The Weeds in the Wilderness

by ealcynn

Summary

A man wakes on a cold and desolate moor. He knows he is hurt. He knows he is alone. What he doesn't know is what he is, or where he came from. He doesn't know even his own name. But there is something else that this man knows, and that is that if he doesn't get help soon, he is going to die. And on this strange new world, there are so many dangers.
Black, pulling, oozing, grasping mud. The earthy-rich smell of it; decay and water and roots. There was a scent of burning too. Was it chemicals? Smoke?

His face was damp and his head ached. Coldness and wetness seeped into his clothing like chilled fingers. He could hear trickling water, and beyond that, silence all around him; deep, full, endless silence. Somewhere far off, a bird called.

He was going to be sick.

The knowledge arrived about the same moment that his aching body convulsed, and his throat was suddenly full; on instinct he dragged his head to one side and the foulness poured out. He managed one desperate breath before his stomach twisted again, and he was left heaving and gasping in the dirt.

His eyes opened themselves, and took in a world in high contrast. Black earth, wet and fibrous, stretching up on either side. Dark water splashing over white rocks below. Above, tufts of grass and marshy plants of vivid green under a low grey sky. Cautiously he tried to lift his face out of the sticky mess it lay in, and even that little movement ushered in more pain. Breathing, he quickly discovered, was almost no good at all. Bracing himself, he pushed up with one arm and managed to roll on to his back. There he lay still for a long while, as a bird swooped and dived far off in the grey sky, and the fire in his body ebbed and flowed with it. When the flames of pain eventually died down to sullen embers, he was able, with some reluctance, to sit up. While he recovered, and the world span, he made an account of himself.

One: He was alive. A good start, all things considered.

Two: He was injured. The burning agony of cracked ribs was loudly proclaiming itself on his consciousness, so he counted that first. Moving to examine his ribs lead to a side observation of;

Three: He was wearing a loose long-sleeved tunic and trousers, possibly once in a pale colour although both of which were now caked with peaty muck and soaked through. His feet were bare, and also filthy. He had walked here.

Four: Oh, yes, his injuries. So his torso was bruised to deep purple all down the right hand side, with a worrying black area under his rib cage. He had hit something hard. Or something had hit him. There was a deep pain in his hip; a chipped bone perhaps.

Five: There was something embedded in his right thigh. He could see the end of it, a little shorter
than his palm, sticking out from his leg, channelling a little blood. Brushing it with his hand sent a	sickening vibration into what felt like the very bone itself and he almost threw up again. He stopped
touching it.

Six: Someone had partially dressed his wounds. The shard of whatever sticking out of his thigh was
showing between thick rolls of bandage tightly bound either side of the puncturing object.

Seven: There was something wrong with his neck and face on the right side. His shaking fingers
were somehow reluctant to investigate the agonising wound, but there didn’t seem to be much blood
on his tunic, so he tried to ignore it. But while he was on the subject of fingers, a couple of those
seemed to be broken as well, and his wrists were rubbed raw.

Eight: He was not armed, had no possessions. There was nothing in his pockets, and there was
nothing lying around or nearby.

Nine: His belly was empty with the kind of aching hunger that meant he had been hungry for a long
time.

Ten: He was very tired. His head hurt.

Eleven: He was cold.

Twelve: He didn't know who he was.

That last observation took him by surprise, and he cast all the others aside for a moment to examine it
further. It seemed to be true. He had no idea of who he was, where he was, how he had got to this
stinking marsh, or how he had been injured. Why he had been running.

He didn't know his own name.

A tendril of panic pulsed through him, but he crushed it after only a couple of moments. This was
because, as the panic had started, he had come to two further observations.

Thirteen: It was getting dark.

Fourteen: If he stayed here, he was going to die.

Neither quickly, but in the time he had been conscious and sitting here, the grey sky had noticeably
depooled in colour. There was a slight wind, bringing a chill with it across the moor. Evening was
on its way.

He needed direction. There was no use setting off blindly the way he had come. Besides, some
instinct inside was still whispering run run run, and he was not going to sit here and ignore it when it
apparently knew more about the situation than he did. Looking around, he saw he was lying in a
wide channel, that the churned-up mud on its edges suggested he had fallen into. Rising on either
side were sloping banks of peat, topped a metre or so above by tussocks of grass. Painfully slowly,
he rolled back over on to his hands and knees, and clawed his way up the bank to the top. Perhaps
he would be able to see a settlement nearby, a path maybe, or some sign of what he was doing here.

The wilderness of the peat bog stretched in an unbroken wave of green and black out to the horizon,
undulating with a thousand water gullies, a million tussocks of heather and reedy grass. He could not
see a single tree. Out of the protection of the channel, the wind whistled around his head, cold and
mournful. He fought back despair. He was not dead yet.

Turning through a full circle, he realised that in one particular direction the moor was not featureless.
Grey shapes, strangely amorphous, rose from the wild wetland around. They barely stood out against the sky, and judging their size was difficult in that featureless landscape. Could they be houses? It seemed unlikely that anyone would live in such a desolate place, but without any further direction, this seemed the best choice of any. And it was the opposite direction to where his footprints had come.

Run run run whispered the voice.

He limped. It was the best he could manage, for now.

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The man with no memory would be the first to admit things were not going well. It turned out to be nearly impossible to keep to the raised grassy areas as he had intended. The peaty channels, once carved out by rivers of water long since gone, criss-crossed the moor in every direction, and his route was frequently interrupted as the high ground fell steeply away into another gully. He was soon forced to awkwardly climb down into the mud every few metres and then painfully scramble his way back up. The man tried following along the base of a gully that seemed to be going to direction he wanted, but after a while he realised it had sinuously curved away and was taking him in a different direction entirely. His thigh burned, and sweat was prickling at his forehead and back.

The shadowy shapes on the horizon didn't seem to be getting any closer, although as the sky darkened they stood out more starkly; black silhouettes over the dim brown land. While he was looking at the horizon, the next gully opened up sharply at his feet. It was only the louder sound of water that alerted him; and he caught his balance just in time. This channel was much larger; several metres wide, with a narrow stream the only remnant of the once great river which must have carved it from the peat. The thin water trickled down its centre over round pale stones. A huge stump from some enormous prehistoric tree jutted out from the bank, twice as wide as he was tall. At that moment, the last light of the dying sun burst through a gap in the clouds, painting a red finger of light across the moor. As the man paused, looking at the red-lit tree, a couple of startled birds suddenly burst into flight from the heather at his feet. He started back with alarm, instinct making him reach to his side for….

For what? Hanging from his belt, there should be …. But no. He wasn't wearing a belt. There was nothing there. As hard as he tried to make sense of the missing something, it dissolved away into the nothingness in his head, leaving just a faint nagging wrongness. The sun dipped behind the horizon and the light died. The man gritted his teeth, forcing back his frustration and anger. He had to keep going.

The momentary pause, however, had not helped the agony on thigh and hip, both of which seemed to have seized up as he stood still. The bandage was flapping loose, and he could barely put any weight on his leg now. Half hopping and half sliding, he made his painful way down to the shallow stream, and dunked his whole head in. The cold water washed the taste of sick from his mouth, cooled the fire of the wound on his neck, and cleared some of the dull fogginess from his brain. Crouching back from the water and blinking droplets from his eyes, he suddenly saw what he needed. Washed against the bank by an eddy in the stream, bleached white by the sun, were several long thin branches. In a moment of inspiration he tugged free the loose outer layer of the bandage around his thigh. It was filthy and stained, and the wound seemed to have stopped bleeding for now. He used his teeth to tear the bandage in half, and tied several of the longest sticks together side by side. It might be strong enough to form a decent crutch. He tested the walking stick by pulling himself up to his feet. It held his weight as he leaned on it. Yes, it would do.

Wearily, he took sight of the distant shapes he was aiming for. Did they seem any closer at all? He
set off again. It was certainly colder, the light breeze had picked up to a chill wind the whistled through his wet clothing. There was barely any light left in the slatey sky now, and it was starting to become difficult to distinguish the black mud from hollows and gullies at his feet. Even though finding walking stick had alleviated a lot of the pain in his leg, he was forced to slow down to keep his footing.

An unguessable amount of time passed, one foot placed unsteadily in front of the other. Dizzy, shivering with cold, he looked up. To his surprise the black shapes he had been aiming at were looming up right ahead of him out of the darkness. He couldn't help a swell of disappointment when he realised the shapes weren't houses or any structures of civilisation, but giant pillars of weathered rock. The rock stacks were huge, many times his own height, formed of flat parallel layers of stone. The night around was featureless but for five or six more stacks disappeared off into the gathering dark. There was a deeper darkness behind the rocks to his left. He limped over to the closest rock pillar and leaned against it wearily. The rock was gritty and cold beneath his hands. The man closed his eyes, just for a moment, and tried to hold back despair. He could feel that he was almost at the end of his strength, and there was nowhere else to go. Aiming for these rocks had been a long shot anyway, but there was no help to be had here. The wind whistled past him and he shivered again, considering his options. It really all came down to two choices. Stay here, or go on. He could stay, and try and make a shelter at these rocks. There could be a cave. He might find enough wood around for a fire, not that he could light one. He might survive. Or, he could go on. Set out wildly into the dark in some random direction, on the off-chance that he stumbled across some help. It didn't seem like much of a choice at all, and the thought of just lying down here and not moving again was very compelling.

With a groan he pushed himself back onto his one good leg, and laid down the walking staff, swaying a little. The flat-layered construction of the rock stack at his back formed a number of thin stacked shelves. He pushed his hands into one narrow crack, found a foothole for his bare foot, girtted his teeth, and pushed up. The gritty rough texture of the stone provided good grip for his cold hands and feet, and despite the shaking in his bad leg and pain of busted fingers, he managed to pull himself up onto the top of the stack. Gripping it tightly, he turned, peering out into the night. Looking back the way he had come, there was nothing but dark shadowy land, indistinct and without feature. In the distance, very, very far off, he thought there was a lightening of the sky along the horizon. Perhaps it was just the last light from the setting sun, or perhaps there was a city out there. It didn't matter. It was too far to be any use to him.

He turned back, looking out instead over the deeper blackness behind the rocks, and gasped. There were lights! Half a dozen, perhaps, small flickering orange specks far down in the darkness. The land must fall away just beyond the rocks. A cliff edge probably, and down on the valley floor...fires, houses? A village? If so, it might just save him. As he tried to work out their nature and number, a suspicious thought came into his mind. Somehow he had been injured, and had ended up alone in this desolate place. His injuries may have been caused by an accident, but how could be have been injured that badly out in the middle of nowhere? And the fact he was wearing no shoes was telling. It seemed far more likely that either he had escaped from something, or someone had hurt him and then left him to die. Neither of those circumstances presented the opportunity for friendly innocent people to be nearby. What if he was returning straight back to the place he had escaped from, and the people who had harmed him? He gritted his teeth again. There was no real option. If he went down to the settlement, he might die. If he stayed here, he certainly would. He was under no real illusions that any shelter he could make up here would be enough to keep him alive through the night. Onwards it was, then.

He got the best sense of the direction off the lights below as he could, and then slithered down from the rocky height, scraping the skin from feet and hands on the rough stone as he did so. He picked up his walking stick, and set off towards the cliff edge. There must be a way down. Fate would not
be so cruel as to let him see his salvation but deny him the ability to get there. His strength would hold. It must.

Before long, he heard the trickling of water in the dark and realised that he had come across the stream again. It was flowing parallel to the way he was walking and he followed it willingly. After a few minutes, the gurgling of the water suddenly fell silent. He limped forward, cautiously. He had reached the cliff. The stream poured over a great rocky edge and out into the darkness. Below, he could hear the crashing of water on rock. Now he could see over the edge, and those hopeful lights flickering in the valley below.

His bare feet felt a change; the rough grass had given way to worn earth. A path. He felt himself smile, and it pulled the wound on his neck painfully. After a few hundred yards, the earth path turned to stone, and his foot found an edge. Steps.

Everything started to lose focus a little after that. Step after step, and each more agonising than the last. He lost his balance once as the muscle in his abused thigh gave out, and slid down several steps. Clawing himself back up through the wave of agony was almost more than he could manage, and he was never sure afterwards how he managed it. His eyes were swimming with black spots, feet so cold they couldn’t feel the stone any more, breaths catching in his abused chest…There was a rushing sound. Was it water or the noise in his head?

Flat ground under his feet had him stumbling. The walking stick slid in his grasp, he almost fell again. Get up. Keep going. The lights were flickering and blurring in his fading vision. He would not fall. More unsteady steps, the lights drawing near. Just a little further…

He fell, and did not get back up. He dreamed of blue eyes and metal walls.

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Chapter End Notes

There are many amnesia fics. This one is mine.

It will be long. You are warned. New chapters posted every week or so.

Thanks for reading.
Movement and pain. Hands pulled at his clothing, and he was too weak to push them away. Someone or something was touching his face.

Cooling water on his over-hot skin. He tried to ask for something to drink.

More movement, cries of pain somewhere, and long pale faces looking down at him.

Something hard was held over his mouth, and prompted a little kick of adrenaline. He struggled, trying to free his arms, but a vice-like grip bound him immovably. A reeking, chemical scent filled his mouth and nose; he tried to hold his breath but his lungs were on fire. He breathed in once, twice, and...he closed his eyes and it all went away.

The echo of a voice. *Master? Where are you? Answer me!*

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He drifted on the edge of consciousness for a long time. He was, for the first time that he could remember, warm, comfortable, and without pain. Eventually, the stirrings of curiosity got the better of him and he blinked open his eyes.

He was lying on the floor of a room. The light was low, coming from two small lamps hanging from the walls. He could make out few features in the gloom. The ceiling was very high and shadowed; the curved walls looked like they were made of rough plaster or mud. In a few places, the surface had peeled away and stone-built walls were visible beneath. The room was decked with various agricultural or domestic items; baskets, plastoid containers, shelves of tools and jars. It was hard to tell from lying down but everything seemed disproportionately large. He looked around for escape routes but was not reassured. There was no window, and only a single door, directly opposite where he lay. It was huge and looked extremely sturdy. There was no lock that he could see, but it seemed to be latched shut. He would hear if someone came in.

He turned his attention to his own remarkably pain-free condition. There was a needle in his arm connected to a sachet of fluid hung above his head, which might have something to do with it. He pulled the needle out without really thinking about it, and then looked around. He was lying on a thin mat under a pile of blankets, both self-warming and handwoven in bright colours. Pushing the blankets aside, he realised with a start that he was wearing different clothing. The torn and filthy trousers and tunic were gone, and he was dressed in a long blue shirt-like garment that almost swamped him. The sleeves, were he standing, would have come down well past his knees. He pushed them up to free his hands and his bandaged wrists, and his thumb knocked against something metal.

Curiously, he pushed the sleeve up to reveal a thin bracelet no wider than his little finger which had slid down over the bandaging on his right wrist. It was made of some silvery metal shot through with
ruby-coloured veins. He tugged at it a little, but it was too narrow to fit over his hand. Perhaps he had been wearing it for years. It told him nothing else, so with a shrug, he forgot about it for now and turned his attention to his injuries. On his left hand he could see that three fingers were strapped together and braced with thin plastoid strips. He flexed them a little, but they didn't hurt.

Pulling up the shirt, he first investigated his wounded leg. The embedded durasteel shard had been removed, and the thigh was firmly wrapped with thick layers of off-white bandaging. There was a strange, sweet herbal smell about it. He jabbed his finger at the area he knew had been punctured by the metal, and it produced only a dull ache. Interesting. That painkiller was astonishing.

Torso next. The ribs were sore when he pressed them, but not agonising, and he could breathe more or less without a problem. His side from hip to chest was darkly mottled with bruising. The only surprise was a square dressing taped high up on the right side of his abdomen, below the rib cage. He hadn't noticed a wound there before, but neither had he noticed the myriad of deep bruises and strange red patches like burns across his chest and arms. The bruises looked very much like they took the shape of someone's boots. Turning his head to try and peer at the bruises on his back brought sparking into life the forgotten wound on his neck. Almost reluctantly, he brought his hand up to it, and found a line of taped dressings stretching from the jaw below his ear down to below his collar bone. Tearing the tape off his beard was going to be delightful when the time came. He pulled his hand away with a shudder. That wound, somehow more than the others, filled him with horror.

A sudden noise made him spin round with a start. The latch on the huge door had clicked, and it was starting to swing open. Someone was coming in, and he hadn't come up with a plan. Heart thudding wildly, he looked around for a weapon, but there was nothing to hand. On instinct, he shuffled back to the wall, pulled his knee up to his chest, and stared at the door.

A creature peered round the door. As he watched, tense with fear, it let go of the latch and dropped down onto all fours. The beast had immensely long arms and legs. Its limbs were thick with pure white fur which appeared in tufts at the neckline and hems of its brown and grey clothing. The creature shambled into the room on its bare feet and knuckles with an odd gait, and then paused. It was looking at him with great interest and, seeing him staring back, turned its long neck and issued a chattering sound. A second creature came into the room, larger than the first but similar in shape and colouring. It appeared more cautious, loitering a little by the door. He turned his attention back to the first creature, which had crossed over to within a few metres of him. He saw that, for all its size, the creature had an expressive face of delicate proportions with a wide up-turned nose, white skin scattered with thin patches of fur, and very large guileless eyes with irises of deep blue. There were glints of light as it moved; the low lamplight glinting off beads and bits of feather woven into its fur. One of its curled hands clutched a bundle of tatty rags. It opened its mouth and showed him rows of sharp white teeth. His heart gave a jolt and he realised he had forgotten to breathe.

The second creature came over to join the first, and he realised that it walked much more smoothly than the first. It gripped the smaller creature by the shoulder, chattering at it in a way that sounded stern. Perhaps it was being scolded. The smaller creature didn't look too concerned; rolling back onto its haunches, it waved the ragged doll-like object it was holding, and stuck its thumb into its mouth. The interactions between the pair suddenly clicked in his mind, and the man realised that, despite its size, at least the smaller of the two creatures was a child. His fear receded a little.

“Hello,” he said, his voice rough and quiet, and entirely unfamiliar to him. “Do you understand me?”

The two creatures gave matching shrieks and dashed from the room. He stared after them with astonishment at the reaction. What the blazes could have caused that? Unless they had thought him no more than wounded animal that they had rescued. Him speaking to them must have been like a puppy suddenly asking the time.
There were voices outside the room, and the door pushed opened again. Expecting one of the previous visitors, his eyes were dragged up with surprise when a huge animal entered the room. Standing up on its back legs, the beast was easily twice the height of the small child, and four times as broad across the back. Its long arms were filled out with muscle. Its clothing were of greens and browns, and its fur was a deep rich gold. The creature, undoubtedly an adult, looked at the man huddled against the wall and turned to speak back out into the hall. The man thought the voice sounded stern. *Kids, what did you do? Now you’ve frightened it.*

The giant dropped down onto all fours and slowly crossed the room towards him. The man realised his breath was coming in little harsh-sounding gulps. He tried to claw back some control over himself and his fear. They had treated his wounds. Despite their terrifying size, they seemed to be friendly, so far. The creature stopped several meters from the bed, and dropped onto its haunches. It bared its teeth at him, raised its hands (two long fingers and a thumb he absently noted), and growled something in its own language. The man swallowed dryly, but did nothing, unsure.

The creature asked what sounded like a question, and picked up a plastoid container that had been beside the foot of the bed. It held it out towards him. He could hear liquid sloshing inside, and hesitantly he reached out to take it. The creature shuffled closer, and passed him the bottle. It was water, stale and little chemical-tasting, but he didn't hesitate to drink. The creature bared its teeth at him again, and he began to suspect that was probably a smile.

