aren’t far. It’s mostly strategical or high-value productions on Akhios, isn’t it?”

“Ah,” Finns says. “Sure. They’d annihilate their own productive base.”

Leia smiles in the dark. Finn follows the thought.

“But I’m sure they wouldn’t hesitate to make an example. One small building, a few dozens of people. I don’t want that. I’ll go back.”

She nods, smiles again. “Then let me try to explain how to keep people out of your head. Not that I’m that well taught, but I’m the best you have right now.”

“Or I could just go to sleep,” Finn says.

“Will you sleep?”

“Ah. Dunno.”

“Am I wrong in thinking that it’s not just people? The Force flow, Finn, sometimes when you’re tired it seeps inside you and you feel trees or mice on the same level as the lovers next door. It’s – well, a matter of remembering what is your own self and where’s the outside.”

“Huh,” Finn says. “Or alternatively you smoke to shut off your brain.”

“Or that.” Leia’s smile is wider than any he’s seen, her eyes bright and hooded as she blows off some smoke. “But it’s not your thing.”

//

“Rey! Oh by the Force, Rey!”

Finn runs and jumps into her arms.

“Finn, that’s really you!” Rey’s laughing, pushing him back at arms’ length to watch him. “You’re – older.”

“Well,” he smiles. “Duh.”

“It’s your cheeks,” she says, brushing his face with her fingers. “They’re hollower. But your eyes, too.” She snorts. “Dunno about the purple skin. Not sure it suits you.”

“It’s mauve, I’ll have you know. Rey, you cut your hair?”

She looks fiercer with the short hair, he thinks. Deadlier, like a well-honed blade. Then she smiles again and the dimples are still there and it’s just Rey, his Rey.

“I didn’t need the buns anymore,” she says. “I decided the family I made myself along the way was more important than the one who left me. Oh Finn, you were all alone in that Republic and they all
said it wasn’t strategical for me to see you. I kept telling them you needed a friend, someone to help you.”

“Yeah,” he says, looking down. “It’s very lonely down there. I think I got lost for a while.”

She hugs him again. Rey, who didn’t want to hold his hand when they first met, hugs him. “But you’re here now,” she says. “You aren’t lost anymore. I found you. Oh, Finn, I’m so glad to see you!”

He’s clutching at her back and he doesn’t care. “Me too,” he says, “Rey, me too. You’re here for Poe?”

“I’m here for you, you dumbass! I’m your pilot.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Come on, a ship fast enough that Poe still stands a chance, large enough for a tank, ten people and a droid. Who else than the Falcon?”

“Oh.” Finn doesn’t know if he’s so happy with the news. “But is she – ah, reliable enough? Won’t, I dunno, the compressor, or some fluvial dumpster, like, blow off?”

She laughs. “Alluvial damper, you mean? I removed the compressor long ago, and for the rest, let me tell you, I’m keeping the ship in perfect, Finn, absolutely perfect shape! She’s never been so great. Absolutely reliable.”

Damn but she reminds him of Han when she’s like this.

“Okay, Rey. But, uh, what about the border? Isn’t the Falcon a bit too recognisable?”

“Yeah. That’s why it’s great that GG comes with us. She’s good enough to figure out the traps they set up out of the main routes.”

He smiles. “GG, astromech, occasional hacker and pretend medtech. What a droid!”

“Yeah,” Rey says. “It’s strange to see her with a standard droid casing. I’ll miss her free wires.”

“Kruit told me she says we destroyed her look.”

“She had a look?”

“It seems. Kruit said it was ‘radical post-Order’ or something. He also said if anything happens to her at Central he voids us when we’re back to his shuttle.”

“Tell him I’ll void him if you’re not in the shuttle when he’s back to the Falcon.”

“Rey, you think it will work?”

She looks into his eyes. He feels her intensity and her strength, and, just a hair breadth away, her tremendous ability with the Force, and he could reach, could see – he smiles.

“It has to work,” she says. “I can’t imagine him, imagine Poe –”

“Me neither.”

“Leia said it couldn’t have gone better yesterday evening. You were great and your plan is a good
“I can’t stop thinking of everything that could go wrong. We’re gonna serve them such a pile of banthashit, Force.”

“You know, I keep feeling like that when I’m supposed to use the Force. I always feel they’re going to see I’m that kid from Jakku with a staff and a lot of attitude and nothing more.”

“But you’re not –”

“Yeah, Finn. Same with you. Hey. It’s going to be alright. Did you see Poe this morning?”

“Last night. I couldn’t sleep at the guesthouse, so I came back to the medcentre. I told Kes to go find a bed and I – I watched Poe sleep.”

He doesn’t tell her he spent most of his night with his hand on Poe’s chest, even sometimes his fingers at his pulse, because in the dim lights of the monitor Poe was too still and the beeps weren’t reassuring enough. That he slept in ten minutes increments because he kept hoping Poe would wake up, alert enough for a conversation, like they’d told him he’d been the morning before. That the first light had come through the window, that Kes had appeared at the door and that Poe slept on, and that he’d known it was time to come here.

That when he’d stood up BB-8 had rolled forward to bump at his leg, and that Finn had never heard a more anguished sound coming from the droid.

That they had understood each other.
Chapter Summary

Trick-or-treating for a bacta tank.

(Sorry, couldn't help myself. It's a coincidence, but haunted hyperspace routes!
Costuming! That chapter had to be uploaded on Halloween)

“I love you,” Lrool tells Finn. “I really love you, you’re the reason I’m here and not dead somewhere in a Stormtrooper armour, but, you know, uh, as a Rriiv’kat you look totally ridiculous.”

Fuck – what if their cover wasn’t good enough? Finn shouldn’t have come. He should have left the field to real non-humans, he should – well, they’re on their way, there’s no looking back now.

“Really?” he says. “I thought our biologies were so close you couldn’t differentiate, except for the skin colour?”

“You’re eyes don’t move the right way, you can’t know how weird it looks. And the way you walk, too, you don’t use your hips right, and – oh. But it’s gonna be alright. Nobody really looks at us anyway, now that we’re scattered everywhere. Nobody – ah, nobody except us really remembers.”

“Okay,” Finn says. “Thanks for the reassurance. And sorry for usurping your identity like that. For the eyes thing, I’ll, ah, I’ll just look down all the time.”

“Anyway that’s what everybody does at Central, isn’t it? That’s what they told me.”

It is. Not in Finn’s own experience, but in so many stories he’s heard, even witnessed by now.

Lrool smiles. To Finn, it looks exactly like a Human smile would. “It’s good that you’re with us, Finn,” he says. “You know the place. And you think fast and you care about you men. I’m glad to fight for you.”

“Stars, I just hope it works,” Finn says. “Thank you, Lrool. And now I should stop worrying and get some more rest – by the way, it’s been a long time since we left hyperspace, but we aren’t there yet, are we?”


Shit, Finn realises, looking at the Falcon’s timer. They’ve been more than twelve hours in transit in conventional space. Poe can’t wait that long! Damn that ship, is she finally falling to pieces?

“I’ll go ask Rey,” he says.

“Everything’s alright,” Rey says, watching lines of numbers scrolling through her screens and drumming her fingers on the dashboard. “It’s just the border. We can’t use the normal routes because of the checkpoints, not that I’d bet on it being faster. So many forms to fill up and huge queues there. We’re using the zhamian ghost way.”

“Ghost way?”
“Sure. They say it’s haunted. Weird branching shapes in the star lines when you enter hyperspace and the Zhamians say they can talk to the roots of their roots when they travel there.”

“Why are we waiting, then? Is it dangerous? Do these, huh, roots reach for lost ships or something?”

“Dunno. Nobody ever complain. We’re waiting for GG to finish tracing us a route avoiding the main Republic traps. Thank the Force for Kruit’s contacts inside the fleet, at least we don’t have to fear the patrols.”

“I thought GG was great at computing navs?”

“Sure. Or it’d take days. We’re almost there, Finn. But passing the border is hard.”

“Hell, I didn’t realise.”

“Yeah. The Republic is a fortress by now. Great when you’re in, maybe. Not so much when you’re out.” She sighs. “We’ll be at the ghost station in three hours, give or take, and then you have a half an hour transit in Kruit’s shuttle. Get some rest, Finn. There’s a bunk here if you need some privacy. I promise I know how to shield myself in the Force flow.”

//

Poe wakes up but it’s not Finn at his side, it’s Kes and BB-8, like last time.

Wasn’t there a kiss? He probably hallucinated the kiss, like Finn. He knows they’re giving him painkillers, huge doses that make him see things that aren’t there. He’s been feeling Finn at his side, calling him, urging him to hold on, and sure, feels good, but that’s not as if it were real.

What woke him up is the pain, and as much as he tries to add painkillers to his drip – right, they gave him a button thingie, he can press and get as much as they’ll allow – it’s not working. There’s an ache now, dull but throbbing and permeating all his being, originating from the leg. He knows better than trying to move it, not even a tiny bit. It’s been smashed. He wonders how his foot is at the other side. Lying flat on his back he can’t see it.

He won’t tell them that it hurts, not even Kes. Kes hasn’t seen he’s awake and is stroking his stump, his expression so bitter it hurts. If he tells him, tells them, they’re going to cut his leg, and he’s not sure he’d like to live with only one leg.

Hold on, the small Finn presence in his mind tells him, so he does, so he will, as long as he’s got his two legs.

Kes sits on his right. What’s on his left? Oh yeah, arm, lying there in a cast. That doesn’t hurt, though he’s sure it should. Hand. Shit, his fingers. He knew that. Fingers got caught under the folded left lateral beam of his cockpit, they had to cut them to get him out. Weird, he can still feel them. He knows about phantom limb sensation, of course, but still, weird.

He gasps. Can’t help it. Fuck, it’s the swelling in the leg. It throbs.

“Son,” Kes says, smiling now that he sees Poe’s awake. “Wait, I’ll adjust the drip. Oh. You already opened it in full, uh. Still in pain?”

Poe nods, because hey, it’s obvious.

He’s an adult. He knows about the realities of war. Better if he gets used to it right now. “Gonna lose that leg.”
Kes looks up to the monitor. Poe tries to as well. Is he feverish? Feels like he should. But he’s not, not yet.

“There’s still hope,” Kes says. “Or your leg would already be off.”

Poe shrugs – ow, pulls at the leg somehow, and his ribs feel sore, too. He thought Kes was better than this. They both can see where he’s headed.

“Finn,” Kes says. So Finn wasn’t a hallucination? “He’s –”

“Did I kiss him?” Poe asks. It still feels like Finn is with him somehow. Only in his mind he looks sort of purple, like a Rriiv’kat. Weird drugs.

Kes grins. “You sure did, son. In front of the General and me. Poor guy.” He seems to like Finn. Still…

“Stormtrooper,” Poe says.

Kes nods. “Nobody’s perfect, uh. But your Finn’s good enough. He’s off to Akhios finding you bacta. Hold on, okay? We’ll save that leg.”

He won’t lie to himself. Relief is what came first. They’ll get him a tank, oh, Force. But then, Finn. Finn back there compromising himself somehow to save Poe.

“He recorded something for you,” Kes says. “This morning before they left. BB, wanna show him?”

A holo. He snorts - ow. Their life together has to be made of holos.

Finn’s looking down to BB’s recorder. He’s – purple, no, mauve? Hard to say with BB’s projector, but a strange inhuman colour anyway. So that wasn’t a hallucination? He also looks very awkward.

*Hell, he’s saying. I spend my life in front of cameras and right now, dunno what to say, I guess – I guess, fuck, you’re sleeping, can’t wake you up but I’d have loved to say goodbye, ah, I. I very much want to see you again, awake, uh, with your two legs, but uh, actually, wanna see you again anyway, and, and, uh, kiss you again. I – damn.*

*You kissed him in front of the General, son. Dammit, in front of his own father. Took balls. And now he’s not even awake and you can’t say it?*

That’s Kes, from out of the recording field. *Son*, he said. To Finn. Also, *took balls*, he said. Poe’s not so sure. Intimacy and the First Order… It’s a part of Finn’s upbringing Poe still can’t parse that well.

A wan smile. Dammit, Poe *loves* what the corners of Finn’s mouth do when he smiles.

*Okay, Finn says. So, uh, I love you. Seems you do too. Love me. Which isn’t logical or sane but I won’t complain. And uh, I hope we can steal that tank alright. ‘Cause I don’t want you to – ah. Love you, Poe. See you.*

A nod, probably to BB-8, and the holo stops.

“Dad,” Poe says.


“Central,” Poe says. “Stealing a tank.” Fuck, he’s in pain, and *tired*. Wants to sleep again. If the leg lets him. Speaking is hard. “Either he succeeds and I keep my leg, or I –” *hold on. Tell him. Don’t*
cry. Shit. “Or they catch him and I – I lose him.”

Finn.

//

Rey hugs him.

“Good luck, Finn,” she says.

“I can still feel him,” Finn says. “He’s in pain. He calls me, I think. It’s very weak.”

“It’s because he’s far away,” Rey say. “He hasn’t got your skills with the Force. He’ll be alright.”

She pushes him away, grins wide. She’s got the loveliest freckles on her nose.

“You show them,” she says. Stops. Her smile wobbles. “Please come back. I don’t want to lose either of you.”

“We’ll show them,” he says. Now is the time for action and that’s what he’s been waiting for. It’s so damn easier. “We’ll put the fear of regulations in them for years.”

//

Central is where Finn learned about freedom. It’s full of music, joy, laughter. It’s a place he used to love.

It’s not the same at all when people don’t smile at you. Don’t even see you. Or, when you raise your eyes a little too often like Lewin keeps doing, when people look at you with either anger or fear or both.

Wexley holds himself perfectly, a well-acted mix of oily and snotty. He’s managed to order the team around without looking them in the eye even once. It’s Pava Finn is afraid of. She’s boiling inside, angry, vindictive. Maybe afraid. But she’s holding up alright, her tense, focused look going well with her intern persona.

Finn leads them to the back medcentre entrance. With so many non-citizens, wouldn’t do to use the main.

“We’re the annual maintenance and conformity team,” Wexley says. “Medicheck INC. I’m Huxley, Team Coordinator. You’ve got, lemme see, three bacta tanks registered with us. Hem. As well as all your third level patient monitors.”

“What?” the employee asks.

“Oh. It’s highly irregular!”

“What is?” The employee looks bewildered and a bit suspicious.

“I can’t find the report for your last tanks check. Hem. TC-M5, come here. Do you have anything in your archives? Mister, uh. Mister?”

“Rylh.”

“Rylh, actually, I can’t find the record for any of the last four years’ check-ups. Stars, has your hierarchy even heard of the medical technologies regulation? That’s a serious concern. The patients’
security is at stake.”

“Fuck ‘em and their rules. Hey, Lowrie!”

“Yeah?” a female voice answers. A new employee appears.

“Looks like we’ve got another maintenance team on our back!”

“Fuck, again? When was the last one?”

“Four months ago. The water sanitation one. This guy says there are yearly regulations for the bacta tanks.”

“That’s new?”

“Actually, it’s not,” Wexley says, at his most oily. “Hem. It’s pre-Hosnian, even. Senate ordinance ST-21/315. I’m surprised a medcentre so well rated as yours appears to ignore it.”

“Alright,” Lowrie says. “Maybe they forgot to warn the reception. Happens all the time. Got your credentials?”

Wexley just nods to GG to roll forward, an imperious, condescending nod.

“In here,” he says.

“Your medtech? You don’t have a separate datakey?”

“It’s a new model. Medicheck INC patent. Our M5 model is multi-purpose and can even be declined in a nurse droid version. But I’m sure you’re not habilitated to discuss acquisitions for your facility. Hem. Please provide TC-M5 with the directions to the tanks.”

“It still has to connect with our security comp,” Lowrie says. “Has it got the required connectors?”

“Of course,” Wexley says.

Please, GG, Finn thinks as Rylh types in a sequence on the datapad GG extends. *Make it work.*

“Everything seems in order,” Rylh says. “Go ahead. Are these your techs?”

“They are. And Lyria, my intern.”


*Shit.*

“You.”

Finn looks down. Fuck, even with the synthskin, he’s too recognizable. Shouldn’t have come.

It’s not him Rylh is approaching. He’s hooking an index under Wasp’s chin, forcing her to look up.

“What’s your name?”

She’s looking blank. Remote. A First Order look.

“Wasp,” she says.
“You’re a Stormie? That’s illegal.”

Wexley’s eyes shift. He clears his voice, doesn’t appear to know what to say. Shit, Finn thinks. He’s going to blow our cover.

Or not. Or he’s playing his part perfectly.

“Everyone does it,” Wexley says, sounding sheepish.

“Yeah, cause you don’t even pay them. One day, they’re going to put these fucking slaves in our place. Gotta think of the future, heh? Where’s my compensation?”

“Oh,” Wexley says, smiling. “Of course. How could I forget? You’re not my usual facilitator, I’m sorry that it didn’t come to mind. TC-M5 will be doing the transfer right now. Just add your fingerprint to its pad. Nothing illegal, of course. It will appear as consultant work.”

“You disgust me,” Lowrie says. “You’re making yourself complicit of the Stormtroopers’ exploitation, Rylh.”

“Yeah, sweetie? And what are you doing about it?”

“Nothing,” she says, “fuck, nothing. But at least I’m not getting money from it.” She looks at Wasp, who retreated behind Wexley. “Wasp, do they treat you alright?”

“We don’t encourage our employees to interact with strangers,” Wexley says. “She won’t answer. I’m sorry, Ma’am. It’s in every citizen’s best interest. With Stormies, you never know. A short leash is best.”

Where did Wexley learn to be so evil? He’s excellent.


//

“Huxley?” Finn whispers to Wexley as they walk through the corridors, towing their anti-grav truck along.

Wexley grins. “That’s my evil twin. The one who wakes up when I’ve been fed too many forms.”

“You’re excellent, Snap. Where did you learn that shit?”

“Ahh. Did border checkpoints, uh. Too fucking often, when our squadron was doing cop work. Okay. Here we are.”

There’s a nurse, a Human one. Finn knows him from his leg wound stay. He doesn’t even register Finn.

“Good morning,” Wexley says. “We’re here for the tank check.”

“Again?” the nurse says. “Wasn’t there a team two months ago?”

“Ah,” Wexley says. “I can’t help noticing instructions have a hard time travelling down in this facility. Your management asked for a second opinion, weren’t you told? Our competitor’s conclusions were, hem, suspicious. They didn’t make you fill in the third page of the BT-567 form, of course?”
“Uh. I – a BT form? No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, here we are. A good thing we’ve been called. Tell you what, so that we don’t lose time, I’ll transfer the form to your desk so that you can fill it in while we check the tanks.”

“But, I – the second one is currently in use, it’s –”

“Are you calling our expertise into question? We’re perfectly able to check a tank while in use.”

“Yes, but the patient –”

“Come on. Why should they care? My techs aren’t even Humans.” He nods to the others. “Follow me, you. The first tank is at door A109. Nurse, make sure to pay attention to the last two fields of the form, please. They’re most important. And don’t forget to crosscheck with the patients database.”

If Wexley hoped it would get the medcentre employees off their backs it’s a failure. A local tech joins them, grumbling along the way about fucking regulations and why should external firms do a better job than the centre’s own workers, so much money thrown away for nothing, look what the Republic’s become.

And they’re running out of time.

The first tank won’t do. It’s small, with a weird shape that could work for human children but is probably made for smaller species. GG connects to it while Finn and Lrool pretend to check out the frame.

“That’s an old model,” Finn says. Fuck, he hopes he’s believable. Yes, he learns fast, but two days ago what he knew about bacta tanks was related only to how they heal people. “Doesn’t appear to have been used that much recently. There’s mineral concretioning on the draining webbing, what are you doing about it?”

“He’s one of the Rriiv people?” the tech asks Jess. He seems to have taken quite a liking to her. “He’s a he, alright?”

“Yes, a Rriiv’kat. I never thought of asking its gender,” Jess says.

“They’re fast learners, these mauve fuckers,” the tech says.


“Yes,” the tech says. “I know about the concretions. But you can check, there’s no bacterial growth. We’ll change the tubes when the light becomes too small, that’s all.”

“It’s still within standards,” Finn tells Jess. “Do I have to report it?”

“We’ll let it pass,” Jess says, smiling to the tech. “I’ll write the report. Medicheck’s equipment branch commercialises high performance tank webbing, maybe you could consider it before the next check-up?”

“We don’t have the funds,” the tech growls. “Not for this tank shape. Next tank is that way.”

The next tank is the half-body one Finn was put in. It would have worked for Poe, possibly. He always could have folded in if he also needs it for his upper body. But it’s the one currently in use and the patient is awake enough to hate the intrusion. They make it fast.

The third tank has to be right.
Thank the Force, it is. It’s also new and in great condition. How do they do it?

Lrool, Finn and Lewin circle the tank.

“Nice model,” Lrool says.

“Your competitors had no defect to report,” the tech says.

“I can see why,” Finn says.

“Shut up, you,” Wexley says. “That one’s the reason why we were asked to give a second opinion.”

His raised eyebrow, as the tech is looking elsewhere, is begging Finn to find something.


“I bet!” the tech says, indignant. “We’re taking the best care! Such an expensive model, and performant, too. It has built-in patient adaptive sensors and can adjust the flow, temperature and nano-bacta levels. It checks vitals, too, and can even perform a few first aid manoeuvres if necessary.”

“Oh,” Finn says. “It’s one of these new models with built-in comps, uh. Ah, but the comp is a Robbot-Universe7 model?”

Thank the Force, it’s written on the casing.

“Yes, why?”

“I’m sure it’s why they asked for a second opinion.”

“Fucking hell?”

“Oh, but the Universe7 is known for its, shall we say, glitches? There has been a whole series with defective processors. A small series, mind you. They didn’t check the comp, did they?”

“Of course not! The standards are for the tanks!”

“Yes, but what if your comp begins to shock the heart of your patient, just because it thinks it should?”

“By he Stars,” Wexley says. “I’m beginning to feel that we were called just in time. Where’s the series number?”

“How should I know?” the tech says, looking worried.

“Behind that panel,” Lewin says. Thank the Force for pilots and their technical knowledge, he’s already kneeling to take off the panel. “Ah. I’m sorry. That’s one of the sensible comps. We’ll have to perform a scan.”

When he was a Stormtrooper, Finn participated in acquisition wars between squads. They appropriated armour parts, bunk beds, better blasters, even a few speeders. But he’s rarely worked with such a smooth team before. He barely hides his grin.

“What?” the tech says. “But it’s never –”

She does great. Of course she does. All kinds of alarms begin to blare on the tank, lights blinking red, the emergency routine initiated, tank shutting hermetically and tubes disconnecting from the wall.

“See?” Wexley says. “I’m afraid this has to go.”

“But – but it’s essential for our department! We need it! What about our patients?”

“I’m betting a lot of them could still use the old ones,” Wexley says. “Anyway, you don’t want to kill them with that comp, do you?”

“Then we’ll remove it! The tank is alright!”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Wexley says with a sneer. “There could have been overheating, and I’m not even mentioning the doubt it throws on the comp ability to maintain a sterile environment. Don’t worry, I’ll sign the necessary forms.” He nods to the rest of the team. “Alright, you. Move that on the anti-grav. I’ll signal for our shuttle to wait for us on the medcentre drop zone.”

“No!” the tech yells, grabbing M’un’s arm as he was beginning to lift up the tank. “You alien fucker! You’re treating it as if it were a garbage collector! You’ll break it! Lemme do it!”

“I’m sorry, sir,” M’un says, still working with the anti-grav. The tech hits him.

Lewin startles and curses.

“Stop that,” Finn whispers urgently. “Don’t move. We’re aliens. We don’t react.”

Lewin turns pale under the synthskin. It makes it appear grey. He freezes.

“You,” Wexley says. “Apologise to the tech.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” M’un says. “I’ll take better care.”

It works. Finally. The tech walks away, promising to fill in a report. Snap offered him an official form, one that’s sure to get lost in the depths of the medcentre’s administrative hierarchy. They can hurry to the shuttle, passing the rows of open stalls with beeping monitors and patients in various state of consciousness.

“Shouldn’t we check out the monitors, too?” Jess asks. “We’ve mentioned them to the reception.”


“At the rear, behind the anti-grav? She was supposed to help it along. Fuck, we’ve lost Wasp!”

“She was there only a few seconds ago,” M’un says. “She must have entered one of these stalls.”


“Keep on moving,” Finn says. “I’ll go looking for her. Come with me, Jess. Wouldn’t do to have non-citizens without their handler in here.”

“Meet us at the drop zone,” Snap says. “Don’t be too long, or we’ll take off without you. If we don’t want to miss Rey we only have half an hour left.”

Finn nods, already running back to the stalls row. Wasp is in the third one. She’s crying, tears running down her otherwise impassive face.
“Finn,” she says. “Blade is here. What did they do to her?”

Blade, fuck. It hits Finn hard. She’s the TIE pilot that he abandoned to her fate.

“She was electrocuted trying to take off with the restraining cuff,” Finn says. “Two months ago. Poe wasn’t sure whether she’d wake up.”

“Well, she fucking woke up,” Wasp says. “Look at her!”

She’s awake. Finn hadn’t realised it, but her eyes are open, looking blankly at the ceiling. Her hands, resting on her chest, are trembling slightly. She’s drooling.

“Wasp,” Blade says. “Wasp!” She turns to Finn. “I keep trying to call her. She doesn’t react. Finn, it looks like the worst botched reconditioning ever!”

There’s a monitor beeping above, a nutritive tube inserted into her mouth, a drip hooked to an injection site under her skin. Finn steps in to check the monitor readings.

“It’s not a brain injury,” he says. “She’s drugged. I think they’re drugging her so that they don’t have to deal with her.”

“We can’t leave her here!” Wasp says.

“Okay,” Finn says. “We’ll have to move her cot. We can’t unhook the drip, not at once. It could kill her.”

“What?” Jess says. “You’re mad! They’ll stop us!”

“You’re the nurse, Jess,” Finn says. “We’re the auxiliaries. There’s a cupboard in the corridor. Go find scrubs.”

Wasp is at Blade’s side, stroking her cheek. “I chose the Resistance,” she says. “I fucking begged her to do the same. She told me loyalty was more important than love. Fuck.”