“Thank you,” he said, a little less croaky, and handed the bottle back. The creature put it on the floor, and then, to his surprise, leaned in and ran its long fingered hand down his head. He froze, but the creature didn't seem to be put off, continuing to pat and stroke his hair. The two children, who had been standing by the door, bounded over and the youngest quickly joined in patting his shoulder, while the older child picked up his hand and started playing with his five fingers in apparent wonder. The man coughed a little, trying not to project his discomfort. He really, really wanted to find a way to communicate that didn't involve touching.

“I don't speak your language. Do you understand me?”

The adult said something that the man obviously did not understand, and then said a word that sounded like *basic*.

“Yes! Basic, I speak Basic.” The man hoped desperately that he had understood the alien correctly.

“Hello fr-iend,” said the alien with bared teeth. The man could have cheered with delight.

“Hello, friend!” he replied. The creature spoke to the oldest child who said something back and scampered from the room. Then it turned back to the man, placing its hand on its own chest.

“I am Chana,” it said, in a strange, heavy accent. Then the alien gently laid its long spindly fingers on the man's chest. “You are?”

The man shook his head a little. “I'm sorry. I don't remember.”

Chana's nose twitched, and it was clear its limited Basic was not enough to understand what he was saying. The alien tried again, pointing to itself.

“Chana,”

“Chana,” the man repeated.

The creature pointed next to the smallest child. “Tiki,” it said.
“Tiki,” he echoed. The child made a coughing noise that might have been laughter.

The door opened, and the older child entered again, carrying a small electronic device. The adult pointed at the child and made a drawn out sound that was mostly vowels. The man didn't even try to imitate that. Then Chana pointed back to him, and he sighed.

“I can't tell you my name. I have lost my memory.”

The oldest child shoved the electronic device towards him, and he eyed it with healthy caution.

“Again!” said the unpronounceable child, who also seemed to have a few words of Basic.

“I have lost my memory,” he said slowly, uncertain what was happening. “I've forgotten my name.”

The child fiddled with the device which played back a short recording of his own voice, then followed by an electronic droid-like voice in what sounded like the creature's language. A translator.

The man was relieved, although the aliens were looking at him with what seemed like alarm. Chana took a carefully grip of his head and began running his fingers delicately over the surface of his skull, feeling every area for injuries or depressions, and eventually peering into the man's ears and eyes.

“I don't have a head injury,” the man said slowly into the translator which was lying on the blankets. “At least, I don't think so.”

"You are very bad," announced Chana, and the man tensed with fear. Had he done something wrong? But the alien's relaxed body language and expression of concern had not changed.

"Bad," said Chana again, and then picked up the translating device.


Oh. "Yes," he agreed. Chana continued to talk into the translator.

“ You are damaged. You have no memory ,” said the drone voice. “ What happened to you .”

“I don't remember,” the man whispered, and suddenly realised how tired he was. “I just woke up on the moor. I don't know what happened.”

Chana made a crooning sound that was clearly intended to be comforting. "Sleep," the alien said in Basic, followed by some words to the translator. "She will be back tomorrow. She will know what to do."

"She?" the man asked, but his eyelids were heavy, and he was asleep again before Chana could reply.

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He woke suddenly the next time, and was instantly aware of dull but unrelenting pain in his chest and leg, of being thirsty, and hungry, and too hot. The pain relief he had felt before had not lasted, although he could tell from a pulling on his arm that the IV had been reinserted. He felt feverish. He blinked back into full awareness, and went to sit up, only to be stopped by a hand on his shoulder.
"Rest."

He started a little at the voice, and turned to see two more creatures sitting beside the edge of his bed. The closest, the one that had touched him, had withdrawn its hand when he jumped, but neither of them moved away, sitting calmly. There was no doubt from their huge size that they were both adults. The brighter lamp they had brought with them showed that, unlike Chana, they had fur that, while white at the core, was tipped in deep, indigo blue. When they moved, the white showed through like silvery light on water. The taller of the two, the one that had spoken, had a mane of blue hair around its ears, and was dressed in a long robe of midnight blue fabric. The second smaller figure was dressed in the same grey and brown hues as the children. The nearer creature showed its teeth, and then said;

"Please do not be afraid. I am Shaarm, wife of the house."

"You speak Basic?" the man said, overcome with relief. While he had managed a few words with Chana with the help of the translation device, a fluent conversation might help him figure out what was happening.

"Yes," the creature said. "This is Grandmother."

Grandmother? Wife? That helped the man to establish that the colour of the fur probably indicated the males and females of the species. If the females were blue then golden-haired Chana was probably male, although binary gender divisions were never something to take for granted.

"You are welcome in our home," Shaarm said, and he smiled, sensing she was genuine. Her accent was more delicate than Chana's had been.

"Thank you," he said, "although I don't remember how I got here."

"You have lost your memory," said Shaarm, "This is what my husband Chana tells me."

The man nodded, careful of the ache in his neck.

"Grandmother found you outside in the street, and you are badly injured. It took several hours to make your injuries stable."

Grandmother showed a set of large, razor-sharp teeth.

"You saved my life," the man acknowledged. His injuries had been severe. "Are you a healer?"

"I am a surgeon, in Tzsaaf," Shaarm said, "but I was able to do little for you as I have never been trained in Pechnar biology. There is a....livestock doctor in the town, and we took you there. Together, he and I were able to repair most of your injuries, I give thanks, although you will need much rest and a long time to recover."

"Thank you," he said again, and she showed her teeth, handing him the water bottle. He was not surprised to hear that she was a medical professional. She radiated calm and understanding and balance.

"Where am I?" he began to ask as soon as he had finished drinking, but Grandmother had moved over to the bed and spoke over his question in their own language. Shaarm explained.

"She says that it is time to see to your injuries now. After that you shall eat, and I will answer what I know. Are you in pain?"
He hesitated, and then nodded. "Yes. Leg, hip, ribs..."

"What should your normal temperature be?" she asked, laying a device on his breastbone. After a second it beeped, and she looked at it with a frown.

"I don't know, I'm sorry. But I do feel a bit warm. Feverish." He tried to answer as honestly as he could. Playing down what his body was telling him in circumstances like these could kill him.

Checking his wounds took a while. The injury on his leg appeared to have been sealed with some sort of colourless paste, and to the man's eyes the skin around was bruised and angry. Shaarm palpated it for a while, and then pulled out different device. Held over the wound, it issued an orange light and a wave of heat that was just shy of being painful on his skin.

"Your hip?" she asked, and he indicated with his hand where the bone felt wrong. Possibly a cracked pelvis. The heat emitter was used again on his hip, and then in long concentrated bursts over his side, chest and belly. Whatever the device was doing, it was not helping with the pain. He gritted his teeth a little.

"What happened here?" He asked, pointing to the dressing on his right side, needing a distraction.

"A blunt traumatic injury," Shaarm answered, with a distracted air as she peeled back the bandages on his neck and focused the heat emitter on his skin. "You were bleeding inside."

The man ran his palm over the dressing, and pushed a little. He felt pressure not pain, and a firmer push brought a sensation of crackling under the skin, like old paper. Grandmother pulled his hand away, and scolded him firmly in their language.

"She says you are a crazy person," said Shaarm. "Do not poke at the wound."

"That's incredible," said the man, genuinely amazed. She had healed a severe internal injury. "What did you do?"

Shaarm looked at him for a moment, as if checking that his interest was genuine.

"Synthetic nanoplatelets," she said. "I was not sure they would work on your physiology, but as you would not have survived anyway, I decided to try. The bleeding was sealed. Now I want to see your back."

With the same lack of concern for his personal space that Chana and the children had shown the previous day, Shaarm put her arm behind his back without warning and easily lifted him into a sitting position. Before he had time to flail or feel unsteady, she had tilted him forward and was pressing on his lower back with her cool fingers. He twitched a little as a stabbing pain flared up. That could be a damaged kidney. He felt her make a few passes with the heat-emitter, and then place something metal on his back. After listening to him breathe a few times, she said "Good!", and his nightshirt was lowered back around him. Then he had to undergo the same search of his skull that Chana had undertaken the previous night, with both Grandmother and Shaarm running long fingers through his hair, jaw and the back of his neck. Their search apparently yielded nothing.

"I will take you to the cleansing room now," said Shaarm, and without another word she lifted him easily, blankets, IV sachet and all, out of the bed and tucked him to her with one arm. She swung round and loped out of the room, trotting on three legs. He was dizzily aware of a large, brightly lit space outside which passed in a swift blur, and then he was gently being stood on his unsteady feet in a small wash room. Shaarm handed him the IV bag and left him alone while he used the facilities. His urine was darkly discoloured with blood. Definitely a damaged kidney then, bruised at least. He
splashed a good deal of water around trying to turn the faucet on and off with his damaged hand, but eventually managed a perfunctory wash. He looked at the door to the ‘fresher longingly, but that would have to wait until he could stand properly.

When he was done, Shaarm carried him back to the room where his bed was laid out. He really wanted to walk, but even standing for a few minutes in the wash room had made his leg ache abominably. Before long, he lying back down, propped against the wall, and re-wrapped in his blankets. Shortly afterwards, Grandmother joined them again, carrying a bowl.

“You seem to be recovering,” Shaarm said. “I am sorry that I do not know more about your people, but were you a Kheelian, I should say that you were very malnourished. Eat, and I will answer your questions.”

Grandmother settled a large bowl on his legs and pushed a spoon into his uninjured hand. He eyed the contents of the bowl with caution; a lumpy white paste with dark brown pieces mixed into the mush.

“We feed this meal to our sick and infirm,” Shaarm said, with her toothy smile. “It is mild and wholesome.”

He took a cautious mouthful. At first the taste was not too bad, rich and earthy, but after a moment a heavy burn of spicy heat filled his mouth and caught in his sinuses. He swallowed quickly, trying in vain not to cough as his eyes watered. The two females eyed him with concern but he managed to force the food down and smile.

“Goodness,” he managed, “it’s quite spicy.” Grandmother seemed to take that as a compliment, and beckoned for him to continue to eat. A little reluctantly he put another spoonful in his mouth, and Shaarm began to speak.

He was currently in a village called Thet which had a population of about one hundred of their folk, living under the cliffs of Kender, the Great Moor. The nearest town where Shaarm held a medical practice was called Tzsaaf. It served the villages around with supplies and services, although mostly the people lived off the land. Shaarm and her family were called Kheelians, although he was not certain if that was the name of the entire species, or just of Shaarm's tribe. The county was called something he couldn't pronounce, and the planet seemed not to have a name. So far so good. Except none of it was in any way familiar.

“And I am a... Pechnar?" He thought his pronunciation was correct.

Shaarm nodded. “Well, that is our name for your species, I do not know what you call yourselves. I am sorry that you seem disappointed. But come, you must eat.”

He took another reluctant bite and forced it down. He found that the mush burned his throat less if he avoided the brown pieces. “I thought I might remember something from your descriptions. I suppose, when I saw the lights from the clifftop, I hoped that you would recognise me, and would know where I came from.”

“I am sorry,” Shaarm said again. “But you did not come from here. There are no Pechnar in Thet, and I have only seen them a dozen times in Tzsaaf. There are more in the City, but that is many hundred lengths from here. People here will be very curious about you. No one except myself and Pakat will ever have seen a Pechnar before, I expect. Chana and the girls thought you were an infant because you are so small.”

He snorted a laugh, unable to feel insulted or annoyed by the insinuation. He supposed that
explained all the petting and cooing he had endured yesterday. They really had thought him no more than an injured baby animal.

“I might not know much about myself,” he admitted, “but I can safely assure you that I am no infant.” The was an ache in some of his joints not caused by his recent injuries, but instead the result of a long life, and a hard one.

“You truly remember nothing?” Shaarm asked, and her expressive face looked worried. “For we found the nature of your injuries...concerning.”

He shook his head in answer, even as he pondered what her pause could mean. “Nothing. I woke up in the marshes already injured. I think I had walked there, as my feet were dirty, but that is all I could tell. I saw the rock stacks in the distance and headed towards them. I crossed a stream, and followed it for a bit. By the time I reached the rocks I could see the lights from the village.”

He looked at the females, and could see their poorly-veiled concern. “Perhaps I came from a village on the moor...?”

But Shaarm was already shaking her head. “There are no settlements on the moor, and it stretches for a hundred lengths in every direction. You could not have crossed it on foot. It is astonishing that you found your way to the cliffs at all. Even those who have lived their lives in its shadow do not find their way easily on the moor in the dark. And there are other dangers too; vicious creatures live there who do not care for Kheelians.”

“Perhaps I encountered one of those,” suggested the man, keen to find an explanation to one of the mysteries surrounding him.

Grandmother made a harsh coughing noise, similar to the sound he had identified as laughter from the children. She followed up with a brief statement that made Shaarm smile. The man realised that Grandmother had been following their conversation; she clearly understood Basic even if she didn't speak it.

“Grandmother says that dangerous the creatures may be, but they do no regularly stab people in the legs with metal shrapnel.”

Seeing his blank look, she pulled out a bundle of ragged cloth from beside the sleeping mat, and unfolded it, showing him a long shard of smooth metal. It was washed clean of his blood, but he knew it was the same that had been embedded in his thigh. He picked it up without much hesitation, and weighed it in his hand. It meant nothing. He handed it back, and with a sigh, slumped back a little against the wall, hand coming up unconsciously to rest on his aching ribs. The pain was back full force, and even this short conversation had exhausted him. His stamina really was a disaster.

“You should eat more,” said Shaarm, frowning, but he couldn't, not even to be polite. He held out the bowl, it was still almost full.

“Thank you,” he said, “it's very...filling.”

Grandmother took the bowl from him, and trotted out of the room with it. Shaarm, with infinite care, lifted the man away from the wall and laid him down onto the sleeping mat. She smoothed down the blankets.

“You must sleep then,” she said. “For a few turns at least. Pakat will be home for the latemeal and you shall join us, if you feel able.” She leaned down, to the floor and a plastoid mask was being held up against his face. He caught a whiff of a familiar chemical scent, and he shrank back, fear bursting
into life. Before he could stop himself he had pushed her arm away. He couldn't have hurt her, of course, and she merely looked surprised, but the guilt was already twisting in his gut.

“I don't want it. I'm sorry.”

She was not deterred, but her voice took on a very gentle soothing tone. “You are in pain,” she said, “and that is not necessary. This is valiform, you need only inhale a little so it will take the pain away so you can sleep.”

She sat back, but instead of applying it herself, just held the mask out to him. He paused for a long time, but loathe to be any ruder than he already had been, he took it. He intended to merely pretend to inhale the narcotic, but found that after only a moment holding it near his face, he was already drowsy. He felt the breather fall from his loose fingers, and he slept.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

More next week...
The Rising, the Growing and the Falling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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*Metal walls and a metal floor. The deep, far off hummin*ng and grinding of electricity, engines, moving parts. *Closer, the dripdripdrip as blood falls to the floor. His own agonized breathing. Blue eyes.*

He woke for the third time, and this time, despite the lingering fragments of some nightmare, he knew instantly where he was. On the sleeping mat in the store room of the house in Thet. He remembered the family of Kheelians who had taken him in. The pain-filled desperate trudge across the moor, and his own mysterious injuries. The gaping, scarred emptiness of his head where his memories should be.

What he couldn't place was the warm feel of someone else curled against his uninjured side, and a loud insistent voice in his ear demanding “Benbenbenbenbenbenben...”

Trying to suppress a groan, he opened his eyes and was not at all surprised to see Tiki, the youngest child, curled up next to him. Or more accurately, he first thing he saw was the four-limbed bundle of rags disguised as a doll which seemed to be the child's favoured toy. It was being unceremoniously tapped against the side of his head. He looked past the doll, and saw Tiki starring him intently. Just his luck to be chosen as the second favourite plaything of a giant alien toddler.

“I'm awake,” he muttered, and moved to sit up. Hands appeared in his field of vision on the other side, and the older child who was mostly sprawled over his shins, moved back and helped to pull him up. She – and the man was fairly confident he remembered Shaarm speaking of 'the girls' yesterday – was grinning widely, with a pointed teeth fully on display. He rubbed a hand across his drowsy face, dredged up a remnant of his manners, and tried to smile back.

“Up, Benben!” the girl said in Basic. “Up! Food is now!”

“Very well, I'm coming,” he reassured her. Tiki, who had taken his sitting up as a minor inconvenience in her attempt to snuggle up next to him, had sat up too, and was now stroking his beard with one hand. The other hand was already occupied due to its thumb being sucked. He pointed to her and said “I know your name is Tiki.”

She pulled out her thumb to show him her teeth, and then it went straight back in. He turned to the older girl as best he could with Tiki's long fingers still tangled in his beard.

“And your mother is Shaarm, and there is Chana and Grandmother. So what is your name?”

The girls looked delighted as he listing off their family's names, even though he knew they probably couldn't understand everything he said. The older girl smiled, and then pronounced that set of indistinguishable multi-syllable vowels that apparently formed her name. Tiki repeated it, adding the phrase Benben to the end, and then they both looked at him.

His first attempt at the name was met with gales of laughter and hand-clapping from both girls. He got them to repeat it, slower, and then tried again. Each wrong pronunciation was met with more hilarity than the last, but in the end he just shortened and simplified the word as much as he could.
“Ooouli?”

The older girl laughed. “No! Not!” Then she seemed to think about the name for a bit, and then pronounced; “To Benben, yes.”

He wanted to clarify, wishing the translating device had been evident; “So it isn't your name, but I may call you Ooouli?”

“Benben, yes.”

“Good. I like it.”

She patted his chest gently, and then climbed up onto her four limbs. “Benben, up! Food is now!”

The sound of a distant voice came through the doorway and, after giving the man a last pat on the hair, the children scampered from the room. He could hear giggling and the words "Ooouli" and "Benben" drifting in from the room outside.

Shaarm entered, pulling the door to behind her.

"Good evening," she said. She loped across the room on three legs, carrying a bundle tucked under her elbow. He observed the Kheelian's motion; they were quadrupedal, walking on their knuckles. As he had seen with the door handle, they could certainly stand for periods of time on two legs to use their hands, and could easily manage to walk on three limbs if carrying something.

"The girls wanted to wake you. I hope they were were not rough, they can get over-excited."

"Not at all," he answered, smiling. "They were very gentle."

Shaarm smiled as if he had offered her a high compliment. “I give thanks,” she said.

"How long was I asleep?" he asked.

"Only four turns. In the evenings, when we can, we eat a meal together. Do you feel well enough to join us?"

He nodded. "I would like that."

"Good." She first carefully detached the IV tubing from the needle in his arm, and then placed the bundle she had brought down on his legs. He saw it comprised a bundle of cloth and a sturdy duralumin staff that Shaarm placed on the floor by him.

"We do not of course have any Pechnar clothes here, and those you were wearing when you arrived were essentially destroyed." She sounded apologetic. "Grandmother and Chana have adapted some old clothes of the children's to try and match your old ones. They will be a strange shape on you I am afraid, but I hope they will serve for now. Later we will find some Pechnar clothes for you in Tszaaf."

The man unfolded the bundle and found a pair of soft, loose trousers, several large tunics and a baggy green woollen overcoat with a long waist tie. He found himself thoroughly moved by his hosts' kindness, and had to blink for a few moments for force back unexpected tears. Was he usually this emotional?

"Thank you," he said, and hoped she knew how heartfelt the words were.

Shaarm smiled, and said, "I hear that you have renamed my daughter."
He winced a little though was fairly confident she was jesting. "Yes, I am sorry. I just couldn't manage to say her name correctly at all."

Shaarm laughed, and he thought it was the first time he had heard the sound from her. "It is well," she said. "Our daughter has a very old name, from the roots of our language. Ooouli is a little more modern. She likes it."

"And what is benben?" He enquired, and it was her turn to look embarrassed.

"I am afraid Benben is Tiki's doll. She and Ooouli have decided that you look like him, and as you had no name, you could share his. I hope it is all right."

He stroked his beard for a moment, pretending to think about it.

"It is well," he acquiesced, and she laughed again. "But I think just the one 'Ben' will do, so I don't start thinking too much of myself."

"It is agreed." Shaarm rose to her four legs, and lowered her head down to the ground in a formal-looking bow. He ducked his own head as much as his neck and chest injuries would allow to match it. "And I welcome you to our home, Ben. Now get dressed! It is time to eat."

After she had gone, the newly-named Ben carefully stood up, and stretched. He hurt a lot, and his body felt stiff and dull. His head ached. It occurred to him then that he had no idea how long he had been here. Just one more thing that he didn't know. Ben stripped off the old nightshirt, suspecting from the shape of it that it too had been adapted from one of the children's garments. The bruising and tenderness on his torso seemed to have gone down a little, although his ribs felt no better. For the first time, he noticed that there were older scars on his body beneath the new injuries. Long, shiny burns on his left arm and left leg, an indentation on his shin indicating a badly healed fracture in his tibia, a tracery of barely-seen white scars over his right kneecap from some past surgery. He didn't feel old, but it was clear his body had been damaged more than once. He didn't know what that meant.

With a frown, Ben shook out the new clothes Shaarm had given him. Time to see if they fitted him as well as his new name did. Considering they were made for a creature a very different shape and size to himself, it wasn't half bad. The trousers had a drawstring which was just as well, or they would never have stayed on. The sleeves of the tunic were still much too long, despite having been already hacked off once, but the green woollen robe was warm and comforting.

There had been no mirror in the wash room, but as he limped over to the door leaning on the walking staff, he caught sight of the base of a wide duralumin pan hanging from a nail in the corner. His badly-lit reflection was a little distorted on the uneven surface but it was clear enough. He was looking at a stranger. The man who stared back was pale; his bruised face had a gauntness around the eyes and cheekbones that spoke of illness, maybe starvation. The over-large size of the clothes did not help the impression of fragility. His hair, which was desperately in need of a wash, was a copper blonde, and fell passed his ears, and his beard was overgrown and unkempt. It was not a good first impression. Ben scowled at his own face.

Pushing open the door, he limped out into a large room full of light and motion. Blinking, he took in the scene around him. The room was huge and circular, under a domed roof of light. Six doorways were evenly spaced around the walls, and between each door, the curving walls were covered with shelves, cupboards, colourful hangings or paintings. Melodic music was playing from somewhere, and someone was humming. In the centre of the room was an enormous circular block of stone, as high as his chest, and it was clear that this table was the focus of the activity in the room. There were no chairs, but cushions and rugs were scattered around on the floor. The Kheelian children were
lying on the floor in front of the table, with their long legs tucked under their bodies. Tiki was
crawling vague shapes on a large sheet of plastipaper, while Ooouli had several datapads scattered
around her that she seemed to be studying. Grandmother was sitting on her haunches at the table,
reading out loud from an actual book, a huge tome with a red cover. She winked at him, but did not
stop her recitation. On the other side of the room, Shaarm, Chana, and another adult Kheelian were
moving around a small kitchen area in comfortable domesticity. As he limped into the room leaning
heavily on the staff, Tiki spotted him and jumped up, loping over to stroke his hair. He realised for
the first time that, when she stood up on her hind legs, she was only a little shorter than he was, the
top of her long ears level with his nose. He guessed that Ooouli would be half as tall again as her
sister. As the adult male he didn't know reached up to lift something from a shelf, Ben could see that
the full grown Kheelians were more than twice his own height when standing. When walking
quadrupedally on their back legs and knuckles, their eyeline was above the top of Ben's head.

Shaarm called something over to Tiki, presumably a warning to be careful, and the young child
dropped back down onto her four limbs and pushed her shoulder in against Ben's side. He ran his
hand over her shaggy head with some affection, and she shuffled her shoulder under his arm,
presumably to let him lean on her back. She hindered him more than she helped, but he eventually
did make it over to the table. Chana, in the meantime, had been stacking several low boxes on top of
each other by the table to create a raised-up stool, and with a tooth-filled smile, he picked up Ben
under the arms and easily lifted him onto the chair, where he could now at least reach the table. The
translating device was positioned next to his place.

“Ben,” Chana greeted him with a brush of his hand over the man's hair.

“Hello, Chana,” he said back. “Hello Shaarm.”

Grandmother continued to read, not at all put off by the other conversations that were happening
over her. Shaarm trotted over carrying a dish in one hand, followed by the other male Kheelian, who
was carrying empty plates and seemed to be the one humming, or half singing to himself. “Hello
Ben,” Shaarm greeted him with a smile. “This is my husband, Pakat.”

To his inexperienced eye, Pakat seemed visually similar to Chana, although he was a less tall and
narrower across the shoulders. His fur was a paler straw colour than Chana's rich gold, making Ben
think that perhaps Pakat was the younger of the two husbands. Ben wondered if there were more
partners in this marriage or if he had now met everyone.

“Pakat, I am pleased to meet you,” he said, giving a slight bow. “I am Ben.”

“Ben!” said Pakat, stroking the man's hair and patting the back of his neck soothingly. Ben
wondered if physical contact of the head was a greeting in the Kheelian culture, but he didn't try to
reciprocate, not yet. Pakat seemed not to speak any Basic at all, and used the translator to make his
greeting, which sounded oddly formal:

“Pleased are we that you have come to us. Our house is richer for your presence.”

“Thank you,” Ben replied, not sure how else to respond.

Shaarm called to the girls, and the three adult proceeded to place numerous small dishes and plates
on the table. The meal seemed to be comprised of a lot of different components. The family were not
sure what Pechnar could eat or what he liked, Pakat told him through the translator, so they had
made many different dishes to see what he favoured best.

Being smaller than the rest of the family, Tiki too had a raised step to sit on opposite from Ben, while
everyone else sat on their haunches on the floor. Grandmother seemed to reach the end of her page,
and stopped reading. The family went quiet, with just the flowing melody of the distant music filling
the silence. Ben waited, wondering what was happening.

Chana came in to the room, carrying a tray in one hand, which he placed in the clear area in the
centre of the table. On it were seven earthenware cups and a glass teapot. In silence, he dropped a
small bundle of leaves into the pot. He stirred the pot seven times.

“Tonight, we are thankful,” announced Shaarm in Basic, as they all watched the pot. “We have food
and shelter and peace. We thank our grandparents for the legacy of our past, we thank our parents for
the for gift of our present-day, and we thank our children for the hope of our future.” As she spoke,
the bundle of leaves in the teapot slowly unfolded in the hot water, unfurling to reveal a curl of petals
like a blossoming flower. Shaarm poured a steaming liquid from the pot into the cups and then
handed one to each person. Tiki gripped her cup with both hands, bearing a look of fierce
concentration. Everyone took a sip of the drink and Ben copied them, carefully lifting the large cup
with both hands. The drink was a little bitter, but had a fresh, green taste.

“Tonight,” Shaarm continued, “we would also like to thank our new friend Ben for joining our
family, so that we have the opportunity to show him our compassion, share our home, and give him
our strength.”

Everyone drank again.

Ben looked to Shaarm, hoping he wasn't breaking etiquette. “May I speak?”

She held out a graceful hand and smiled. He took the translator from Pakat.

“I would like to thank you, all of you,” Ben said,” for the kindness, welcome, and understanding you
have given me in your home. I thank you for the gift of my life.”

His words were met with silence as everyone drank the last of their drinks, and then the table erupted
into noise, with the Kheelians knocking on the table with their hands in what seemed like a
demonstration of loud approval at his words.

Now that the formality of the ritual was over, the meal began. It was a surprisingly disorderly affair.
It seemed to be perfectly acceptable to lean across the table to get the item you wanted, shout, laugh,
sing and generally make a lot of mess and noise. Grandmother continued to read from the book in
between eating, although nobody seemed to be paying her any attention, and she didn't seem to
mind. Underneath the madness of noise and sound, her voice added a perfect rhythm to the swirl of
the family life. Chaos, yet harmony. Ben was distracted by watching what was happening until
Chana gestured to his empty plate.

“Ben, here. This is...not bad.” The Kheelian offered a dish, containing small red cubes in a watery
sauce. Ben took it with a smile, remembering Chana's odd turn of phrase from before. He cautiously
put a little onto his plate, and tasted it. His eyes instantly watered up and the burning sensation went
through his throat into his nose, making him cough. Chana gave a small laugh, and took the dish
away.

“Oh, it is not good for Ben! Sorry.”

Other dishes were passed down and suggestions made on all sides for foods he might try. Ben found
before he had eaten much at all that his sense of taste was completely burned away. Almost every
dish seemed to contain a certain vegetable known as a tarvaroot which, although mild in taste to his
hosts, burned Ben's mouth and throat like fire, almost as a mild allergic reaction. With regret, Shaarm
explained, tarvaroot was a stable of the Kheelian diet. She indicated to a dish which did not contain
the vegetable, although Ben had only to smell the small white berries it contained before his brain was clamouring with warnings. He may not have been able to remember his own name, but he was sure that the contents of that dish were extremely toxic to him. Fortunately, the family took this as a matter of scientific interest rather than insult. Ben let Pakat squash one of the berries on to the back of his hand, and there was general horrified amazement when a red, irritated patch appeared on the skin after mere moments. They all agreed that he should stay very far away from the white berries.

Which just left the problem of what he was going to eat. The spicy white paste he had been given before had been edible, but even that had been almost hotter than he could stand. The only successful thing he had found at this meal so far were some orange-coloured dumplings Tiki had fed him which didn't really taste of anything. There was a long discussion, and Chana and Ooouli seemed to come up with an idea, dashing from the table and rummaging in cupboards. A packet was found; the contents were mixed with boiled water, and a dish was presented to him. The resultant concoction was a grey slurry with a faint lavender tint. It looked vile, and with certain reservation, Ben tasted it. It was...actually all right. Rich and incredibly sweet, like a sugary gravy, but he could swallow it. The family were delighted. The dumplings were known as phuff. Shaarm said they were something the girls had eaten as infants, and they only kept it in the house as Tiki still wanted them occasionally if she wasn't feeling well. The grey slop was called grol, and Ben was not really surprised to learn that it was leftover food from a small mammal the girls had once kept. Baby food and pet food. If he came out of this experience with any dignity left, it would be astonishing.

After the mission of finding Ben food had been accomplished, the family turned to conversation. Ben, finding himself surprisingly full after eating the first real meal that he could remember, listened intently. The Kheelian language did not seem as alien as it had first sounded, and he began to pick up a few words here and there. Ooouli saw him watching the speakers.

“Learning?” she said, in Basic.

“I'll try,” he answered, and pointed to her datapads still scattered on the floor. “What are you studying?” he asked her. Ooouli, it turned out, went to a school in the town Tszaaf, and she loved to learn. The translating device was actually a small computing tool she used for her school work; translation was just one of its many functions. She was currently reading all the lessons she had about Galactic Basic, so she could talk to Ben better. Her favourite subjects were History, and something the translator gave as Oneness. Ben wasn't certain what this last subject involved, but it seemed to include, from what Ooouli said, a study of holistics, the nature of fate in comparison to causality, and discussion of personal choice and individual rights versus societal duty. It sounded rather advanced for a small child, and Ben told her she must be extremely clever. Ooouli said she wanted to go into Anti-Conflict Law when she grew up. Ben was again not sure what that involved, but he liked the sound of it.

The conversation prompted him to ask more about the family. Shaarm, he knew, was a surgeon. She and Pakat explained that they had met at the university in the City, where he had been studying ecology. When he had been assigned to the Kender moors, they had moved to Thet together. There they had met Chana, who was a poet and artist, and, from what Ben could gather, somewhat celebrated at both. Chana also managed their smallholding and kitchen garden where they grew their food and livestock.

Ben listened with rapt attention to this amazing world unfolding before him. The arts seemed to be highly valued in Kheelian culture, and they prized learning, and balance, and peace. Even the structure of the marriage was formed on the principles of balance, in that a triangle was the strongest shape. Each of the adults worked through two of the planet's three seasons, known as the Rising, the Growing, and the Falling. It was currently just becoming the coldest season, the Falling, which meant that Pakat would stay at home to care for the children, while the other two worked in the
surgery or sowed crops on the farmlands. In the Growing, Chana travelled to sell his art, and there was a lot for Pakat to do on the moor, so Shaarm remained at home during that time. In the Rising, Chana remained at home, while the others worked. Grandmother seemed to be the key link in tying the family into the local community. She was responsible for preserving the memories and traditions between the families in Thet and in other villages.

Ben marvelled at the system, and couldn't help but wonder, for the first time, just what he had lost when he forgot everything. What were his own relationships like? Did he have a spouse, or children to care for? What values did his culture place above all others? He thought of the scars on his skin. It seemed like peace was not among them, at any rate.

Tiki had remained mostly silent throughout the meal, staring at Ben with her wide blue eyes, as if he was a puzzle she couldn't figure out. In a lull in the conversation, she addressed him quizzically; he knew the question was directed at him as it was preceded by Benben but he was at a loss as to what was asked. Shaarm came to his rescue.

“She wants to know why you only have fur on your head and chin and not the rest of your face or your arms. She is wondering if you burned your fur off in an accident.”

The question made Ben laugh, but the others seemed genuinely interested in the response.

“You can tell her I was not in an accident. It is just the nature of the way my hair grows,” he said.

“Does that mean all Pechnar have bald faces? They only grow fur on their chins?” Ooouli asked, via translator, her curiosity peaked too.

“No, only the males have fur on their chins, but most have it on their heads. And some shave it off their faces because they think it improves their looks.”

Ooouli looked horrified and fascinated at the same time.

“What does the red of your fur indicate?” asked Shaarm, now that the floor seemed to be open to questions. “I have always wondered about the colours when I encountered Pechnar but did not feel I could ask. Your colour is one I have never seen before.”

“It does not signify anything, I am afraid,” said Ben, feeling like he going to disappoint them. “It is to do with pigmentation of a substance called melanin in the hair follicles, which may be affected by race or genetics. It does not indicate gender, although the colour does change with age. The elderly can have grey or white hair, or no hair at all.”

“So Pechnar would have the same colour hair as their parents?” Shaarm asked.

“Usually,” Ben answered, “but not always, and siblings can have different colour hair from each other.”

Grandmother said something that he didn't catch, and the adults around the table looked thoughtful.

“She said,” translated Shaarm, “that it is interesting that you can remember such detail about Pechnar biology, but nothing of yourself. She says it seems significant that you have lost only your own history.”

Ben was startled; she was right of course, and he had not noticed. He could not consciously have said he remembered anything about his physiology, but when they had asked he did retain taught knowledge. What else might he remember, if prompted with the right query?
The meal ended with the pouring of a rich blue liquid into small glasses, which the children were not given. Shaarm offered one to Ben, with a warning that it was strong. It was clearly alcoholic, and had a tangy, citrusy taste, but he quite liked it and finished his glass. The Kheelians watched this in amazement, before cautiously sipped theirs as if the drink was incredibly strong; Pakat even coughed a little. Ben smiled. At least there was something on this planet that was not toxic or thoroughly unpleasant.

The family talked for a little longer, but eventually the children started to fidget. The light had faded swiftly from the dome of the roof above their heads. The room was darkening, with scattered low-energy lights mounted on the walls twinkling into light as dusk fell, casting beams of warm low light over the curved space of the house. Shaarm sent the children to clear the table. Chana and Grandmother disappeared through one of the other doors. Ben would have offered to help carry the dishes, but forced to rely on his staff, and with broken fingers too, he was more likely to get in their way or drop something. If he was being honest, sitting upright on the raised backless stool for that length of time had starting to take its toll on his ribs and damaged abdomen in the form of a deep, unrelenting ache.

Pakat, as he passed, seemed to recognise the tightness of pain and tiredness in Ben's posture, and with an anxious clicking sound, he peered into the man's face. Ben tried to smile, not wanting to show his fading strength, but Pakat was not taken in. He called something softly to Shaarm. “It is time you went to lie down,” she said firmly, coming over. He considering protesting, but there really was not much point. If Shaarm thought he should be somewhere, she would just pick him up and take him, whatever he said.

“Say goodnight to Ben,” she instructed the girls. They both came over together, tangling their hands in his hair and beard, and stroking his back.

“Goodnight,” he told them, and rubbed their furry heads and ears. Ooouli giggled, and patted him on the back of the neck. “Learning,” she said again, followed by “Goodnight Ben,”

As if to emphasize his earlier thought about being carried places, Pakat handed Ben his staff to hold, and then carefully lifted the man up and rested him against his elbow, in the same way Shaarm had carried him to the bathroom the previous day.

“I can walk,” Ben couldn't help but protest.

“But you do not have to,” pointed out Shaarm, who had turned back towards the kitchen.

“Goodnight Ben!”

Pakat carried him first to the washroom, where Ben was pleased to note that the IV fluids seemed to be doing something to improve his bruised kidney at any rate. After he had finished, Pakat returned him to the side room where he had been sleeping, setting him down with marked gentleness, still humming the whole time. Ben lowered himself down onto his sleeping mat with relief. It was not the wound on his thigh that was hurting so much now as his hip. Hopefully some rest was all he needed. Pakat ruffled his hair in a way that was becoming more familiar to him and slipped out of the room, raising up on his hind legs to pull the door to behind him.

Ben laid back, resting his eyes, and listened for a long time to the sound of humming that was making its way from the living room. His head was spinnning. Why did he remember some things, but not others? How could he recall how to walk and dress himself and speak, but not where he was born, or who his family were, or how he had been injured? What had caused him to lose his memory? Was anyone out there looking for him?
Ignorance, yet knowledge, a voice whispered in the back of his mind. He barely heard it. He fell asleep with his questions unanswered, and music flowing into his dreams.

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Chapter End Notes

TBC next week...

Thanks to everyone who is reading, and particularly to all you guys who left comments. I hope you continue to enjoy.
When Ben awoke the next morning he was, to his surprise, both alone and in a quiet house. He lay still for a while, enjoying the peace. He cared very much for the Kheelians already, but they could be quite exhausting. Physically, he felt better this morning than he could remember. Much of the pain from the bruises, burns and from his leg had noticeably lessened. His ribs were still painful if he tried to take too deep a breath, but the intercostals didn't ache as much as they had. His body was definitely improved for the fluids and food and rest that had been forced on it. But as for the remainder of him… well, he felt restless, uncomfortable in his own skin. Anxious almost. His head ached, a throbbing pain deep in his temples. Now he was awake, he was surprised he had been able to sleep at all. He needed to get up and do something, anything, to take his mind off the swirl of chaotic feeling in his head. It was as if all of the emotion he had felt in his short memory; fear, gratitude, panic, delight, doubt; were all clamouring for his attention and he couldn't find anyway to release them.

Ben decided he might as well give up on sleep entirely. As he started to climb out of bed, he suddenly realised his shirt was wet. Puzzled, he pulled it away from his neck and saw there was drying blood all down the front. What the blazes…?

He limped over to the duralumin pan he had been using as a mirror, and peered at his own face. There was blood crusted round his nose, mouth and beard. His nose must have been bleeding in his sleep. He frowned. That couldn't be normal.

Ben peered out round the main door into the dark and shadowy living area of the house. There was no sight of anyone around, and barely any light illuminated the translucent dome of the roof. It must be very early. Keen not to disturb anyone, Ben collected the spare shirt Shaarm had given him and quietly shuffled across the house to the wash room, his staff tapping loudly on the stone floor. It took him a while to figure out the 'fresher, as the controls were designed for someone twice as tall as him, and with half as many fingers. The 'fresher turned out to be sonic rather than water, but was better than he could have hoped for. He even managed to wash his hair. Afterwards, Ben attempted to rinse the blood from his shirt in the sink, although it took rather longer that he had hoped with his broken hand. He hung the wet shirt off a rail in the corner to drip.