“She’s gonna be alright,” Finn says, busying himself with unhooking Blade from the monitor.

“You!” a voice says at the door. “What are you doing here? Stop that!”

It reaches Finn on an instinctive level. He finds himself standing to attention.

“A Rriiv’kat, uh.” It’s the nurse from before. “Are you a refugee or a Stormie?”

He stood to attention. Fuck. “A Stormtrooper, sir,” he says.

“Dammit, and they say Rriiv Stormies are mad. What are you doing here alone? And the other one’s a Stormtrooper too, I’ll bet. Who let you enter? Where’s your handler?”

“I’m here,” Jess says. The nurse turns and freezes. Jess is pointing a small hand blaster. Fuck. Nobody was supposed to bring in any weapon.

“Jess…” Finn says.

The nurse swivels, takes a longer look at him.

“I know that scar on your eyebrow,” he says. “You’re not a Rriiv’kat. Shit. Shit, you’re Finn! A Stormtrooper, alright. Fuck me, I always knew we shouldn’t trust your kind. What were you doing?
You were unhooking the monitor?"

The nurse’s hand creeps to his waist and to the alarm button there. *Fuck.* Jess raises her weapon.

“Stop,” Finn says. “Everyone stops! Don’t move!”

He doesn’t know what he just did, but it worked. Nobody’s moving anymore. Actually, it’s scary.


“Fuck” Jess says, lowering her blaster.

“What did I just do?” Finn asks her.

“Fuck if I know. Used the Force, obviously.”

He gestures to the still-frozen nurse. “What – what’s gonna happen to him? You think he’ll move when I’m not here anymore? Jess, he knows who I am.”

“How should I know? You could order him to forget everything, maybe. I think that’s one thing Force users can do.”

“Uh. How?”

“Dunno? Like you just did?”

“I don’t know how I did it!” Finn yells. Shit, he’s shaken. “I don’t know how long it lasts!”

Jess walks in, pat him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Finn. We’ll find a way. Maybe we can take him with us?”

“He’s frozen. Oh, fuck. Okay. Gotta do it. Okay. Jess, I hate to say it, but if it doesn’t work, ah. If he tells others what he’s seen, the Destroyers will fire on the compounds. If he escapes, ah. Kill him. No. Give me that blaster. I’ll do it.”

“You sure?”

“I can’t give you that kind of order.”

“You know I kill other pilots for a living, right? That’s what you do in Starfighters.”

“Anyway.” He gulps in a big breath. Focuses. Feels the Force flow, all around, Blade curiously muted in it. Even feels Poe, Poe’s pain, so far away. Focuses again. “Nurse,” he says. “You’re going to lead us to the drop zone. This patient is stable and will be evacuated to the compounds. You’re taking her to the shuttle and accompanying her.”

“This patient needs to be evacuated,” the nurse says. “I’m going with her.”

“You’re the nurse, we’re the auxiliaries. We’re following you.”

“You’re following me.”

“You give Jess the necessary meds for the patient.”

“I give Jess the necessary meds for the patient. Who’s Jess?”
Fuck.

“T’m Jess.”

“I give the woman the necessary meds for the patient.”

What time is it? Fuck.

“We are going to run.”

“We are going to run.”

//

“You!” Wexley yells when they reach the drop zone. “What took you so long?”

He’s very pale. He looks angry. He’s probably scared. Shaken. They’re late.

“Damn these aliens,” Wexley tells the medcentre admin who’s hovering over him. “So unreliable. I wonder if it’s such an advantage to use them.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling to my hierarchy all along,” the admin says. “They’re been pressuring us into hiring them recently.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Finn says. “We’ve been ordered to help evacuate this person. The nurse is commandeering our shuttle.”

“I’m commandeering this shuttle,” the nurse says.

“Who’s –” Wexley begins, then looks down at Blade and grimaces. Something like shock passes on his features, very fast. “That’s irregular,” he tells the admin.

“Not in emergency situations,” the admin says, apparently revelling in Wexley’s ire.

“I’ll register a complaint to your hierarchy,” Wexley says.

“Don’t hesitate to do so,” the admin says with a cold, polite smile.

Finn catches the gaze Wasp sends behind her as the shuttle’s door closes. It’s burning.

“I wish I could blast them,” she seethes.

Finn looks down at the rapidly retreating roofs of Central, at the grey patch of the navy base beyond, thinks of Poe and feels the same surge of all-encompassing rage. If they weren’t in a weapon-less civilian shuttle, if he had a gun command under his hands, if – he’d shoot, and to hell with the consequences.

He forces himself to breathe, lets the moment pass.

//

Poe can’t sleep. Too much pain. He’s not sure he’s awake, though. They upped the meds so high he’s sort of floating and it’s not even enjoyable. He knows the visions of Finn he’s having are hallucinations now, because yeah, a purple hand on a purple cock, if Finn’s off stealing bacta, not likely.
Okay, at least *this* was enjoyable.

But fuck, it hurts too much.

“Dad,” he calls.

“Kes is sleeping,” a female voice says.

“Mama,” he says. “Where were you?”

An exclamation. It’s dismay, possibly pity or fear.

“Poe, do you know where you are? Dammit, not where, when?”

Poe’s mama is dead. She’s been dead a long time.

“Leia,” he says. He tries to gather his thoughts. His needs. “Cut the leg. Hurts. Too much.”

“Hold on,” Leia says. “We’ve had news from Finn. They did it. They’ll be back with the tank in one day. The medics say you can last that long.”

“Fuck them.”

“I brought you something to eat. You’ll have a lot of healing to do in the tank, you’ll need reserves. Strength. A drip isn’t enough.”

She’s already pressing the controls of his cot, raising the head up.

“Gonna puke.”

She’s got a spoon and some nutritive something in pureed form. She sits on the bed, helps him arrange himself. “Well,” she says. “Don’t. Now open up.”

He’s never seen her so tender. Nor so openly worried.

//

“Oh Force,” Rey says when they’re safely in hyperspace and she can come to the lobby to see them. “That’s Blade.”

“You know her?” Finn asks. He’s feeling strange. Sort of far away.

“Of course,” Rey says. “The TIE pilots are heroes. They won us the K-naann battle. And him? Who’s he?”

“He recognised me. So he had to come with us.”

“I had to come with you,” the nurse says.

Finn staggers, feels his head reeling. Next he’s on the floor, sitting, Rey beside him.

“How long have you been ordering him along with the Force?” she asks.

“Have to,” he says. “He’d betray us.”

“He’ll betray us.”

“Not in the Falcon.”

“How do I let go?” Finn asks.

“Dammit. Let me help.”

The pressure lifts from his mind, somehow. He feels himself falling into Rey’s arms. Further away, Wexley exclaims, bent over the nurse who collapsed on the floor.

“Never using the Force again,” Finn mumbles. “Nurse, I’m sorry. He’s okay?”

Wexley makes a sound of assent. “Just shaken, I think.”

“You don’t have to use the Force, if you don’t want to,” Rey says. She doesn’t say he’ll need to learn to control it because she’s being kind, but they both know the truth.

Wasp comes to help the nurse up. “Go tend Blade,” she tells him. “She’s agitated. Whatever poison you injected her is weaning off.”

“Blade?” the nurse says.

“The TIE pilot we rescued.”

“They said she was dangerous,” the nurse says. “She has to be kept under chemical restraints.”

“That’s not what we’re saying,” Wasp says. “I want you to wean her. Without hurting her.”

“She went mad.”

“She was an ace pilot,” Finn says. “Her whole life revolved around it. And she was forbidden any form of flying. Of course she went mad.”

The nurse nods, stands up and begins to busy himself around Blade. He sighs, turns and looks down to Finn, still sitting on the floor, pressing his lips together, breathing in.

“We get patients like her sometimes. We’re told to keep them, ah, blank. I never liked doing it. They tell you we have to. For, ah, for Blade, I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

Wasp grunts and doesn’t acknowledge his apology. Finn looks down.

Blade is moaning and stirring and then she startles and tries to grasp the nurse’s clothes, aims a blow at him, although it goes wide. Wasp hurries at her side, directs Blade’s arms down gently, and smiles feebly when Blade’s gaze seems to focus on her.

“And you, why didn’t you do anything? You said you didn’t know?” Wasp asks Finn. “You left her rotting there for two months!”

“I thought she was dead. I had no news.”

“And the others? There are eleven more TIE pilots with the same cuff!”

A Stormtrooper wouldn’t be so aggressive. They wouldn’t insist, accepting any excuse they’re fed. They’d respect authority. Wasp isn’t a Stormtrooper. She’s a pilot, an officer. In his former life, Finn would have deferred to her. It hangs in the air between them.
Finn sighs. “The pilots weren’t my responsibility,” he says. “They were Poe’s. I guess they’re still busy refurbishing ships. I think they’re safe for the time being, as long as I come back to the Republic."

“You think Safe,” Wasp says, looking bitter. But she doesn’t challenge Finn any further.

Maybe they’re really safe, Finn thinks, watching Blade thrash around. Or maybe Poe was the only protection they had left against jail, or worse. He let them down and it makes him want to howl, or fall down on his knees and ask for forgiveness, if only he could. But he’d still do it if it meant he can save all the others.

I’ve become their leader, he thinks. Somehow. It means that I’ve got to accept casualties and call them unavoidable. Is that how you felt, Poe, when I accused you of sacrificing the TIE pilots?

They land into madness. A team rushes in and vanishes the tank away, and Finn has to run, any concern for Blade, Wasp or any other forgotten, to climb into the hovercar with them.

“How is he?” he asks as they’re rushing through the giant trees.

“You’re not too early,” a medic says. It’s Kalonia, Finn realises. The whole Resistance appears to be here.

“But he’s gonna be alright?”

Poe.

Poe!

Kalonia smiles. She’s tired. “Yes,” she says. “I think so. Your friend has a lot of courage. He needed it to hold on.”

They rush the tank in, connect it to the power source. Poe is already there, lying naked on a stretcher, bruised, the leg looking even worse. He’s struggling feebly against two medics trying to press the breathing mask against his face.

One of the medic looks up, sees Finn. “Come here,” she says. “Talk to him. That hard-headed son of a thadlit won’t let us adjust the mask if he can’t see you.”

Finn runs.

You made it, Poe says. His lips are moving but there’s no sound coming out. Finn still feels the words somehow.

I was afraid, Poe conveys. For you.

“You dumbass,” Finn says, smiling. “I was afraid.”

He still is. Poe’s hair is damp with sweat and his eyes are glassy. The fever is rising.

“You gotta go in right now,” Finn says.

“Kiss,” Poe says, aloud.

Finn complies. Poe is too weak to react.
“Go in,” Fin says. “Get well. I love you.”

“Stay,” Poe says, still pushing the medics’ mask away.

“I can’t,” Finn says. “If I’m not back in one day they’ll kill the Stormtroopers.”

Poe sighs, closes his eyes, pain etched on his face. The medics make another attempt with the mask. Poe’s hand is still in the way somehow.

He opens his eyes again. “Free them,” he says. Then his hand falls down and Kalonia makes the winning attempt at fastening the mask.
Finn's fight

Chapter Summary

Finn fights back and sets up a Revolution.

Chapter Notes

This is the political chapter where I lose half of my (admirable, heroic, enduring) readers.

Or maybe I'm being Poe-level pessimistic! So if you're still with me (and with Finn) by the end, please come say hi in the comments :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They’re passing the border. With the right codes and security clearances, it’s taking them the grand total of five minutes.

“So you’re really going back,” Pava says. “I thought maybe –”

“Thank you for flying me there,” Finn hurries to answer. “It’s nice having a friendly face for a few hours more.”

“Are you going to do it again? Spew the ugliest things at us, fuck, at Poe in public, and pine for him in private?”

“I’ll have to. Dunno if I’ll be able to do it believably for much longer. But they think Poe’s dead. Maybe they’ll stop making me drag him through the mud?”

“Yeah, and then everything else’s gonna be alright, uh,” she says, her voice harsh.

“Poe told me to free the Stormtroopers,” Finn says. “But it would mean a war and I – there’s just one of me, and I’m just a trooper. How could I do it?”

“Dunno. But I didn’t know how to steal a tank in Central. From what I’ve seen and heard, you’re not just a trooper, Finn. There are so many people listening to you. Find a way.”

“So many people,” he echoes. “So little power.”

And then he remembers what Leia talked about, that night when they sat on a bench on Yavin. So many people, more than a little power. Maybe.

//

“You weren’t seen at Dameron’s funeral,” Statura says.

“No,” Finn answers. “Leia Organa thought my presence would cause, ah, tensions.” It’s true. A lot
of people weren’t happy to see him on Yavin. And those who still believe Poe is dead are angry. “But I watched the ceremony.”

“And now you’re back. I counted on it.”

“Of course I am, Tihhe. Don’t act as if you didn’t know why.”

“I had to take securities, Finn. Doesn’t mean I’m not genuinely happy to see you. Your Stormtroopers are safe, did you doubt it?”

“I did everything for them to be, didn’t I? Tihhe, they’re my people and I want to take care of them. All of them. I’d like to close Dameron’s school and move all the remaining Stormtroopers to the compounds.”

“Phasma included?”

“Phasma and the pilots. Even the cuffed ones.”

“Ah. That might actually be a good thing. We’ve had misgivings about Phasma recently. While you were away, one of the cuffed pilots was – ah, not important. But we’ll breathe easier if the most dangerous elements are removed from Drion.”

Finn makes himself smile, finds he has to clear his voice to go on. “Tihhe, is your offer for an official position still standing?”

“More than ever, Finn. Are you still considering it?”

“If you give me reasons to stay here beyond not wanting my people to die. First of all, you rid me of Auderd and Sebvaux. I want real freedom.”

“Other bodyguards, then?”

“Unless you can prove me they’re not murderers, no bodyguards.”

“Ah. Well, I can do it. Actually, I thought your conditions would be harder to meet.”

“That’s only so that I keep considering your offer. And I want my tracker out.”

“Why not. You’re learning, Finn.” Statura’s grin is lopsided, a little ironical. “Just so you know, there are more, ah, conventional approaches to knowing where a man goes. People talk.”

Finn represses a shiver. Does he know?

“I know you’ve spent a lot of time in the compounds,” Statura says. “More than you’re supposed to officially. Ah, well. How long until you decide? There’s unrest in the factories. I – I’ll be honest, I really need you, Finn. Unlike my two colleagues, a part of my political base is the citizens living and working there. Well, it used to be, I’m not sure they’re with me anymore.”

“One month. Give me one month for myself, no holovids, no PR team, no bodyguards. Let me travel freely around the factory compounds. I want to make sure my people are alright, and who knows? Maybe I could help you some in the process.”

Statura grips Finn’s arm and shakes his hand for the longest time. “I know we’ll make a good team, you and I,” he says. “Thank you, son.”

Kes didn’t shake his hand when Finn left. He hugged him, in front of many doubtful faces. Wished
him good luck. Promised he’d find a way to keep him updated about Poe’s health.

Smiling for Statura isn’t that different from smiling for the camera. “Thank you for your trust, Tihhe. It’s most appreciated.”

Why is it feeling so much like home? Home, for Finn, has been a large apartment with a well-stocked kitchen, in an upscale neighbourhood. Not a series of hastily added bunks in compounds dorms, not that hazardous quest for a slot in an out of synch sonic fresher, not a continuous discovery of what people can eat when they don’t have the choice. But before Central, before holos, that’s what Finn was used to. Dorms, water only for drinking, and rations because one has to eat. And most of all, he’s back to the tested and tried Stormtrooper way to pass information. Not in large assemblies, not in front of cameras, not with smiles and public positions, but by hints and implicit codes, in small groups that can always maintain that they don’t know each other. It’s gossip, it’s plausible deniability, it’s what ifs, and it works.

What if, they tell each other, what if the goods we produce didn’t reach Central anymore? What if we used Kruit’s team of pilots, now supported by so many others, Han Solo’s long ago contacts, Nien Numb and his friends, and even that old legend, Lando Calrissian, to build ourselves a parallel trade system? What if it were based, not on unequal trade between the Republic’s centres and the factories, but on fair exchange between production sectors?

Some say we’re so numerous, they whisper between bunks at night, Stormtroopers, refugees, Sullustans, Rriiv’kat, Wiirk’ts and so many others, so many of us that we’re more numerous than the Republic citizens. Some say we could organise ourselves, they dream. Some say things could change.

We could fight, they write on the misted surface of a brand new ship panel as it emerges from the mold, there’s so many of us, so few of them. We could seize their weapons and they couldn’t react, not really, not when we’d control the production centres. We could march on and overthrow Drion’s government.

“We don’t have to fight,” Finn says in confidence to two Stormtroopers and three Wiirk’ts. “Not with weapons. Not by risking so many lives. They wouldn’t destroy the pharmaceutical plants, or the shipyards, not here on Akhios where most of the factories have strategical importance. But they wouldn’t blink twice before bombing the exotic flower farms on Toillys or even the recycling plants here. What we can do is strangle them, stopping the benefits of trade from reaching them, forcing them to come to the compounds to get their food, making them beg for us to take their ill and their wounded. Until they feel so much pressure they cave in.”

“We need to make sure we’re self-sufficient,” Finn tells three other Wiirk’ts and two Rriiv’kat from another compound when the idea has travelled far enough. “Our own supply network, our own local resources. We need to divert enough from the factory production to build stocks, but not enough to draw attention. We need to be ready before we strike and cut the Central line.”

“You’re mad,” Phasma tells him through Stormtrooper handsign language. “By now you could have evacuated all the Stormtroopers to a safe place outside the Republic. We could be fighting for the Resistance. You certainly have the contacts and the fleet to make it happen.”

“We’d be refugees again, in a more dangerous place,” Finn answers, his hands trembling a little as they sign. He’s standing his ground against his former captain, and he feels the sweat gather down his spine. “And what of all the others? They’re not so different from us.”
“But we don’t have any obligations towards them.”

“Well,” Finn says aloud. “I have. They trust me.”

“There’s going to be violence,” Phasma signs.

“I’m trying to keep it to a minimum.”

“Don’t imagine the Republic will hesitate to kill us.”

“Us?”

Phasma actually colours a little and nods curtly. “Us. As in: all the destitute people working in these godforsaken factories and who’re going to die for your grand dreams. We might be numerous but we’re like sheep in front of them.”

“The Republic has more principles than the First Order. They’ll hesitate to kill so many people at once.”

“Are you so sure?”

“I have to be,” Finn signs, “and we’ll do the best we can to protect everyone.”

Phasma nods again. “Then I’ll follow you. But don’t ask me to stand helpless against their troops. We’ve got weapons and we’ll use them if necessary.”

“What?” Finn can’t help shouting aloud. Thankfully the noise of the machines behind them covers most sounds. “Where did you find them?” he signs when he’s calmed down a little.

“Poe,” Phasma signs, although of course the old Stormtrooper sign is different, neither flattering nor kind. “He had stocked up a few caches before the K-naann campaign. Seems he’d had misgivings about the PSR government for quite some time. More recently, he’s also left instructions for the Stormtroopers and TIE pilots under his responsibility, including how to hack the cuffs and people to contact when breaking away.”

“Poe was planning an armed revolt?”

“I think he was thinking more of the need to defend ourselves. He’s a practical man. But also clever enough to see the potentialities.”

“I don’t want an armed revolt.”

“And I’ll follow you. But we’ll defend ourselves.”

It’s hard to sleep that night, even with the soothing noises of all the people around. Part of it is the constant time lag that goes with hopping from compound to compound to station to yet another planet. Part of it is the certainty that Phasma is right. What Finn is setting up is a revolution, and even if he’s trying his best to organise a peaceful one, there’s bound to be some violence, possibly on a large scale. Poe set up a war. Finn sets up a revolution. They’re both going to be responsible of so many deaths. They both think it’s worth it.

It’s not a good feeling.

And then, of course, there’s Poe, for whom the extent of news Kes managed to safely pass through amounts to he’s alive, we saved his leg, he’s back to fighting, he can’t contact you. Together with the news came some jewellery trinket, a metal ring, with a note reading you might need it, so Finn keeps
it on himself, not even trying to understand. Now and then he finds himself fingering it in his pocket, and trying to reach with the Force for Poe again, stealthily, without giving away that Poe’s alive to anyone listening.

He can feel him, but that’s about it. A presence in his own mind that he’s now learned means that Poe’s alive and that he’s conscious or sleeping – not passed out, not in a coma, not about to die. But Poe can’t reach for him, not consciously, not out of some life or death emergency where instinct would take over. He’s not strong enough.

Finn would give anything for more. For the feeling of their skins touching, maybe. For Poe’s voice. For them both to know whether this love thing that was admitted on what felt too much like Poe’s deathbed will hold on when all fear of the end are discarded. So much is still unsaid between them, Finn has still so much anger, fuelled again by Phasma’s reveals, and so much guilt.

//

Finn wakes up to only ten days left of his month of freedom. They’re not ready. Will they ever?

“Hey, that tastes great!” he says as he eats a breakfast that’s as far removed from rations as his own cooking was. Only he had exotic goods and delicate flours at his hand, which he’s sure is not the case here.

“Yeah,” the Rriiv’kat smiles, doing something non-human with their eyes that Finn can spot now that he’s had some practice. “We were so tired of their yeast-as-everything rations. You wouldn’t believe what you can grow in the swamps around here. We’ve even acclimated some of our homeworld mushrooms!”

“Hm. Well, tastes really wonderful. Are you growing them in large quantities?”

“No, but we could. They don’t need much working power.”

“Then I know of a whole world, a swampy one, who’d love to hear about your mushrooms and your cooking. I think they have medics willing to come here to teach our own in exchange. We have a contact with our friends scheduled tomorrow, I’ll take you up.”

And so their network builds itself, some teaching against plans for food or energy self-sufficiency, former pilots taking to the space again in old clunkers and reformed freighters as reinforcements for Kruit’s phantom fleet, former engineers devising underground recycling plants, former farmers growing their own foods between rows of the exotic, useless flowers they’re supposed to tend to. Somewhere, Phasma’s arming whoever she feels she can trust, but Finn tries not to know too much about that. Slowly, very slowly and discretely, their workforce and their brains, so numerous and so underused by the Republic, figure how to control the factories, how to set aside to prestigious, useless positions those who won’t side with them.

//

It had to break somewhere. But violence, in the end, doesn’t come from a Republic attack and it happens on Akhios, not on some oppressed backwater planet.

“Some of them were citizens,” Phasma says. “Citizens who heard about your trip to Sedratis.”

“Lounes and Hlath here are citizen too and they’re siding with us,” Finn says.

“Are you so sure?” Phasma asks, and Finn can see a lot of Stromtroopers nodding behind her. “Anyway these three weren’t.”
“So you killed them, one of you killed them anyway. Why, Phasma, fucking hell why! And your forces broke the machines, shot at managers and workers, I don’t know how many died there, and destroyed the factory! Shit, and you warned me of violence?”

“Some of the workers and managers tried to stand up for those three,” Phasma says. “With heavy blasters that they began to use. It made things volatile for a while. Your dream of a bloodless revolution was just that, Finn. A dream.”

A Stormtrooper shifts and comes forward. He’s vaguely standing to attention but nobody in the First Order ever had such a defiant stare. That’s Triple, Finn recalls. One of the original Twenty-Three.

“This guy here,” he says, nodding to one of the bodies that doesn’t only looks dead but like it was beaten to death. “He hadn’t been in the compound for long. I saw him before. Sat a lot with the Lieutenant at Central. Used to egg him on. I caught him stealing a speeder yesterday.”

“He confessed to trying to go back to Central to report,” Phasma says.

“Fuck,” Finn says, noticing the man’s broken, ruined hands and feeling ill. “Confessed, uh.”

“What else should I have done?” Phasma asks, still as calm and cold as ever. “Would you have preferred a leak?”

“You could have locked them in!” Finn yells. “Fuck, just prevented them from reporting! Not, not beating them to death and burning down the whole area!”

“People were dying here last week,” Triple says, increasingly agitated. “In a fucking machine accident no one cared about, not even you! It’s only fair that some of them die, too! You, Finn, you’re all around, talking, making us dream, fuck, organising, but what does it do? We still can’t move around, we still crawl in the mud, still die in the factories while people like them get to bathe in water and eat things that cost more than one year of the pay of all the workers here! It’s only fair that we burned them down!”

“Trooper,” Phasma says, “you’re overstepping your boundaries.”

Triple actually shuts up. But it’s clear that he’s not cowed. He’s a tall man and he’s trying to loom over Finn.

Finn doesn’t want to fight him. He looks down, at the red-brown stains and the soot on the concrete. Sighs and sits down on the ground. Looks up.

“Truth is,” he says, “there are people there at Central I’ve wished to kill with my own hands. Burning down Central, yeah, at times it feels like it would be gratifying. Triple, I never suffered here like you suffer, but I bear the guilt of luring you in and – ah, I’d tell you I’ll never be sorry enough but why should you care for my apologies?”

Triple is still standing tall, looking awkward now that Finn is so far below on the ground. He shifts and shuffles, checks the perfectly maintained blaster he’s been holding all along, turns it around in his hands, sheathes it back. Grunts and sits down. Phasma smirks and sits as well. She’s still the tallest.

“We could burn Central down,” Finn says. “Maybe. We’re not that much of an armed force but we’re skilled. And then what?”

“We’d show them,” Triple says, but it lacks conviction.
“And then they’d show us. We’d go down as another bloody, short-lived rebellion. We’d be hated. There’d be retaliation in the compounds. New refugees brought in to replace the workers they’d have murdered and man the machines in the factories. Show them, is that what we want? I think freedom, and beyond that social and economic justice are more important.”

Empty sentence. Fuck, Finn thinks. Four years ago we may have trained together. Just two drones in white plating trying to follow orders. And now I’m thinking I can lead him. Lead them all. And I’m so bad at it. Fuck.

“Listen,” he tries. “I – fuck, it’s heartless to say it like that when there’s been casualties in your factory, but yeah, I’m going around organising people. It’s – it’s already better than it was. The medical care is better, and I’m so sorry it wasn’t enough here. But for our young, too, of all species. They’re not working in factories anymore. They’re learning. Triple, we’re already building something, a better society. It’s better than burning things down.”

“But as long as they pressure us for more production and more profit, we’ll die in their fucking compounds.”