Clean, dressed and now very awake, Ben knew he could not face going back in to his own room. Instead he began to explore the living area of the house. Some of the artworks on the walls were clearly done by the children, but there were other paintings which must have been Chana's works. They were colourful, textured and wildly abstract, but he found them to be well composed and soothing. The shelving units contained an odd mixture of electronic items, tools, toys and old fashioned bound books. He was curious, but didn't touch them. Handling real paper books without asking seemed wildly indecorous.

Ooouli's datapads were still scattered across the floor from last night, and for something to do, Ben took a seat on a cushion on the floor, and switched one on. The Kheelian written language was like nothing he had ever seen before, and didn't seem much chance he could understand it. The diagrams on the page were familiar however, and he knew they related to the principles of repulsor physics. He was reminded of the conversation they had been having yesterday; he had the knowledge of the subject at his fingertips once he was prompted, but could not have said how or why he knew it. Just
thinking about that made his headache worse.

The second datapad he reached for was exactly what he had been hoping to find. Ooouli’s Kheeli to Galactic Basic language textbook, and there was a small headset attached to listen to a spoken translation.

Engrossed in the text, Ben didn't notice the time passing until he heard movement in one of the side rooms. Grandmother came quietly in, wearing a pea green robe formed of many embroidered layers. Ben found the right phrase on the datapad, and then greeted her in her own language.

“Good morning, Grandmother.”

Grandmother started in surprise, and then offered him a smile of razor-sharp teeth.

“Good morning Ben.”

She followed this with a statement he didn't catch all of, but thought it was to do with knowing. She was asking him if he was learning the language, perhaps?

I am trying, he wanted to say, but it came out more like “I attempt.”

Grandmother smiled again, and turned back to the shelves. There was a comfortable silence for a while as she moved around the kitchen preparing food items. She bore no recognisable signs of age that he could see in comparison to the other adults. Her fur was as blue as Shaarm's, and she did not seem to be stooped or suffering any limitations to her movement. Perhaps the name was an honorific rather than necessarily linked to age. After all he didn't yet know how the Kheelians aged, or what their lifespan might be. After a while, Grandmother crossed over to his side of the room and offered him a cup, which he accepted gratefully. The drink tasted similar to the tea they had drunk with dinner yesterday, although this was chilled and sweeter.

“Thank you,” he said. She ran her hand through his hair in reply, and then asked a question that he didn't follow at all. She found the translator on the table, and asked Ben how he was feeling.

“I am good,” he said, and just at that moment, one of the doors off the living chamber swung open and a yawning Ooouli padded into the room with Tiki clinging sleepily to her back. Tiki was wearing a long nightshirt, but Ooouli was in a formal-looking robe and trousers of bottle green. She exchanged some words with Grandmother, before spotting Ben on the carpet.

“Ben!” She loped over and folded up on the floor next to him.

“Good morning Ooouli,” he said in her language, and Ooouli looked delighted. Tiki lifted her head up as she heard Ben's voice, and the raised her arms, sliding down her sister's back and onto the floor.

“Benben!” she announced and then slumped into his lap, just avoiding his healing leg, and burying her face sleepily into his shoulder. She weighed a ton. He put an arm around her and rubbed the fur on the back of her head affectionately.

“Someone needs to go back to bed,” he told her. “Sleep?”

“Ben! You learn!” Ooouli was delighted with his rather small efforts at speaking their language.

“I looked through your textbook,” he told her using the translator. “I hope you don't mind.”

“No, no! It good,” She was insistent; she would teach him Kheeli, and he could teach her Basic in
They started by looking through the datapad together with Ooouli reading a grammar lesson slowly out loud, but before long they had regressed to pointing at things around the room and naming them in both languages. Even Tiki perked up after a while and joined in with the Kheeli words, although she remained half sitting on Ben, fingers tangled into his beard. Ben had added a large number of new words to his vocabulary and Ooouli was still trying to pronounce the word 'table' when Shaarm, who Ben hadn’t even noticed entering the room, reluctantly interrupted to remind Ooouli that it was a school morning and they had to leave shortly for the town. Apparently yesterday had been the ten-day resting day when everyone was at home, but now Shaarm also had to go back to the surgery. The two of them gathered up Ooouli's textbooks, ate a rapid breakfast, stroked everyone's fur/hair goodbye, and then with the promise that they would do more learning later, Ooouli and Shaarm dashed out of the door.

Ben was left to play with Tiki, who finally seemed to have woken up a bit. She had fetched a puzzle of shaped plastoid blocks that apparently were designed to be fitted together into a frame, and they spent a peaceful half standard with Tiki passing him the pieces, and Ben fitting them in place under her direction. After a while, Chana entered the room through a side door, and spoke with Grandmother at the cooker. Within a few moments, they had both joined Ben and Tiki on the carpet, bringing with them a tray of foods, and a jug of ice-cold liquid, which turned out to be some kind of tangy syrupy juice.

"Ben!" Chana greeted him with a few pats to the neck and head. “You are well?”

Grandmother handed him a piece of fruit. After last night's experience with Kheelian food, Ben tasted it with extreme caution. It was floral and highly scented, with an odd soapy texture, but it didn't try and burn the inside of his mouth out, so he was more than content to eat it.

“I am very not bad,” Ben replied, smiling at his own lack of coherency. He was still learning after all, but that sentence had hardly been articulate. It did not seem to matter to Chana who was patting Ben's shoulders and back with delight. Until Shaarm returned, or Ooouli brought the translator back with her from school, they would have to make do with what rudimentary language they had between them.

Wondering where Pakat was as he hadn't been seen yet that morning, Ben tried to ask. Chana's reply mostly meant nothing to him, but he heard the word Kender, and assumed the other Kheelian was out on the moor. He remembered Shaarm had told Ben last night that her other husband worked up there.

By the end of breakfast, they had discovered three more food s Ben couldn't eat and one more thing he could; a crunchy, flavourless biscuit, which by the repetition of the word phuff from last night made him assume they were made of the same sort of stuff as the orange dumplings.

He insisted on carrying some of the breakfast items back into the kitchen for Grandmother when they were finished. Walking on two legs rather than three or four made carrying burdens much easier, even when he was using his walking stick with one hand. Grandmother led him through a door he hadn't been through yet into a long corridor lined with shelves and cupboards. The stone floor was suddenly colder under his bare feet, and he stepped out into a brightly lit, half-covered walkway. The partial roof was made of the same translucent white material as the main house, letting filtered light in. One side was open to a sunlight, walled garden area, in which grew hundreds of brightly-coloured plants laid out in high raised beds up to the far wall. There was a mechanism at one end of the covered walkway which Grandmother led him over to. She turned a long handle attached to a winch, and the mechanism began to wind. After a moment or two, water bubbled up, presumably
drawn from some great depth below the earth, and splashed into a broad stone bowl. Grandmother led him over to the sink and he handed her the dishes which she washed and then stacked in a small rack.

Before Ben could turn to go back into the house, Grandmother reached down and gripped the sides of his face firmly with both hands. He held still while she turned his head, peering critically into his eyes. After a moment or two, she made a humming noise and let go of his head.

“What is it?” Ben asked, a little uneasy. He was never sure how to interact with the elder at the best of times.

“Bad,” was all she would reply, and tapped his forehead. Then she turned away, and led him back into the house. He wasn't sure what she had meant by that, but it couldn't be good. First the memory loss, and now headaches and nosebleeds. Were his physical injuries just the start of his problems?

Back in the living quarters of the house, Tiki was now dressed in a brown tunic and trousers and Chana was doing up the fastenings on the front of her green coat. Chana himself had added a long yellow robe over his brown tunic and trousers, and there was a large backpack by the door. The two looked as if they were getting ready to leave. Chana held out Ben’s green woollen robe to him.

“Ben, go out?” Chana asked. Ben shook his head, not understanding. “You see Thet, Kender, Pakat...” he added.

“We are going out to the village? To Thet?”

“Yes, Ben,”

Ben was slightly anxious. He felt much better than he had, but he didn't know how far they were intending to walk. Although Chana surely would not have asked if he thought Ben could not manage it. And Grandmother too was pulling on a midnight blue coat over her robe so it seemed that she was going out as well. He really did not want to be left here on his own with his thoughts.

“Yes,” he nodded, “I would like to come, but I need some shoes.”

Another problem, of course. Kheelians did not wear shoes and Chana did not understand what he was asking for. Through gestures and guesswork, Ben eventually managed to communicate that he needed something for his feet. This did involved showing the soles of his feet to Tiki and Chana and letting them feel the difference between his skin and the Kheelians' own tough hides. Ben also discovered he was ticklish; not a distinguished trait he was certain. Grandmother realised first what it was he needed, and returned with several pieces of leather, a bundle of animal wool and a ball of string. Between them they bundled the wool around his feet, and then wrapped them with strips of leather. Ben then bound the string tightly over the leather to hold it in place.

Ben stood up cautiously, and tested his new footwear. It seemed adequate; his feet were warm for the first time in ages, and the tightly wrappings should protect his feet and ankles from the worst stones and twists. He smiled at the Kheelians and thanked Grandmother. They were ready to go.

As he stepped outside, Ben could see that the day could not have been more different to the one when he had awoken up on the moor. The small, dark yellow sun was burning in a clear lavender sky, accompanied by two huge moons which were bright and well defined. The air was crisp and clear, and seemed free of pollutants or chemicals. Ben, of course, had not yet seen the Kheelians' house in daylight, and as he stepped out through the large door, he turned back to look. The main part of the house was circular as he had thought, crouched in a grassy green hollow with grey stone walls and a domed roof of white plastoid. Leading off from the main dome were at least eight side
passages or rooms, some of which interconnected and some snaked off for some distance. He
couldn't see the walled garden he had been in earlier from here; it must be obscured behind the rest of
the buildings. The sails of a white wind turbine span lazily at the back of the complex.

He wandered on ahead of the others across a broad terrace of meadow grass in front of the house
which led up to the ridge at the edge of the dell. From here, the valley opened up and he could see a
scattering of dispersed farmsteads across the valley floor and clustered along the line of a narrow
road. Several had enclosed gardens or fences, and livestock animals were grazing in the larger fields
around. Beyond the village, the cliffs descended into crags and then into rolling green hills, dotted
with wind turbines. Far away, following the line of the roadway up the valley, he could see sunlight
glinting of metal and dark shapes. That must be the town of Tszaaf. Raising his gaze and turning
around, he took in the rest of the vista. The cliffs of the moor, dark and imposing, rose up some
distance away, and he could see the distant pillars of the rock stacks he had climbed up on the cliff
edge against the skyline. The line of the stone steps were just a distant shadow from here, but the
waterfall shone like dancing silver in the sunlight. The cliffs themselves were curved along the
horizon, enclosing the valley in a great crescent.

The group set off down towards the village, with Chana and Grandmother walking at the front,
talking quietly, but setting a slow pace on behalf of their small guest. Tiki insisted on holding Ben's
hand, even though she seemed to find balancing on three feet while walking more difficult than the
others. She generally seemed to be a quiet child, but occasionally she would burst into speech, or ask
him questions, mostly that he didn't understand or couldn't answer. A large insect with a shiny blue
carapace at the side of the road was a matter of great interest, and they had to stop for several minutes
while Tiki examined it. Ben considered how old she would be in relation to a Pechnar child; four
standard years at most, he would guess, depending on how quickly this species aged. That thought
made him wonder again if he had children of his own somewhere in the galaxy. He clearly liked
children and enjoyed teaching, but could he imagine being a father? The thought made his headache
throb behind his eyes.

After a turn and a half of walking, the fields and meadows on either side gave way to scattered
buildings, and they came to the outskirts of the village. Up close, he could see that the houses were
of a variety of styles and materials. Some were stone built, like Shaarm's family home, while others
were of duracrete, or even of baked mud bricks. Other structures seemed to be more temporary, built
of plastoid panels. Every house had a garden area of plants and vegetables grown in rows or up
trellises, and he noticed all had small wind turbines or solar generators in the garden plots. Self-
sufficiency seemed to be important here, although he did not know if it was through choice or
necessity. He saw no droids, and few transports.

At the third house they passed, a male Kheelian was working in the garden. He paused his digging,
greeting Grandmother with a bow of his long neck. The three adults exchanged a few words and
leaned over the fence to stroke each others' fur on their arms and heads in greeting. The male looked
around for Tiki, and his eyes fell on her and Ben. His double-take was almost comedic. He called
back towards the house and dashed through a gate. Behind him, a Kheelian woman came out of the
house, and joined him at the gate. Ben tried not to look frightened and uncomfortable as they reared
up above him, tugging gently at his hair and clothes. He felt small, and terribly vulnerable, but he
stood still, enduring. A short conversation ensued of which Ben followed almost nothing, although
from the tones of voice he imagined it went something along the lines of;

“What the blazes is that thing?”

“It's a Pechnar that turned up injured at our house. We've decided to keep it.”

“It's weird looking. Where are its parents?”
“We think it's full grown. Pechnar are just really tiny.”

“Why has it got no fur?”

And so on. After a while, Chana seemed to indicate that they had to move on, and the Kheelians reluctantly stopped pawing at him. Ben let go of the breath he hadn't realised he was holding, and his ribs twinged in protest. He hadn't counted on being such an object of interest in the village, although Shaarm had warned him that Pechnar were not known there. He wondered if he should have stayed back at the house. Tiki gripped his hand tightly and tugged a little. “Benben,” she said, encouragingly.

They continued on down the road and passed four more houses before suddenly they rounded a corner and came to a large palisade fence. It was taller than Chana would be standing on his back legs, and was built of linked duralumin posts, painted dark green. Ben stared at it in surprise; he hadn't noticed it when looking down at the village from the house. The defences seemed incongruous with all he had learned of the peaceful Kheelians.

“Chana,” Ben asked, pointing at the fence. “What is this?”

“On Kender,” the Kheelian said, struggling with how to express the words. “Animals live there. They were very...hmmm...not happy? Many came.”

Ben mused on this as they passed through a gateway in the fence and entered into the main village. Shaarm and Grandmother had mentioned dangerous creatures dwelling on the moor when he had first awoken. He wondered what it was that Pakat did on Kender, and if it was dangerous. It was certainly a serious-looking fence, but he had seen no other signs of defensive capability about the Kheelians. There were no weapons that he had seen, and there were a significant number of houses built outside the fence, Shaarm's included. Perhaps the threat was not so great, or was lesser than it had once been.

This part of the village seemed to be busier than the outskirts. The houses here were closer together, and the gardens rather smaller in size. They passed a number of Kheelians in the street, all of whom greeted Grandmother with respectful bows, and Chana and Tiki with pats, strokes and hugs. They all regarded Ben with astonishment and curiosity, although Chana, who seemed to have sensed his discomfort, said something which caused the Kheelians to limit their attentions to gentle pats of his head and shoulders.

Grandmother seemed to be a person of some note within the village. They went from house to house, with Grandmother conversing at length with the inhabitants, after they had all discussed Ben first, of course. He wasn't sure if she was taking or giving advice, gathering opinions, or merely checking the Kheelians' well-being, but sometimes they doubled back, returning to a previous residence to pass on some new development or discussion. After a while, Tiki began to fidget, clearly bored. Ben's hip and thigh were starting to ache. Chana spoke quietly to Grandmother, and leaving her to her discussions, he ushered the two of them outside the house, back into the day-lit street.

“Come,” he said. “Grandmother makes many words, yes?”

“Yes,” nodded Ben fervently. Tiki laughed, and clung onto Ben's hand.

“We get more food for Ben,” Chana said, and then followed it up with a sentence in Kheelian. Tiki agreed enthusiastically with whatever the suggestion was. Ben nodded.

Chana led them across a the road to another building. This one was constructed of pre-fabricated panels, and was a larger than most of the others. It also had a landspeeder parked outside, one of the
few Ben had seen. The inside of the structure was cool and dim, and after blinking his eyes a few times, Ben could see it that instead of another domestic house, this was some sort of large storeroom. The space inside was contained rows of shelves containing hundreds of different boxes and containers. Fresh vegetables and produce took up one half of the room, while the other held preserved foodstuff, fabrics, electronics, rope, tools, building materials, and a host of other items of all sorts, mostly looking half-used or recycled. There was a Kheelian at the back of the shop who was moving things around on shelves. He didn't come rushing over like the other Kheelians had, but smiled cheerily as he continued to move the crates. Chana led them over.

“Ben, this is Nenka,” Chana introduced him. “He is the son of my sister.”

Chana then switched languages, and Ben heard his name and 'Pechnar' and 'Shaarm', and words he now recognised as 'house' and 'wounded'. Nenka ran a hand through Ben's hair in greeting, and Ben patted his arm in response. Nenka's age was revealed by the colour of his fur; his mane and arm fur were golden yellow, but there remained youthful patches of white around his face and neck. A teenager, or young adult then.

A lengthy conversation between the two Kheelians began, with Chana taking muddied vegetables and pots out of the bag he had been carrying and placing them on the counter. There was what appeared to be some fierce haggling, followed eventually by an agreement, and the two of them went around the shop gathering a selection of items which were packed back into Chana's bag. Nenka gave Chana a hug, Ben a wink, and Tiki a bar of some sort of candy, and their shopping was done.

“To the water?” said Chana. Ben just nodded, not understanding but happy to follow. Chana led them slowly back through the village, stopping briefly at the house they had left Grandmother at to let her know they were going on ahead. They exited through the palisade, and then across the fields. They were heading in the direction of their house, but then Chana turned aside and they headed instead towards the distant waterfall. Wherever they were going, Tiki was excited, and started to pull on Ben's hand to hurry him up. He let go of her hand and gave her a gentle shove.

“You go on ahead if you want to!” he told her, tugging on her ear gently. “Don't let this old man slow you down.”

She laughed and scampered ahead a little way, only to pause and look back, to check he and Chana were still following. Chana called out something to her, and she trotted off.

“She like you very much,” said Chana to Ben.

“Yes,” he replied in Kheelian, “I make a great toy.” The growing ache in his head and leg made the comment sound more waspish than he intended.

Fortunately, Chana just laughed. “Yes, true. You are so small, like a doll.”

They rounded the corner, and were greeted by a magnificent sight. The little stream that poured over the cliff at the edge of the moors was falling on to the rocks before them, throwing up a plume of spray. It was not a great body of water; indeed, the broad channel at the top of the cliff edge suggested that the falls had at one time been massive. However, the stream such as it was fanned out as it fell, creating a wide curtain of splashing water. This gathered in a small pond, edged by mossy greenery and plant life, before trickling into a shallow stony bed and running down towards the village. Tiki was already hovering at the water's edge, looking back. Chana called out a permission, and she scrambled into the stream, laughing. This tranquil spot seemed to be their destination, and with great relief, Ben lowered himself down on a large rock. He had been walking or standing for many hours this morning, and his body was complaining.
Chana glanced at him with a concerned eye, but made no comment. Instead he opened the backpack and took out a few packets, laying them out on large flat stone. So this appeared to be a picnic. Ben hadn't noticed but he was also quite hungry.

They watched Tiki play at the brook's edge, splashing in the water, and before long, they were joined by Pakat and another Kheelian who appeared from the other side of the river. They must have come down from the moor. Ben watched the arrivals with curiosity; the new Kheelian who came with Pakat had fur that was dark purple in colour. Ben had not seen fur that colour on any of the Kheelians in the village and was at a loss as to what that signified. The new arrival was introduced to Ben as Porra, although the Kheelian looked distracted and did not react with surprise to see a Pechnar in Thet in the least. Chana gave Ben a small container of grool, which was worse cold than it had been hot, and three flat slices with a bready texture which tasted like the dumplings. Tiki also had the breadlike substance, but with a number of colourful cubes of vegetable. There was more of the cold tea in a bottle. The other adults helped themselves to the other foodstuffs laid out.