“Yes. That’s why we’re rising up.”

Damn, but Triple is lighting up at that.

“But not with weapons. What matters isn’t our revenge, but what we can build afterwards, and that it lasts. Equality, as I said. Freedom.”

“It’s easy for you to say that. You’re, officially, you’re with them! Not stuck here, not dying for one more holoprojector assembled in one hour.”

“After today,” Finn says, standing up, “I think I’m with you. Only with you. Officially.”

Phasma stands up too, brushing her coat. Triple follows suit, as do the many others that had sat down and that Finn notices only now. Stormtroopers, but not only. They’re silent but they look like they’re waiting. For Finn’s decision.

“I hear you,” Phasma says. “So, no weapons. But now it’s your move, Eight Seven. Because I don’t think the Republic will stand idle after what happened here. I hope your plan is a good one.”

“We’re going to know very soon,” Finn says, and the sea of people around him sways and rumbles and finally stands still, taller, ready for the fight.

“Are you ready?” Phasma asks as they walk through the ruins of the factory. People are already cleaning up, washing the blood and burying the dead. So many of them.

“For that?” Finn asks, gesturing to the disaster. “I think I’ll never be. There should be a trial, Phasma. People were tortured and murdered.”

“You’re such a puzzle. You want a trial? Wait for when your power’s a little more settled. No, I was talking of being ready to seize the power. So?”

“Ah. Seizing power. That’s not – ah. I guess you could call it that. Well. I sort of told myself I had four more days, but what’s four days? It’ll have to work.”

“They’ll bomb us.”

“Don’t know if their public opinion will allow it. Or their attachment to their own property.”
“There was no mention of gambling as a flaw in your file.”

“Yeah. I hate that.”

//

It’s just a code word, spreading through the compound on the back of their phantom grid, and as far as the furthest, most forsaken planet of the Republic territories. Especially there. In its wake, official holochannels and grids shut down, the merchandise flows take new directions, and everywhere, refugees, workers and non-human rise up.

“Finn! Oh Force, Finn, I was so worried!” a harrowed Statura says when Finn presses the connexion to the Director’s personal holocomm. “I heard of the burning of the holo factory, I thought they had killed you there. What’s happening? Everything is – nothing works! Not even the normal comms! No holo outside Central! And the supplies! I’ve managed to hide it to the population but we’re not getting any supplies here. What are you – can you do something?”

“Ah,” Finn says. “I’m sorry, Tihhe. I called to tell you that I’m not accepting your offer. I’m staying with my people. Siding with them, you understand.”

“Siding? I don’t u – siding? Finn, what have you done? Are we under attack?”

“No armed attack. We’re just, ah, reorganising the production and the distribution here at the compounds, you see. Directing it to those who need it. Making the working conditions better. That sort of things.”

“But – but they’re – they’re the property of –”

“As I understand, the ownership of the factories is a complicated matter. Shareholders. Companies. Funds. But what about the lives of the people who work here? Isn’t that also something that gives them rights on what they’re making?”

“It’s a crime! Finn, a crime against property, against, I’ll say it, our citizens’ safety, and we won’t let you get away with it! The government has power, young man, and we’ll use it! Destroyers! Troops!”

“In case you didn’t realise, Director, we’ve taken hold of all the factories here on Akhios. There aren’t any supplies reaching Central, as you said. No fuel for your ships, no charges for the blasters. No food.”

“By the Stars! That’s blackmail! And our ill and wounded? Are you going to choke the medical centres too?”

“We’ll allow the serious cases to come to the compounds. We’ve built quite a good medical system here, you know. Less discriminatory. And we’ll even allow you the use of a bacta tank, if there’s a real need. As for the rest, well, maybe it’s time for the whole population to see what it means to be given medicine only when you absolutely need it.”

“We’ll break you! We have enough fuel and bombs to destroy you! We’ll strike from the other worlds!”

“The other worlds are siding with us. You don’t realise how many refugees, workers, aliens were set aside from your Republic’s safety recently. We control the resources, we’ve got our own freighter lines. We’ll choke you before you choke us, Director.”

“There still are Destroyers above Akhios.”
“How are the shareholders going to react when the destroyers bomb their property? We’re not breaking anything. We won’t let anyone starve or die from illness. You’re the one who talks of doing it.”

“We’ll find a way. I misjudged you, Finn. Myrtas was right all along. You’re dangerous. But don’t ever imagine you can win that game.”

Finn smiles, slowly, and delights in Statura’s angry, scared expression. Then he switches off the comm.

“Do you think he’ll bomb us?” Phasma asks. “I’m inept when it comes to interpreting the Republicans’ political positions.”

“He won’t. Not on Akhios where most of the factories are high-profit and high-tech, especially not when I’ll have spoken on the official holo. Not so close from their political base. But elsewhere… Fuck, I hope we can hold.”

“Hold? Against destroyers?”

“Depends how well they control their fleet. Hell, I wish I knew what Poe is up to right now.”

“I’d guess he’s off fighting the First Order, any other idea?”

“Do you think I’m creating an opening for them, I mean the First Order, destabilising the Republic like that?”

“Probably. Do you think it’s worth it?”

“Fuck, no. I’m gonna hope the Resistance is strong enough to contain them. But if – if not, I’ll stop it. I hope I can see it early enough. Shit. And to think I was mad at Poe for endangering the life of sixty pilots.”

“Can’t be helped, uh?”

“Is that how you end thinking, in that position? Fuck. As for our more immediate problem, I’ll have to think of something to stop the destroyers. The TIE pilots were heroes of the K-naann war, I’m told. Maybe the fleet will listen if I make one of them talk on holo.”

//

Stan, Finn thinks. How I wish you were still here.

Of course the PSR tried to make their holonet more secure. And even without Stan to provide the codes to Finn, of course they failed, because they never understood the importance of GG and her TIE droid friends.

And Finn was good. As good as he ever was, at least, because it had been so long since he’d been allowed to pour his heart into a vid. We don’t want chaos, he said. We don’t want to overturn the Republic. Nobody knows better than us how important it is to stand united against the First Order threat. But that’s the thing. We’re fighting for the forgotten people, the majority who works and fights and makes the Republic stand but gets nothing in exchange. We’re fighting for justice. We’re fighting for ourselves.

He tried not to be too long. He tried to be reassuring. He told the citizens to come to the compounds, to participate to the new community they’re creating. He called for a peaceful resolution of the crisis,
tried to make them see the PSR as the belligerent party. He made Gale, one of the eleven remaining TIE pilots, call the fleet to their side.

But Stan would have known how it went. He’d have known if they’d reached their target. He’d have been enthusiastic or critical. He’d have held Finn’s hand during the post-vid jitters.

Now Finn still doesn’t know if they stand a chance.

We’re still good, Kruit reports after a few days. Most Starfighter squadrons are sitting it down and a lot of individual pilots are defecting. It was great, the way Gale invoked Poe’s memory. And military pilots hate being used for police operations.

“But the destroyers?” Finn asks.

“And meanwhile the PSR is still standing, organising their own propaganda offensive, trying to regroup the mostly residential and leisure worlds of which Finn’s movement failed to take control. It’s not a standoff, Finn tries to tell himself. Merely a slow crawl towards victory, while the PSR frantic calls to Outer Rim independent worlds are met only with silence, and while more and more citizens leave Drion to learn about the life in the compounds.

Make it a few months, a year at the longest, if there’s no First Order attack, if they can ride the PSR riposte, and they’ll be good. They can hold on. Finn made sure of it.

//

But it turns out that the PSR has more teeth left than they thought – or rather than they hoped. It’s not Kruit who calls Finn, it’s Nien Nunb, his accent so thick in his agitation that Finn has to beg him to slow down to understand.

“They’ve gathered all the destroyers they have,” Nunb says, frantic. “All around Gha’um V, one of our two main longcorn flour suppliers. They know how we rely on it and they don’t care much for its population. Very few filed in the forms to become citizens. They’re about to blast off the planet, Finn!”

“I thought the destroyers were vulnerable?” Finn asks.

“For sure. Poe’s brought a few squadrons into the system and I think I spotted the Falcon, too. Right now they’re hiding. But if the destroyers begin the bombing he says he’ll shoot them down. What should we do, Finn?”

Now that’d be chaos.

“We can’t allow the PSR to destroy a whole planet,” Finn says. “That’s as evil as Starkiller blowing up Hosnia. But damn, Resistance squadrons shooting at Republic destroyers, the First Order’s would love that! Nien, where are you? Can you fly me there fast?”

“I’m close to Akhios. Sure, I can get you in the Gha’um system in a few hours. But why?”

“But not in the system, down on the ground.”

“Hell. Can be done, yeah. Without starfighters the destroyers are helpless to stop small crafts. But why?”
“Maybe I can stop them. I have to try.”

“And die with everyone?”

“I have to try, Nien.”

//

“They’re lowering their orbit,” Nien says as they reach atmosphere. He’s obviously scared, but doing his best to speak slowly enough to be understood. “The Destroyers. That means they’re about to begin.”

A sharp red light flares from one of the huge ships behind them and hits an area of the planet surface. Finn startles and tries to get a better look at the ground.

“Aiming shot,” Nien says. “For the moment it’s only light. It looks like they’re targeting the fields. Maybe they’ll decide to confine their hits to the production areas and spare the inhabited centres.”

“They won’t blast everything?”

“I don’t know. The official communiqué threatened of planet annihilation. But maybe some of the destroyer officers hesitate.”

“What’s Poe going to do if they do a selective shooting like that?”

“There are people living in the fields. A lot. Lives against lives, the crews in the destroyers are less numerous. I think he’ll attack.”

“Can I reach him with that comm?”

“Chanel 42.”

“Is it secure?”

“Should be.”

“Black Leader,” Finn comms. “This is Finn. Hold your fire, I’m going down.”

“Fucking hell, Finn!” comes the answer. “What the hell are you doing here? They’re about to blast off that planet!”

“Going to try to stop them.”

“Not a chance, dammit! Nien, move away! They’re about to begin shooting!”

“I have to try. Nien, please, can we go down, and fast?”

Finn!

Maybe Poe commed his answer. But Finn felt it with all his being. Poe.

Nien’s small transport connects with the ground, hard. Finn feels the adrenaline spike up like rarely before. He was less conscious of the stakes during Stakiller, he guesses. He should panic. He feels clear headed, strangely removed from the fear he knows he’s experiencing somewhere.

“Nien, you can still escape. Get off.”
“I’m staying with you.”

“You thwip-brained fool, get off.”

“Might have the time to evacuate a few people. I’m staying.”

“Okay. Hold that camera, then.”

There are people rushing on the tarmac. Scaled, patterned skin, long thin tails, strong legs. The native species. Finn nods to them.

“I’m Finn,” he says.

“We’re honoured to know you at the time of our death,” one of the newcomers says. “Does your honour command you to die with us?”

“Trying to stop them,” Finn says. “Nunb, the camera should be on. Do you know how to set it to an all channels transmission? Okay, that’s the small button on the left. Press twice. Good. I’m getting it on my own wrist comm.”

Finn breathes in, deep, and then slowly out. “Okay,” he says, looking into the camera. “I’m Finn, talking to the destroyer captains. Hold your fire. Acknowledge.”

“Commodore Belliey, leader of the destroyer fleet,” the answer comes. “Why should we hold fire?”

“I’m on Gha’um’s surface, as you can see. Are you going to bear the responsibility of the retaliations that my death would bring, Commodore? Violence, all across the Republic territories, while the First Order laughs and waits to seize what remains?”

“You sided with the scum of the Galaxy, Finn. Don’t hope for any leniency on our part. The scourge must begin somewhere.”

“These people around me, Commodore – show them, Nien. Thanks – these people are the planet’s inhabitants. The ones you’re about to kill. Scum, you called them? Actually, they’re farmers. Not important, in the grand scheme of things. There are other corn producers in the Galaxy. That’s why, I guess that’s why you got your orders. But think of it, Commodore, and you, officers of the Republic, you, crew members. Will you blow them off? All of them? Or will you just destroy their crops and their fields, and make them just another of the wandering people of the Galaxy? When I checked, last time a planet was destroyed it was Hosnia, annihilated by the First Order. And until now all the refugees we admitted in the Republic fled the same First Order. Is that what you want? To become the First Order’s equals? Is Hosnia already forgotten?”

“Not forgotten,” Belliey sends. “But we’re not at fault here. You are. Stop that sordid revolt of yours, Finn. Surrender. And the planet is saved.”

I could, Finn thinks. I should.

“Don’t,” one of the locals urges, fervently. “If you fail, the retaliation will be worse than whatever destruction they can work here. The Republic officials were already killing us. Making us produce more, always more, poisonning our soils and our seas, poisoning ourselves for one more harvest. We’re standing behind you.”

“Did you hear that, Commodore?” Finn asks into the comm. “Our fight will go on.”

“Your fight? Were you ever a farmer, Finn? Or a factory worker? I remember the privileged poster
boy living the Central life. When did you decide you were like them?”

“I always was a Stormtrooper,” Finn says. “A lucky one, for sure, and it took me long enough to realise what the PSR turned the Republic into. But now I’ve witnessed exploitation and denial of basic sentient rights and I’m on their side. And ready to die with them. Will you bear the responsibility of this massacre, Commodore Belliey?”

There are vague echoes of raised voices in the comm. Arguing on Belliey’s side, possibly. The answer lags. But destroyers can now be seen from the ground, and one moves to position herself right above the spaceport.

They’re going to shoot, Finn thinks. I wasn’t enough to change their mind. They hate us. Statura chose well. Or was it Gilles’ choice? Or Myrtas’?

In front of him, Nien Nunb curses in Sullustan and nearly lets the camera fall down. He’s looking behind Finn’s shoulder.

“What is it?” Finn asks. “Are they shooting already?”


Finn swivels, looking up to try to spot the Starfighter squadrons launching at the destroyers. Nothing.


And sure, far away on the landing area there’s the unmistakable shape of Black One – how long has it been since Finn saw her fly? Then Poe tumbles down the ladder while BB-8 gets lowered down and rolls to him, fast.

“Belliey,” Finn’s comm says in Poe’s voice. “I’m here too. On the ground. You’re ready to be responsible for my second death?”

“Anyone’s got a holoprojector?” Finn asks, before remembering the camera has a projector setting. They turn it on.

There’s Poe, seen from below since he’s obviously using BB-8 as a recorder, and Finn feels such a surge of—fear, want, need, love, that it’s Poe who jumps and looks sharply towards him.

Poe. Fuck you, what are you doing here?

“Dameron,” Belliey comms. “We ki– you’re supposed to be dead.”

Poe smirks. “What do you think? Obviously, I’m not. Or are you going to say I’m not me? You’re using the Justice as your flagship, I see. I made the same choice during the K-naann campaign. Is Flight Lieutenant Ujelmin still coordinating the desk?”

“I am,” a new voice says. “Glad to see you’re alive and flying, Commander.”

“Well, not for long, Lieutenant, if your Commodore has it his way.”

“Why should I change my mind, Dameron?” Belliey comms. “You’re a renegade and a danger for the Republic. It is going to be my pleasure to make sure you’re dead this time.”

“I hope all your crew and officers heard that, Belliey. Officers, BB-8’s uploading the log of the last flight I did over Akhios. The one that ended in a crash. I think you’ll deduce easily that it wasn’t an accident, if you didn’t already infer it from Belliey’s slips. People like him, like the government he’s
taking his orders from, they’re murderers, yeah, and they are the people whose orders you’re following, guys. I escaped because I was lucky, but not everyone was. Who’s going to be next? When will you diplease the higher ups enough for them to decide it’s your turn? What’s going to cause it? When you refuse to do police work? When you chose to fight the First Order instead?"

“A droid’s log is no receivable proof!” Belliey comms, his voice rising.

“This is not a court,” Poe says. “Your crew are good techs, they know they can trust my astromech. Your pals tried to kill me and very nearly succeeded.”

“Dammit, Ujelmin,” Belliey says, the comm still on. “Shut that droid’s transmission!”

“Afraid of what’s in there?” Poe asks. “So, Captains, Lieutenants, Is that the leader you want to follow? Do you want to be remembered as the destroyer fleet that blew off a harmless planet inside the Republic’s own territory?”

No answer, and the destroyers don’t budge.

“Tell you what,” Poe says. “Right before I came down I was circling around your destroyers and I wasn’t alone. I was leading a fleet-sized Starfighter force, and you know they can take you down. I passed down the command to my second, because fucking hell, it’s madness! Don’t you see it? The Republic blowing up its own planets, the Resistance shooting on the Republic? Belliey, I know where you stand politically, but this is not politics! This is ethics! Morals! Basic decency!”

No answer from the capital ship. The destroyer positioned above them shots a new aiming ray, squarely between Finn and Poe. It’s not even warm but it’s making Finn break in a cold sweat.

“Finn,” Poe says through the holo. “Don’t lose hope. They’re telling me several destroyers have abandoned post. Only, not our friend the Justice up there.”

Something else comes with Poe’s message. Finn’s name, through the Force. And something big but wordless, an immense emotion. And grief. And then surprise, and a snort of laughter through the comm.

This time Finn can see why. That’s the Falcon landing close to Nien’s ship and Rey stepping out with Blade, the TIE pilot, in tow.

“Force damn,” Poe says, but he’s still chuckling. “Now that’s a target. Talk of upping the stakes.”

Rey doesn’t even wait to be out of the gangway. There’s probably some sort of recorder in the Falcon.

“I’m Rey!” she proclaims. “Remember me? I know you do if you were in the K-naann campaign. For the others: I’m the one who bested Kylo Ren in single combat, and no, I didn’t die on Starkiller. I escaped in the Falcon and have been fighting the Dark Side ever since. And here’s Blade, hero of the K-naann fight, who was kept under chemical restraints for two months by your government before Finn freed her. Are you going to kill us too?”

She steps forward and unsheathes her lightsaber, switching it on. “If you blow the planet, you kill me, and with me the hope of defeating not only the First Order but also the Knights of Ren, or so my master, Luke Skywalker, says. And you know what? He still let me come down. Because if the Republics kills a planet, and if the Resistance fights the Republic, whatever the outcome of the war against the First Order there’s no hope at all for the Light Side. Will you kill us, officers of the Republic, and fall to the Dark Side?”
The official comm has obviously been shut down on the flagship and nothing moves for a while, not even to take anotheraiming shot. Finn wipes the sweat from his face and takes a good look at Rey, who appears as calm as ever, her stance relaxed and alert, and at Poe, who winces, massages his left leg and crouches to tellsomething to BB-8.

Then other destroyers appear in the sky, pressing the flagship on all sides. And the Justice finally tilts, at first towards the ground, and Finn is afraid that Belliey is going to crash his ship as a last, suicidal gesture. But then the ship stabilizes and climbs up, his cannon ports closing. Nien Nunb curses for a very long time and is joined by Poe, still on the comm.

“Lieutenant Ujelmin speaking,” the comm says. “We deposited Belliey. We have some wounded on board, requesting permission to land. Is there room enough, Commander Dameron?”

“There is,” Poe answers. “Large grassy patch between my ship and the hangars. The ground is stable enough for your ship. Congratulations on your decision, Ujelmin. And my most grateful thanks to all your fleet.”

“Captain Groelund speaking, destroyer Alderaan,” a new voice says. “Finn, our thanks for giving us a chance to get ourselves out of that peacefully. And you can’t know how glad we are that you’re alive, Dameron. We’re awaiting your orders.”

“I’m not your admiral,” Poe answers. “But tell you what, I won’t ask you to take sides in that fucking civil war. As today shows it shouldn’t be fought with ships anyway. But we’re trying to prevent the First Order from using it to its advantage, so if you want to participate to the effort you’re more than welcome. The Resistance could do with more heavy ships.”

“Gladly,” the answer comes. “We’re retiring to a neutral orbit, some of us have inner wounds to tend to. I’ll wait for your instructions after our downtime, should take twelve standard hours.”

“Copy that, Groelund. Glad to hear you.”

Poe was sitting on the ground answering that comm, Finn realises. And now he’s slowly pushing himself up, wincing. But there’s already Rey running to Finn, laughing wildly, jumping into his arms.

“Rey! Oh Force, Rey! What were you thinking, putting your life in the balance like that?”

She’s still laughing. “Same as you! I thought it could make them change their mind. That idiot on the capital ship was a hard headed asshole! Finn, Finn, by the Force, we’re alive!”

She hugs him again, and now that’s Finn who laughs, because he really thought he was about to die, and they’re young, they’re alive, and they won. Poe, Finn thinks, needing to share his joy. Poe! But when he looks up Poe is still standing at the foot of Black One’s ladder and his face is twisted in a bitter, hardened expression. Then he catches Finn’s gaze, looks to Rey, then down, and begins to turn away.

That’s it, Finn thinks. In life and death situations, we still care for each other more than anything. But out of that there’s too much pain between us. Poe’s right. Better to stop it here.

“Finn?” Rey asks. “What’s the matter – oh.”

But Finn can’t pry his gaze from Poe, who has begun to walk away, limping heavily. It’s better like this, he tries to tell himself. But then Poe stops and turns his head to look at him and Finn realises what he mistook for bitterness is sadness, pure and simple.
“You idiot,” Rey whispers urgently. “He thinks you don’t want him. Go!”

Finn is already gone, running to Poe on the tarmac, like that first time after Takodana.

“Poe!” he yells. “Poe Dameron!”

But unlike on D’Qar Poe isn’t running to him, standing rooted on the spot instead, looking unsure. Finn manages to squid to a stop at the last moment, exchanging the hug he was planning for a hands grab. Poe’s left hand fingers feel icy and their grasp is clumsy. *Fingers*, he remembers at once. They’re metal under synthetic skin, prostheses.

“It’s okay,” Poe says, following Finn’s gaze. “I’m lucky I could have them fitted so fast. Skywalker promises me you get used to it. And,” he adds, smiling more openly if a bit crookedly, “I’m fucking glad you saved my leg, Finn.”

He won’t say anything more personal, Finn realises. And now he’s biting his lip, exactly like that first time.


A lip bite, *again*, but followed by a slow, widening, happy grin. And finally Poe throws himself into Finn’s arms, hugging him fiercely, his palms running across Finn’s back, his right hand coming up and clutching desperately at the back of his neck, pulling him in. “Me too,” Poe says. “Oh Finn, Love, me too.”

Poe pulls away, only by a few inches. Finn still feels his breath on his own lips, sees his pupils blown up so wide and the line between his eyebrows. Poe’s right hand slides from the nape of Finn’s neck and comes to rest on Finn’s face, his fingers just brushing the curve of his eyebrow, his cheekbone, his jaw, his thumb pressing on his upper lip.

“You’re here,” Poe breathes. “Oh Force, you’re alive! Fuck, I’ve been so afraid – ah. Look at you. I’ve never seen your cheekbones like that. No desserts, uh? Kruit told me you’re travelling all the time. Do you sleep, Finn? Are you managing to sleep at all? Are you okay?”

Finn laughs. “I’m alright! Actually, Poe, right now I couldn’t be better. You’re here! We’ve won!”

“Force, when I left for the K-naann campaign, I thought I had lost every right to hope for you to come back. Finn, with what I did, you’d be completely right to –”

“Poe,” Finn whispers, taking Poe’s wrist into his hand, kissing his palm. “Don’t. Don’t try to push me away again. Come with me?”

“Where?”

“Huh. Dunno. To some private place? I’m sure they have them here. Poe, I want –”

But Poe’s looking unsure again, his lips twisting into a grimace.

“Ah. Not right now, I’m afraid.”

“What?”

“You’re their leader now. They’ll want to talk to you. Look at them, how happy they are. You’ve just saved them.”

“I?”
“You. Besides, I have some organising to do too. Some of my pilots need to land to refuel, and I need to reach Ackbar to see how we could work these destroyers in. And there’s the matter of that asshole, Belliey.”

“Fuck. Once you’re in, you can’t really step down, can you?”

“Yeah. Finn, there’s something else. Should have begun there, actually. There’s trouble on Akhios too. Phasma managed a contact, the Directors have ordered the troops to attack some of the compounds.”

“Oh shit. The three equatorial factories?”

“Yeah. Lots of workers, low-value production.”

“You know more?”

“I do. She said she organised the evacuation of the non-combatants to the Wiirk’ts tunnels, according to the plan. Also that she hates it but she’s only defending the positions, not attacking, and that she won’t be able to hold for more than a few days.”

“Then I need to negotiate with the Directors. And soon. What’s the time at Central right now?”

“Early night, according to my timer. I think it can wait for the morning.” Poe’s eyebrow quirks up and his mouth extends in a sinuous smirk. “We can steal a few hours for ourselves, after I’ve dealt with my fleet problems. Finn, you think the Directors will want to negotiate?”

“Even with their troops loose on Akhios I’ve got the upper hand. We already controlled the main production centres and the commercial fleet, and now, with your help, they’ve lost the last important part of their navy. The best they can hope with their little offensive is to become the lords of one single isolated planet. They’ll negotiate.”

“Good.”

“How is the war going on the outside, Poe? I can’t go on destabilising the Republic if it means I’m inviting the First Order in.”

“The First Order’s not the real threat anymore. We’re holding them out easily now that we’ve got reinforcements from the Republic as well as the unaffiliated worlds. We’re the ones progressing into their territories, actually. But the Knights – that’s something else. Thank the Force for the K-naann, but, ah. Actually, I’m surprised the Republic hasn’t seen more of them.”

“One more reason to stabilise the situation, then.”

“Right. Okay. I’m gonna see about the fuel situation around here and then – then, uh. Finn, may I kiss you right now?”

“They’re looking at us, you know. The Gha’umians or whatever they’re called. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, if you don’t. Kiss?”

It’s intense and hurried and Finn can feel a slight tremor in Poe’s whole body – how long has he been awake, watching the destroyers and wondering if he should open fire? – but it feels like a promise. Like a future.
So: general strike, appropriation of the means of production, some armed fight. Hi, Gloss!

And yet, I guess that a lot of the guys I was doing activism with during my student years would feel it's a half-assed, pale red revolution. I'm full of contradictions and Finn doesn't like violence (me neither), I guess. Also, what's great when you write a fictional revolution is that you can write it with a happy ending, even politically.