Chana and Pakat spoke amongst themselves for a while in that quiet voice that adults use around children who they hope will think the conversation too boring to listen in on. Ben thought they looked anxious.

"What has happened?" he asked.

Chana answered, in Basic. "The animals on Kender… they move."

"Here?" Ben glanced up at the cliffs, as if their arrival was imminent.

"No! Not. But they are not good. Not happy." Ben thought he understood, assuming 'not happy' meant some sort of serious dissatisfaction. The three adults were concerned. Ben rubbed his forehead, feeling a little spike of tension.

After the meal, Pakat and Porra said goodbye, and turned back towards the cliff steps. Their work day was clearly not over. Chana did not seem inclined to move, for which Ben was grateful, and the two of them sat in the sun and watched Tiki play. After sometime, two more children appeared, shortly followed by a third. This was obviously a well-known spot. The children greeted each other easily and then quickly entered into a game that seemed to involve trying to climb across the shallow water using the stones, although slipping and falling in seemed to be just as much fun. Chana produced a sheet of plastipaper from his pack, and began sketching. Ben had almost forgotten that he was an artist.

Of course, it wasn't long before the children caught sight of Ben, and came over for a look. Tiki spoke very firmly to one of them who had leaned in close to Ben and looked as if he were about to prod him in the belly. Ben smiled and tried to look friendly.

"Hello," he greeted them in their own language, which produced great joy from his audience. They talked at him and poked and patted his skin a little curiously. Ben sat patiently, and eventually the children returned to their game.

Ben wasn't really sure how much time had passed, but eventually Tiki came over and said she was tired. Chana put away his sketchbook, and they packed up the remaining food items. Ben stood up and was forced to sit straight back down again as pain instantly flamed into life in his leg. He had rested too long and everything had seized up. If he could remember any curses he would have used one. Instead he was forced to merely grit his teeth, and push his fist into his hip.

"Ben, okay?" Chana was asking.

"I'm alright," Ben said, and stood up again. He managed only a couple of limping steps before he had to stop again. His hip felt like it was on fire.
“Here,” said Chana. He swung the pack round until it was hanging on his front, and hunkered down in front of Ben, clearly inviting Ben to climb up on to his back.

“I can't!” Ben protested, a little embarrassed. “I'm far too heavy to be carried about. I can walk. I'll be alright in a moment.”

Chana snorted. “You! Not so. Lighter than Tiki! Get up.”

Ben remained on the floor, feeling ridiculous. Chana sighed.

“Get up!”

Knowing he really wasn't going to get far on his stupid leg and he would only be slowing them down, Ben reached up for Chana's shoulders.

“Here,” Chana showed Ben where to fit his foot in above the Kheelian's leg joint, and Ben climbed up. He got a grip on the warm fur, and just about had time to tuck his cane under his arm and brace himself before Chana rose up onto his four feet.

“Not bad!” said Chana, and set off. It took Ben a while to get used to the rocking motion of the Kheelian's walk, but he found if he leaned back and relaxed he could keep his balance pretty well. Even with Tiki's shambling walk, they moved much faster without having to wait for Ben, and it wasn't long before the house came in to sight over a rise. They reached the front door and Chana sat carefully up on his haunches. Ben slid down, landing on his feet with a jolt. Tiki took his hand and lead him into the house while Chana disappeared around the side of the buildings, toward the garden.

“Ben,” said Tiki, and tugged at the front of her coat. He undid the fastenings for her, and then pulled off his own coat. It was pleasantly warm in the house after the fresh wind outside.

“I take,” said Tiki taking Ben's coat, and proudly carried it off towards his room. Ben followed her to the back of the house, and then diverted off to the washroom. By the time he emerged, Tiki was standing in the living space, watching him limp across the room. She looked upset, and it occurred to him that she probably didn't understand why he was in pain again when he had been well that morning. He smiled at her and tried to look unconcerned.

“Do not frown, Tiki,” he said. “Where is Benben?” The mention of her doll cheered her up, and she disappeared into the room where the girls slept to fetch him. While she was gone, Ben lowered himself down on the floor in the living room with relief. His head and hip throbbed with every movement he made, and he could tell that he had overdone things. Chana came in through the garden corridor, and saw his expression.

“Ben, you are bad? So sorry.”

“I am alright,” Ben said with smile. “I enjoyed the walk.”

Tiki reappeared, and Chana spoke with her as he moved things around in the kitchen area. She brought her doll over to Ben and tucked him under the man's arm with intense concentration. Then she gathered up some cushions and dragged them over, pushing on Ben's shoulder.

“You want me to lie down?” He gave in, and lay down on his left side on the cushions she had brought. His injuries twinged at the movement, but lying down did seem to help. Tiki smiled at him, stroking his hair. Chana came over, and knelt down at his side.

“Try this,” he said, holding up a thick green square, like a medical dressing, about the size of the Kheelian's hand. He peeled a film layer off one side, and gave the item a shake.
“Where does it hurt?” He asked. Ben gestured to his side and hip. Chana lifted Ben's tunic and smoothed the fabric patch over his skin. Instantly, a soothing warmth flooded into the joint, and he almost groaned with relief. Chana smiled, pulling Ben's clothing back in around him, and adding a blanket, tucking it up to his chin. Tiki sat down, leaning against her father, sucking her thumb. Ben extracted the doll from under his arm and inspected his namesake. It was probably once red in colour, although it was so patched and repaired it was difficult to tell. One of its four limbs had been reattached at some point in its history. The threads of its joints were coming undone, but its face was still smiling. Ben felt he might have more in common with it than Tiki had intended. He held the doll out to the little girl.

Tiki took it, shifted a little to get comfortable and then murmured something to Chana. He smiled, and looked at Ben. “She wants me to tell you the story of Benborena.”

“Benborena?”

“He is a Kheelian folk hero. Tiki named her doll after him.”

Ah, the original Benben. Ben smiled. So he was named after a folk hero and a doll? This name was getting crowded.

Chana pulled out a book from the shelves. Ben caught a glimpse of bright, gaudy pictures before he rested his eyes. At his side, Chana launched into a familiar tale; of Kheelians under threat from a terrible fate, and Benborena, the knight in shining armour, whose destiny it was to save them all. It was probably a story that, which a few variations, was known to every child in the Galaxy. Ben was asleep within minutes.

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Chapter End Notes

One day I will end a chapter with something other than people falling asleep. It is not this day.
Another slow chapter for Ben but next week shit starts to gets real.

Thank you again to everyone to who left comments. Your kind words very much made my week.
Metal walls and metal floor. They seep any warmth from the room and radiate a bone-chilling cold, but he stopped shivering a long time ago. It is growing increasingly difficult to keep his focus, but he breathes slowly in and out, striving to hold the shredded tatters of his mind and his will in balance.

How long has he been here? It does not matter. Focus. Hold the walls in place. They will get nothing from him.

Footsteps echoing on metal walls, and a blow that snaps his head and rocks him against his restraints.

“I grow tired of waiting.”

“I am so terribly sorry.” Ben's voice is cracked, barely more than a whisper. “I'm sure you're a busy man. Don't let me keep you.”

Another blow. He spits blood.

“You are beginning to bore me. It's time to try something else.”

There is a distinctive vhooom sound that makes his stomach clench, and a blue light bursts into life. He wants the lightsaber so badly, but he could never reach it, restrained as he is. Taunting him with the chance of freedom, the light flickers off the man's face. The eyes are wide with a sick madness.

“How hot does a lightsaber get, do you think?” says the other man. “Hot enough to melt metal. Certainly hot enough to melt skin.”

“This is pointless,” Ben says. “You know I won't tell you anything.” His mouth is drier than bone, his eyes follow the blue blade like an obsession. It tilts closer to him, and he smells burnt hair as it dips towards his head. Sweat runs down his face.

“Shall we find out what your skin melting feels like?” the man whispers, smiling, and then nods to someone behind him.

Firm hands grab Ben's head and force it to one side. He arches, jaw clenched, every muscle tighter than a wire, trembling against the restraints. The painfully bright blue light swings into his field of vision, plasma crackling with heat, and those mad, mad eyes behind.

“Ready to burn for your silence?” The man says, and presses the white-hot blade against the side of Ben's throat.

Someone screamed. Ben convulsed, arching in agony and threw himself forward. He clutched at his neck. Blood was spurting from his nose and pooling in his throat and mouth. Hands were holding him, restraining him, and he threw them off, fighting madly. He felt as if he were choking, and he tore at his throat, desperate. The hands were back, snatching at his wrists. He kicked out wildly, but his feet were held too, and he could only sob and choke on blood, and throw his head back. Sounds
were wildly distorted in his ears; he could hear crying and shouting, and then a calm, clear voice said;

“Ben. You must stop. You are frightening the children.”

The tension suddenly rushed out of him, and he felt his limbs go limp, even as his heartbeat raced. Someone gathered him up, and lifted him securely and he felt the world sway as he was carried away. The person carrying him hummed softly with a soothing vibration, and Ben was set down on something cool. The blood he had swallowed was curdling in his stomach, and he could smell burnt flesh. Ben felt himself go rigid, he tried to mumble a warning, but then he was throwing up bile and blood all over the floor. His helper didn't pause in his soothing humming but carefully held a basin to his chin, and then laid Ben down on his side on a cool surface. A cloth was pushed up against his nose, and his hand was moved up to hold it. The other person moved away.

Ben lost track of time for a little while, and the next thing he knew, someone was shaking his shoulders, and then pulling him into a sitting position. He blinked his eyes, and Shaarm and Pakat swam into focus. They were talking together in soft, anxious tones. He was in the living area of the Kheelians' house, sitting on the edge of the stone table. Pakat was supporting his shoulder, looking worried, but Shaarm was as calm as ever. She took the bloody cloth from Ben's limp hand, and replaced it with a fresh one, bringing Ben's hand up to his nose again and clamping it there. He tilted his head forward to stop the blood running into his mouth.

“Are you awake now, Ben?”

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, but the movement sent little tendrils of agony down his neck and into his jaw. He made an involuntary sound of distress and tightened his jaw.

“What happened?” he muttered around the cloth, just aware enough to speak in the right language.

“You had a nightmare,” Shaarm said. “Do you want to tell us about it?”

“No!” The response was emphatic and immediate. He closed his eyes, trying not think about flickering blue light, the horror and the madness.

Shaarm reached out. “Very well. But you need to let go, Ben, so that I can look at your neck.” She pulled at his other hand which he hadn't noticed was still clamped to the side his throat. With her encouragement, he loosened his stiff fingers. Pakat took his hand and gripped it while Shaarm tilted his head back gently. He looked up to the ceiling and concentrated on pinching his nose as Shaarm peeled the dressings off his neck.

“Yes, it is bleeding,” she said quietly. “I will need to clean it before I can dress it again.” He closed his eyes once more and tried to ignore the sting and burn as she worked on the ruptured blisters and charred skin he had torn at in his nightmare. His hand moved of its own accord a few times to push her away, but Pakat held it firmly and wouldn't let go.

Ben suddenly remembered that someone had been crying.

“The girls!” He made to leap from the table, but Shaarm held him firmly.

“The girls are fine, Ben. They were just frightened by the sound of the screaming. Chana is with them.”

Ben felt the full horror of what had just happened rise up to smother him with fear and guilt and dread. “I'm so sorry!” He managed, through choking breaths. “I didn't mean to scare them, I”
“Ben!” Pakat gave him a little shake.

“It is all right, Ben,” Shaarm was saying. “We understand, and no one is angry. Breathe slowly.”

He really did try to, but he was shaking hard, and his breath was too caught up behind painful ribs. His eyes were wet with tears. Ben felt like he was coming apart; all the emotion bottled up inside him with nowhere to go. Suddenly he found himself enfolded tightly in someone's arms. He dropped his head down onto a broad shoulder, and just let himself breathe, let the simple comfort of being held push down the panic and dread that was coursing through him. A soft hand was smoothing down his hair. After a few minutes, he pulled away and Pakat let him go.

“I'm okay,” Ben said, at their looks of concern. “I'm all right. Sorry.”

His nose finally seemed to have stopped bleeding, which is just as well or Pakat would be covered in it by now. Shaarm's hand had moved from his hair to supporting the back of his neck.

“Here.” She handed him a damp wash cloth. Ben wiped his face, washing some of the drying blood from his face and beard, and the salt from his eyes. Shaarm peered into his face.

“May I carry on?”

He nodded, and she resumed dressing the burns on his neck. It took her a while to cleanse the wound of blood and pus, and he found himself sinking into misery. He had frightened the girls, awakened the whole household in the middle of the night, and had almost fallen into a full blown panic-attack, all over a dream...But his mind kept going back to the blue,blue light that burned, and those mad eyes.

*Are you ready to burn for your silence?*

Who *was* he?

“We need to talk, Ben.”

It was early the next morning. Shaarm had carried him back to his sleeping pallet after she had finished dressing his neck, but he had not slept again that night. He was not sure anyone else had either. The girls had been quiet and subdued at breakfast that morning, but they were out in the garden now with Grandmother, and he could hear laughter through the halls. Children recovered quickly. Shaarm had cornered him then and made him sit at the table while she checked the burns on his neck. He had apparently torn at the wound in his nightmare and damaged the new skin that was forming under the cauterised burn. Shaarm re-dressed the injury, and then stuck a green patch, this time radiating cold, over the dressing. When she had not moved to help him down from the seat afterwards, Ben realised she wanted to talk. Pakat and Chana were hovering nearby, putting items away in cupboards or on the shelves. They were clearly to be part of the discussion too, but were trying not to crowd him.

“Do you not have to go to work?” he asked Shaarm.

“I have told them that there is an emergency and I will be in later. Ooouli as well,” Shaarm answered, “and do not try to change the subject.”
He smiled, a little.

“We are very worried Ben,” she said. He nodded, swallowing, and turned the earthenware cup round in his hands.

“I know. I am sorry that I have brought this to your home.”

“Make amends,” Chana suggested, “by telling us what you dreamed about.”

Ben shook his head instantly. “No.”

She sighed. “You dreamed about your injuries, correct? About being hurt?”

“Yes,” he conceded.

“Ben,” Shaarm was looking overly calm. The two husbands had stopped still, no longer pretending to be busy. “When we treated your wounds, there were some that may have been caused by an accident. A fall, perhaps. Your ribs, the internal injuries...But there were others….Ben, we think someone may have hurt you on purpose. In Basic you would say...torture.”

The Kheelians looked at him as if unsure what his reaction was going to be.

Ben nodded, carefully, rubbing his chin through his beard. His fingers brushed the bandaging on his neck. “Yes, I know. I came to the same conclusion myself when I woke up on the moor. I had almost decided not to come down to the village when I saw the lights in case it was where I had escaped from.”

Pakat especially looked shocked and a little upset at that.

“We are not violent,” Chana said, quietly. “We defend ourselves if we must, but one Kheelian does not do violence to another. Not any more.”

“I know that now, and it is admirable,” Ben said, soothingly. “But not all peoples are the same, I think. There is much danger and darkness in the galaxy.”

“Listening to you speak of violence and darkness, of torture...it is as if the war had come here after all,” Pakat looked sad.

“The war?”

“There is a terrible war engulfing much of the galaxy,” Shaarm explained. “Many planets have been destroyed and many people suffer. It is a war about power, between those who want to stay in the republic, and those who want to leave.”

“And which side are you on?” Ben asked.

“We are neutral. We govern ourselves and do not travel into the stars. Years ago, our planet was engulfed in a terrible civil war. We survived, and since the peace was forged, all Kheelians abhor violence and pursue only peace. I have a former colleague,” she added, seemingly out of the blue. “He works in the city, helping people who have been in accidents, on the roads or trains for instance, or in a fire. He helps them not to be afraid and to feel whole again. I told him about you, and what we guessed had happened to you. He said that talking about anything you could remember might help. That your missing memories might come back if you can tell us anything you dream of.”

Ben smiled sadly, and said; “I can't,” but what he meant was I won't. The Kheelians were peaceful,
caring and gracious, and he had come crashing into their lives. The best kindness he could do them in return was not to drag them into the horrors of his.

“I understand,” she said, but he doubted that she did. “I would like to take you to my surgery at Tszaaf soon, now that you are able to walk. We have very good medical equipment there, and I would like to check your leg and organs, and run a scan of your nervous system. Without an identity, getting your treatment will be difficult….we can try next week when many staff will be away. But even though you seem to be healing now, you do not seem...well. And your memories do not return. Perhaps it is the shock of the torture. We found no head injury, although it remains possible that there is some other underlying cause, like a tumour. But I feel that your captors, somehow, did this.”

It was Ben's turn to sigh now. “Yes,” he admitted. “I think you are right. My head feels…strange. I think they must have done something to me a bit more serious than just breaking a few fingers.”

Chana winced at his casual tone. “Forgive me...” the Kheelian said. “You do not seem very concerned by what has happened to you.”

“Concerned? I am terrified.” Ben admitted. “But I can see that my pain is in the past and cannot be changed. I must be mindful of the present, and therefore now I am more frightened about what they wanted.”

The Kheelians looked at each other, puzzled.

“Pechnar are complicated,” he tried to explain. “Some are peaceful, yes, but others are cruel, or driven to cruelty to achieve a goal. I do not think they hurt me for just for sport. The dream I had. It was a memory, and I—” Ben paused, unwilling to carry on. “I had something they wanted.”

“Credits?” Chana guessed, trying in vain to picture what cruel men might hurt others for. “Power?”


“I am frightened of what I told them, I am worried as to why I knew anything of value in the first place, and I am terrified of what my weakness might mean for others.”

“But how do you know that you told them anything?” Shaarm said. “Perhaps they changed their minds? They did bandage the wound in your leg,” She did not look convinced even as she said it.

“But they did not treat it,” Pakat reminded them all. “It was bandaged to stop the bleeding, but they did not take the metal out.” He looked sickened. “Maybe they were just trying to keep you alive for long enough.”

Ben nodded. “I am afraid that you are right. I do not think I would still be alive if—” He stopped, suddenly. A horrible thought had come into his mind. A horrible, terrible, desperate thought.

“Ben?” Chana asked, worried. “What is it?”

“Oh,” said Pakat, who seemed to have come to the same realisation. “Oh.”

“You were saying you would not be alive if you had told them,” Chana said, trying to follow their logic. “But you are alive, so therefore you told them nothing. But that is good, yes?”

“Yes,” said Shaarm, looking uncertain. “Except it means that whoever took Ben did not get what they wanted.”

“I thought I had been running,” Ben said, “When I woke on the moor. I seemed to remember I had
been running, but I had no shoes.”

“You escaped…” Pakat concluded.

“Wait,” said Chana with alarm. “Are we saying that they might still be looking for Ben? That someone could follow him?”

“Let us hope not,” said Shaarm firmly. “And even if they were hunting him, I do not see that they could track him here. His residence here has not been registered with the authorities, unless we report it or he receives medical treatment. We are in the middle of nowhere, even beyond the end of the railway line. Who would search here? More than that, we do not even know how Ben got here.”

“It is unfortunate that there are not more Pechnar.” Pakat frowned. “You are too distinctive. Everyone in Thet knows about you by now, and they will tell others.”

“I should leave,” Ben said, feeling as if ice had been poured into his stomach. “If there is any chance that they could-”

“You will not! Do you think we would cast you aside the moment that there was the slightest suggestion of danger?” It was the first time Ben had seen Shaarm angry, and it was an intimidating sight. “We are peaceful, not cowards! You will stay, until you are healthy, or until you freely choose to leave us. You will not be driven out, or taken from us! I will not allow it.”

Humbled, he bowed his head, realising he had said something wrong. “I did not mean to suggest such a thing. I apologise.”