That said, while writing this chapter, I really wondered if it would work for a (mainly?) American audience, and if it wasn't desperately boring. *fishes for comments*

Next: Poe and Finn get some time together and the reader gets to forget about politics for a while.
When Poe finally shows up, Finn has lost count of how many people hugged, patted or otherwise kissed him. Some even offered congratulations, even though he’s not very clear on what they’re offering them for. The corners of his mouth ache with how long and how wide he’s been smiling and he feels sort of empty, especially since Rey had to leave, explaining with a tired, worried expression that Luke needs her elsewhere.

Finn patted her on the back and kissed her on the cheek, trying to convey all his love and his wishes for the war he knows she was going back to. She jumped into his arms and he thought he could feel wetness on his own cheek. And if Blade stayed, it was so that she could fall into Wasp’s embrace when she disembarked from her T60, kissing her and laughing, and then take her hand to lead her away. Finn couldn’t help the hint of envy at the scene.

“May I steal Finn from you?” Poe asks, smiling, looking cleaner and slightly more rested. “Finn, we’re being offered a room. And many blessings, if I understood the meaning of the, uh, of the numerous flowers scattered around. Did you manage to reach Central?”

“I commed the Directors’ office, yes. Got some aide that assured me I’d get a direct line in, lemme see, fuck, six hours.”

“Then you need some rest. Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

Poe is limping more heavily than ever when they reach the room and lets himself fall down on the bed as soon as Finn has closed the door behind them.

“Are you okay?” Finn asks. “Shouldn’t you use, I don’t know, crutches, a cane at least?”

Poe grunts. “If I were using a cane I couldn’t pilot my ship.”

“Oh. So you don’t use one.”

“I don’t have any problems piloting Black One. Ask BB.”

“And I’m glad of it. But really, Poe, how are you doing? It’s painful, watching you walk like that. With the bacta, I – I thought, ah – is that limp forever?”

“The pain’s worse when I’m standing up without moving, so, huh, today was particularly trying.
Finn, really, it could have been so much worse if you hadn’t got me that tank, I don’t give a damn about limping. And it should mostly go away. When I got in that tank, there was too much damage for the bacta to do all the work, but they say they could try to do some kind of bone reconstruction, although I’m not holding my breath, and most of all I’m still supposed to do physical therapy to help the muscles strengthen and to recover some flexibility.”

“And you’re doing it?”

“Yeah, trying to, when I’m not flying. These medics are evil. How did you do it?”

“They’ve got nothing on your average First Order drilling sergeant, you know.”

“Ah. Yes.”

Poe looks down, massaging his thigh with the heel of his left hand. His right is fingering something in his jacket pocket. Silence stretches on.

Finn walks to the bed, taking off his own jacket. It’s Poe’s old, patched one, he remembers as he puts it down. It had been so long since he’d wanted to wear it but it felt right to put it on when embarking in Nien Nunb’s ship. He sits on the bed beside Poe, passes his arm over his shoulder. Poe doesn’t say anything but leans on Finn’s shoulder.

It feels good, intimate, tender, like something he didn’t remember he needed so much. How long, Finn wonders, since they’ve last been like that, his arm around Poe and Poe’s head on his shoulder? He feels himself shiver as he realises it was just before one of their major rows, when Poe refused to come to his apartment under the prying eyes of his bodyguards and when Finn accused him to use him to get to Statura. Poe groans, which makes Finn realise he’s been gripping his shoulder too hard.

“Sorry,” Finn says, “I was thinking of –” But he doesn’t want to talk about it, doesn’t want them to get back to that place, and so he pulls Poe’s head towards him instead, sees Poe’s eyes, dark and wide open, the line still creased deep between his eyebrows, and kisses him.

They kissed, too, that day on the bench, hard and hungry and desperate, and so Finn does everything he can for it to be different, trying for tender, making the simple touch of mouth against mouth last, making it sweet, tasting Poe’s lower lip with his tongue, sucking it in. Poe moans a little, a helpless sound, nearly a sob, and both his hands come to stroke Finn’s back, the nape of his neck, his hair. He’s already breathing faster as he pushes his tongue into Finn’s mouth, and shifts on the bed, obviously hard. Finn breathes in his smell, feeling the throbbing heat in his own dick, and slides a hand under Poe’s shirt, trailing his fingers across the familiar line of hair below his navel, feeling the muscles of his belly ripple.

“Wanna use my mouth on you,” Finn says. “Everywhere, wanna lick you, taste you. Gonna mouth your nipples until I make you whine, wanna eat your ass, and then blow you until you beg me, wanna make you come from sucking you, with my mouth alone –”

But Poe’s gone rigid under his hands, even though he’s breathing harder and faster than ever, and then he pushes Finn away.


“What?” is all Finn manages to say, feeling the old panic raise its ugly head, because something is wrong, something is very wrong, Poe doesn’t want him, doesn’t want them together, or he’s afraid, or his wounds caused something Finn didn’t know about, it’s happening exactly like that day on the bench, Poe’s going to push him away, say they’re done –
Poe’s head goes back on Finn’s shoulder, and then there’s Poe kissing his neck, cradling him.

“It’s okay,” Poe says, low and urgent. “I love you, I want you, promise, Finn. It’s just that, ah –”

“What is it? What’s the problem?”

“Not a problem, Finn, ah, Force, believe me, would feel so much easier to fuck right now, I really really want it, but, but, except that it’s what we always do, or rather don’t, we don’t talk, uh. We’ve got so many things we have to make clearer between us, and then it’s sort of awkward and one of us jumps the other and it’s glorious but we still don’t know what the other thinks. Fuck, we needed me to be unconscious on a hospital bed, plus the help of my father and BB-8 to admit we loved each other.”

“But I love you,” Finn says, “I really love you.”

“I know. Now, I know, and you know I love you too. But I don’t want us to leave it at that, fuck like ash-rabbits, and wait for the next time one of us is out of his mind to yell ugly truths at each other. We need to talk before that thing between us goes any further, Finn.”

“Oh, hell,” Finn says, but it does nothing to abate the panic. What does he say? Where do they begin? What do they really have to talk about, now that he thinks of it? Is he still angry with Poe? Or just relieved that they’re back together? Is Poe guilty, and of what, and how does Finn’s own guilt computes?

“Come,” Poe says, pushing Finn down gently to lay him on the bed, his head on Poe’s lap. Poe’s right hand, the one that’s whole, begins to scratch his scalp. “No need to sit all straight and rigid like it’s an interrogation room, uh.”

And then Poe doesn’t talk, not at once. He just sits there, bent over Finn’s body, scratching his hair lightly with his nails, laying his other hand on Finn’s shoulder, then pushing it through his shirt collar onto the skin of his chest.

“It’s very strange,” Finn hears himself say before he can think. “Your palm’s so rough and warm and these fingers are so cold and sort of smooth.”

Poe’s hand freezes and moves as if to pull away.

“I’m sorry,” Poe says. “I’m not – ah, not used to it, especially not for this kind of touch.”

“No, it’s alright. I should be sorry. I didn’t think. It feels strange, but it’s not unpleasant. Actually, I’m sort of curious. Do you have feeling in them? How much do they feel as your o– ah, shit, sorry.”

“As my own? Working on it. I do have feeling, actually touch is the part that’s very well done.” Poe’s prosthetic fingers begin to wander on Finn’s skin, brushing one nipple, again, and again. “Tell me if it doesn’t feel good, uh?”

“Feels great.”

“Don’t get too worked up, I still wanna talk, uh?”

“You’re the one working my nipple up, Poe. And something else, too. Aw. Don’t stop!”

“I’ll get back to it later. Promise. To finish about these fingers, touching sensations are great, movement is – ah, I still need to work on small motions. I’m told it gets better with practice.”
“You can practice on me all you want, baby.”

Poe chuckles. “Later, I told you. You feel better now? Can we try to talk about heavier things?”

Finn sighs. “Yeah. Thanks for taking the time to help me wind down. Yeah, I guess we really have to, uh.”

“I’ll begin, shall I?” Poe doesn’t look so at ease himself, licking and biting his lower lip again.

“Hey, buddy,” Finn begins, but Poe grimaces at the apostrophe. *Fuck.* That’s how Poe used to call him, but obviously that’s not how he wanted to. He slipped, once or twice, what was it already? Finn smiles apologetically. “Okay. Trying again. Hey, Love.” *Yeah.* “You don’t look so comfortable either. Let’s lie together on that bed?”

Poe smiles and lies down on his side, facing Finn. Their arms raise instinctively, draping around each other, pulling their hips close.

“Talk,” Poe says. “We’re here to talk.”

Finn nods.

“I – I know I did things you didn’t like,” Poe says. “Such as enrolling the Stormtroopers for the K-naann war. You – I know you felt they weren’t in a position to make an enlightened choice. Do you, uh, do you still think I used them?”

“Do you feel guilty about them?”

“I –” Poe’s eyes shift and look somewhere behind Finn’s shoulder. “Frankly, if I had to do it again, I’d still ask them to come. The ground troopers, they really wanted to fight, and I don’t see how it should be different from any Resistance recruit who does it because of a personal grudge. We don’t send them away, do we?”

Finn does his best not to work himself up, keeps his voice even. “But you sent me away. I asked you to take me back to the fight, several times, and each time you said no. And you didn’t even offer me the choice for the K-naann campaign.”

“But did you really want –” Poe begins, then he stops himself and his eyebrows furrow. “Fuck, I’m doing it again. Not trusting you to know your own mind. I’m so damn fucking sorry, Finn. Thing is, I told myself I was giving you what you really wanted, deep down, some enclave of peace, a place to grow. But really, it’s probably that I shouldn’t put myself in a position to take decisions that concern you, because I love you, and I’ve been loving you for so long. I guess I just wanted you to be out of harm’s reach, that’s all.”

“But it’s not yours to decide!”

“I know. I’m not saying I was right. But it’s so hard, loving someone, and watching them march into danger.”

Poe’s eyes are pleading, begging for some understanding. Which Finn can give.

“I guess I did the same with the Stormtroopers,” Finn says finally. “Being blind to their ability to choose for themselves. And I didn’t even have the excuse that I loved them. I see Blade, or Wasp, and I realise they’re not so different from Pava or Arana, or, or from you, and that they’re totally were they should be, even if it kills them.”
“You know,” Poe says, “I do feel guilty about the pilots. Sure, I needed them, and they needed to fly again. Yeah, we understood that about each other. But I should have found a way for them, fuck, for them not to die, not in such numbers. I dunno how, I should have flown with them, maybe, and fuck what the others were saying. And I should never have agreed for these twelve to come back with me.”

“They say I’m a leader now,” Finn says. “I keep second-guessing my decisions. I think the guilt never goes away.”

Poe nods, then begins to smile. “Your decisions are perfect. Not like mine. Yeah, you’re a leader, a great one. Dammit, I tell you to go make the Stormtroopers free and you set yourself to freeing all the oppressed people of the Republic!”

“There’s nothing perfect in that. It’s scary, actually, all the things I could set in motion, I –”

“Hey, big deal. Hey. It’s working. You’ve got it under control. Hey. Gonna sound sappy, but I can’t tell you how proud I am of you. I knew you had this in you but I couldn’t imagine – Force, I didn’t think what you’re about to achieve was even possible!”

“You didn’t? But you were the one who saw the problem, from the beginning. It took me so long to come to that point!”

“I could see the problem, but not the solution. And you did, all by yourself.”

All by himself. Poe might say it as some kind of high feat, but it sends Finn back to these times when he was desperately hoping for some support from Poe, some hint, some help for navigating the murky waters of Akhios politics, and the anger flares. Not so high, not out of control, but still.

“Yeah, all by myself, uh. Used to annoy me a lot, the way you wouldn’t help me understand. It still does. You had to make me do all the work.”

Poe winces, opens his mouth, obviously to fight back, then sighs and shuts it, smiles and tries again: “I think – maybe I’m wrong, but I think it isn’t something you can be told. You’ve got to understand by yourself. Tell you what, I’m not sorry, not about that.”

‘Yeah. But you never even said! You liked your fucking little manipulations a little too much, didn’t you? Manipulating me into learning to see things by myself?”

“Fuck, Finn! Ah. I – a little bit, yes.”

“Made me feel you were hiding things from me. I hated you, sometimes. Because, fuck, objectively you hid a lot from me.”

Poe looks down. “I’m sorry. I, ah, I saw that. That I was hurting you, I –”

“Statura was so much kinder, at times. It was so easy to want to believe him. Shit. I was some kind of prize in the fight between you and Statura, wasn’t I?”

“No! Fuck, Finn, I love you! From the beginning, I loved you! You say it like, like you were some kind of object we could compete for.”

“But for Statura, I was.”

“Probably. I think so. I couldn’t tell you. I’m sorry.”
“You’re sorry. You always say that. And then you do it again, leaving without telling where you go, coming back and hiding everything.”

“I’m so— hell.”

“Poe. I’m sorry, too. I understand that there were a lot of things you had to hide because of how blind I was to what Statura and the others were doing. Still, please, don’t do it anymore. You did hurt me a lot.”

“If it can make you feel better, I don’t see how I could hide anything from you anymore. You’ve grown. You understand the politics of the Republic, perhaps of the Galaxy, better than I could ever do. And you know me too well. It’s—well, it’s comfortable, actually. Like I can be myself around you and trust you with the consequences.”

“You’ll tell me everything?”

Poe smirks. “Or you’ll guess everything. Doesn’t mean I won’t have to take actions that you don’t approve. I’m still a leader, too. A military one. Means my decisions tend to kill people.”

“Yeah, like when you armed the Stormtroopers without telling me.”

“Like that.”

“With those weapons, they burned down a compound, killed and tortured people.”

“And now Phasma’s able to hold the Republic’s troops at bay, with the same weapons and fighters.”

“And now, you’re gonna tell me it can’t be helped, uh? The necessary evils of our fight? Fuck. I hate this.”

“Ah, shit. I thought it was necessary. Giving them weapons. But that’s the thing. I’m intelligent enough, I’d say. I can think clearly when I’m in a context I’m used to. They say I’m a good tactician and until now it seems I’m proving them right. But I’m not you. I don’t have your intellect. You’re able to think out of the box like nobody else I know. Like, what we were just talking about, like for the Stormtroopers. I see how the Republic is about to crush them down, so I arm them. You see the same thing and devise some mostly peaceful way of making the Republic a welcoming place for them.”

Why didn’t you tell me? Finn thinks. All these things, that you trusted me, that I was good enough? But Poe did tell him, he realises. He made his admiration and his hopes known, only not at a time when Finn could have really heard him. What should Poe have said? I can’t help you, because I think you’re so much better than me and I don’t have the ability? Because the solution you’ll come up by yourself will be so much better than any I could help you think of? Or did he say exactly that, and Finn just didn’t understand?

“You’ve gotta learn to tell me things, uh, away from when we’re fighting,” Finn says. “So that I listen.”

“Maybe you could try to listen a bit better, too,” Poe says, but his voice is very soft. “I—I’m not really sure that I have that many useful things to tell you.”

“You’re belittling yourself.”

Poe smirks. “I’m honoured that you think so. Still, I trust you to lead better than I ever could, in war as well as in peace, and I’d follow you anywhere.”
Oh, fuck. “Please. That’s not what I want! Not from you! I’m not some sort of, I don’t know, of supreme entity that’s always right! I don’t want to be put on a pedestal, especially not by you. Please, Poe, I love you, I love you as an equal. I want you to keep on yelling at me when I’m wrong!”

Poe’s smirk is morphing into a grin, wider, but softer at the edges. “Yeah,” he says. “Can do. Actually, that’s something that’s very easy to promise. You know me. I yell. Just tell me when I go too far, uh? And make me repeat when I’m calmed down if you think it’s worth it.”

Poe blinks and shifts on the bed, his hand going back to fidget with something in his pocket. He goes on. “Because, uh. Sometimes I’m not the one who doesn’t say things. It’s been, sometimes it’s been very hard knowing what you wanted. What you thought. I know I should have told you that I loved you much earlier. The fault is mine and the only excuse I have is that I was scared. But, uh, I tried to convey some other things. And the way you reacted, I thought you weren’t interested. When it seems, well, I hope, ah, fuck, when it seems that it was that you didn’t understand.”

“Poe, you don’t realise the amount of things I didn’t understand these last years.”

“Well, you could have made it clearer. You could have said.”

“What was it that I didn’t understand in particular?”

Poe breathes in. He’s looking pale.

“Official,” he says.

“What?”

“See? You don’t understand.”

“Fuck, Poe! Oh.” Yes, oh. It’s not the first time Poe’s using this word and being all weird about it, and not the first time Finn is puzzled. “So,” he tries again, “what does official mean in the particular context of our relationship? Oh. Oh, Force damn, Poe. Does it mean there’s some kind of way to make the love between two people officially acknowledged?”

“Stars, Finn, you lived out of the First Order for more than three years and you never realised some people were married?”

“I lived in Central and the people around me were you and the PR team guys, whose idea of a lasting relationship was one that passed the one month mark. No, I never realised there was some official way to love someone.”

“But, but, married?”

“Yeah, I thought it was just synonymous to long term dating, alright?”

“But what, I dunno, what about history? You must have heard about Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala, at least?”

“Yeah, vaguely, probably not in the same context as you did, but they were mythical figures! Royalty! A Jedi! And it ended very badly! Nothing to do with us!”

They’re sitting on the bed, yelling, and Poe’s been talking with his hands worse than ever. They look ridiculous. Poe snorts.

“Better tell you what marriage is about, uh. Official commitment. That is, if you wish?” Poe’s
looking unsure again.

“I’d very much love to, yes.”

“So, uh. As you guessed, it’s when two, uh, can be more, but it’s usually two with Humans, fuck, let’s use our particular situation as an example, so two people love each other – well, in some cultures it’s not about love but about some other reason to spend your life together, ah, Force dammit! I sound like my father trying to explain the birds and the bees.”

Finn is doing his best to repress his chuckles and nods to Poe to go on.

“So, they love each other, at least in our case that’d be the reason, and want to build a life together, uh, doesn’t mean you can’t get away afterwards if upon reflection you want out, even if it’s years and years later, uh, but also if it’s hours later, oh, hell. So you tell each other you wanna live together and make it last, uh, and right now as far as I’m concerned I’m very much hoping about a whole life, but when I say live together, like in the same place I understand there might be material obstacles, such as a war, but you promise each other you’ll be together as much as you can, ah, fuck!”

Now it’s Poe who’s chuckling, more and more helplessly until he bursts into real laughter and Finn is laughing with him.

“Fuck, Finn,” Poe manages to say between two fits of laughter, “help a guy out, won’t you?”

“How could I?” Finn pants. “You’re the one doing the explaining. Go ahead, I’m listening!”

“You’re evil.”

“I thought you loved me?”

It earns Finn a quick kiss that manages to be quite heated and sort of disappointing when Poe breaks away.

“I love you, you lovely idiot.”

“I thought I had a –”

“– superior intellect, yeah. Only not when it comes to marriage. So. Where was I. Well, basically you promise to love each other and do everything you can to build a life together. Often, you also promise to be exclusive, although it depends on the cultures and the individuals and fuck I’m doing it again, so yeah for my part I’ll be frank and tell you that I’m realising I’m jealous and I’d probably suffer in an open marriage, that means one where you fuck other people on the side, or even have an ongoing relationship with one or several people in addition to the one you’re married with, ah –”

Finn’s smile is a bit wobbly. “I’m jealous, too. And I think I’ve been ugly about it. I promise I can work on it, but, but yeah. Exclusive would be great for me as well.”

“Yeah. BB-8 told me. I believe you. I’m really sorry, Poe.”

Poe nods and smiles, taking Finn’s hand in his. That’s something else Finn had missed, how tactile
Poe is all the time.

“So,” Finn says. “We love each other and promise to work at being together, but how does it become official?”

“Depends on the local rules. Sometimes they use priests, sometimes it’s lay officials, sometimes it’s only forms. Whatever it is, the official side of marriage helps a lot. We’d be each other’s next of kin automatically, for example. Marriage would also make it easier to share money or a place to live, uh, or to raise children if you ever want to consider it. But, uh.” Poe’s blushing now, fidgeting again with the thing in his pocket. “The administrative side isn’t the only one. Getting married, it’s a way to celebrate being together. There’s often a ceremony, a party, whatever. There are symbols, such as exchanging rings and the like, and, huh, sometimes one of the two takes the name of the other. And, huh, proposing, huh, like I think I’ve been doing right now, it’s supposed to be a very romantic moment. Not, huh, awkward, embarrassing and comical like my present performance.”

Finn smiles widely. “Well, dunno about romantic, cause my only references are the poetry you made me read me long ago, but I’d say you’re doing good, all things considered.”

“Thank you. So, in the hope of saving what little romance still remains, and in the light of everything I tried but probably failed to make clear, Finn, will you marry me?”

Poe extends his hand and the thing he was playing with is finally in the open, lying there on his palm. It’s, as Finn guessed only seconds ago, a ring.

“Take it?” Poe says. “If you wish.”

Finn does. It’s a wide band of dulled metal, so dark it’s nearly black, with swirling, shining patterns etched into it. It reminds Finn of Poe, of the way he flies with Black One.

“I don’t want to take your name,” Finn says. “I like being Finn, just Finn, the name you already gave me, and if I have another name somewhere I want it to be mine. I don’t want to just, I dunno, merge into you.”

“Yeah,” Poe says. “I like you to be Finn, just Finn, too. Maybe when this fucking war is over we can go look for your name. But you’ll probably have made a name for yourself by then. As I said, it’s just one of many symbols. And not one I care much about.”


Poe’s expression is one of deep, giddy, delirious relief.

“Were you afraid?” Finn asks. “You thought there was a possibility I’d say no?”

“I’d like to see you in my place,” Poe says. Finn nods. He’s got a point. “So,” Poe says, chuckling a little. “About making it official. Thing is, I think it already is. If we want. I think that’s what the flowers mean. A blessing, for after our union has been made official.”

The flowers. They’re really everywhere, in vases, in pots, as petals on the ground, as bunches on the pillows, as a kind of lattice thing across the windows.

“But how? They think they married us? We had some sort of ceremony without knowing?”

“I asked BB-8. Well, his databanks. What I’ve cobbled together from the little he had is that it seems kisses, public kisses like the one we shared on the tarmac have a very special meaning here. They’re
very rare, so it’s hard to say, but they appear to be the most sacred way to ask witnesses to bless a relationship. It definitely makes it official. I wouldn’t have told you if you had said no, but all we have to do is sign the forms they made ready and the marriage is valid in the whole Galaxy.”

“Fuck me,” Finn says. “Did you know?”

Poe grins wide. “Fuck you, heh. That, too. No, I didn’t know when we kissed. But I already knew when we entered the room. And, Finn. Since we’re married. The tradition on Yavin is to exchange rings, so I’d like to put the one I gave you on your finger, at least.”


“What?”

“It’s in my pants pocket. Wait. Here it is. I’m afraid it’s not as fancy as yours, though.”

“Finn, you knew about rings? You made me explain all about marriage and make a fool of myself and you knew? Fuck, man!”

Poe is sounding unsure again, maybe hurt. Shit.

“No, no no no! Ah, Poe, dammit, it’s your father!”

“Kes? Kes gave you a ring? Like that?”

“Like that. He sent me that ring, and the only thing he added was that I might need it. So. Give me your hand.”

Poe’s eyes are definitely misted over. “Damn that old meddler,” he says, smiling. “Never could prevent himself from prying into my love life. Damn, after all this time apart, he still guesses right. And let me do the marriage explaining, that fucker. Finn, come on, your hand first. No, the left one.”

Finn looks as Poe slides the ring on his finger and then moves to take Poe’s hand and do the same.

“Please, no,” Poe says. “I – the left hand is the traditional one, but I’d like your ring on a, well, a real finger. Right hand, please?”

Then it’s done and Poe is openly crying, and Finn feels the wetness well up in his own eyes.

“Is that romantic enough for you?” he asks.

“On Yavin that’s when we’d be supposed to kiss,” Poe says.

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Poe didn’t plan on being in tears. Not even on having Finn pushing him flat on his back on the bed, burying both his hands into his hair and kissing him with all his might, his body heavy and real on top of Poe’s.

Actually, he didn’t really plan on being married at the end of the day. Sure, he’s been keeping the ring in a pocket since he’s been out of the bacta tank, but that was more as a talisman than as anything else. A way to promise himself he’d remain alive long enough to meet Finn again and try his luck, and fuck the consequences.

But the most he hoped from that day was that he’d be alive at the end of it, possibly having destroyed
a Republic fleet to save a planet.

And then Finn saved the day, and then Rey was in his arms and Poe didn’t even want to confront Finn with his unrequited love anymore, or so he thought. But that’s how Finn and Poe’s relationship goes, isn’t it? When Poe is certain there’s no hope left, Finn barges in with a kiss or a bacta tank or a ring of his own and suddenly everything is perfect again. And for the first time in years, Poe allows himself to hope that it will last.

“Poe?” Finn’s voice calls from far away. “You alright? You want to stop?”

Poe grabs Finn by the back of his head and pulls him in, kissing his lips, his jaw, his throat, and back to his chin – there’s the rasp of stubble, a testimony of the absolute haste he must have found himself in when he left for Gha’um. He can’t help the small peck and flick of tongue at the corner of Finn’s mouth, the savouring of the glorious curve of Finn’s upper lip with his own mouth.

“Oh no,” Poe says. “Never stop. It’s just – I’m a married man, Finn. To the love of my life. I – oh Force, I promise I won’t be so sappy all the time, but I’m not used to –”


“To, ah, I’m finding I’m not used to hope. Sorry that I’m so, ugh –”

“Uh. Rey did say your encounter with Ren left scars.”

“Don’t look. Please, Finn, I know you have the Force, please, don’t.”

“I won’t. Anyway I wouldn’t trust myself with something like that. I wouldn’t even know how to do it.” Finn smiles and Poe realises his eyes are glinting too. “A whole life with you. Force, Poe.”

Finn lets his head fall down into the crook of Poe’s neck, burrowing his face between the collar of his jacket and his skin.

“Fuck,” Poe says. “I’m so, uh, so clothed. Still wanna make love, Finn? I recall you saying something about wanting to use your mouth. Because, uh, I sort of may have wanked at the thought for most of the time we were apart, just so you know.”

Finn lets out a long breath at that, hot against the skin of Poe’s neck.

“What are we waiting for?” he mumbles into Poe’s hair while already trying to divert Poe from his jacket and shirt. “Want you naked, come on.”

“You, too,” Poe says, and can’t help adding: “except for the ring.”

He feels Finn’s smile on his skin at that, lets Finn battle with clothes for a while and finally manages to pry himself apart long enough to push all his clothes out of the way and help Finn with his. Then he has to stop and just watch. Finn is still glorious, leaner than he was but still as fit, muscles rippling under his gorgeous skin.

“Damn,” Poe says. “With everything you set yourself to do, you still find time to work out?”

But of course Finn doesn’t pay attention to that because Finn is looking at him, and Poe does his best not to mind. It was unavoidable, really, that his eyes would shift to the scars the bacta didn’t completely erase, all across his left side from shoulder to foot, to the dent and bend in his left shinbone, to the difference in bulk between his right and left thigh.
“It drives it home, doesn’t it, how close it was?” Poe says to try to defuse the situation.

“You used to know you were gorgeous,” Finn says, looking up into Poe’s eyes. “Fuck, Poe. You still are. Those scars are – they mean you survived. Are they – can I use my mouth on them? Would you like that?”


The look Finn sends him is smouldering, but there’s something else behind, a glimpse of unease, some guilt. It passes fast, though, and Finn latches onto Poe’s mouth again, then shifts to his throat, and works from there, and Force, Poe is going to lose it fast. Because there’s Finn’s tongue flicking at one nipple, and his fingers pinching the other one, hard, and Poe hears himself moan already. And then Finn’s mouth is probing that jagged scar along his rib, his lips wet and firm on the too-sensitive skin, his stubble scraping. There’s a kind of acute edge to the building sensation, some pain mingled with the anticipation, and Finn knows for sure what it does to Poe because he’s adding teeth, carefully, slowly, but enough to send shivers to Poe’s spine and make him grunt and curse.

That’s something Poe should address, while he’s still coherent enough, because what they’re beginning here isn’t something you should do before discussing boundaries, Poe getting off on pain, okay, and Finn – not on inflicting it, Poe doesn’t think so, but obviously Finn enjoys how it makes Poe react, and that’s enough for him to play along. But maybe Poe is already too far gone, and fuck, Finn’s mouth on his ribs, and Finn’s nails digging into his butt and thighs. And Finn knows, and Poe trusts him with this knowledge, and the discussion can wait. Poe thinks of trying, maybe, still makes the effort to talk, but what comes out is: “Force, missed your mouth, Finn, you’ve got no idea, been so long –”

“Missed this too,” Finn says, breath hot against Poe’s skin, eyes shooting up and that line in his forehead creasing again. They both know what lurks behind, because it has been a very long time, the angry, urgent sex they had in the last months of their fucking having no place for such attentions.

“Love you,” Poe says, a ward against the bad memories, and Finn mouths the answer into the skin of his lower belly, making him arch up.

Then there’s this place on Poe’s inner thigh that’s always been so sensitive, and Finn remembers it, of course, licks there and bites, and Poe’s already rock hard, lowers a hand to stroke himself and meets Finn’s hand.


“Yes,” Poe rasps, hard to breathe, fuck, Finn is hot like that.

Finn spits into his hand and grabs Poe’s throbbing cock, twisting as he slides up, stroking the head. He makes a small, hot, helpless sound as Poe throws his head back, eyes closed, hissing.

“Gonna eat your ass,” Finn says, and that’s not a question.

“Yeah,” Poe breathes, “Fuck yeah, but Finn, ‘f you wanna me to last you should, fuck, slow down, ‘cause, ah, fuck –”

“Don’t want you to last,” Finn says inbetween licks at Poe’s crack, at his hole, damn, feels good.

For he doesn’t know how long Poe gets lost in the sensations of Finn’s tongue wet and sloppy on his rim, and then hard and breaching his hole, in and out, again, and again, and of Finn’s stubble raspy on the sensitive skin of his crack, of Finn’s teeth sinking into his asscheek. He hears himself pant,
moan, curse with each of Finn’s stroke on his cock, hears the obscene slurping Finn makes as he sucks on his hole, breathes out, long, hard, in a desperate attempt not to come on the spot, manages to hold on for yet another little while.

He makes himself open his eyes, it feels so glorious, he has to watch, to know that it’s real, that it’s Finn down there making him squirm and push down and beg. And here he is, woollen head bobbing between Poe’s open legs, a darting glance up, eyes black and shiny and eyelashes so lush, a wide smile, and then back down. His back is moving with the long upwards swipes of his tongue, knotted with muscles, so gorgeous, and down there, there’s a leg half on the bed and half dangling, Finn’s groin pushing against the mattress edge, and Finn’s other hand lodged under, stroking and playing with his own balls.

“Fuck,” Poe swears as Finn’s tongue breaches him once again, “wanna touch you, Finn, please, let me –”

“No,” Finn says, his head coming up, lips swollen and shining wet. “Keep your hands up, this is all for you, you’re so close, aren’t you, I’ll make you come, keep your hands up.”

Finn’s voice, low and hoarse with arousal, is nearly enough to topple Poe over the edge, but he manages to stay there, cock bobbing and throbbing inside Finn’s grasp, head thrown back and mouth open in a silent yell, hands up behind his head grasping at what he can – This is a pillow, is that flower stems? – making himself breathe, dammit, not yet, he wants to last a little more, fuck. Finn kisses him, short, sloppy, wet, then pries himself apart, saying, “you gonna come in my mouth, Love, come for me?”

Then he’s back down, blowing on Poe’s loose, wet, tingling hole, pushing two fingers in, engulfing Poe’s cock into his mouth, pressing down until Poe’s cockhead is lodged into Finn’s throat and Finn’s stubbly chin rasps against his balls, and for a few seconds there’s only the muffled grunts of Finn sucking him, the sound of him breathing through his nose, fast and hard, and Poe’s whines, higher and needier with each thrust of Finn’s fingers into his hole.

And then Finn presses on his prostate, goes down on his cock the whole way, with that hint of teeth again, and Poe can’t hold anymore, yelling, exploding, ass clenching, cock pulsing, feeling Finn’s throat swallow convulsively around him, Finn’s fingers stroking inside, and he keeps coming, coming for a long time, until he feels spent and boneless and tingling everywhere, and Finn is back alongside him, hard cock lodged against his hip, arms around his shoulder, cradling him, kissing him.

“So good,” Finn says, “so good, my beautiful Poe, love you, love you so much –”

Poe should answer but the best he can manage is a feeble “fuck” as he tries to remember how to breathe, unable to even open his eyes. He remembers to get his arms down from under their pillow, gropping for Finn blindly, pulling him even closer, trying to roll him over his own body.

“Shhhh,” Finn breathes, “Poe, it’s alright, I’m here, I love you, you’re alright,” and then Poe can open his eyes, sees Finn watching him, so close, his lips half open, a small string of come at the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, Force,” he says. “Now that was… Damn.” Finn smiles and shifts slightly, his cock pushing into Poe’s side. “Mmmh. You hard, huh?”

Poe slides a languid hand around Finn’s cock, which twitches a little. Finn makes a small strangled sound that sends a jolt into Poe’s own cock – already?

“It’s okay,” Finn says. “There’s no hurry. I can take care–”

He scoots down on the bed, facing the beauty that is Finn’s cock, his hand making a loose circle around it. He hesitates, looks up. Finn isn’t too far gone, watching him, in control. Maybe there’s some space for a little talk.


Finn snorts. “Guessed so.”

“You know, sometimes, especially in the last months of our, uh, fucking, you’d fuck me rough, take me when I wasn’t completely ready, and damn, it hurt.”

He says it with a smile, hopes Finn will see where they’re headed. They have to talk about it, fuck, they can’t go on as if everything was okay if they don’t make it clear beforehand, please, Finn, don’t get mad, don’t feel guilty, please…

Finn presses his mouth together, not smiling, fuck, that line coming back on his forehead, his gaze turned down to somewhere behind Poe, looking ashamed. Poe strokes him a little, bends to kiss him on his lower belly, where he knows it tickles a little.

“If it’s not clear by now,” he tries, “I like that, Finn.”

“But I was angry,” Finn says. “I didn’t like that. Well, the sex was great, but I hated it. I hated myself because of what I did to you. I wanted to hurt you and I hated you too, for enjoying it and making me do it more.”

“Yeah,” Poe says, still stroking Finn’s cock. He’s still hard, thank fuck. Maybe they can manage to go somewhere. “The anger, I didn’t like it either. I – if that’s all you’re getting from it, I’m gonna stop asking it from you. There are plenty of other things that get me off. As you know very well.”

“But. But you want it, don’t you? Poe, what do you get from the pain? That’s something you enjoy, really?”

“Uh. Yeah, I guess, a little. You, ah. Seem to be very good at guessing exactly what amounts work for me. And then there are things I find terribly hot, because in another context they’d be off-limit, if there was less trust between us, such as your hands on my throat or you pinning me down and twisting my arms when you fuck me. But mostly it’s control. Letting it go. And you, if you don’t do it knowingly, taking control, then your instincts are incredible because that’s what you just did, uh, and it was fucking great.”

“You weren’t like that in the beginning, though.”

“Yeah. As I said, I love plenty of other things, and sometimes it’s tender or on top that I want. And you let go only with someone you trust absolutely, you know? I think I have that with you now. Even though I shouldn’t have let you do it in these last months before the K-naann campaign. I – I felt so fucking up, like I deserved it, you know, but –”

“Promise you don’t let me do that to you again, Poe.”

“Yeah. That’s why we’re talking. So that we know what’s okay and what’s not. Alright?”

“Alright. It does feel great when I’m in control. And, uh, rough, if I know that’s what you want, that’s good.”
Poe nods encouragingly. Finn appears totally aware of Poe’s hand stroking his cock, is bucking a little into it now, and maybe what they’re talking about is somewhat enhancing the sensation.

“But there are things that I won’t do. I’ve heard,” Finn begins, his voice trailing down. “I’ve heard, some people like you, they like being restrained. Cuffs, things like that. Won’t do it to you. I can’t.”

“Yeah. I understand. To tell you the truth, after all that happened, I don’t know if I could enjoy it again. Don’t really want to try and guess, either.”

“Again, huh. I’ll ask you about again when I have that jealously thing under control. Poe, I could really hurt you, inflicting pain. I mean, not in an erotic way. How do I know if I’m going too far?”

“There should be a code. Sometimes it’s a word, not ‘no’ or ‘stop,’ something that’s not likely to come by itself when we fuck.”

“Like, I don’t know, ‘regulations’?”

“Ugh. Ah. Long word, but why not? Or if I’m likely to being unable to talk, because of, uh, things in my mouth, it can be just shaking my head several times, more than three for example.”

“Yeah. I like that better. Poe, I, I find it hot, you know? I really do. And, huh, I want to tell you I know it doesn’t make you weak, that it doesn’t mean I can order you around, I mean out of our bed.”

Poe sits up to kiss him, long and sweet. “That’s one of the things that make me trust you, Finn. And now, about that thick cock of yours, you think you could stick it up my ass? You know, rough?”

Finn looks down to Poe’s hand still twisting lazily around Finn’s cock, then to Poe’s own, still mostly soft.

“But you’re spent!” he says. “Wouldn’t be fair! I –”

“I still find it hot. Use me, Finn. I want it. And about being soft, dunno about coming again, but I’m so starved I’ll probably get a decent hardon in no time.”

Finn’s expression is strange, some arousal, some doubt, amusement on top.

“Come on,” Poe says.

“Okay. I’m still lubing you up properly. Rough’s good, but I don’t want you to tear.”

Poe feels the smile blossom and widen. “Love you,” he says.

“Wait. Do we have lube here? I, huh, didn’t think of taking some with me. You?”

“Not in the standard X-Wing equipment. Okay, there’s a basket on the nightstand. There, under the flowers. No, these flowers. Try that?”

Finn uncorks a bottle, then another one, sniffs suspiciously at a third and pours some goop on his fingers. “Yeah. Looks like lube. Wanna try your luck?”

“Does it sting?”

“Nah. And there’s a rather explicit drawing on the bottle. I think we’re good. Come here.”

Finn makes short work of preparing Poe and when he enters him, yes, he feels big. Big enough for Poe to have to breathe around it, big enough that for a while there’s only that, Poe’s ass opening and
stretching around Finn’s cock, and yeah, it hurts. Enough for Poe to cry out, and for Finn, noticing his wince, to lie down heavy on him, grabbing him under the shoulders, staying still.

“You okay?” Finn asks, mouth against his cheek. “Want me to go slower?”

“No, damn! Come on, Finn, fuck me!”

At first Finn doesn’t move, just lies heavy on top of Poe, breathing hard. Then he pulls half-off, still gripping Poe’s shoulders, and slams back in, at once, balls deep, making Poe yell in surprise, pain, pleasure all mingled.

“Fuck, yeah,” Poe moans as Finn picks up an unforgiving pace, and Poe tries to follow, to buck up in answer, finally opting for raising his ass as high as he can, folding in two, his knees as far apart and close to his ears as he can. Finn leans on him and pounds in, face scrunched in budding pleasure. For a while it works great, and Poe begins to stroke himself, working his cock to full hardness, and damn, it feels good, and then his left leg gives.

“Ow,” he says. “Fuck!”

“Your leg,” Finn says. “Ah, fuck.”

“I’m okay. Finn, go on, I’m alright, nothing’s broken, please.”

“Okay my ass.” Finn pulls off, takes Poe in his arms, sits him up, helps him extend his leg. “Damn. Alright. What about lying on your side? This way I won’t lean on your bad leg and I can still kiss you.”

Poe nods, feeling the lancing pain recede, and lets himself be arranged on the bed, feels Finn slide in again, less of a shock this time, and heartbreakingly good. “Yeah,” he moans, “yeah, like that –”

“Missed this,” Finn pants, “your ass, it’s so gorgeous, me in there, and fuck, and you, you love it so much!”

Finn’s rhythm is frantic again and in this position Poe can’t do much more than letting him pound him, admiring Finn’s technique as he tries his angles, aiming for the right spot, delighting in making Poe shout. But soon Finn’s too far gone for any finesse, just spearing Poe, cursing with each thrust, glorious as he bends over Poe, his skin slick and glistening with transpiration, his mouth open, beads of sweat on his upper lip, his eyes scrunched in pleasure.

“Come in me,” Poe begs, opening himself wider, twisting and raising his arms to grab Finn’s butt, pulling him in, pressing fingers along his crack, into his hole. “Please, Finn, now.”

Finn braces himself, one arm around Poe’s leg, the other pressing on his chest, and spears him, once, twice, then freezes and howls as Poe feels Finn’s cock pulse and release inside him. Poe grabs his own cock and works it feverishly, feeling the skin so sensitive after all Finn did, his cockhead nearly raw with the sensation overload. He doesn’t know how long it takes, his hand twisting and pulling and squeezing, hard and fast, and Finn above and inside him, murmuring lewd encouragements, still being wracked by the aftershocks of his own orgasm. And then Poe wrings that second, tired orgasm out, cock twitching, ass clenching, and laughs out in pleasure.

“You’re incredible,” Finn says, mirth in his voice. “My lovely, lovely Poe.” He chuckles, bends down to kiss Poe and lets himself fall on the bed beside Poe. “Damn, I’m exhausted.”

Poe rolls on his back, feeling so fucking sore and so happy. He extends a hand to stroke Finn’s chest. It’s the left one and shit, he still needs some practice.
“Sorry for the chilly fingers,” he says.

“Right now, feels great,” Finn mumbles, then he yawns hugely.

“How long have you been awake?” Poe asks.

“Dunno. Too long. Gonna crawl to the fresher and then I think I’ll sleep like I couldn’t in months.”

“Yeah, get some sleep. You’ll need it for, uh, what’s the time, fuck, for today, Central time. Stay here, I’ll go grab a towel.”

“No way. I know you’re sore, you madman. And, uh, I’m sorry about your leg.”

“I still can walk to a fresher, fuck!”

Poe stands up and hopes Finn didn’t catch his wince, because yeah, the ass is sore and the leg has seen better days.

Finn snorts and stirs, sitting up. “Let’s stagger in together, then. You can lean on me, I’ll act as if I didn’t notice.”

The fresher is small but it’s a water one, thankfully devoid of flowers except for a small bunch in a vase in a corner. Finn and Poe are sweaty and sticky and spend entirely too much time kissing, laughing and petting each other, just for the fun of it, before Finn notices how much of his weight Poe puts on his good leg and makes him sit down.


“I’m okay,” Poe says, raising his voice above the noise of the pouring water. “I forgot I had lost so much flexibility, that’s all. I probably sprained something. Small price to pay, uh.”

Finn nods, turns to scrub at his face and says something that gets drown away.

“What?”

The water dwindles to a trickle. Finn, Poe notices, is playing with his ring, pushing it up and down his finger.

“I was saying I thought you were dead, after the crash. For a while I didn’t know how to go on. I’m fucking glad you survived.”

Fuck. Poe grimaces and motions for Finn to come sit beside him on the tiles. For a while, he doesn’t talk, just holds Finn against him, wet and warm and here with him, and this time it’s Finn who leans his head against Poe’s chest, in a way that probably allows him to hear Poe’s heartbeat.

“You’ve got petals in your hair,” Poe says after some time has passed. “And, uh, pollen, I think. Ah, no, it’s sticky. Some flower-related sap. Smells nice, at least. Pass me the soap, I’ll wash it away.”

Poe dials in a slightly stronger water flow and begins to massage Finn’s scalp, sitting flush against his back. Feels good. Finn’s head is nodding down, the muscles at the back of his neck and shoulders stretched and too tense.

“Falling asleep?” Poe asks.

“Not quite.”
Poe sighs. “You know, it’s still war. We’re gonna get separated in not too long. I’ll be flying for the Resistance and they need me, and you, you’re going to be stuck on Central for a while, aren’t you?”

“Uh. Depends on the next move. But yeah. One way or another, I can’t go back to the Resistance right now.”

“I promise I’ll do everything to visit often, cost and ethics of hyperspace travel be damned. But, Finn, pilots. We don’t live that old. I may die, any time, you know that.”

“Yes,” Finn says, his voice rough. “I know.”

Soap suds are running down Finn’s back, following the line of his old scar. Poe massages the tense shoulders, follows the line of his spine, presses his palms down to his lower back and across his sides, then hugs him from behind.

“But we’re both alive, right now. And at least we’ll have this night. Uh. Is it night?”

“Dunno. There are blinds and the sky was pretty overcast when we came in. Feels like it is as far as my personal clock in concerned.”

“Then let’s dry up, sweep the flowers in a corner and catch some sleep. Gonna be great, sleeping in your arms.”

Chapter End Notes

The accidental marriage trope! I can't believe I managed to slip it in this fic.

Hope you liked :)

Oh, and does it feel like we're approaching the epilogue? Well, let me tell you, the two next chapters aren't at all an epilogue *evil cackle*
“Poe!” That’s Karé, yelling from across the tarmac and running to him. “Fuelling’s complete. How do we pay them? I got the feeling that we used a lot of their strategic reserves.”

“They said they’ll accept credits.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of trust in the Republic’s currency.”

“They must be confident in Finn’s negotiating abilities. After all, the planets who went along with his system did well.”

“Yeah, I guess his own credit took a bit boost with the trick he pulled yesterday. Fuck, the three of you, you’d have left them blast you, that wasn’t a bluff, was it? You didn’t have the time to discuss it beforehand?”

“No, we didn’t and yes I thought they’d blast us for a moment. Thank the Force, and well, thank Rey, it worked”

“Where’s Finn now?”

“Rehearsing data with Kruit in preparation for his conference with the Directors. He said he needs to know exactly what the balance of power looks like. I already gave him an assessment for the Resistance side.”

Poe raises a hand to scratch the back of his head.

“Fuck, I need more caf. Four hours of sleep isn’t enough, not when you aren’t some kind of superhuman ex-Stormtrooper.”

“You spent the night with him, didn’t you. You sure it’s wise? Hey, what’s that ring?”

Poe stands straight and looks her in the eye, coolly. At least he hopes so. Karé’s one of the fuckers who say he hasn’t got a good poker face, but at least he’s sure he’s not blushing. He checks out for any caf cup or any other hot beverage that could cause collateral damage in Karé’s hand. The path is clear. “Finn and I got married.”

Her reaction doesn’t disappoint. There’s spluttering, and a very undignified squeal. “Fuck!” she yells, and it doesn’t sound entirely congratulatory. “But when? I know for a fact that you didn’t see him between the bacta tank and now!”
“Yesterday, on the tarmac. The kiss. We didn’t know at the time that it’s a valid marriage ceremony on Gha’um.”

“Oh, right. Then you can always annul it.”

“What makes you think I’d ever want to annul it? I’ve been kind of dreaming of propositioning him for a very long time.”

“But – but this is the guy who let you –”

“You mean the guy who saved my life, and my leg, too, and who, by the way, loves me?”

“That’s what you think.”

“That’s what I think, yes. Karé, come on.”

“Does your father know? He was so livid after that vid, he –”

“Kes was the reason Finn had a ring to give me yesterday.”

Karé looks at him incredulously, then snorts. “He was? Shit. Never could pry his nose out of your love life, your dad.”

“You know what, I’m grateful for once.”

“Heh, he had to survive your teenage years. And your academy years too. Could scar a man, that.” She stops and turns to take a good look at him. “You look happy. Poe, you really love him? And him, you? After all he said on holo...”

“He had to. And we do, yeah.”

“Well, then, congratulations, you loon. Be happy with your husband and tell him we’ll keep an eye on him, so he’d better behave. Oh, and you’ve just broken the heart of half the Resistance personnel, dunno if you’re aware.”

“You know I don’t fuck down the chain of command.”

“Never prevented them from dreaming. Hey, at least, I’ll be able to boast that I was the only female in your all-male tally.”

“Good times.”

“But that’s Finn you love.”

Poe can’t help the grin that spreads across his face. “Yes.”

“If you guys don’t throw a party soon, there might be retaliation.”

The smile leaves Poe’s face. “Yeah, well. I’ll be up with the squadrons and he’ll be away twisting Statura’s arm or something. Partying will have to wait.” He looks down at his timer. “Fuck, and I think he’s in front of Statura right now. Don’t have the slightest idea of what his terms are going to be.”

“He’ll want to overturn the government, you think? Put himself in their place?”

“Told you. No idea. I don’t think supreme power is his thing, but there’s a need for someone sane at
the helm and obviously the PSR is a problem. Tell you what, it’s in times like this that I’m glad I’m only a commander.”

“Huh, you’re a bit more than this, right now, wouldn’t you think?”

“Ah. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. Politics feel bloodier than war sometimes. Hey, this Gha’umian’s shouting. Calling you, I think?”

The Gha’umian is the tech who set up the holocomm for Finn’s conference with the directors. Poe runs.

“Finn requires you in,” the tech says. “He says he needs your advice. He said to tell you it’s on a military point, sort of.”

Inside, the room has been darkened and the three shapes of the Directors have taken a blueish glow. Statura looks at once relieved and terribly guilty when he sees Poe enter the holo field. Gilles looks incensed and self-important. Myrtas – doesn’t reveal anything.

Finn looks like himself, young and unassuming and calm, blank, Stormtrooper blank. Poe knows he must be shaking inside, and knows as well that it won’t have any consequences on Finn’s clarity of mind.

It is, surprisingly, Myrtas who breaks the silence, his voice quite pleasant, slow, slightly accented, a bit veiled. Poe realises he had never heard him talk before.

“Dameron,” he says. “So Belliey wasn’t hallucinating when he said you were there. You’re alive, hm. And whole, it seems, since that limp must mean it’s your own leg. Your friends stole that bacta tank for you?”

The corners of Finn’s mouth contract slightly upwards. “Indeed,” he says.

“Ah,” Myrtas says. “I’d heard gossip about Poe Dameron being back piloting Black One, but I dismissed it as myth building on the part of the Resistance. Goes to show, doesn’t it, Gilles?”

Gilles grunts, looking more affronted than ever.

“I guess that if you’re alive,” Myrtas continues, “the various reports mentioning that girl, Rey, being alive and fighting as well should be trusted. It was her on the tarmac yesterday.”

He sighs and it sends a shiver through Poe’s spine.

“Finn?” Poe says. “You wanted some advice?”

“They agree to step down,” Finn says. “If I come to Akhios to discuss the terms.”

“What? No! Don’t do that! You’ve got the upper hand, at least opt for neutral ground. There are space stations in that system. Places that are easy to secure.”

“Our troops are battering Phasma’s defences on the ground,” Statura says. “If you don’t meet our terms, civilians will begin to die.”

“I will go,” Finn says. “As long as we’re fighting between ourselves we’re making the bed of the First Order. Poe, I want your advice on how to limit the risks.”
“No. Finn, you can’t –”

Poe hears the tension in his voice, realises he’s about to shout. Landing down at the heart of the Directors’ power is madness, he wants to say. They have too many troops on the ground. They can’t be sincere if that’s their condition, they’ll kill you – but he knows that’s him thinking with his heart and not wanting Finn to be hurt. He knows he wants to protect him and that he can’t, not by forbidding him to go where he’s needed. He has to trust Finn’s decision.

Finn turns slightly, extends a hand to brush his arm. Poe nods.

“Statura,” Finn says. “I want a ceasefire. Complete, your troops retreating to a neutral position.”

“They’ll still be on the ground,” Poe says. “Too close. They need to evacuate the planet.”

“A neutral position on the ground, that’s doable,” Statura says. “If we’re given guarantees the insurrection won’t move either. But we won’t get our forces off Akhios. We’d give up our main leverage for the negotiation.”

“You don’t have leverage,” Finn says. “Unless your only objective is chaos on your own world. We control the trade routes and most of the productive planets.”

But they have, Poe thinks. Because, Finn, you’re the one who doesn’t want chaos.

“Chaos?” Statura says. “The responsibility would be all yours. And believe me, our political base knows it very well. The full effects of the food and medical care disruptions are felt at Central, now. People are hungry.”

“They can go to the compounds for their needs,” Finn says.

“Compounds,” Gilles echoes, sounding disgusted and faintly scared. “Our base would never go there, among your traitorous rabble.”