“I accept,” she said, straight away, and stroked his hair to indicate her forgiveness. Chana and Pakat crowded closer, patting his shoulders and back, and Shaarm's fur. No-one spoke for a minute or two.

“I am pleased that some of your memories are returning to you,” Shaarm said, quietly. “It suggests that the damage may not be permanent. I hope you remember something that you feel you can tell us.”

“I think perhaps there are some things I would be better off never to remember,” Ben said, feeling hollowed out. “My old life does not seem to have been one that I should want to go back to.” The conversation had drained him entirely, and he felt old and tired. They looked at him in silence for a moment.

“There are many things about you which we do not understand, Ben,” Pakat said. “But every living thing in the galaxy has its worth, and you are quite unique. Do you not realise that you have been speaking our language fluently all morning? You learned it in three days.”

Ben stared at him in astonishment. “But I do not…” he stopped, frowning, because the words did not come out in Basic. He was indeed speaking Kheeli.

“I did not notice,” he said, slightly disquieted.

“Your accent is truly terrible,” said Chana, with a smile, “but it is better than my Basic, I am sure.”

“I am sorry, but I must go,” Shaarm said, “Or Ooouli's teachers will be furious. Ben, you must rest. There are more heat and cold packs in the kitchen if your injuries pain you, and Chana has laid out some of your food in the cooler. But today you are to do no walking or carrying. And do not let Tiki make you play with her for too long. You are only to rest, and not to think or worry.”

He nodded, but he did not think there was much chance of that.
The day passed much as Shaarm had decreed. She and Ooouli were out, and Pakat was tied up with his work worries for much of the time, and was either closeted away in the house somewhere, or up on the moor. For their part, Chana and Grandmother took Shaarm's sanctions seriously, and Ben was allowed only to walk between his room, the living area and the washroom. He spent several turns playing quietly with Tiki, but it wasn't long before they had gone through all her puzzles and picture books, and were both bored stiff. Grandmother took her out for a long walk after lunch, leaving Ben alone in the house 'to rest'. He, slightly rebelliously, walked out through the house to the garden. He explored it thoroughly, investigating every tool, every variety of plant in their beds, and the irrigation system drawn from the well's deep waters, and the wind-powered generator. That took up one turn.

He went and lay down in his room, to sleep perhaps, but he just ended up looking at the ceiling and doing the two things Shaarm had told him not to do. Think and worry.

Pakat said he had learned their language in three days, but that could not be true. For one thing, many of the words in their conversation that morning; violence, cruelty and war; those he had certainly not learned from Ooouli's text book. He was certain now that he had known how to speak Kheeli already. It was just concerning that, yesterday, he could not remember that. He was still having a great deal of difficulty with the Kheelian written language though – he had not been able to read any of Ooouli's books that did not come with a translation. And Chana had said his accent was terrible. So it seemed clear that he probably did not come from here. Perhaps he was from Tszaaf or a similar town, or even from the City where Pechnar were populous. He must have a job which meant he had dealings with the Kheelians enough that he knew their language but did not need to write it often. It seemed like a likely solution to the riddle, but solving it did not bring with it much in the way of relief, or satisfaction.

He closed his eyes, and tried to do what Shaarm had said. Tried to block out a spiralling wave of feeling and a thousand unanswered questions and fears. Attempted to access some kind of harmony and balance that came deeper than conscious thought. There is no emotion, he told himself. Only peace. All he got was another nosebleed.

After what seemed like an afternoon which lasted forever, the family returned. Dinner that evening was as near a perfect event as he could picture. He could understand and join in the conversation for the first time, and he did actually feel improved for his enforced rest. Everyone’s fears and doubts of the previous night seemed to have been been put aside, and there was music and food and laughter. Chana had composed a poem, and he tested it out on the family. Chana really was an artist; even though he still didn't understand all the language, Ben's mind was whisked away by the skill of the words to a far off place in a swirl of linguistic colour and motion. They all cheered and applauded uproariously when Chana had finished reading, and at Shaarm's insistence, he read out several other pieces which seemed to be family favourites. Even Grandmother stopped her recitation from the red-bound tome to listen. After the meal was was over, Ben spent a while working with Ooouli on her Basic. She had an exam in a few days that she was practising for, and had come along tremendously. Ben enjoyed teaching her, but too soon Shaarm was telling the girls to bid him goodnight. Ben sat for a while and listened to the adults talk about the events of the village and the town, of Shaarm's colleague who had been accepted to publish in a prestigious academic journal, on the price of Ooouli's school robes in comparison to last season. Ordinary, beautiful, wonderful, everyday things, all a world away from mysterious injuries, torture and tattered memories.
Then night came, and he was back in his room, lying on his bed in his sleeping clothes, staring up at the curved ceiling and wondering what he was going to do. Why was he here, in this house, in this village? Could he stay here? Should he? If not, where else could he go?

Unbidden, Ben's thoughts turned inexorably back to the nightmare. His one memory of the time before he was here, and it was one he could hardly bear to examine. As with the nature of dreams, much of the detail had gone from his mind, but the emotions remained. He had felt fear and pain and dread, and more oddly, resignation. No, perhaps that was not the word...Acceptance. Ben had felt acceptance that he was being tortured, and determination to hold out as long as he could, for...what? He wasn't sure. But he remembered speaking; his own voice was unafraid and more, he had been sarcastic, throwing out dry witticisms at his enemy's expense. What sort of life had he led that even a torture chamber provoked amusement?

But more than the fear and horror, his own strange sense of humour, more even than the mad eyes, he remembered a single word.

And that word was *lightsaber*.

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Chapter End Notes

TBC, new chapter coming soon.

Big love to you all for your comments.
Two more days went by. Ben rested and ate and slept and rested some more. It was, by his count, seven days since he had arrived in Thet, and inactivity was making him want to tear his hair out. He had seen little of his hosts except in the evenings. On the eighth day, the third since his nightmare, Shaarm, Pakat and Ooouli were at work and school, Chana had gone out to share his new poem, and Grandmother and Tiki were visiting some of the other village children. Ben was left entirely alone and to his own devices. Although, as Shaarm had firmly instructed, said devices came with strict limitations, and essentially comprised resting and very short walks. Ben was not to leave the house under any circumstances, short of an actual fire. Ben had tried not to let his frustration show. Convalescence, it seemed, did not suit him.

Keen to do something productive with his forced downtime, Ben had set himself to learning the written language of the Kheelians. He had been making some progress, but it was just not as quickly as he would like. Irritated again by his own lack of patience, Ben abandoned the task by mid-morning in frustration.

Shaarm's psychologist colleague had apparently suggested that drawing or painting might be a way to access Ben's buried memories, and Chana had left out some art materials for him to try. Not feeling particularly positive about the attempt, Ben had made a few token swirls on the page. He was not shocked when the activity caused no new memories to be miraculously unlocked. His dreams over the last few days had been only of the family and the house in Thet, or of his trek across the moor. He did not dream of the metal room again, but Ben did not think that was necessarily a sign of improvement. His head ached almost constantly and he had three more nosebleeds.

Ben felt like he was at his wits end when a humming at the door around midday heralded the return of Pakat.

“Please give me something to do!” Ben implored the Kheelian the moment he was through the door.

Pakat laughed, setting down his equipment. “You are not bored, are you? How did your painting go?”

“Terribly,” Ben sighed. “I definitely was no artist in my former life, I can assure you. But there must be something I can do around the place. Just for a turn or two. I won't tell Shaarm if you don't.”
The Kheelian smiled. “Well, first you can eat the midday meal with me. And then...has someone showed you how to use the datastream yet?”

“Datastream?”

“Yes, most homes do not have one, but we have connection through Shaarm's work. You could access most of the collected knowledge of our people from there, if you were interested. Perhaps we can find something in there that will spark off your memories.”

Ben was elated. “I am most certainly interested. Would you show me? I am making some progress learning to read, but something a bit more engaging than Tiki’s books would help. I would be most intrigued to learn more about the Kheelians.”

“Very good. Food first, and then I will show you how to get on to the system and make a search. You will have to use my Ident access details for now, until you can get some of your own.”

Those last words were just a casual aside, but they hung in Ben's mind as he and Pakat prepared a small lunchtime meal. If he was going to live on this world, he would need an identity. The Kheelians clearly had a fairly sophisticated societal structure – he had heard mention of healthcare and currency, there was employment, transportation, Oouuli's schooling... All of those things invariably came with a form of citizen registration, and using those services left traces. Shaarm had said that they had not yet informed the authorities that Ben had been living at their house. Who knew what sort of registration process that might involve. But looking at it another way; if he belonged in this country, then someone must have a record. A report of a missing person, perhaps, if there was some form of law enforcement agency as Shaarm's words suggested, and if he had someone to miss him. Unpaid bills or fees, or an even unclaimed transport. But, there was still a lingering fear in his mind. That voice that on the moor had told him to run run run and don't look back. He was still in danger, but whether that was from the person who had captured him or from some other menace, he wasn't certain. Perhaps he was even a criminal, who had been lawfully detained, and would be immediately returned by those authorities to the metal room. Perhaps he did not belong on this planet at all.

“Have you had any success with your work problem?” Ben asked as they sat down to eat, to get his mind off that disconcerting line of thought.

“Work problem?” Pakat looked confused.

“You work on the moor, isn't that right? You had seemed to have some recent concerns.”

“Oh, I see,” the Kheelian nodded. “Well, I am afraid it cannot really be resolved. We can only monitor the situation.”

“Is there something wrong? You are an ecologist, is that the right word?”

“Yes, that is right. My job is to work with the new wind farms and solar farms we need. We are suffering from something of an energy crisis at the moment as our population grows but our resources do not, and the river is drying up. I came here to study the impact of the wind farms on the ecosystems of the moor. The problem is the narms- the creatures who live on the moor. They are not indigenous to that area you see, they came down from the mountains about five hundred years ago when the climate started to change, looking for food. They are incredibly territorial, and it is quite fascinating how the smaller predators have adapted to- Well, I can get carried away with my subject, I am afraid.”

“No, go on.” Ben was fascinated. This was the most he had ever heard Pakat say.
“Do you know what narms are? No? They are four-legged animals, with small heads and necks like a Pechnar, but large powerful jaws. They have long spines in green or brown. There is a theory that Kheelians and narms share a common ancestry – quite fascinating. Anyway, they are interesting in their own way but can be quite vicious to other species. They used to attack the villages up until about thirty years ago, looking for food. Times were more desperate then, for everyone.”

“So you built the palisade fence?” Ben guessed.

Pakat clarified. “It was a strategic measure constructed in the War, but it proved its use since. In case of a large group attack, the livestock and houses will be easily protected behind the fence. The numbers of the narms have dropped significantly since then and they have not been thought a threat to us for many years. The village expanded beyond the fence, about ten years ago.”

“And now?”

“We are not sure what happened, but the narms have been growing bolder and bolder over the past few months. I have been trying to work out why their behaviour has changed so radically. In the past week we have heard of narms killing livestock out in the fields, and yesterday it was reported that a pack had attacked a child in a village on the other side of the moor. They are not a threat to us individually, but in large numbers they could do some damage. They are quite small you see. About the height of a small Kheelian child.”

About my height then, thought Ben. I have a very bad feeling about this.

“You told Chana you woke up on the moor,” Pakat had put down his spoon and was looking at Ben intently. “I do not suppose you can remember anything about what you saw?”

Ben shrugged, sipping his tea. “Yes, a little. But I am certain I did not see anything like you describe.”

“That is fine, I would be interested in anything you can remember. Did you see any creatures, or animal tracks at all?”

Ben thought. “No, I don’t...Oh, wait, yes, there were two birds. I remember. I...woke up, lying on my face in the bog in one of the river gullies. I realised I was injured. After I climbed onto the bank, I could see the rocks which stand on the cliff edge in the distance. At the time I though they might be buildings, so I headed towards them.”

“I do not suppose you know which direction you walked?”

Ben shook his head. “The sun was behind the clouds.”

“Wait a moment,” Pakat leapt up and disappeared into one of the sleeping rooms. He quickly returned with a small palm-sized holoprojector, and placed it in the middle of the floor. A huge topographic hologram map of the moor flickered into life, filling the room from wall to wall. Ben slid down from his box-seat and landed up to his waist in it. Pakat flicked his fingers and the map contracted slightly, now stretching only across the open area. The Kheelian span the map round with a twist of his hand until the rock towers and the waterfall were laid out before them in miniature.

“Well, here are the rock stacks,” Pakat moved and arm and the projected rocks shot past them, until they were standing out in the moor, shimmering blue. At this scale, the thousand water gullies were just visible, like ripples on sand. “What else did you see?”

Ben considered. “There was nothing significant until I came to a stream. There was black earth, white rocks...and a huge tree stump on the edge of the riverbed where it went passed around a bend.”
“I know the place!” Pakat was looking excited. “Grandfather Kender, they call it. The last tree on the moor. Here...”

He manipulated the map, and it rushed past them at great speed until they were looking into a tiny scale version of the place Ben remembered.

“Yes, that is where I saw the birds,” Ben added. “Two, nesting in the bushes I think. They were brown, but I don't remember anything else about them. Oh, yes, the sun did come out briefly, just as it was setting. It was behind me as I looked towards the rocks.”

“Good!” Pakat made an quick calculation on a datapad. “Sunset was at 19 turns 21 on the day we found you. We can tell where know where you were, and when.”

Ben started to feel the same excitement.

“We know that then you headed to the Grey Kings- that is to say, the rock pillars on the cliff edge. Did you stop at all?”

Ben folded his arms, rubbing his beard with his right hand as he considered. “No, I don't think so. I couldn't have been walking very fast though. By the time I reached the rocks it was almost fully dark. I climbed up to have a look around, and I could see the lights of the village, but not the cliff edge. I don't really remember what happened after that, but I think I must have followed the river to the waterfall, and found the stairs.”

“Fully dark...let us say about 21 turns,” murmured Pakat, tapping at the datapad. “Grandmother found you on the path by the house at 15 past 23 turns, which means it took you two complete turns to climb down the stairs and follow the road. That sounds about accurate.”

Ben nodded, unsure if it did or not. Pakat stood, and gestured to the map, which flew past them again, until it slowed to a stop at the point by the river and the tree stump. “I think we can say that before this point, given your injuries, you could not have gone faster than the speed of half a length per standard, which is how quickly you moved between Grandfather Kender and the Grey Kings.”

“Slower, I should say,” Ben added. “I did not pick up a stick to use as a crutch until the river, so it was harder going before that.”

Pakat nodded, and spun the map again. “You said the sun was under cloud when you woke? The sun was out in the morning that day... it was not until around 70 after 16 turns that it clouded over. If we assume you woke up and started to walk in a more or less straight line towards the river, that means you woke up somewhere...here.”

The Kheelian clicked, and then waved his hand. A golden light shimmered into life. It followed after the motion of his fingers and highlighted a narrow arc across the map. Ben stared at the area, his heart pounding. Was somewhere in that place the spot where he had first woken? The ground where his life as he knew it had begun, as if the moor itself had suddenly brought him into being. Was there an answer to his mystery, somewhere in that shimmering light? Ben was startled from his introspection by Pakat. The Kheelian's attention had been drawn away from the highlighted area, and he was staring intently beyond it at a distant place, out in heart of the moor.

“What is it?” Ben asked.

In answer, Pakat drew the hologram closer, and expanded the area that had caught his interest. There was something there. A dark shape, out in the marsh. The image flickered, distorted by the scale.

“What is it?” Ben asked again. “Is it another rock outcrop?”
“I know this moor very well,” answered Pakat slowly. “I have worked here for fifteen years, and there is nothing in that area. It is flat, open moor. This image is formed from data from our satellites. It is from three days ago.”

They both stared at the flickering shape on the moor, hearts racing.

“What are the chances,” Ben murmured, “that two strange things should appear on an area of deserted moor at the same time and their appearance not be related?”

“Very low, my friend,” said Pakat.

Ben closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating. He felt as if there was something he had missed. Something important. He cast his mind back to the moments of waking on the moor. What had he seen? Heard? Smelt?

“I just remembered something!” He said, with a growing sense of urgency. “When I woke, I could smell something. I thought it was smoke...chemicals...”

They looked at each other.

“Rocket fuel,” they said at the same time.

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The remainder of the afternoon was written off as far as Pakat's work was concerned. Ben and Pakat spent most of the time using the datastream to research space travel and types of ship. The Kheelians did not have much in the way of space-fairing interests it emerged, and the spaces ports in the City were small, and mainly concerned with Pechnar transport and a small amount of trade. Ben could remember nothing about ships or flying them, beyond a basic knowledge of engineering, even when prompted with diagrams and images. After a frustrating few turns, they were forced to give up and quickly begin preparing the evening meal before the others returned. Ben managed to persuade Pakat to let him help, peeling and cutting up vegetables while they speculated wildly and jokingly about his life as a space adventurer.

The pair of them were like excited children that evening, and they barely managed to contain their discovery long enough to wait for all the family to return. As it was, Shaarm only just managed to finish the giving of thanks at the start of the meal, before Chana dragged the information out of them.

“You had better tell us whatever it is, Pakat! The pair of you look as if you have a bad case of Tremanian fire fleas!”

Pakat didn't need much encouragement. “We know how Ben got here.”

There was a stunned silence, and not only because of the normally-restrained Kheelian's outburst. Then there was a clamouring of voices, and the children cheering with delight. Shaarm's was the most easy question to pick out.

“How! What happened? Did some memories come back?”

“No, I don't remember anything yet, I am afraid. But Pakat will show you what we found.”
Pakat lit up the holomap again, and pointed to a small yellow marker dot, which pulsed gently.

“We calculated how fast Ben was walking that day from landmarks he remembers, and the time of day, and we worked out that he was somewhere near this point when he first awoke. We were looking at the area when I saw this.”

He expanded the hologram of the mysterious dark object and it hovered blue and ghostly above the dining table. Everyone stood up, crowding forward to see.

“What is it?” Chana and Grandmother both asked.

“It looks like an egg!” said Ooouli, and Ben had to admit, it did look rather egg-like.

“We think it's a ship,” said Pakat. “A crashed space craft.”

Ooouli gasped, and Grandmother sat back in astonishment.

“Of course!” Chana cried. “That makes perfect sense! That is how he could get into the middle of the moor without transport.”

Shaarm was nodding too, “Some of your injuries would be consistent with a vehicle crash, so that does indeed seem to be consistent. But how do you know how to fly a ship? Do you think you are a pilot?”

Ben shrugged, “Well, if I am, it doesn't look like I am a very good one! That ship, or whatever it is, is definitely out there, and it seems only logical that its appearance and mine are somehow related. I suppose that puts an end to my theory that I came from the City, which is how I was familiar with your language. I thought perhaps when I was...” he cast a glance at the children. They had all been vary careful not to mention the circumstances of Ben's injuries in front of them. “I thought that the people who I was with before might have left me on the moor on purpose.”

Left him there to die, was what the adult Kheelians understood from his words. Or dumped what they thought was his lifeless body somewhere no-one would find it.

“We must go out there and see it,” said Chana, excitably. “Who knows what could be out there! We could find ownership documents with ID, or transport logs, or even some of Ben's possessions...”

“We might find a burnt pile of scrap,” Ben reminded him. “Let us not get too over-excited. Passion, yet serenity.”

“Chana is right. We do need to go out there,” Pakat mused. “If the ship did crash and the fuel cells or other chemicals are leaking from it, then we need to know as soon as possible. We could be facing an ecological disaster.”

Ben hadn't considered that, He looked down, suddenly feeling guilty and uncomfortable. Pakat rubbed the back of his neck soothingly. He hadn't meant to cast any blame on Ben.

“What about the narms?” Ben asked, reminded of another issue. “Will they not attack us if we go onto the moor?”

“We cross their territories often during the course of our work,” said Pakat. “They are nocturnal and will not be interested in us in the day, particularly if we do not go too near their nesting grounds. I would not be concerned with them.”