“Is that really all you care about right now, your political base?” Finn asks.

“Anyway,” Myrtas chimes in, “the offer stands as it is. We’ll discuss stepping down if you come to Akhios, and we agree for a ceasefire but not to evacuate our troops.”

“Finn,” Poe says, “may I?”

“Go ahead.”

“Okay. If the government troops stay on the ground, they’ll have to be kept in check by a third party.”

Statura grimaces. “Third party, hm. Since I don’t think you’re talking of the First Order, does it mean you’re thinking of bringing the Resistance into this mess, Dameron?”

“It’s already way in. We nearly had to fire at your destroyers yesterday, Statura. You can thank your stars that Finn’s a man of peace.”

Gilles snorts. “Thank him for stealing our largest ships?”

“Finn didn’t steal anything. But if the ships hadn’t stolen themselves away, they’d be debris orbiting around Gha’um right now. So maybe it’s time to think of it, Directors.”

“Can the Resistance spare troops right now?” Finn asks.
“And do you stand high enough in the chain of command to decide, Commander?” Myrtas asks.

“Yes,” Poe says. “In such a situation, Admiral Ackbar and General Organa will support my decision.”

“Oh. So you’re not just Finn’s fuckboy,” Gilles leers.

Poe can just catch the ripple on Finn’s features, the flare of his nostrils, the shift to a tenser position on his seat. Myrtas actually looks annoyed. Statura looks more uncomfortable than ever.

“No,” Poe answers, raising his right hand to show up his ring. “I’m his husband. And also someone who can assure you that, yes, the Resistance will spare the necessary troops. And ships.”

Myrtas looks at him thoughtfully. “Hmm. So it isn’t commander anymore? Did you get a fast promotion to general? I recall there were a lot of those in the old Alliance.”

“Still a commander.”

“Well, we all have our little affectations, commander. What you’re proposing isn’t really a third party, though. You’ve been helping Finn’s little rebellion all along.”

“That’s all you’re getting,” Finn says.

“Something else,” Poe says. “The meeting place won’t be at Central. Too many civilians if things go south. I know you were trained for this, Finn, but hell, I don’t want an urban guerrilla on our hands.”

“Agreed,” Finn says. “The navy base would be a better place. You’ll give us the codes for the surface-to-space defence, Directors. In advance. And we’ll check.”

What Finn wants, Poe realises, isn’t his advice. He’s perfectly capable of dealing with the military side of things by himself. Poe is there as Finn’s guarantee for a Resistance backup. Well, fine with him.

“And our fighters on Akhios won’t abandon their defensive positions,” Finn adds. “They won’t lay down their weapons. And we’re given a safe-conduct to evacuate the non-combatants beforehand.”

“So many demands, Finn,” Statura says.

“You’ve lost, Directors. It’s only a matter of you realising it.”

Poe isn’t so sure. How much does the movement stand to lose if Finn disappears? That’s what he tries to make Finn realise, as soon as the Directors have made a show of reluctantly agreeing to Finn’s terms and shut off the comm.

“Your personal safety is important,” he says. “Finn, they’ve compromised too fast, except on the Akhios location. I’m betting they’re going to try something.”

Finn sighs. He’s looking tired. “Poe, you agreed not to do that. I’m not made of glass.” He sighs again. “I know it’s dangerous.”

“I’m not speaking as your lover, Finn. You know how disastrous it’d be if you died.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t have to do it.”

“Then let’s talk about your safety. The Resistance hasn’t that many special forces to spare but this is important. We’ll see what we can do.”
“Poe, I can’t come at the negotiation table with a whole army!”

“You can. At least, you can land down at the base with enough of an army to secure the whole area. Hm. Also, do you think Phasma could be spared from the equator battlefield?”

“What for?”

“You need personal bodyguards. I can’t think of someone more suited to the task than her.”

“Poe, what she does there is more important than –”

“No. It’s not.”

“Okay. I’ll ask. I think it’s possible. There’s this drone, Wiirk’t drone, they’re very competent and Phasma likes them, they could take her place in the fight.”

“Phasma likes a non-human?”

“And vice-versa. You know, having seen them together I think, well, Wiirk’t aesthetics is what Phasma’s been after, all these years. I mean, the shininess, the metallic plating…”

“Got a point there.”

“Besides, she’ll always admire a competent fighter.”

“And this Wiirk’t likes her too? I thought they were uneasy around humans?”

“But Stormtroopers aren’t the same. They’ve – we’ve got a lot in common. Alright. I’ll ask Phasma, and, by the way, makes me think I know who I want to bring to the negotiations.”

“Yeah?”

“Representatives of the main communities, either from Akhios or elsewhere. Phasma can stand in fort the Stormtroopers. I’ll pass the word.”

“Non-humans, uh? The Directors will hate that.”

“I know. Poe, I’d like you to come, too.”

“The Resistance has no place there. We don’t want to become more of an occult political force than we already are.”

“Not as a Resistance representative. As yourself. I – you said I’d need bodyguards. I’m, actually, I’m a little frightened, hell, a lot. I – if I have to fight, I’d like you to be with me. We work well together.”

“Fuck, Finn. That was before! Have you seen my leg? And you’re the one trained for ground combat. I’d only be a nuisance!”

“You’re a good shot, ain’t got nothing to do with your leg. And you’ve got a good eye, too.”


Landing on the navy base as the leader of a successful rebellion involves pomp, more than Finn has ever experienced on Central, but closer, actually, to some ceremonies he’s witnessed in the First Order. Rows of impeccably uniformed soldiers are lined on the tarmac, opening their ranks only to let through some protocol droids who come to greet Finn and studiously ignore everyone else. By
contrast, Finn’s special security forces – the majority of them Phasma’s, she insisted – are still partially covered in the ubiquitous equatorial mud. Their gear is ill-assorted and well used, they’re bloodied, spiky, dented, looming or darting, unshaven or hirsute or mottled depending on the species. They’re also good, alert and well-fed, unlike these Republic soldiers with pinched faces and gleaming blasters with only five charges each on their belt. Every functional trooper they have must still be away on the field, hopefully retreated to the promised neutral positions.

We’re winning.

The PR team is there with Rannel standing by, looking thinner and uneasy. Finn notices that his cameras are mostly following the Wiirk’ts, shooting from low positions to enhance the menacing height of the insectoid species. There’s been a zoom on Poe, too, catching him as he walked in front, side by side with Phasma, in civilian clothes but his blaster very conspicuous at his hip. Finn tries to imagine how they must look, him and the other representatives of the refugees’ and workers communities, unarmed, but surrounded by the small, thick, scary group Phasma and Poe cobbled together for his personal safety: Stormtroopers and Wiirk’ts, mostly, but also a few trusted Resistance people that Poe picked out, among them Jessika Pava who, it turns out, is as well trained as a ground fighter as she’s as a pilot and better as both than as a cover agent. Rannel’s cameras linger on them, then aim back to Poe’s right hand, and pan to Finn’s left afterwards.

Spin all you want, Rannel. Do you think Central’s remaining citizens will find me scarier when they’ll know I married Poe? I’m the scary one. And we’re winning.

Something feels off. It’s the absence of any civilian crowd, Finn realises. Just his delegation, his forces, and the other side’s soldiers, the Directors nowhere in sight, safely retreated inside. That’s the first time he finds himself in an official meeting here on this planet without people milling around, calling, laughing or shouting. As they’re reaching the large conference building they’ve agreed to use, their steps echo on the concrete of the empty alleyways, already far away from the landing parade. The Director’s security team waits for them at the door and Finn recognises some of them, that woman with a daughter named Ullix, the man whose blaster he signed. They don’t smile, avoid making eye contact, and glance at Phasma with hints of fear in their eyes.

“What’s that?” one of the bodyguards asks, gesturing down with his blaster. “Does it have the required clearance?”

“He,” Finn says, feeling even more incensed because he could once have talked like that, “is BB-8. Part of our communication system with the outside, and yes, he has the required clearance. He’ll be recording the session, as an additional guarantee for us.”

“I’m gonna have to scan it.”

“What for? If that’s a blaster you’re looking for, well, our security team already has plenty of them, do you want us to lay them down?”

“Huh. My orders –”

“–aren’t to deprive us of our weapons. What, then. A bomb? Because we’d so love to blast us all to pieces?”

“You never know,” the poor guard mumbles.

BB-8 delivers something shrill and quite long that makes Poe smirk in spite of the utter lack of reaction from the guard, who finally motions for the droid to roll along.
“Finn!”

It’s Statura, alone but for the bodyguards, walking towards them with his hand extended. Why not? They’re here to talk. Finn shakes it.

“Statura.”

“So I’m not Tihhe anymore. Not even Director Statura?”

“It’s how I got used to call you at the compounds. Mind you, there were a few less palatable alternatives.”

“I thought you really liked me, for a while.”

“Yeah, same. I mean, I thought you liked me.”

“I did, you know. I do. You – you know I never had children. You felt, ah, a bit like a son for a while. And a bit like a younger me, same harsh childhood, same ability to lift yourself up. I was proud of you.”

In the corner of his eye, Finn can see Poe’s expression, annoyed and slightly disgusted, possibly worried that Finn will fall into the trap.

“Yeah,” Finn says.

“When I said I thought we’d work well together, I mean it. I do admire you, son. I – ah, Finn, why didn’t you come with me? It’s such a waste!”

“A waste, uh. Do you realise how incompatible our positions are?”

“We could have worked on it. You’re young, Finn. With time, you’d have seen –”

“Seen what?”

“That idealistic, grand theories like your friend Dameron’s don’t make for a long political career. That you’ve got to learn to manoeuvre around obstacles instead of hitting them upfront.”

Poe has been gradually edging closer and mumbles some curse at that.

“Sacrificing Stormtroopers and averting your eyes on innumerable refugees’ deaths is learning to manoeuvre around obstacles, uh,” he says without taking his eyes off the massed Republic bodyguards, looking for a potential threat. Nonetheless, Finn glimpses Phasma’s wince at the display of amateurism. Bodyguards don’t mingle with their employers.

“Dameron,” Statura says. “I was told that limp was pretty bad, I’m glad to see it’s better. Good to see you here.”

“Really?” Poe asks.


Poe nods, guilt painted on his face, and takes one step aside.

“I never wanted you dead,” Statura says. Poe doesn’t answer.

“And, ah, congratulations on your wedding.”
“Where are the other Directors?” Finn asks when it’s obvious nobody is going to react any further to Statura’s attempts.

“Myrtas is waiting for you in the conference room. Gilles, ah. Gilles is dead.”

Already, Finn thinks. But why not Statura, then?

“I thought you’d go before him,” Finn says. “Gilles tended to fall in line with Myrtas.”

“He was in bad health. His usual physician had left for the compounds and he tried to self-medicate. It wasn’t murder.”

Poe and Phasma snort at the same time.

“I’m sure of it,” Statura says. “I have evidence.”

It feels like he believes it. Well, who knows. Things at Central appear to have been pretty difficult recently.

“Here we are,” Statura says. “Are these al– are all these people coming in with us?”

“The representatives, yes. And my personal bodyguards. As we discussed.”

“But – even the Wiirk’ts? They – we didn’t plan for such extreme – for non-humans.”

“Even the Wiirk’ts.”

“It’s going to be cramped.” Statura stops with his hand on the door and turns to Finn, taking in a big breath. “We’ve known each other for a long time,” he says, looking Finn in the eye. “I know you used to care for the people of Drion. They’re good citizens, Finn, they’ve got kids, jobs they want to keep, good lives. They deserve your attention too. I hope you’ll think of them during the negotiations. Do not let violence reach Central.”

*Like you let it reach the equatorial compounds, you mean.* “I think we’ll all work towards a peaceful solution for all the people involved,” Finn says instead. He catches Poe’s lopsided, sort of admiring grin, and then steps into the room, where Myrtas is waiting for them, sitting all alone.

BB-8 utters a series of short whistles that make Poe run to Finn.

“BB tells me there’s some kind of dampening field around this room,” he says. “He can’t transmit.”

“Fuck.”

“Abort? They’re gonna try something, I’m sure of it.”

“No. Poe, I’m sure they’ll attempt to cross us too. But it’s too important, we’ve got to try to reach an agreement. Besides, we’ve got weapons and we outnumber them inside the building as well as outside.”

“Fine. I fucking hope we’re not doing a mistake.”

Over there at the table, still seated, Myrtas lays down a mug of caf unhurriedly. “Sit down, Finn,” he says. “As well as, uh, the four of your entourage who need it the most. Or deserve it. I’m afraid we didn’t count on your delegation being so numerous. There are a few cups and some caf as well, not enough for everyone.”
Finn catches Poe’s shudder. Yes, there’s power in Myrtas lonely, heavy form. Because he’s not standing up or deferring to Finn in any way. Because his voice remained steady and low, sounding even a little amused, without any hint of fear. Because he’s looking at Finn, one eyebrow raised, waiting for his move, no, *inviting* it.

Statura walks around the table and goes to sit beside Myrtas. He doesn’t say anything.

Finn turns to the others. Should he sort out the ones deserving to sit? Doesn’t feel right.

“Taq’kiiirt won’t sit,” he tells the remaining Directors. “Wiirk’ts don’t bend that way.” And they’ll loom over the assembly, which is something Finn can use – it appears to worry Statura, but Myrtas remains as impassive as ever. “As for the others, sit as you choose, everyone. We’ve sat on tables before, nothing new here.”

They mill around, settle where they can. Kruit, here as the representative of their civilian fleet, smirks and sits cross-legged on the table, followed by many others. Poe, Phasma, Pava and the other armed guards stay upright.

“Won’t you at least help your husband to a chair?” Myrtas says. “He may have cheated death but he didn’t escape from the crash unhurt. He looks unwell, don’t you think?”

*Fuck, what?* Finn turns to Poe. He’s standing alert and stable enough on his two legs, no hint of any ache hindering his movements – the dose of painkillers he took upon disembarking must have been massive. The only matter of concern is that he’s a little grey in the face, his lips slightly bluish, and he’s shivering faintly, which is strange as the room is quite warm.

“I can stand,” Poe says. “I’m perfectly well.”

“I’m thinking you didn’t lead such negotiations often before,” Myrtas says, his eyes still on Finn. “Do you have an idea of where you want to begin?”

Fucker. But Myrtas’s passive-aggressiveness helps Finn’s jitters, grounding him, morphing the edge of panic into anger. “The situation on Akhios is a priority, of course. We won’t discuss anything else as long as your troops menace civilians.”

“Civilians? I’m not sure our troops encountered many. But of course it’s hard to differentiate them from your rabble of made-up fighters.”

“You’re resorting to insults already? Are we scaring you, Director?”

One corner of Myrtas’ mouth comes up in an amused twist. “Ah. Sorry. You’ve got to admit they’re not very pretty to look at, nor that efficient.”

“We’re very efficient,” comes in Phasma’s steely voice. “But under-equipped. And you haven’t breached our defences.”

“Yet. Give it time.”

“No,” Finn says. He feels strange. Uncomfortable, like there could be a physical threat in the lone two men in front of him. Like there’s some pain somewhere, some pressure on his brain, his eardrums, his sinuses, only when he checks he’s perfectly fine. It makes him snappy. “I’m not giving it time. Myrtas, Statura, a victory on the ground wouldn’t give you any wider advantage. Remove and disarm the troops completely or these negotiations end here.”

“We want to live in peace, Directors,” Jollan Mlew, Riiv’kat refugee and representative for the north
eastern region workers, says. “We won’t keep on living like that, hiding, running from your soldiers. It has to stop.”

Myrtas shifts on his seat and breathes in as something passes on his features, some ripple of calm and empathy. Finn can feel it.

“Of course,” Myrtas says. “Your demands are quite understandable. I’m sure we’re all working in the same direction towards the resolution of this conflict.”

Mlew’s shoulders sag down and his face relaxes. “I’m sure we’re all working in the same direction,” he echoes.

How strange. Mlew always was one of the most vindictive towards Central, always advocating for a merciless, no-quarter fight. But Finn conveyed the same idea to Statura, more or less, some empty general promise about a resolution of the crisis. It’s politics, nothing more. Still, Finn feels chilled and doesn’t understand why.

Somewhere on his side, he feels more than hears Poe’s small gasp, manages to glance without moving much. Poe’s massaging his temples with his left hand, the right set on the butt of his blaster. He appears to groan and bends to whisper something into Pava’s ear, who nods and walks to Phasma. But Phasma is behind Finn and he can’t see what she’s doing with Poe’s message as he has to go on facing Myrtas.

“We’ll remove our troops,” Myrtas says – sure. Posturing is well and good, but they can’t really do anything else in the position they are. “I think it’s the wisest move.”

“It is the wisest move,” Statura says.


“Of course,” Myrtas continues, “we’ll ask for guaranties in exchange. You stole these destroyers from us. You need to give them back. You will ask the Resistance to return them. I’m sure the Resistance will agree, Poe Dameron.”

Poe steps forward and leans on the table. He’s masking it as a way to invade Myrtas’s space but Finn caught the way he staggered right before. He’s looking ill, breathing fast, his eyebrows knotted and his mouth set in a thin line. “The Resistance takes no part in these negotiations,” he nonetheless manages to say through gritted teeth. “But it has always welcomed defectors from a Republic that doesn’t know what its responsibilities are anymore. I don’t see why it should change.”

Then Poe turns to Finn, looking agitated, his eyes wide open and, Finn’s sure of it, trying to convey something. ”Finn,” Poe begins, “he’s –” but he has to stop, gasping in pain and bringing both hands to his head.

“Poe,” Finn says, “what the hell –”

“You will give us these destroyers,” Myrtas repeats, voice still low but strangely bearing, his eyes boring straight into Finn’s. “After all, they’re ours. It’s for the best.”

It feels like a pressure on his mind, something to which he can’t avoid paying attention, is spite of Poe grunting in pain only a couple of feet from him. What?

“Of course it’s not,” Finn says, his own voice feeling thick and slow. “You heard Poe.”

“They’re theirs,” Kruit says, still sitting on the table, his voice flat. “It’s for the best.”
“And the Wiirk’ts will move away from Akhios to some planet better suited to their burrowing habits.”

Finn can actually see Taq’kiiirt squat, something Wiirkt’s usually only do in front of allies. Their elytra begin to vibrate, but their voice is strangely muted and lacks its usual harmonies. “Akhios is indeed unsuited to our burrowing,” they says. “We’ll move away.”

Myrtas lets a small sigh escape, sags a little. He’s whiter around the eyes than usual, sweating. Not normal. Not normal at all. Fucking hell!

“He’s using the Force!” Finn shouts. How do you shield people from that? Is it even possible? “Wake up, everyone! He’s trying to control you!”

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger, but on the other hand I'm uploading the next chapter right after this one...
“Freeze,” Myrtas says. “Fall down.”

“No!” Finn yells, but whatever Myrtas is doing to the others, Finn can’t seem to protect them. Bodies are collapsing all around him, looking surprised or peaceful or, in a few cases, struggling. Pava’s down, as well as Taq’kiiirt and Kruit and Mlew. The pressure on his mind intensifies.

“You’re strong with the Force, Finn?” Myrtas says. He’s raising a hand towards Finn, standing up, and Finn feels the air sort of thicken around him. He shakes his head and the feeling with it, standing up slowly. Myrtas curses. “I had considered the fact that you were Force sensitive, but not to that point.”

If I’m strong, Finn thinks, why can’t I reverse what you did? Hell, what can I do? On his left Poe is still standing, maybe only because he’s pushing himself up on his arms, his mind still with him, but shivering violently and his breathing reduced to gasps of pain. There’s something Finn has to be able to do, something, anything –

“Tihhe,” Finn says, trying to pour all the conviction in the Galaxy into his voice. “That blaster on your hip. Take it out, shoot Myrtas.”

Statura actually moves, his hand hovering over his hip. He grunts.


Statura lets his hand fall down to his side.


Myrtas only chuckles and begins to stand up, a hand on his hip. It’s not a blaster holster he’s got there, Finn realises. It’s too thin, too short. *Fuck.*

An anguished beep emanates from under the table. It’s BB-8, bumping gently into Poe’s calves and trying to get some response from him. But Poe is breathing very fast and his head is lolling, his eyes scrunched shut. He doesn’t seem to register his droid.

“BB-8,” Finn urges, “get out of here! He can’t touch you with the Force, get out! Warn the others!”

But the droid is still making anxious noises at Poe and doesn’t seem to hear him.

“BB!”

His call gets him some long string of heated binary, but BB-8 doesn’t move. *Shit.* Finn takes in a
breath, tries to think. Myrtas said he was strong. Must mean Finn’s got some kind of power, some
abilities to counter him – what was it? Rey hinted at needing to concentrate, to void his mind, fuck,
how do you void your mind in the middle of such a mess? Poe’s headache is acquiring a physical
quality, seeping through the air into Finn’s mind, and it doesn’t help.

Can’t Finn wake up some of the fallen? Myrtas obviously needed to work harder at the Wiirk’ts, at
least. Finn knows he needs to focus, tries to remember the sensation of the Force flow as he felt it,
that night with Leia Organa on Yavin. For a few heartbeats it overpowers him to the point he thinks
he feels the rodents living in some hole under the floor and Poe’s nausea so strong he sways and
nearly throws up, but then he manages to sort out the feelings, identify individuals in it, among them,
Myrtas burning with a cold, powerful flame, and Poe, his presence coloured by pain and by a
hovering ghost in a black flowing outfit and a metallic mask. And others, muted, somewhat linked to
Myrtas, some more than others. He tries to single out those for which the link is weaker and calls
again.

“Wake up,” he says – pleads? He’s got to calm down. “Wake up,” he tries again, getting his
breathing under control, focusing. “Stand up. Iiik’nirk, you’re closest to the door, stand up, get out!”

The Wiirk’t is stirring and beginning to stand and Myrtas curses, extending a hand.

“Get out,” Finn repeats. Calm. He’s got to stay calm. “Warn the others. Tell them to fly in some K-
naann. Or Rey.”

Myrtas gestures as Iiik’nirk reaches the door and opens it. The door slams closed, snapping the
Wiirk’t hind limbs. They’re out, though, and still with enough motility to run. Finn feels his legs
wobble and has to sit down.

“Damn the Light,” Myrtas says. “You’re quite a powerful little shit, you know that, trooper?”

Finn can’t answer, too busy trying to get his breathing back in control. He feels exhausted. Myrtas
doesn’t look that well either, standing motionless with his shoulders slumped, panting. But he’s
recovering, Finn is sure of it, probably already overdoing the exhaustion in order to lull Finn into a
false sense of safety, and angling, inches by inches, towards Poe’s prone form slumped on the table.
Finn is so busy watching Myrtas that he almost misses the sound of the safety being switched off on a
blaster behind him, only realises what it is when Myrtas turns at once.

Phasma. Who wasn’t that stunned by Myrtas’s order, or who was freed from it by Finn’s attempt.
She’s shooting, first blast going wide, and the second – stopped in mid-air by a gesture from
Myrtas’s hand. Finn steps backwards to get both Myrtas and Phasma in his field of view. Myrtas is
sweating, his hand still raised, and Phasma is standing, fully conscious, grimacing and frozen.

“Well well well,” Myrtas says, “Another resistant one? I’ve always maintained we should screen the
Stormtrooper corps for Force user candidates, but of course, the stability of the programming with a
Force teaching added in was in question. Hm. Although, of course, Phasma, your abilities aren’t on
par with young Finn here. Too bad you weren’t found before your defection, young man.”

“So you really are a Knight of Ren,” Finn says.

Myrtas smirks, but there’s an undercurrent of unease. “So you can talk, even now. And even move.
I’m impressed.”

Finn has been edging towards Phasma and her upheld blaster, and stops dead when he realises
Myrtas spotted it.
“Don’t,” Myrtas says, smiling. “You’ve noticed I can stop the blasts. Ah, by the way –” his hand falls as he steps aside and Phasma’s shot unfreezes, ending into the wall. “– no need to use more Force than strictly necessary. And, Finn, should you envision trying anything else, you might have noticed I am –” his other hand comes up with a flourish, and that’s indeed a lightsaber he was wearing, now flashing a pale, pinkish red – “quite close to your friend, ah, forgive me, to your husband Poe Dameron. Who is in no shape to defend himself, ah, damn, what’s that!”

BB-8 has surged from under the table, taser out, and is doing his best to keep Myrtas at a distance while avoiding the lightsaber swipes.

“Force damn!” Myrtas exclaims. “Damn that droid!”

Another motion of Myrtas’s hand sends BB-8 into the shelves on the side of the room, hard enough that it makes a dent in the plastisteel wall behind and that he stays there, emitting a wheezing sound. But Myrtas has to lean down afterwards, too close to Poe for Finn to try anything, shit, but still. He stumbled.

But now there’s that lightsaber so close to Poe’s head, and Myrtas standing taller and gloating. “Knight of Ren,” he says, the light of his saber reflected in his eyes. “That’s how he told us to call ourselves, yes. Although I wouldn’t say I belong to anyone right now, and certainly not to Kylo Ren. I have – I think I still have, no thanks to you, Finn, we’ll have to see whether my people on the outside can catch your Wiirk’t, I have a Galaxy-sized Republic under my hand. What’s Kylo Ren compared to such power?”

Poe grunts, still sprawled on the table, unmoving. Finn can see his eyes, open and darting from him to the place against the collapsed shelves where BB-8 is still buzzing, his dome askew.

“Finn,” he says, breathing hard. “Even… if it kills –” he has to stop, grunts in pain, makes himself go on. “– me, stop him.”

He gets one elbow under himself and pushes, collapsing from the table onto the floor and then rolling, away from Myrtas.

I can’t, Finn thinks, I can’t let him kill you, I love you. Poe! But of course he should, because one life, even Poe’s, is not as important as the sake of the Galaxy, and finally Finn makes himself extend a hand towards Phasma, somehow reaching for her blaster – isn’t she standing too far apart for that? – which he arms and aims to Gilles, hoping he can make the blast bear, passing Myrtas’s defences –

“Stop,” Myrtas says, Finn’s hesitation having lasted long enough for him to walk to Poe and push the lightsaber some fractions of an inch under his throat. “If you manage to get that blast past, I’ll fall onto Dameron, lightsaber first.”