“Is it Ben's space ship?” said Oooouli, who was bouncing about on her feet with excitement. “That is
so cool! Does it travel in hyperspace? How big is it? Perhaps you will find some of his friends there!"

There was a sudden, chilling pause as the adults processed the child's innocent words for what exactly they might imply. No-one had yet considered that Ben might not have been alone in the craft when it crashed. He himself had barely survived, and the fact that he was still breathing now was astonishing. For a second person to have survived, and to still be alive – the chances were beyond impossible. The thought of stumbling onto a blackened wreckage strewn with cold corpses suddenly filled their thoughts.

“Yes, perhaps.” Ben answered Ooouli, trying not to sound as horrified as he felt. “But I think it is highly unlikely.”

“If there is any possibility, however small, that this ship exists then we must go and see,” Chana said, and all three of them turned to Shaarm, unintentionally waiting for her approval.

There was silence for a moment as she considered, and then the Kheelian woman sighed. “Yes, I think we must. Although if Pakat's concerns are right then I am not sure what we are going to do about it. When should we go?”

“Tomorrow!” said Chana and Ooouli at the same time. Tiki laughed, and banged her spoon on the table.

“I want to go too!” said Ooouli.

“I am due to take the last measurements of the water volume tomorrow, before the Falling,” Pakat said. “So I will be up near Grandfather Kender anyway. It is close.”

“Tomorrow I have an important surgery scheduled, and then I am working in the emergency department in the afternoon,” Shaarm said. “And it is certainly far too soon for Ben to be making such a long trip tomorrow.”

Ben's heart raced at the thought she might confine him to the house for more time. “I have been resting for three days now,” he contended, “and I feel very well. My other problems, like my leg, are not going to improve significantly for further days of rest; in fact it might take weeks for those to improve. Pakat is right that we should act straight away, but I have to go as well, for who knows what I might see or remember when looking at the ship. Also,” he added, having exhausted all his logical arguments. “If I have to stay here on my own with nothing to do for another day I will probably go completely mad.”

“I do not think he is joking about that!” Chana said to Shaarm.

She sighed, looking frustrated. “Very well,” she reluctantly. “But you, young lady, are certainly not going.”

Ooouli frowned; “But—”

“No,” said Shaarm firmly. “You know the moor is not safe, and besides, you have your Galactic Basic exam tomorrow that you and Ben have been working towards.”

“Oh yes!” Ooouli brightened. She was very excited to show her teachers everything that she had been learning in the past week, although she obviously was disappointed at not going to be able to go on what she saw as an adventure. “You will take some holopics for me, though? A real spaceship!”
Ben smiled. “I will,” he promised, although he knew whether or not the little girl got her pictures would very much depend on what exactly it was they found out there.

“I have another condition,” Shaarm continued, as if the previous exchange had not occurred. “And that is that Ben must walk as little as possible. You can ride on Chana or Pakat's backs.”

“But...” said Ben, aware he sounded like Ooouli’s echo.

“No!” laughed Shaarm, “Enough complaints; there are two mischievous children already in this house. You will please do as your doctor bids, Ben.”

“I will,” he agreed.

The Kheelians spent the remainder of the evening preparing for their expedition tomorrow. An antigrav cart with long handles and a yoke was set up in the yard in front of the house. Two crates, a tarpaulin and several tools were packed onto it. Heavier cloaks and garments were laid out, and a meal was packed. For his part, Ben tried to focus on helping Ooouli with the last of her revision, but neither of their minds were fully on the work. The girl would break off every few moments to ask him questions about space travel he had no hope of knowing the answers to, or with wild guesses about his possible galactic career (everything from Republican senator to spice smuggler). While Ben knew she was just excited, her guesses were starting to unnerve him. None of those options sounded appealing. He couldn't be criminal...could he? And a politician...that might even be worse.

When the time came to settle down for the night Ben's mind was buzzing. He lay on his thin sleeping mat and stared up at the dim ceiling, his thoughts crowding into his mind. A ship...perhaps he would see it and all of his memories would come flooding back. Perhaps, by the end of tomorrow, he would have his own identity once more. Or, more likely, the ship would be nothing more than just so much scrap metal half sunk into the bog, and they would learn nothing. Maybe what they were looking for would not even be a ship at all, but just some glitch on the satellite mapping. Or, another scenario; what if it was a ship, but they found he had not been alone at all...Ben pictured himself waking up as the only survivor of a brutal crash, climbing through the still-warm, bleeding corpses of his friends and family, crawling out into the mud only for grief and horror to drive him out of his mind....

He fell into an uneasy sleep that twisted into dreams even more confusing that his waking thoughts.

He is in a corridor. Metal walls and metal floor. Putting one foot in front of the other is not easy, but he's doing his best. Warmth at his elbow- someone his holding his arm. There's a man; young, tall, sandy haired, almost dragging him along. The bloody wound on Ben's thigh is on fire at the punishing pace. He stops suddenly, planting both feet, and drags his arm out of the man's grip, stumbling back.

The man turns; “Hey! What are you-”

Ben sees crystal blue eyes and the face of a stranger. He doesn't know where he is, or what is happening. Fear bursts into life in his chest, crawling up his veins, closing his throat. The man moves towards him, and Ben backs away.

“What the hells...?”

“I don't know you,” he manages to gasp out. “What's happening?”

“Sithspit!” The man curses, but tries to hold back his obviously rising frustration, raising his hands placating. “Look, we really don't have the time for this...I'm your friend, we've known each other for...”
nearly twelve years. You were captured by some very bad people and now I am trying to rescue you, and we have already had this conversation. Twice. I know everything seems weird and confusing right now, but you gotta trust me, okay? And right now, we gotta go.”

The man makes to take hold of Ben’s elbow again, but Ben stumbles back out of reach, shaking his head.

“I don’t believe you. Don’t touch me!”

There is a distant sound of shouting and crashing somewhere up the corridor that echoes off the cold walls. The stranger twists his head to look, and then turns back to Ben with another curse of frustration.

“Look, I really don’t want to have to do this, and I’m sorry in advance, okay? Although I’m really, really hoping you won’t remember this anyway…”

The stranger moves his hand from side to side as if he is smoothing a wrinkle out of the air. Ben feels a sudden sense of serenity rush over him like an engulfing wave. He blinks slowly, feeling a lethargy soak into his limbs and his mind.

“You want to come with me,” he hears a voice say. He can’t help but echo the sound.

“I want to come with you,” Ben says, and finds that he desperately does; he wants to follow the stranger with every fibre of his being.

“You're not going to fight me any more,”

“I'm not going to fight you any more,” he assures, far too tranquil and at peace for such a thought to even enter his mind. He finds his arm is raised up over a tall pair of shoulders, and they are moving once more. Ben feels as if he is floating. There is more noise behind, shouting and metallic clangs. The other man twists to look back, but Ben does not. As long as he is with the man, he is content. If only the pain in his head would stop escalating, everything would be perfect.

The floor changes beneath their feet, becoming sloping and echoey. Ben has to step over a raised doorway and looks up to see they are entering a ship. Something red hot flashes past his ear and hits the side of the ship in a shower of sparks and noise. He observes the phenomenon, mildly. It would seem they are being shot at. The space closes in around them as the man drags him inside and closes the hatch, all curved walls and compact metal. The stranger lowers Ben onto the floor and disappears up a narrow corridor into the cockpit. There is more noise outside and each shot against the ship's hull is like an assault directly against the pressure in his head. He groans and puts his head in his hands. His nose is gushing blood.

Something is wrong .

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Chapter End Notes
To be continued, of course.
They left early the next morning. Shaarm, Grandmother, and the two girls were waiting at the door to see them off. Ben fixed the ties on his makeshift shoes, and then endured patiently as Shaarm bundled a thick, heavy woollen cloak over the outside of his other garments. A long, wide scarf in a burnt orange colour was wrapped around his head and neck too, and his hands pushed into small squares of fleece which had been sewn together as makeshift mittens. Grandmother handed Ben his staff, and then the two of them inspected him critically.

“I suppose it is too late to persuade you to stay?” Shaarm asked, sounding a little wistful. “My husbands are more than capable of bringing back anything you might need.”

He smiled. “I know. But I really have to see it for myself.”

“Well, I suppose you are ready,” Shaarm concluded, grudgingly.

Ooouli suddenly launched herself at Ben from behind and hugged him tightly around the shoulders. Taken aback, he stroked her mane comfortingly.

“It's all right,” he said, into her shoulder. “What's wrong?”

She didn't lift up her head and he was suddenly worried that she was crying. Tiki, always sensitive to her sister's moods, started to sniffle.

“We'll be fine,” Ben said. “Pakat goes up onto the moor all the time, and the narms aren't dangerous.”

“You've found your ship,” she said, rather muffled.

“Perhaps,” said Ben, still not certain what she was getting at.

“You've found your ship, and now you're going to leave us.”

“Oh Ooouli! No, dear one, that's not going to happen. No, listen,” Ben said when she didn't stop crying. “I am not going to leave. One day, maybe, but not any time soon, and certainly not today, okay? I want to hear all about your exam when you get home and how brilliant you were. So I just want you to think about that. And I will see you and Tiki when you get home this evening.”

Ooouli nodded, sniffed, and let go. Ben gave her a last pat on the back of the neck and a smile, ruffled Tiki’s hair, and stepped out of the door.

The morning was grey and dull, and swathes of mist hid the world beyond the end of the yard. Pakat and Chana were waiting at the path. Pakat had the yoke of the cart hooked over his shoulders and across his broad chest like a carthorse, to allow him to keep his hands and forelegs free for walking. Chana crouched down, and Ben climbed up onto his back. The Kheelian rose up onto his four feet, and with a brief wave back to Shaarm, Grandmother and the children in the doorway, they set off.

They walked up from the house and onto the roadway. The fog swirled around them. Ben could
only see a few metres in front of them through the gloom, beyond which everything turned to a misty haze. Water droplets had settled on Chana’s coat and clothes, and Ben was glad of the warmth that radiated up from the creature into his legs. The Kheelians were mostly silent, caught up in their own thoughts, and Ben shivered a little, and pulled the scarf in closer across his face. The mood was sombre and the atmosphere heavy. After his uncanny dream, Ben felt particularly on edge. The strange young man who had held such power over him... Had it been just a dream, or as it a true memory? Was it prophetic that he had dreamed of a ship on the day they saw it on the map? Or was that just the power of suggestion at work? Ben tried to relax and not sit tensed up, for Chana's sake.

After what might have been a turn or so, a darker shadow loomed up out of the grey mist to their right, and it grew and grew until the massive bulk of the cliffs was hanging jutting out above the path. A distant roar muffled by the fog told him that the waterfall was nearby. Both the Kheelians stopped, the squeaking of the cart falling into the silence. They only waited a few moments before there was the muted sound of footsteps on the roadway, and a Kheelian appeared out of the gloom. Ben recognised Nenka, Chana's friendly nephew, who worked in the village shop.

“Good morning!” Nenka greeted them quietly but cheerily. The others greeted him back, and hugs, pats and strokes of fur were exchanged.

“I asked Nenka to accompany us,” Chana turned his long neck to talk to Ben. “He has lived near the moors his whole life, and it is good to have an extra pair of eyes.”

Ben nodded approvingly. Pakat's description of the increasing aggression of the narls had left him uneasy. Greater numbers would definitely be advantageous if they had to scare the creatures off.

“It is good to have you along, Nenka,” Ben told the young Kheelian as they set off again, heading for the sound of the waterfall. Nenka did something of a double-take.

“You speak Kheelian?” He asked in amazement.

“He does now,” Chana said, with a hint of something that seemed like pride.

“That is amazing!” Nenka had an air of poorly suppressed excitement about him. “It is unbelievable that you are here. An alien from another planet. And now a crashed spaceship! Nothing like that happens around here.”

“You did not mention it to anyone did you?” Chana said.

“Oh yes,” said Nenka. “Taaki’s cousin married a couple in Graldit, the village up the valley, and they were asking about you when they were visiting and came into the shop last week. They’ve even heard about you up there!”

“You haven't seen any strangers about have you?” Ben asked. “People you didn't know. Or any other Pechnar?”

“No,” Nenka seemed puzzled. “There aren't any strangers around here, apart from you of course. Why?”

Ben tried to sound casual. “Oh, just curious. But you will let Chana know if you did hear of anyone?”
“Sure!”

By the time they had followed the base of the cliffs along to the stairs, the unrelenting greyness was starting to lighten as the morning gained strength. At the foot of the steps, Chana pointed out a system of pulleys and ropes attached to a wooden platform that rested on the grass at the edge of the cliff. Ben could just make it out through the fog. It was the old lift system for getting peat and turfs down from the moor, Chana told him. A piece of Kheelian heritage from before they had antigrav. Ben did not think that time had been all that long ago.

Ascending the stairs proved to be more tricky than Ben had anticipated. The Kheelians adopted an almost upright position to climb, using the knuckles on their long arms as balance to lift their long legs to the next step. Ben found himself having to tilt all the way forwards and cling on to the back of Chana's jacket to stay seated. From his position, he did note that the stairs seemed comically small to the Kheelians, who took the ascent three of four stairs at a time. Chana told him, between breaths, how the stairs had been made by the creatures who lived in this land before the Kheelians. They had been a small people, not unlike Ben in stature, and they had worshipped the stone stacks on the edge of the moor as gods. Seeing them loom through thinner patches of mist above them like great black demons of rock, Ben could believe it.

The fog suddenly thickened and they had the strange impression that they were moving through a layer of cloud. He could barely see Chana's back in front of him. The water droplets hung thick and heavy in the air, condensing on his hands and face and soaking into his outer cloak. Chana leapt up a few more steps and they burst through the fog, out into bright cold daylight. Ben blinked around in surprise, and saw that they reached the plateau of the moor. Turning back they could see the world below them was lost in thick cloud that filled the whole valley from cliff edge to the distant hills. The waterfall beside their path tumbled down into that smothering heavy whiteness that hid the village from view. On the moor itself, save for a few patches where it clung on stubbornly in hollows, the fog had almost completely burned away in the weak sunlight. Tuffets of emerald-green grass stood out jewel bright against the black peat mud and white stones that edged the path. The path ran along the edge of the cliffs for a way, and then darted out onto the moor, twisting and diving between the gullies and the gurgling stream, towards those grey towers of the rock pillars which edged the moor.

It was strange to be back here again. Apart from his disconcerting fragments of dream, this moor was really the first place Ben remembered. It was, in many ways, his birth place. It felt as if he had travelled through a strange cyclical narrative, only to return to the same place he had begun. But despite all that, his journey did not feel like it was nearly at its end. He had more questions now than he had ever had, and next to no answers.

There was some discussion happening between the Kheelians. Ben drew his mind back from his thoughts. Pakat, it seemed, was going to divert to a small storage unit the scientists had hidden nearby to pick up equipment he needed to take his readings and measurements. Chana, Nenka and Ben would followed on behind at their slower pace with the antigrav cart. They would probably arrive at their meeting place, the old tree stump Pakat called Grandfather Kender, at about the same time. Ben was anxious about Pakat going off alone, but the others did not seem to be concerned. Perhaps the narms really were no threat.

Ben slid down from Chana's back and walked around a little to stretch his legs, as Pakat unhitched the antigrav cart. The Kheelians each ate a nutrient block from the stash that Chana carried; Ben settled for a drink of cold tea instead. He had noticed that the Kheelians needed to eat much more frequently and lager quantities than he did, presumably due to their much larger body mass. Pakat set off first, heading confidently out into the moor.

“I'll take Ben if you want?” Nenka offered, casually. Chana agreed with a smile, and connected the
straps of the cart to his own shoulders. Ben climbed up onto Nenka's back, and they set off again. Chana had given Ben the holomap device to navigate by, as he had his hands free. A red line projected a few metres out from the device into the misty air before them to mark the direction they should follow.

At first they travelled in silence, but it wasn't long before Nenka's curiosity got the better of him again.

“So you really can't remember anything before you turned up at Uncle Chana's house? Not the ship wreck or anything?”

Ben shrugged. “A few snatches, but no, not really.”

“Wow,” marvelled the teen. “So Ben is not your actual name? That's funny, because it doesn't sound Kheelian.”

Ben laughed. “No, sadly it is not my real name, though I am growing rather fond of it. The girls...Tiki and Ooouli...they named me after someone from history I think. Benbor- something.”

“Benborena? Oh yes, that is just the name the locals give him; they can't managed more than one name around here,” Nenka pronounced with the scathing tones of a youth who had never left his home town and probably never would. “His real name was Benibor Waken. He is famous for ending the War of Ten Thousand Days.”

“That sounds like it could only have been a good thing. But you surprise me, I thought that peace was valued so highly here...”

Nenka bobbed his head in agreement, and Chana took over the tale.

“The War is precisely the reason why. Ten thousand days of war...can you imagine it? It all but destroyed us. By that time neither side could even remember why they were fighting, except that I was how things had always been.”

“Benibor Waken saved us,” said Nenka, proudly. “And since that day we have renounced all violence. You will have heard Grandmother reading from the Death Lists? The big red book that she keeps?”

“I did not know what it was.”

“It is a list of all those who died in the War from this region. Grandmother's task is to keep the names alive by reading them. Ask her to show you some time, she would like that.”

“I will,” Ben promised, feeling like his whole world view had shifted in the last few moments, and that the Kheelian people were far more complex than he had previously understood. “So your cherishing of the arts and sciences are reaction to the war, in a way?” he asked.

Chana bobbed his head. “There was an understanding that only through expression and creativity would we truly find lasting peace. All weapons and devices of war were destroyed in all countries, so that there could be no temptation to take up arms again. Although it has been said that now our pacifism holds us back.”

It was a surprisingly bitter statement from the Kheelian.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Ben.
“There is such a fear of war that any technology which could be conceived in anyway to form a weapon is banned. Many devices which could aid the lives of ordinary Kheelians; instant satellite communications, better transportation, droid labourers, and even certain medical devices, are no longer permitted, and no further research can be made.” He sighed. “We are safer now than we were at war, but no less afraid for it. I think the situation will improve in the coming years as people start to forget...But forgetfulness itself cannot be hoped for, because that is how history repeats itself.”

They had made steady progress while they had been talking. Looking back, Ben could see the rock stacks were diminished against the horizon, and the cliff edge had could not longer be seen. The moor now stretched away from them on all sides. It was very quiet. The patches of fog lingering in some of the gullies had melted away, although the sun was not hot and the day was chill. Even though it was wet through, Ben was glad again of the extra layer of the cloak. Looking back to see their path, Ben saw a flash of movement in the direction he thought that the cliffs lay. Pakat, probably, coming over to meet them.

The conversation fell quiet for a while as they trotted along. The Kheelians' four long legs managed the undulations of the moor's surface much better than Ben could have done on his own, and even pulling the antigrav cart behind them, the land passed by quickly. Ben was about to ask how much further until the meeting place, when he saw more movement ahead.

“What is that?” he said. The Kheelians looked up.

“What?” Chana asked. “I do not see anything.”

Ben pointed. “I'm sure I saw movement, over there. Is it Pakat?”

Chana shook his head, raising a foreleg to shield his eyes. “He will be coming from the other direction.”

They carried on, but it was only a few moments before Ben saw the movement more clearly, and saw what was causing it.

“There's an animal over there, beyond that higher patch of grass,” he said. “It's hard to see, but I think it's a quadruped, and a seems to be a dark greenish colour.”

“Sounds like a narm,” Nenka agreed. Ben pointed it out, and they observed it for a while.

“Well I can see only one,” Chana said, “and it does not seem very interested in us. We'll keep going and it will probably run off when we get close.”