“Do it,” Poe says.

Finn is still aiming at Myrtas, his arm steady, and he can feel the path. He feels Myrtas’s life at the end of his blaster, feels the line of energy that could end it, feels it ineluctable and easy, and he knows he could get it past. Poe.

He lowers his weapon.

“No,” he says. “I can’t.”

Myrtas chuckles, sending cold shivers into Finn’s spine. Poe moans. “I wonder,” Myrtas says, “how it would have been with you, Dameron, if Ren hadn’t carved that path into your mind. Because it’s damn hard to control you. Do you know, Finn? Do you feel it? At first what you think when you
meet him is that he’s hopeless with the Force, just a tiny spark of sensitivity, here.”

Poe gasps and collapses and Finn realises he was using the Force, probably unconsciously, to keep himself half-upright.

“Yes,” Myrtas continues. “Nothing here to cultivate or even make good use. But dammit, the man knows himself. Ren could pry intel out of his brain, sure, although I’m told it took some effort. I can’t, whether because Ren is better than me, which is probable, or because you had some training to protect your thoughts inbetween, Dameron. But who cares. There are so many other people here, from your little rebellion, Finn, or from the Resistance, from which to extract information.” He pauses, shakes his head, and a flash of anger goes through his features, although he sort of grins to hide it. “I have to say, though, that it does annoy me that I can’t order him around. I don’t even think Ren could have, not reliably. Damn. I was so giddy when I head he’d come with your delegation, because he would have made such a powerful pawn to control.”

“Are you controlling Statura?”

“You know what? It wasn’t even necessary, most of the time. Democracies have this way, sometimes, of collapsing onto themselves under the weight of fear, misinformation, ignorance, even disinterest. Statura was exactly the man for such a time. He really believed in the things he fed the populace and knew how to make them think they’d come up for it by themselves. Oh, for sure, I had to prod here and there, a push to make him accept a few of our methods here, an idea I had to reinforce there. His mind is easy. Look at him. I’m not even using much energy to keep him unreactive.”

Myrtas isn’t even sparing a glance for Statura, still frozen on his chair, opting instead to circle around Poe. Make him talk, Finn thinks, Myrtas is the boastful kind, self-centered and too proud of himself, make him talk and it’ll gain some time, Finn needs time, to give a chance to the others to realise something is wrong, to think of a plan, anything to get them out of this.


Myrtas laughs. “Ah, but Gilles was another Knight! Ren wouldn’t have been as dumb as to send only one of us to hunt such a prize. Knights go in small groups, so that they control each other. Well, you could say I controlled him. Terminally.”

“So you did kill him. Statura thinks it’s an accident.”

“Of course. That’s what differentiates me from Gilles. I don’t think Knights should advance openly, killing people left and right with lightsabers or a Force bolt. I’ve had fun playing the Republic Director for so long, I needed to preserve my means to do so in the future. Gilles was strong with the Force but dumb any other way, and thank the Dark, he wasn’t in great health. It was easy to feed his paranoia and let him self-medicate – up to his end. And now, what shall I do with you?”

Myrtas’s lightsaber is painting Poe’s face with red highlights, passing so close to his eye, his nose, his mouth.

“Fuck!” Finn can’t help shouting. “Don’t touch him!”

Poe grunts as the lightsaber nearly connects with his head in a stink of singed hair. The lightsaber lifts back and shuts down but Poe keeps making noises, a moan that morphs into a continued whine.

“What are you doing to him? You said you couldn’t control him. Why is he like that!”

“Ah. That’s what I was talking about. Ren’s path into his mind. I can’t control him for sure, I can’t
even reach into his thoughts, but by the Force, I certainly can make him howl in pain!” Poe gasps, twitches, moans again. “Tell, him, Dameron. Tell him how you feel right now.”

Poe’s moans stop. “I’ve felt worse,” he groans.

“Tell him, or it’s going to get worse.”

Finn closes the few feet that separate him from Poe, kneels beside him and pulls Poe’s head into his lap. Myrtas smiles and lets him.

“Move away, love,” Poe says. “I’m prob’ly gonna puke. Wouldn’t do to – ow, shit, fuck that Sith – to soil this pretty jacket of yours.”

Myrtas mouth twists, his hand moves, and Poe howls, arching into Finn’s embrace, trembling violently.

“Stop that!” Finn growls. “I’m gonna kill you, Myrtas, gonna smash you!”

Poe yells again, thrashing and pulling free of Finn’s hold, twisting, vomiting. Finn feels the build-up of his own power, pushing against Myrtas’s, the way he could get hold of him, close Force hands around his throat, lift him and bang him around –

“Now that’s power,” Myrtas smiles, around gritted teeth. “Feel it, young Finn? Ow –”

Now you stop talking, Finn thinks as Myrtas has to brace himself against the table and cough, rising one hand to his own throat.

“Stop. Hurting. Poe,” he says, standing up and concentrating against Myrtas’s renewed assault, feeling him batter his defences, feeling him, maybe, bend under Finn’s own surge of power. Poe howls. Finn feels his knees buckle and has to lean on the table.

“Now you really hate me, don’t you,” Myrtas breathes, and he’s pushing, pushing at Finn’s throat from afar, invading Poe’s head, and Finn can feel it, Poe’s all-encompassing headache, his vertigo, the radiating pain in his spine and limbs. “Feel how your lover hurts? Think you can make it stop? You need to best me, Finn, do you hate me enough for that?”

Yes, Finn thinks as Poe howls again, I hate you enough, you’re the one who pried Poe away from me, you’re the one who tried to kill him, killed Stan, killed the lieutenant, oppressed my friends, look at you now, buckling under my power, look at you, you’re grunting, you’re half begging, I know you feel the pain –

“That’s the real power,” Myrtas repeats, eyes glinting and breathing hard, as if he was inviting Finn in. Finn hates the half smile that still floats on his lips, wants to smash it off, raises his hand and pushes with his mind, and laughs as Myrtas stumbles and falls backwards against the wall.

“You got to keep all these people frozen,” Finn says. “And keep hurting Poe. You think you can do that and counter me, Myrtas?”

Myrtas gathers himself on all fours and looks up. “Maybe I can,” he pants. “I’m trained and you’re not. Although you’re learning fast.” He raises his hand, although it’s limp at first, and Finn feels his throat constrict again.

Poe coughs, gasps, and says: “he’s got a lightsaber. He isn’t using it.”

Myrtas hisses and sends Poe’s head knocking back into the ground. Finn feels a new surge of hate
and raises his own hand, envisioning a more lethal blow.

“Lightsaber, Finn,” Poe whispers, and then yells.

It feels like a cold shower. There’s Poe’s presence, somewhere in Finn’s mind, hurting, yes, but also loving, and worried. Why? Finn was having the upper ground, he’s powerful enough, he’s – but Myrtas could still walk the few paces between them and stick his lightsaber in, and what could Finn do?

“You’re playing with me,” Finn says, forcing himself to cool down, making himself breathe, in, out. “I heard about that. Rey hinted at it when we talked, she said there are urges you’ve got to resist. I’m untrained, but you’re training me.”

Now that he’s watching himself, finding some balance again, feeling Poe’s love ground him, he can see how it was, for a dizzying moment, the Force around him, through him, like it felt back then in the First Order. Something red, powerful but with the power to destroy, twisting and burning what it touched, mutilating those who use it beyond saving.

“This isn’t who I am,” he says. “I fear the Force. I don’t want to be trained to use it. And, and if I have to, not like that. It’s an ugly way to kill people, or to change them into what they aren’t.”

Myrtas unfolds and stands. “Ah,” he says. “I had to try. Not much hope there, a pity the Light calls you so strongly, but what a powerful apprentice you’d have made, Finn. And love is such a strong lever. It nearly worked.”

But in the end, Finn thinks, it’s Poe’s love that called me back. Not that I’m going to tell you.

“I think I still wouldn’t need the lightsaber,” Myrtas continues. “Without the strength of the Dark side, you are weaker than I. I could crush your throat with one thought.” The lightsaber wooshes to life. “But why tempt fate? And should I kill you? I had some hope to control you before. Maybe I still can. I could keep your lover alive as a hostage. Make you behave.”

“No,” Finn rasps.

“No, you’re right. Too dangerous. He’d find a way to sacrifice himself, wouldn’t he. Or you’d find a way to save him. I think I’ll find another puppet. This Riv’kat, maybe. The opinion loves them. Dameron and you will be dead, a tragic death, and we’ll say Statura did it. That droid of yours is still recording, isn’t it? Can’t move, but I can see the blink of the recorder. We’ll get the images and doctor them. And the New, New, New Republic, ha, will rise on the ashes of Statura’s execution. Yes.”

“No,” Finn says again, more to call Myrtas’s attention to him than for any hope of making him change his mind. Because he can see Poe’s hand, creeping towards his hip and the blaster sheathed there.

But Myrtas must have enough of a hold on Poe’s mind to realise what’s happening, and pivots at once. “You stop that!” he shouts, the lightsaber hovering over Poe’s wrist. “Yes,” he repeats. “Too dangerous, as this little display just demonstrated. I’m thinking I’m going to kill you first, Dameron. Now, should I make it quick, or should I teach you? You’ve been such a thorn in my foot for so long, I think I’m entitled a bit of fun.”

“You maim me too much,” Poe says, his voice hoarse from shouting. “You gotta explain it. Harder to spin.”

“Ah, yes. To the throat, then”
He raises his lightsaber in a flourish, higher, fancier than he should. For Finn, some shard of time longer to think, what can he do, hell, he’s got to do something – Rey called the lightsaber to her, when she fought Kylo Ren, that’s what she told him she did, can he do it as well? A lightsaber that’s not his, that doesn’t call to him?

He tries. The weapon wobbles in Myrtas’s grip, then steadies, but Myrtas grunts. It feels ugly, though, something Finn couldn’t use, doesn’t want closer to him, reeking of darkness and too many kilings. What he wants to do is the opposite, and so he does, trying to push it as far away as possible from him, from Poe, from any kind of use Myrtas could put it to.

The lightsaber wobbles again and Myrtas curses, pushing forward with his whole arm, trying to bring the lightsaber down. Finn raises both his hands and pushes physically as well as with his mind, his whole body straining against the evil will behind the saber that wants down, down and across Poe’s neck.

“You little fucker,” Myrtas says, panting with the effort. “Think you can hold for long like that? Think you can withstand it?”

Finn shoulder muscles are already aching under the weight of the lightsaber, of Myrtas’s whole body, of his Force strength behind it, and then Myrtas grunts again, and Finn’s hands begin to hurt, as if the blade was really burning against them. It’s a real burn, a physical one, one that he can witness, his hands in front of him being seared, the skin red and blistering, and it hurts, it hurts so much.

“You’ll let go,” Myrtas smiles. “Eventually. Nobody can hold like that for long. Who’s going to run to your help, Finn? Let go now and I cut his throat. Hold any longer and I take my time.”

“Poe,” Finn manages to call. “Get away. Move. He can’t lower that saber right now.”

Poe shivers, moves feebly, stops, his whole body trembling. “Can’t,” Poe whispers. “Fuck, I’m sorry, hurts too much, can’t control my legs, Finn –”

Fuck.

“Tihhe,” Finn says, trying to spare a portion of his power to direct to Statura. “Tihhe, you’ve seen what he is, you were in the Resistance, get that blaster out, get rid of him, kill him.”

That’s how it’s going to end, Finn dares to hope. Like in these stories they tell on the Republic side, those about Palpatine’s end. The father seeing the Light and coming to save the son. It has to work, Myrtas underestimates Statura, his grip on his mind isn’t that strong, I made him move earlier, it must work –

Statura moans.

“Would be so, I don’t know, so symmetrical, wouldn’t it?” Myrtas asks. “Like a retelling of Vader’s downfall. Don’t you think I know Statura’s mind perfectly by now? Could do that in my sleep.”

He snaps his fingers and Statura, who had begun to rise, collapses on the table, unconscious.

Myrtas laughs, pushes harder against Finn’s burning hands. “And you wasted your power on him. I don’t think you can hold that much longer.”

“Poe,” Finn says. “I’m so sorry. I love you.”

He knows he’s going to break, wonders if he can leap and throw himself between Poe and the
lightsaber, if he can force Myrtas to give them both a quick death. Rey! He remembers to call, too late, much too late.

But there’s a kind of clanging, metallic sound, and a ball of fury rushes towards Myrtas, whistling the highest, most painful shriek Finn ever heard BB-8 utter. His dome is dangling on his side, clearly damaged, but his speed is incredible as he connects with the Knight’s shins. Myrtas curses and falls.

Of course, Finn thinks. Droids aren’t in the Force flow. He couldn’t feel him come. Finn has to adjust his Force grip on Myrtas’s saber but he holds on, looking away from hands that feel like they’re charred and melting, his strength renewed by hope. He sees BB-8’s taser at the Knight’s throat, and the discharge the droid releases is stronger than anything Finn witnessed, making Myrtas jerk and twitch and gasp, until his uncoordinated movements become only reflexes, until they stop completely. And even then, BB-8 keeps shocking him for the longest time, until Finn, realising he doesn’t have to push against the lightsaber anymore, tells him to stop.

All around them, there are people groaning and shifting, sitting up, cursing.


“You saw?” Finn asks.

“I did. He froze me, but I had my mind to myself. Damn,” she adds, looking down to BB-8’s extension still at Myrtas’s throat. “Thank the Force for droids.”

“In a way,” Finn chuckles. “Although we should probably thank Poe more than the Force for this particular one. Yeah, thank whoever invented them for droids and thank the Force for organics who underestimate them.”

BB-8’s dome wobbles and cranks up a few inches, still askew. His eye whizzes and focuses on Finn. Some slow, deliberate beeps come out.

“Sorry,” Finn says. “Still hopeless with binary.”

Poe grunts and raises up on one elbow. “He’s saying, very slowly and clearly I must add, that there was a charging station behind the shelves on the wall. That he waited until the loading was complete and released it all through the taser. BB, buddy, what’s the damage? Only in the transmission?” He tries to sit up, moans, curses and lies back down. “Fuck. Fuck that Sith. Damn.”

BB-8 whistles, low and concerned. Finn rushes to Poe’s side.

“Can you move?” he asks. “Poe, how’s your head? You’re alright?”

“I’m okay. Yeah, I can move. It’s just, ah, fuck, guys, too much noise. Please, headache, I –”

“Alright, Dameron,” Pava whispers, standing up. “We’re used to it by now. Shall I lower the light?”

“Yeah. Thanks. Fuck, Finn. Your hands!”

Finn looks down. They’re not charred. But they’re beyond blistered, raw and oozing. Now that he’s paying attention, they hurt.

“How did you do that?” Poe asks. “You didn’t even approach him.”

“I don’t really know. It’s something with the Force. When I was trying to prevent him from lowering that saber. Speaking of which.”
He walks to the crumpled form of Myrtas on the floor and bends to switch off the lightsaber.

“And how do you think you’re going to do it with your hands like that?” Pava asks. “Shit, look at that hole it dug through the floor. How do you shut off these things?”

“Well, there’s a switch. Yeah, here. Is Myrtas still alive?”

“Wait. No, I don’t - ah, fuck. I’ve got a pulse. Yeah, he is. What do we do? Finn, he’s gonna wake up, no way restraints could stop him, fuck.”


There’s some noise coming from Statura’s side of the room. Phasma turns and aims in one fluid movement.

“There’s a first aid station with the guards outside,” Statura says. “I can go and ask them for the necessary material.”

“Then I’m going with you,” Phasma says. “I don’t want you to escape, Director. And I’m wondering what we’re going to find on the other side. Iiik’nirk escaped but nobody came to our aid. There might have been fights. Is that alright with you, Finn?”

For an instant, Finn wonders why she’s deferring to him. Then he remembers and nods. And then he notices that for the first time, she called him by his name. Exhaustion is making his thoughts slow and his head light.

“You’re swaying,” Poe says. “Sit down.”

He does, as Poe pushes himself up and manages to stay that way, sitting propped against Finn’s shoulder. They’re both panting.

“Fuck,” Poe says.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t realise you reached the Skywalker level of Force sensitivity. Say, are you using the Force right now? Cause my head should hurt more, I feel. Last time I puked for hours.”

“Uh. Dunno. Trying to make things hurt less, hands, head, yeah. Maybe with the Force.”

“The headache you’re feeling is mine, I think. Thanks for the help. Stop, if it’s tiring you too much.”

“Nah. Sitting down, I’m okay.”

“Fuck. I can’t believe what just happened. You’re really good.”

“Am I? I meant it when I said the Force scares me. Don’t wanna become a Knight, Poe. Not even a Jedi.”

“The General is neither. She’s still strong, like you. And I heard her say once, what was it, that we all use the Force, because the Force is life itself. That, uh, that the difference is how aware we are of it, and what we can do with it. I think you’ll need to talk to her. Wow. Can’t believe it. You’ve bested a Knight.”

“Who was one of the Republic’s heads of State. Can you believe that?”
Poe bends his head down and massages his temples. “Yeah. Unfortunately, I can believe that. Explains why we didn’t notice any Knight aggressions within the borders. They were already settled in, uh.”

“That’s scary.”

“Fuck yeah. Thank the Force for ex-Stormtroopers with superior brains and incredible Force sensitivity.”

“You know that’s BB-8 who got him.”

“I don’t think he could have even approached him if it weren’t for you.” Poe smiles, although he’s still slightly green. “My hero.”

“Sure,” Finn says. “You’re mine, too. Seriously. If it weren’t for you, maybe BB-8 would have needed to shock two darksiders. I’d kiss you if I wasn’t so sure your mouth must taste gross.”

“Yeah. Don’t try it. I wouldn’t kiss me myself. Hey, you alright, Finn?”

Finn thinks he might have fallen asleep, for a blink. Or lost consciousness. But he’s right back and since they’re still in the same position it can’t have lasted more than a few seconds.

“Going into shock?”

“No, don’t think so. Just very tired. And my hands fucking hurt.”

“Good timing, Phasma and Statura are back. I’m sure we can find something for your hands.”

“And for your head. Phasma, how is it going outside?”

“I didn’t explore very far, but we didn’t see anybody. There were scorch marks on the ground, though. Marks of fighting. But I wouldn’t worry too much. With the Resistance’s reinforcements, we outnumber them three to one and we’re more experienced.”

“You found the tranquilisers?”

“Yes. And some more medical supplies. I’m going to give the Knight what he needs right now. You can dig for bandages and bacta gel and there should be something for Dameron’s headache, too.”

Phasma rummages in the large bag she brought with her and retrieves a syringe, then pumps in a pale yellow liquid.

“Is that the regular concentration?” Finn asks.

“It is.”

“Then you’re giving him thrice the usual dose.”

“I am. It shouldn’t be lethal and that’s the protocol. And if you feel sorry for him, just remember that it’s more or less what they did to Blade.”

“Go ahead. Sorry or not, I couldn’t face him again if he woke up.”

“I could kill him instead.”

It’s tempting. What do you do with a Force-sensitive prisoner anyway? Drug them forever?
“No. Dose him.”

“What are you going to do?” Statura asks. “You said you wanted to avoid chaos, Finn. Well, you got it. Fighting in Akhios’ capital, violence in the negotiation room, a Director tasered, drugged and restrained. From the outside, it looks a lot like a coup. Is that what you wanted?”

“No,” Finn says. “Director Statura, I’m here to negotiate, and I will. Now.”

Statura is wobbling on his chair, his skin so pale and sick-looking it’s gone beyond grey to green. By all accounts he shouldn’t be able to appear so genuinely caring and surprised, nor to use his voice with such strength and conviction. “By the stars, Finn! You don’t even know what your hand is. The Republic forces could still win!”

“Don’t count on it,” Phasma says.

“I don’t think he does,” Finn says. “He just knows how to make one’s hand look good.”

“You’ll negotiate with him?” Poe asks. “You heard what Myrtas had to say about him.”

“He’s all we have. And I don’t want chaos.”

“For fuck’s sake, he let a Knight in!”

“I don’t think he knew. And, Poe, he never betrayed Rey.”

“Rey wasn’t a Republic matter,” Statura says. “And whatever you think, I’m a man of honour.”


Finn nods. He probably should stand and begin the negotiations, since he called for them, but the effort he needs to produce to repress the enormous yawn that wants out takes all of his remaining strength.

“Let’s call a recess first,” Jess Pava chimes in, so fresh you wouldn’t think she was down only a few minutes ago. “Finn, you’re so knackered you can’t keep your head upright, and you need your hands cared for. And Poe isn’t the only one with a headache. Let’s say one hour?”

“Huh. Um. Yeah.” Not that coherent, and undignified for the vanquisher of a trained Force user, but Finn couldn’t care less. “Good. Is there anything to eat, you think?”

“There was,” Statura says. “A little, not enough for everyone. It was supposed to annoy you. Back when I still thought we were between civilised people.”

“The guards must have kept more,” Finn says. “If they’re like every other guard in the universe.”

“I’m going back out,” Phasma says. “Eeriit’t, you didn’t seem too affected by Myrtas’s hold, come with me. Everyone else who can stand, blaster out and keep both eyes on the door.”

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Finn lets go. He hears the knocks and shuffling feet of those taking position and the hushed buzz of conversations around him, feels someone handle his hands gently, coat them with goo and wrap them in gauze. It hurts, but it’s unimportant, and he feels good. Above him – he’s lying down, his head on Poe’s lap, when did that happen? – Poe’s saying something to someone else, giving thanks, possibly, then turning back to Finn, not to say anything but to trail a hand through his forehead, the side of his face, his lips, and then to rake his fingers through his hair.
“Mmmh,” Finn manages to get out. “Feels good. Don’t stop.”


After a while Finn feels Poe shift and lie back a little. He opens his eyes long enough to see that someone pilfered some cushions and arranged them in a pile on which Poe is now reclining. BB-8 is nested against him, his dome still sideways, whirring softly, Poe’s left arm over the ball of his body. Further away, standing up, Pava is cooing and taking holos.

“You sell them to any kind of news source,” Poe tells her, “You’re on fuelling duty for the next decade.”

“Why? There’s nothing shameful about this. A holo of the three heroes who saved the Republic? Every news outlet’s going to want one. And besides, you three are fucking cute.”

Poe grumbles a little, but Finn can feel his heart isn’t in it.

“Old habits die hard, uh?” Pava says, more softly. “Everyone knows you got married, boss. Gotta own it.”

“But that’s a private moment,” Finn says.

“Oh,” Pava says, crestfallen. “Alright then.” Then she seems to rally. “The squadrons are still gonna see them, I’m on a mission. And we’re family.”

Poe clears his voice. He feels better, Finn can tell. The tremors in the hand that’s still lying on the top of Finn’s head haven’t completely abated, but the background of headache has become just this, a background that can be set aside.

“Do you want to eat something, Finn?” Poe asks. “There are, uh, I’m afraid there are mostly rations. And some fruit cubes from the Directors’ stash but not many. Or you can rest some more, if you’d rather. We’ve still got, uh, twenty minutes. Statura’s gone with a squad of ours to see if he could establish some contact. He promised he’d be back at the appointed hour.”

“A ration bar,” Finn says. “Dunno if I could keep down anything else right now.”

He eats, then sleeps again. Poe probably sleeps, too, as it’s not him who wakes Finn up with a hand on his shoulder but Statura, looking smaller, older, and tired.

“Finn,” he says. “If you feel up to it, it’s time. I mean, if you still want to negotiate. But I can wait longer, if you need more rest.”

Finn makes himself sit straight. Back then in the First Order he’s done it in worse shape, and it’s not that hard right now to feel alert enough, even with his burned hands throbbing under the bandages. Beside him, Poe is indeed sleeping, slumped into a twisted position on the cushions, his arm still around BB-8.

“Let’s move to the table,” Finn says. “I don’t think we’re gonna wake him up.”

“He looks, ah, he looks sort of uncomfortably cosy,” Statura says with a strange, wistful expression on his face.

“How can you –” Finn begins, “how do you think you still can say anything, uh, anything like that about him? Like you care? After all that happened?”
“I’m not responsible for the attempted murder,” Statura says, wincing.

“But you still were his political enemy. And Force dammit, you made him pay.”

“I did. I still like him, whether I’m allowed or not. I like you both. Poe Dameron is a very charismatic, very idealistic man. And you – you know how I feel about you.”

Finn pulls a chair and sits down. “Don’t hope it’s gonna change anything about the negotiations,” he says.

“Of course.”

“So, what’s the situation outside? An assessment, Phasma?”

“Statura managed to use his personal codes to establish a comm contact. Dunno what he told his troops, but anyway they’re cornered and surrendering. And there are more Resistance ships incoming. The Falcon, for one, and a K-naann Starfighter squadron.”

“That’s good news for everyone,” Finn says, his heart jumping with joy at the idea of Rey coming back. “Trained Force users, finally. I hope they’ve got an idea of what to do with Myrtas.”

“I don’t have any leverage left,” Statura says, clearing his throat. “Truly, Finn, you can talk of negotiations all you want, but what you’re really doing is prolonging the pain of me having to wait to hear the terms you dictate. All I can do is beg you not to forget the safety of our citizens. And the right of the shareholders on the factories you stole.”

“I want the citizens to be exactly as safe as any inhabitant of any world the Republic controls,” Finn answers. “Believe me. That’s why what we’re having are real negotiations, and I’m hoping for your complete and sincere agreement when they end. We can’t leave the Republic torn apart. As for the factories, they’ll keep functioning as we set them to function. If the shareholders want to come in to explain to the workers representatives how they’re going to take into account their rights and their safety, and what their ideas are on fair trade and a just retribution of any kind of work, they’ll be heard.”

“And you say you don’t want the Republic torn apart.”

“How many shareholders are there, Tihhe? Against how many workers, refugees, citizens whose right are to be taken into account as well?”

“So. Are you going to replace me on the spot? Aiming for the Director position, Finn? What are your conditions?”

“I don’t want that kind of power. I don’t want the leadership of the Republic. But I’ll take it if needed.”

“Pshaw. They all say that.”

“I want elections.”


“Yes.”

Statura looks incredulously at Finn and laughs. “Sorry. Can’t help it. You’re – I’m sorry, Finn, but that’s ridiculous! Elections? And what makes you think you’d win them?”
“My conditions. Although I’m not sure we’d win them.”

“You can’t impose conditions on a democratic election, Finn. I’m – I shouldn’t tell you that, because that’s not in my interest, but really. Do you realise the kind of handicap you’re starting with? The citizens are afraid. They’ve been starved, had to move to the worst parts of the worst planets for their basic needs, and are scared for their positions, their families and their status. And you’d probably listen to Dameron’s elucubrations about the borders, too, you’d open them, get even more immigrants of all kinds to swarm us, which would cost you even more votes. Not even taking into account that I’m much, much more experienced than you, Finn, I’d win in a landslide!”

“I’m still the one who just got us rid of a Knight of Ren that had happened to steal the leadership of the Republic. And you associated with him.”

“As for that, I’m as much a victim as you are, Finn.”

“A victim, uh? Were you conscious and aware when Myrtas talked of you and said you did most of it on your own free will? Because I’m sure I can get BB-8’s recording, holo, sound and all.”

“Ah, but holos can be doctored. And you’ve worked for three years for a team whose job it is, Finn. Easy to spin, easy. What is it? You think you can bank on your popularity with Drion people? You might restore some of it, but never enough, son, never enough. Right now they mostly fear you.”

“What I want, Director, is an election in which everyone who worked in the Republic worlds, or even lived in for more than a year, gets a vote. Regardless of origin, status or conditions of arrival.”


“Why?”

“Too many people. Unused to our democratic traditions, culturally behind, scattered everywhere, unrecorded. Enormous fraud risks.”

“Yeah, we’re many, many people. Something like seventy percent of the whole Republic population, according to our estimates.”

“Seventy? That much?”

“Sure. Lots of them native people from unimportant Republic worlds who never could register as citizens, like, you know, on Gha’um, that planet you and your friends wanted to blast away. But a lot also came here because the chaos the First Order created destroyed the economy of their worlds. Or just plain destroyed their worlds. You wouldn’t believe how welcome the refugees were where cheap workers were needed. Especially when they were illegal.”

“Still, I don’t see how you could register them with some semblance of safety.”

“You like that word, uh? You know what, in the last months, we’ve set up a system that works with them. They’ve maintained the Republic’s productions to their previous levels in quality and quantity, at the least. They’ve organised themselves, for food supply, health, education. Even defence. They’re perfectly able to register for an election. Even to run for office, because you know, Tihhe, being a refugee isn’t synonymous with being dumb or illiterate. Look at Phasma.”

“I’m not running for office,” Phasma says. “I’m too scary.”

“You don’t say,” Statura retorts.
“But I think Taq’kiiirt should. They’re a great administrator, as the recent years have proven, and respected by most even outside their own species. Besides, there are many Wiirk’ts communities scattered through the Republic, which might help secure them a place at the Senate.”


“I’m trying to change it. To something that might become a real democracy. Not a, how could I say, a humanocracy? I’m going to do it, Statura. With or without your blessing. But for the safety of all, as you so like to say, it would be better if we agreed. And I’m even prepared to leave you at your place until the election, provided that you limit yourself to day to day matters and listen to the representatives of the Republic’s main communities.”

Statura has been looking down at his hands on the table for a while, but now he raises his head and gazes straight into Finn’s eyes. “You’ve just annihilated a Knight of Ren,” he says. “And now you’re showing that you can hold your own against a seasoned politician. It’s a damn good thing that you grew a conscience somewhere along the way. Because else, you’d be unstoppable and even more dangerous. I’m going to agree with your conditions, if only because that way I can run against you. I still hope I can win, and I think the Republic really needs it.”

“That’s democracy at work, as I understand,” Finn says, unsure that he really got the last words out, because he’s at once flooded by an immense relief and an immense exhaustion. He wants to yell that he’s done it, to hug everyone, to laugh and cry, but even a whisper feels like too much effort. He tries to stand but his head is reeling and he has to brace himself on the table.

Statura is at his side. “You need rest,” he says, taking his arm and sitting him back down. “You look beyond exhausted. Go find a real medic who can take a good look at these hands and then sleep, son.”

“I’m not your son,” Finn hears himself say from very far away.

“Leave him be,” he hears in what sounds like Poe’s voice, floating around what remains of his consciousness. He feels an arm around his shoulders, Poe’s smell, acrid with sweat, lips on his neck, briefly.

He tries to focus. “Come,” Poe says into his ear. “Let’s stagger to the door together. I’ll support you, or, huh, we can support each other. Our friends are outside and I’m sure we can ask them for stretchers.”

There’s a pause during which Finn gets hauled up, and for a while it feels very precarious. Then he gets his vertigo under control and begins to walk along with Poe, one step after the other.

“Rey’s here,” Poe says. “She said, huh, at first she cursed for a very long time, I wasn’t aware that she had such a repertoire, but then she said she wants to monitor the both of us for a few hours at least. Anyway we’re allowed to sleep.”

“You were awake?” Finn asks. “Did you hear the exchange with Statura?”

“I went outside when I woke up but I heard the last bit. Elections, huh? That’s the most peaceful, possibly the most successful revolution I ever heard of. You’re – you’re amazing, Finn. It’s just perfect!”

Finn sighs and lets his head fall down on Poe’s shoulder, lets Poe lead him away. He hears the clunking of a damaged BB-8 following them along, his soft whistles, and can make out the outlines of a group of people, among them Rey’s slender-strong frame. All his friends are here, and he’s done
it, and he’s done *good*, and now he can rest.

Chapter End Notes

I'm deeply unable to come with anything original concerning the Force. So I hope this will do!

Aw, we're nearly done. The next chapter will be the last, and I promise that I'll leave Finn and Poe to their wedded bliss. More or less.

Thank you for still being here! <3!
“Hey,” Finn says. “Stop! The new skin is horribly ticklish.”

“But –” a nip – “your fingers are still coated in pastry sugar –” another nip, a kiss at the joint between finger and palm – “and with the khan-nut they taste fucking good –” nip. And a lick on Finn’s too-sensitive palm. And another nip.

“Poe!”

Poe looks up and grins. “Yeah, I know your hands are incredibly ticklish, and my plan is to enjoy it while it lasts. Because it’s been great for these last four months, but now that you’ve thrown yourself back into working out, lemme tell you I still don’t know how you do it, won’t be long before your palms are just as calloused and tough as in the old days. Hey! Ouch, ah, stop, what’s that?”

“Retaliation.”

“Ow! Stop! Ahh. You know, my nipple’s not ticklish.”

“Not quite ticklish.”

“Ahh. Mmmh. Finn, Finn, stop that. You can fondle my cock all you want, I’m spent. Can’t get it up right now. We’ve had, what, three rounds this evening?”

“Hasn’t stopped you before,” Finn says, but he lets it hang like a question and takes a good look at Poe’s sprawled form on the bed.

That’s the thing. Finn is in charge and could take Poe’s ass, no need even for much preparation in the state he is, and soft cock or not the part of Poe who enjoys when Finn takes control, who enjoys being used, would react and let all out, even beg for more. But Poe, in lovemaking as elsewhere, is reckless enough to give it all without any thoughts for the consequences, even without any real regard for what he truly wants. And in here, at least, it means that it’s Finn who’s allowed to assess and decide.

So, is that stop for real, or is it a challenge and an invitation for more?

Poe stirs and yawns, then utters a small, cosy sound, burrowing his head deeper in the pillows. Alright. No more fucking tonight. Finn’s jitters will have to find another outlet.

“You’re tired,” Finn says, and doesn’t miss the hint of disappointment on Poe’s face before he grins softly and pulls Finn into his arms.

“To tell you the truth,” Finn continues, “Could have fucked you again for a while, but I don’t really
Poe snorts and smiles. “Seems to me I wasn’t the only one. Am I wrong or do you want to jump me more often since Kes has left?”

“Heh. It was great, having your father here. I’ll never thank Kruit enough for his present. And mind you, I love our place at the compounds, the Wiirk’ts-built cells are a tremendous improvement on the ground barracks, but still. A mattress in the main room and paper-thin walls between us and the bedroom aren’t conductive of great fucking.”

“You – you, Finn, were afraid of Kes hearing us?”

“He’s your father. Weren’t you?”

“Who are you and what did you do with the shameless, body-flaunting Stormtrooper I married?”

“He’s been corrupted by this soft, shy, decadent Resistance pilot I married.”

“Ha. Shy. Come here and kiss me, you fallen man.”

That’s another of the things Finn loves, these kisses that go nowhere. There’s still his own taste in Poe’s mouth, mingled with the khan-nuts pastries they snacked on, Poe’s stubble rasps deliciously on his already flushed skin, and he can feel his smile against his own lips. Then Poe’s smile morphs into a barely-concealed yawn.

“Force, you are really tired,” Finn says. “The lessons with the K-naann?”

“Yeah. Especially today, ’cause I had to schedule it on top of a physical therapy session. I don’t get headaches anymore after working with the Force but it still makes me feel like I was turned inside out. Hey, Finn, that’s alright! At least, ah, well, I’ll never hold my own against the likes of Kylo Ren but now I can meet a trained Force user without becoming a useless wreck.”

And the need for you to deal with the scars from the Finalizer means that I had you here the whole time, over four months at the compound, Finn thinks. Thank the Force for Leia Organa and her way to order you out of your ship. The thought doesn’t come without a small pang of guilt, because between the campaigning and the registration work Finn spent a lot of that time away himself. But it’s done. And this, in turn, brings the jitters back.

“And you,” Poe says. “You found the time to talk with Leia?”

Fuck.

“I talked with her, yeah.”

“And?”

“And I talked with her, that’s all. Told you, I don’t want to train. The idea that I could influence people with the Force, in the position I am –” Finn shivers.

“And Leia had nothing to say about that?”

Finn sighs. “Yeah, okay. She said I’m already using the Force, especially in the position I am. That it makes me real good at understanding people. Empathy, she said. That’s how the Force works best in me.”

“They say it’s the same for her. You’ll work with her, will you?”
“When I can, Poe. When I can.”

He knows he’s shivering again, not from any kind of fear – he doesn’t think? Nothing about the Force anyway – but from these fucking jitters, so it’s no surprise when Poe grunts a little, sitting up, and settles with his legs on each side of Finn, embracing him from behind, holding him close. His chest is quite sticky, no surprise there.

“It’s alright,” Poe says. “I’m not in a position where I can blame you for waiting.”

Finn lets himself be soothed by the rhythm of Poe’s breathing, his ribcage rising and falling against Finn’s back, his breath warm and wet on Finn’s ear. Or he tries to.

“Jitters, eh?” Poe asks. “Want us to talk about it?”

“You’re tired. We’d better sleep.”

“And then it’s gonna build up and you won’t sleep and I’ll find you tomorrow morning passed out on the kitchen table, covered in flour. You don’t want this, not tomorrow.”

Finn doesn’t want to talk about it. He wants to absolutely ignore it for the few hours they still have together, he needs his pretend normalcy, the anonymity of this cell like thousands of similar others in the equatorial compound. But Poe’s right. He won’t be able to avoid it, and it’s better to confront it with Poe than alone.

“Okay. There’s not much to talk about, though. All’s done.”

“Yeah. All the votes have been sent and most must have been counted by now. No major incident. We’ll have the definitive results in the morning, as scheduled.”

“Poe, what if Statura wins?”

Finn feels Poe’s sigh as a long, wet breath on his neck and can nearly hear the again he doesn’t quite voice.

“Do the maths. He can’t.”

“Not if we add up the communities’ votes, I know. But Poe, that’s the thing. He’s been very good during the campaign, and I know a lot of refugees who want just what he dangles in front of them, a small place for themselves, a promise that they’ll be just like the citizens in no time, just as rich, with exactly the same kind of possessions, an apartment, a speeder, a stack of holoprojectors in each room, and to hell with those who can’t fit.”

“Rannel’s not that good. He doesn’t understand the non-humans, not really. When he spins something it always reeks of Central. And most of the communities still remember the situation we’re in, and what they want is to build a better world, everyone together. And that’s your promise, Finn. Some refugees might not hear you, but that’s balanced with all the citizens you convinced.”

“That’s not Rannel who’s good. Statura is. Hell, I believed him for the longest time.”

“That’s why all the polls give you taking the Senate with a ten points margin, not with a forty-five points one. Come on, you know this better than I do. Finn, what’s bothering you is what happens if you win, uh? What comes after?”

“Yeah,” Finn hears himself say, small and damn fucking scared. “They’ll give me the directorate, huh. No way to avoid it?”
Finn hates the way his voice rises in the end like a question, like he begs Poe for a way to opt out. Dammit, he campaigned, hard, with all he had, for exactly that result, and what he’s going to get tomorrow is what he wants. Or is it?

“But you all are going to change the constitution, aren’t you?” Poe says. “Less power to the executive, more to the Senate?”

“Sure, that’s the proposition we’re gonna support in the debates anyway. Still, no way I can get rid of the leadership, not so soon. Poe, I’m twenty-seven and human. There are so many people more qualified than me!”

“It’s not the qualification, it’s what you can do with it. You’re the one we all need, Finn. Human or not.”

“Even if all our representatives were elected, the Senate would still be skewed towards Humans, you know?”

“Gonna change with time. Let the other species settle a bit more.”

“You know what the Rriiv’kat say, sometimes?”

“About Humans?”

“Yeah. They say we’re the scariest sentient species around. That we can take out entire planets and nobody even understands why. That there are great people among us, dreamers, builders, community organisers, selfless heroes, but that it’s impossible to differentiate them from psychopaths, not until it’s too late. That normal people can think they’ve done it, understood all there’s to understand in the big words we use, found them good or even great, and then some Human comes and turns them upside down and uses them to commit a genocide. And that then we find one of their last surviving youths, coo at them, find them Cute and Tragic, in uppercase, and raise them as our own.”

“Fuck. And they still root for you?”

“They say they need to believe they’ve figured me out. They say they genuinely like me and that I mustn’t prove them wrong. Still, they’re mostly right about the bigger picture, don’t you think?”

“Never saw it like that before, but yeah. Chilling, uh?”

“The Empire was ruled by a Human. The First Order is all about Humans. The Republic will be peaceful the day Humans step back. Fuck, Poe, I’m gonna make a mistake! For all I’m talking, I was raised in the First Order, and I don’t know other species that well. Hell, I’m not even thirty! There are so many things I don’t know.”

“I hate to tell you that, but we all make mistakes. Let’s hope ours won’t be too catastrophic, uh? Finn, we’re all too young in that war. Rey’s taking over Skywalker and she’s younger than you, and I know that I must look ancient from your perspective, but when I go back to the Resistance it’s to take control of the fleet. And I’m still in my thirties.”

Finn feels cold inside. He knew that, of course, there were enough hints and demonstrations of power on Poe’s side. But it was never said, not explicitly. That sweet little parenthesis in their lives is going to end, and not only because Finn is doomed to go back to Central. Poe will leave as well, for a war that always changes but doesn’t seem to end, the First Order less of a threat but the Knights a more diffuse, scarier, all-encompassing one.

“And Ackbar?” he can’t help asking nonetheless.
“Leia needs him as a permanent advisor. And he’s old.”

“Admiral Dameron, huh.”

“Never. Acting Admiral if they insist, but the day they plague me with that rank is the day they bar me from climbing into a Starfighter cockpit, and that’s not going to happen. I’ll lead the fleet all they want, but from the point. And besides that’s the kind of war we’re facing right now, a Starfighter war. No big battles.”

“You’re gonna leave, huh.”

“I’d have told you tomorrow, with the results in and you a little more, uh, settled. I’m sorry. Shouldn’t have let it out now.”

“The Force lessons are done?”

“As much as they ever could. I should have gone earlier, in all honesty, but I didn’t want to leave you alone right now. I can extend my stay here for one week, two at most if nothing major emerges. I’m sorry.”

“You should have told me earlier. Not later. When are you going to understand, Poe?”

“Ah, fuck. I’m sorry, Finn. I’m so–”

“Yeah. I know you’re sorry. You always are.”

“Shit, I –”

Poe is looking genuinely, spectacularly contrite, and Finn isn’t in the mood to start a fight. Especially not on the subject of them being, ineluctably, through no fault of their own, pried apart again.

“Come back.”

“You know I – ah, fuck.”

Poe’s voice is strangled and very hoarse. Finn feels Poe’s forehead settle on his shoulder, his nose digging into the ridge of his shoulderblade and his mouth warm underneath. After a while he feels wetness at the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Poe repeats. After a while he takes in a big breath, sighs and says: “the fleet headquarters should go back to Akhios, in time. And I’m not just saying that because I want to be near you. Strategically, it’s less a heresy than it was when we were mostly fighting the First Order. The Knights are more widespread and there’s no place that’s completely immune. Better be at the centre to dispatch the squadrons.”

“Will the Resistance merge in with the Republic?”

“As I see it, the military forces should make allegiance, at least. It made sense to keep apart as long as we didn’t trust the Republic, but we’d be fools not to trust you now. Another reason to go back to Akhios. The most important, in my opinion.”

“As long as the forces themselves are scattered enough not to make too obvious a target.”

“I love you, Finn. You’re cleverer than most our generals. Yeah. We want to remain as shapeless as we can. And we’ll work with Rey and the K-naann a lot. I don’t want a traditional military force, that’s not what we need anymore.”
“Love you too, and dunno if I’m that clever. You’ve obviously come up to the same conclusions by
yourselves, and me – fuck, I really don’t know where I’m going. I – I keep thinking of Stan and the
Lieutenant, and I know I promised there’d be no retaliation against the PSR, but fuck, sometimes I
feel the bloodbath would be worth it.”

“Yeah, and then there’d need to be a trial against the Stormtroopers who burned down the factory,
and we’d have everyone hating everyone and civil war again. I hate it too, and fuck, it’s good that I
won’t be too close to the PSR ex-security or I might go for a personal revenge, but I think you were
right to promise a reconciliation. Best thing for the Republic right now, especially since nobody can
tell exactly what part happened because of Myrtas’ control on others.”

“The Republic, yeah. But what’s the Republic gonna be, Poe? Do we even need a Republic? Look
at all the good it did, huh, not.”

“Honey, it’s late, you are that clever but right now you’re not making sense.”

“The participative system that was born in the compounds is the best democracy, Poe, and it’s not
Galaxy-wide. It’s just a lot of small communities agreeing to work together, all different, living on a
fuckload of deeply different planets. Why the Republic?”

“Finn. Finn, when you’re getting like that you can’t sleep for hours afterwards. Fuck. I’ll just go and
make us some kind of tea, huh? Since we’re not getting much sleep tonight. Lrool’s homegrown is
kind of soothing and doesn’t taste like old socks, and I’m not adding to the jitters with caf, however
much we both yearn for some.”

Finn nods, most of his mind caught into trying to see, fuck, if he could only see what made that
collection of communities work together, and how it would, could, should? Translate into one single
Republic. Isn’t that what leaders should do? Understand what they are about? Because if they don’t,
who does?

When Poe comes back with two steaming mugs he’s still deep in his own thoughts. “I get that we’re
all unified by a common set of rules – ow, fuck, it’s hot! Could warn a man, fuck –”

“I tried,” Poe mumbles.

“So, a common set of rules, and of course the Republic embodies that. But if it was only that it’d be
no more than a symbol, no need for a Senate, we’d just need a meeting place to brainstorm together,
huh, that’s what the Senate is in the first place, uh? I’m dumb, Poe.”

“You’re not.”

“Provided the representative don’t only care for their electors only in election time, of course. Means
there should be more room at the Senate for simple citizens having a proposition to make. More links
between the individuals, the communities and the representatives.”

“Are you going to write the new constitution tonight, love?”

“Ah, fuck. Easy in theory, fucking complicated in practice, ain’t it? Still, a goal we can aim for. And
the Republic itself, Poe, why is the Republic considered as a territory, with a border and all?”

“You tell me.”

“Stop sniggering. I can’t sleep, at least I’m allowed to ramble. Seriously, why a border? We’re united
by common beliefs and rules, not by geographical closeness. Borders are a heresy, what with
hyperspace travel and so many routes. Take Yavin, for example, why wouldn’t Yavin be a part of
the Republic when it’s populated with so many great people?”

“Thanks.”

Poe settled back beside Finn on the bed, plastering himself against his side and leg, and Finn can feel the jerking, silent laughter that shakes him.

“Poe,” Finn says, overdoing the whine a little, “you’re laughing. What I’m saying isn’t that ridiculous, is it?”

Poe’s arms pull Finn even closer against his chest, and his voice is more than a little tender when he answers: “of course it isn’t. Makes lot of sense. It’s just that – you’re making fun of me when I get caught in droid programming algorithms, why shouldn’t I laugh when you go on such a spectacular tangent as that? I should take notes, they’ll be handy when you get written into the history treaties, probably by your thirty-fifth birthday, at the latest.”

“But borders –”

“Borders make no sense in a three dimensional, hyperspace connected Galaxy, I completely agree.”

“Why do we have them, then?”

“We don’t have to. Get rid of them. We’ve seen how effective they are against Knights anyway.”

“Can you secure the routes instead? I mean, the goal isn’t to close them when we’re threatened, it’s not only the worlds we should protect, it’s the connexions. Poe, hear that, that’s what the Republic is, a set of common beliefs and rules, sure, but most of all an agreement to stay connected, and the means to do so. For everyone. There’s no inside and outside, what we are is a set of worlds that the routes bring together – oh, fuck.”

“Fuck?”

“That’s what you’ve been advocating all along, haven’t you? Open the borders, keep the connexions open, protect them. That’s what you said, as far back as during the Rriv war.”

“Huh. I sort of said it, yeah. Always hated that border. But – but to make it into a definition of the Republic – I love it, Finn. Anyone who flies would love it. Shit, everyone can love this. It’s beautiful.”

“Is it viable? So many lines, can you defend them all?”

“It’s always been the most rewarding strategy anyway. You gotta find the nodes, there aren’t so many of them. Finn, it’s doable, I want to believe it can work with a menace as diffuse as the Knights, because I hated what the border did to us. And closing on ourselves means dying in the long term. But it’s not a guarantee we’ll win.”

“And you’ll be at the point. Fuck. Don’t fleet admirals, even acting admirals, have to lead from sheltered positions usually?”

“See what I meant when I said it’s hard to let a loved one walk into danger?”

“Fuck yeah. I – you – you just – just remember I’ll be waiting for you, okay?”

“Dammit, when that’s all done, when we’ve won, I’ll leave the fleet. At once. I know they all think, well, hope I’ll die of old age in my X-Wing, but fuck, what I love is flying. Not killing people. And I
won’t be kept apart from you any longer than necessary. I can always find a job with Kruit, or work as an instructor, dunno, do test flights –”

“No test flights.”

“You can keep to fairly secure ships, even during tests, promise.”

“Uh. You know, Poe, I never wanted to become a director. Or any other honorific they’ll come with for the head of State.”

“I know.”

“When I set to help the refugees and the Stormtroopers it’s because you told me to set them free. I – I sort of hoped that if I managed it, then I could come back to the Resistance. To you.”

“Yeah. Kind of backfired, didn’t it?”

“Did it ever.” Finn takes a sip of tea, grimaces. “Damn, it’s gone cold!”

“These things happen.”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay, give me that mug, I’ll warm it up.”

“My turn. Want another one?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

Finn pads to the small kitchen area, taking in the curving walls of consolidated mud, the large oven they’ve been sharing with two other families, the droid parts slowly but ineluctably invading his baking domain. They’ve shared this place for such a short time and no other has felt as much like home.

“I wish we could stay here, the both of us,” he says when he comes back with his, damn, his overheated mug. Ouch.

“If only,” Poe sighs.

“Ah, the neighbours need it more anyway, what with their cousin-sons coming in next month.”

“For the sake of honesty, I’ll admit I won’t be sorry to go back to a water ‘fresher.”

“Yeah. But the rest –”

“Yeah.”

“Poe, I’m like you.”

“Huh?”

“I won’t do it all my life. The, huh, the head of state thing. I don’t want to become another Statura.”

“He wasn’t like that, back in the Resistance.”

“My point exactly. I may be good at helping changes happen, but I don’t want to settle in that kind of life. Don’t wanna begin to care more for the political game than for the reason I’m playing it for. It’s
not my place anyway, there needs to be non-humans at the helm, and soon. And then I can step down and just be myself. Dunno, become a cook or a baker, or make you happy and tackle medical studies?"

“Pass me a little of your tea.”

“Uh?”

“Your tea, I’d like a drop in my mug.”

“You’ll splash the bedsheets, have you seen the colour of that tea?”

“Gonna dry up anyway, don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

“Have, you, seen, the, colour?”

“I’ll be careful.”

“What do you want my tea for? You said you were done.”

“I want to toast.”

“Give me your mug, I’ll do it myself.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“No. For not staining the bedsheet, I don’t trust you.”

“Uh. Okay. Thanks.” Poe raises his sloshing mug, managing not to splash anything with the contents. “So. To the Republic and the Fleet, may they prosper. And to peace, and to our normal lives afterwards, together, may they last long and may we never tire of them.”

“Did you pour brandy into your tea?”

“Nope. If I sound wasted it’s only that I’m fucking tired.”

“Okay. To all of that. And especially to our life together.”

They clang their mugs together. A lonely drop escapes and lands on Poe’s pillow, and of course he kind of tries to wipe it off with a finger, spreading it into a wider stain. Some things never change.

Poe yawns. “Do you think you can sleep? You can fuck me if it helps.”

“I’ll pass on the fucking. I just want to hold you, I think.”

“Come in, then.”

The light is voice-activated, a luxury that still amazes Finn. Poe orders it off. Then he nestles into Finn’s arm, warm and compact and real, and it’s all Finn ever hoped for.

Still.

“You’ll always crave the adrenaline, though,” he says after a while. “And anything unfair will make your blood boil.”

“And you won’t be able to see people in need without finding a way to organise them,” Poe whispers.
“We’ll make it work,” Finn says.

Chapter End Notes

And I'm done!

Thank you so much for following me this far! It's been great sharing this story with you and talk about it in comments. And if it took you time to reach the end but still persevered, thank you! Even if it's days (weeks) later, let me know :)

I should maybe write some sentences here about the political parallels I tried to make, but heh. From what I read in the comments, you appear perfectly able to find your own, and that's great. I just hope that in our respective countries we'll manage to find ourselves some versions of Finn someday.

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