True enough, the creature had disappeared when they approached and Ben didn't see it again. They arrived at the huge tree stump on the curve of the river that they had designated as their meeting place to find Pakat already there. He was using a long probe to measure the thickness of the peat at various places around the river bank. They took another break while they waited for him to finish his work. Ben was given a packet of the tasteless orange-coloured biscuits from Chana's knapsack, which he soaked in his tea to make palatable. The Kheelians found that most amusing. Smiling to their laughter, Ben couldn't help but notice that circumstances couldn't have been more different to when he was last in this spot. When he had been cold and in pain, and dying. And alone.

Pakat finished the last of his notes, and took a final few samples of the river water in small vials. These were tucked into a case, and packed onto the antigrav cart. He turned back to the others.

“Right. Is everyone ready to go on?”

Although he had been talking to everyone, the Kheelians all turned to Ben. The moment of truth was
fast approaching. He nodded, suddenly nervous. The headache which had been held at bay all
morning suddenly lurched back into life behind his temple. Despite it, he nodded.

The Kheelians exchanged burdens again, with Nenka taking a turn pulling the cart and Pakat
carrying Ben. The holoemitter had now been programmed with the projected co-ordinates of where
they had seen the map anomaly the previous day. Ben turned the device on, and the red beam
flickered out across the moors.

“Let's go,” Ben said, pleased that his voice sounded confident.

There was nothing to see for a long while, long enough that Ben's doubts were starting to niggle at
him again. Was this a good idea? A wild gundark chase more likely. They didn't even know for
certain that he had come this way; it was all drawn from his tattered memories and supposition.
Maybe they ought to just-

“Look!” Chana was ducked down to ground-level, pointing at the earth. Ben and the others craned
over to see, but it was unmistakable. A row of uneven bare footprints, a quarter the size of Chana's,
heading back the way they had come. Ben's stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch. They weren't
wrong. He had been here.

Their pace quickened now they were sure of the path. Suddenly, Nenka, who was at the front,
stopped sharply with a shout. The others hurried over to see, and also stopped still, staring. Their
path was cut by a swathe of destruction. Something huge had smashed through, scoring a deep scar
into the peat. Bushes and plants were hurled aside, and water seeped from torn earth like blood. The
scar was at least five metres wide and two metres deep, and perhaps twenty metres long. The smell of
burning was everywhere. All of their eyes were drawn to the right, where the scar cut through a high
bank and then fell out of sight. But just beyond the top of the bank, the cold light glinted off metal.

Ben felt suddenly sick to his stomach. “Stop, please. I need to get down.”

Pakat obligingly knelt, and Ben scrambled down, ignoring the twinge in his hip. His eyes were fixed
on that glint of metal.

“Are you all right?” Pakat asked, softly.

“I dreamed of a ship,” Ben said, and then blinked in surprise. He had meant to keep that to himself.

“You did?” said Chana coming over. “That is good news! Your memories really are returning. When
was this?”

“Last night,” Ben confessed.

“And when were you going to tell us?” Chana scolded, light-heartedly.

“I wasn't alone.”

“What?” Pakat and Chana looked at each other.

“In my dream,” Ben clarified, reluctantly. “I wasn't alone. There was someone else on the ship.”

The atmosphere instantly went tense. Four pairs of eyes turned to the ridge, beyond which that
enticing metal gleamed.

“Ben-” Pakat began, but Ben couldn't hear any more placations.
“Let's go,” he said firmly. “I just need to know.”

He turned and set off towards the ridge, letting the others follow along behind. He had to know for certain, one way or another. He forced his way up the bank, pushing uprooted plants aside with his cane, scrambling over clods of torn earth. With the Kheelians at his side, he breached the top of the ridge, took a deep breath, and looked down.

There lay the ship. Half sunk into the mud and listing unnaturally on one side. The hull was blackened and cracked, and around it in all directions was a field of scattered debris and shards of ceramisteel inside a forty-meter crater of scorched earth. The stench of fuel and burned plastoids still stung at their eyes even after all this time. The Kheelians began to climb down the bank towards the ship dragging the cart. Really, Ben considered absently, calling it a ship at all was was generous. It was little more than a pod, and did, as Ooouli had said, resemble nothing quite so much as a smashed egg.

“It's not the ship,” Ben said, almost faint with relief. He scrambled down the bank to where the Kheelians were peering at the craft.

“It's not the one you dreamed about?” Nenka questioned.

Ben shook his head. “This is much smaller. The one I remember had fixed wings and there was a separate cockpit area…”

“And another thing, Ben,” called Chana, who had stuck his head into the open side of the pod. “There definitely was not anyone else here. Come and see.”

Ben limped over, and climbed up beside the Kheelian. Chana stepped out of the way and let him peer into the ship. Several things were instantly apparent. The craft had been designed to hold six passengers, with the seats all positioned facing outwards around a central post. There was no viewscreen; the ship was meant to be flown with a holoscreen, or on instruments alone. Almost certainly it was an escape pod then. Thirdly, the landing had not been smooth; one entire half of the pod had been crushed on its impact with the ground. The inner chamber had buckled, and four of the six seats were completely destroyed. A three-metre long rod of steel had punctured straight through the backrest of the fifth seat. Anyone sat in any of those seats would not have walked away. Ben ducked his head, touching the synthleather of the one intact seat a little reverently. That he had survived such a crash...it was unbelievable. There was some force out in the universe looking out for him, of that there could be no doubt. And thank that force, whatever it was, that there had not been five other passengers on board when the pod had crashed. And that he hadn't chosen the seat to the left.

A tearing sound above his head made him pull his head out of the capsule.

“What are you doing?” he asked Chana, who had a large sheet of the hull's cladding in his hands.

“Salvage.” Chana gave him an odd look. “Many of these materials are very rare. That is why we bought the cart.” He suddenly tensed, as if worried. “That is alright with you, is it not? I am sorry, I thought you and Pakat had agreed it.”

“Oh,” said Ben, who hadn't really thought this far ahead. “Yes, of course. Absolutely.”

Nenka had brought the antigrav cart over, and the Kheelians began unpacking the tools they had brought. Chana and Pakat worked on dismantling the pod, while Nenka poked through the debris around the site for anything of use.
Ben remembered his promise to Ooouli, and found the camera amongst their gear. He got a few pictures of the ship and the Kheelians working nearby to give it some scale. The creatures were tearing off whole plates of metal with their bare hands. Their great strength was incredible. There wasn't much he could do to help out here.

“I can get inside the pod,” Ben offered, “and see if there's anything useful I can get out of the electrics.”

This offer was gratefully accepted, and soon the whole group were intent upon their tasks. Ben found the manual task of stripping out the panels and inspecting the cabling to be refreshing. After so many turns of weariness and ennui, it was beyond satisfying to be doing something useful, accompanied by the quiet if the moor, Chana's hammering and the sound of Pakat humming. Not that there was much to salvage. The majority of the electrics were so much melted slag, although there were some parts that had survived intact or might only need minimal work to be functional again. He pulled out anything that he thought might have any utility at all, and passed it out to Nenka who was making a stockpile by the cart.

It was not all good news however. After some searching, Pakat had managed to find the fuel cells, and three of the four were ruptured and empty, the fuel long ago having leached out into the ground around. The Kheelian had taken more samples from the water around the craft, but they could all see the unnatural iridised sheen to it. What effect it might have on the ecosystem of the moor, none of them could guess.

After several turns of work, the escape pod had been reduced to a bare hulking skeleton, squatting in the blackened earth. All of the ceramisteel hull which was salvageable was packed onto the antigrav cart, along with as many panels, engine parts and electronics as would fit, and of course, the single surviving fuel cell. Each of the Kheelians was also carrying a backpack stuffed with recovered hydraulics, cabling, circuitry and other parts. The remaining parts of the ship which could not be saved; the shattered dome, the flight computer, most of the engine and boosters; these they piled into a mound around the burned carcass of the vessel. Hopefully, Pakat said, they would come back another time with a larger group and shift the rest of the debris. The ravaged shell of the craft cast a melancholy shadow in the late afternoon light.

Ben had been forced to finish working well before the others when his nose started up bleeding again. With a muttered curse, he had retired to the earth bank, to pinch his nose and watch the others finish packing up. When they were done, the Kheelians joined Ben on the bank to rest for a while before starting their return journey, and to finish up the rest of the food they had left. Ben had yet more of the bland orange stuff; this time it was cold dumplings. The stuff was getting less appealing every time he ate, but at least it didn't feel like it was burning the inside of his face off.

At last it was time to go, but Ben felt oddly reluctant. He wasn't sure what he had truly expected to find at the crash site, but there hadn't really been any answers here. All he knew at least that no-one else seemed to have been hurt or killed. And that the dream he had? What could he really remember of it anyway? An old ship, bigger than this. Blaster fire. A tall sandy-haired man, full of frustration and anger. He hadn't wanted to go with him. Ben shivered, remembering that false sense of tranquillity that had overcome him before he had lost his own will to resist.

“What is that?” Chana asked in a curious tone, and Ben dragged his mind back to the present. The question had been aimed at Nenka. The youth was looking at another piece of debris he had just picked up from out of the grass where it had been flung far beyond the wreckage.

“I'm not sure,” he said, examining it. “I don't think it's part of the ship.”

Ben glanced over, and saw the Kheelian was holding a silver-coloured duralumin cylinder. There
was a small silver hanging loop, and a line of black ridges at one end, like a handle. It was oddly familiar.

Nenka peered into the top of the tube. “There's a button here,” he said, and his thumb moved.

Ben felt as if time had jolted. He was moving before thought had even passed through his head, throwing himself forwards. His bodyweight hit the young Kheelian before the cry had even left his lips.

“No!”

The cylinder was thrown from Nenka's hand and rolled harmlessly away across the earth. Ben collided hard with the Kheelian's bony shoulder and slumped to the floor, gasping. Pakat and Chana came suddenly alive out of their shock, dashing forward.

“Nenka! What happened?”

Ben rolled aside. Chana was holding his shoulders, trying to sit him up, but Ben pulled out of his grasp, curling forwards against the pain in his ribs. Damn, damn, damn. Everything had been going so well.

“I don't know!” Nenka sounded distraught. “It was something about the cylinder...”

Pakat bent over and picked the innocuous thing up. “What, this?”

“Don't touch it!” Ben groaned out through gritted teeth. That had really hurt. “It's a weapon...it's dangerous.”

Pakat carefully lowered the cylinder back down to the ground and stepped back.

“Ben, are you alright?” Chana was stroking his hair and back. “What's wrong?”

“Ribs,” Ben grunted, closing his eyes now the immediate danger had passed. The sharp agony was starting to lessen now. He probably hadn't done himself any new damage, just exacerbated his previous injuries by smacking his not-yet-healing ribs against twelve foot of solid Kheelian. He sat up, and looked over to Nenka.

“Are you alright?”

Nenka nodded, wide eyed. “Yes, I'm fine. Sorry, I didn't mean to do anything wrong.”

Ben waved off his apology. He got painfully up to his feet and staggered over to where the weapon lay on the ground.

It was familiar, but at the same time, not. It felt wrong in his hand. His thumb strayed to the button, but he didn't press it. The Kheelians were watching him, clearly rattled and completely at a loss at what to do.

“What is it?” Pakat asked. “What do you remember?”

“It's called a lightsaber,” said Ben, quietly. He clipped the cylinder onto his belt and let his cloak fall over it.

“You are not bringing it back,” Chana objected. “A weapon? What if it explodes!?”

“I can't leave it here,” Ben said, firmly. “It is safe enough as long as I keep hold of it. No-one will
touch it but me, I promise.”

“But,” said Chana, “how do you even know how safe or dangerous it is? I mean no insult, but your memory is not the most reliable—”

“I am sorry,” Ben said, not to be dissuaded. “But you will have to trust me. I don't like it any more that you do, but I feel quite certain that the 'saber has to come with me. I won't bring it inside the house if that makes it any better.”

Finally Chana nodded, although Ben could see he wasn't happy. Pakat, who had remained quiet throughout, spoke up.

“We should leave now if we are to get back before dark.”

Everyone agreed. With a final look back at the wrecked escape pod, they turned away and headed for home. At first, Ben insisted on walking, citing the Kheelians already over-large burdens for his reason, but in reality he just wanted to move on his own. He felt ill at ease and on edge. The discovery of the lightsaber had rattled him. He had been hoping that the dream he had about the metal room and the man with the mad eyes was no more than a nightmare. But now the lightsaber was real, in his hands, and he didn't know what to do. Unconsciously, his hand came up to his burned throat. It was the one part of him, apart from his hip, that didn't seem to be healing as well as Shaarm hoped; the burn still weeping and blistered even days later. Ben thought back to the moment he had seen the lightsaber burst into life in the metal room,. His shredded memory insisted there was something not right about the handle he was carrying. It seemed like it was the wrong shape, or the wrong colour or…

Ben stumbled over a cluster of roots and came up, cursing. How he had ever managed to make this journey before, alone and bleeding to death, he would never know. Chana stopped by his side.

“Come here, Ben,” he said. “You cannot walk any more.”

“I am fine,” Ben said, stubbornly, even though he wasn't. Shooting pains were arcing like lightning through his hip and pelvis, and his ribs were protesting even more stubbornly than he was. His head was begin to ache again. Chana swung his backpack round onto his chest like he had before on their trip up to the waterfall, and crouched down.

“Ben,” he said softly, and waited. Ben sighed, and gave in, climbing up on the Kheelian's warm back.

They made better progress when Ben had stopped being stubborn. Despite the hindrance of the anti-grav cart, the Kheelians loped along at a smooth pace, and Ben found himself lulled by the rhythm into a sort of trance. It was much better than his anxious brooding of before. He started out of his meditations when Chana stopped, suddenly. Ben looked up. The afternoon had grown dim, and the mist had gathered again in the hollows of the moor and settle about them. Pakat and Nenka were stopped just in front, their long necks swaying as they looked around.

“What is it?” Ben whispered.

“Narms,” answered Chana, and he sounded worried.

Ben sat forward and peered into the fog. He could see dark shapes circling in the gathering mist. One appeared out from the fog in front of Nenka, darted a few steps forward and stopped, watching them. Its large body was covered with thick olive-green spines with a dark brown stripe down the back. Its spines were flecked with mud, and rippled as it moved. It hunched on its four legs, its long snout low
to the ground, snarling through its bared fang-like teeth. Ben couldn't help but feel it was staring up at him.

“Stay calm,” Pakat said, quietly. “No-one move.”

“What is it doing?” said Nenka, sound tense.

“I have no idea,” said Pakat. “They have never done this before.”

Well, that wasn't very comforting.

There was a sense of something moving behind them. Ben turned, and saw two more narms silently circling behind Chana's heels.

“There are more behind us,” he alerted the others as quietly as possible. His hand went to the 'saber handle on his belt. If it came to a fight, would he even know how to use the kriffing thing?

The green narm in front of Nenka continued to growl. Ben felt Chana's muscles tense in his back. Suddenly, the narm made a barking, snapping sound. It was repeated in three or four voices from the rising mist around them, and slowly the narm backed away from them. Its yellow eyes stayed fixed on them the whole time until the fog swirled between them, and it was gone.

Ben looked back behind them. The other narms had disappeared along with the leader. He could feel that they were alone. Chana stayed tensed.

“They've gone,” Ben said.

“What the grzzking trzk was that?” Chana muttered, looking at Pakat. Nenka had slowly backed up until he was closer to his uncles.

“I do not know,” Pakat was looking worried, but then again, he nearly always did. “I have never seen narms act that way towards Kheelians before, particularly when there are a number of us. I suppose they might think Ben was a child and therefore easy prey if he was alone, but not with three of us here as well…”

“We should go,” Nenka said. “In case they get their courage up again, and come back.”

Ben couldn't agree more.

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Chapter End Notes

TBC!

So, lots of hypotheses at the end of last week's chapter...but no sign of Anakin yet. He's busy readying himself for a more dramatic appearance... Thanks again for all your comments and kudos; it's really relieving to hear that everyone is still enjoying it, and I
adore hearing your thoughts. Until next week!
Another talky chapter, but all important for the set-up of big stuff to come.

It was a quiet and thoughtful group which arrived back at the house that evening. They had achieved their goal; finding the ship and searching it, but the other uncomfortable and unnerving events of the day had left them feeling on edge. Nenka had parted from them on the road down to the village. Ben had thanked him for his help, but was concerned that the youth's easy friendship he had seen at the beginning of the day had gone. He supposed almost stabbing oneself through head off with a lightsaber swiftly followed with almost being eaten alive by marsh wolves might do that to a person.

The Kheelians carried the spoils of their scavenging into the sheds beside the main house. Chana showed Ben a place in one of the side buildings by the garden where he could keep the lightsaber. It contained some farming tools and chemicals, and had a numeric lock on the door that the children did not know the code to, so that fear at least was lessened. By the time they made it into the house, everyone was soaked through and chilled from the mist and falling temperatures. The girls waited impatiently while 'freshers were taken, and while Shaarm and Grandmother handed out hot soup and grool. Ben's only set of clothes were drenched, so it was extremely timely that Shaarm had that day bought a set of Pechnar garments for him in Tzsaaf. There was a set of black trousers and shirt in a dusty blue colour, both oddly tailored tightly around his calves and forearms only to billow out above the knee and elbow. A burnt-orange sleeveless jacket went over the top of the shirt. The girls laughed excessively when he emerged from the washroom in his new attire, particularly as blue was a 'girl's colour'. Ben had no objections at all though, as long as he was dry. Shaarm had still not been able to get any proper footwear for him though, so he would have to rely on his improvised boots for a little longer.

Once the family were all seated, they gave an edited summary of the days events to Tiki and Ooouli, who were thrilled and delighted by the mystery and the romance of a shipwreck. Pakat brought out the holopics that Ben had taken and Ooouli had poured over them. She was disappointed when Ben asked her not to take them in to school to show her friends.

“They might go up onto the moor to look at the wreck,” he gave as his reason, “and I don't think it is very safe. Why don't you tell me about your examination today?”

Ooouli had not only successfully passed her Galactic Basic test at school, she had come highest in her year group. The family celebrated her success for several turns and it was the chief topic of conversation throughout dinner. Eventually, bedtime was declared, and the girls were taken off to bed by Grandmother. The remaining group abandoned the table for the comfort of the thickly-carpeted floor. Ben snagged a cushion and found a way to sit that relieved some of the chronic pain in his abdomen and hip. The Kheelians sprawled on the floor nearby, Shaarm leaned back against Chana's broad chest, while Pakat lay at their feet, pouring over the datapad like a sphinx. Without the children present, the three adventurers were free to give Shaarm a full account of what had happened that day. She looked very relieved when they explained that, even though the ship had been crushed,
it had clearly contained only one occupant. Her fear that they would find bodies up there was obviously greater than she had made out.

“Despite the damage to the ship, the salvage was good,” Pakat was explaining, totalling up a quick inventory of what they had recovered on the datapad. “Much of the metal and ceramisteel we can almost certainly exchange or sell for Ben to others in the village. We might be able to find someone with a use for the rarer pieces in Tszaaf or one of the other towns.”

“You will be able to build up quite a stack of credits of your own with all this,” Chana nodded appreciatively at the list.

Ben shook his head. “I don't know if the wreck is even mine to give away, but as far as I am concerned, it is all yours. You have provided me with food, clothes and medical treatment, and I am sure none of it has been cheap. I know you did so out of kindness and hospitality, but at least you should not also be out of pocket. You have a family to support after all.”

Shaarm frowned, and looked as if she was going to object. Then she saw the subborm look in Ben's eye, and conceded the fight before it began.

“Very well. If you are determined, I will keep a credit list of your...ah...expenditures. And I will cross those out when we sell or exchange pieces of the salvage. You will have no debts here, for your costs are meagre. Believe me, you eat barely anything at all! Skin and bones...But all the leftover credits, I will return to you.”

“In all seriousness, please don’t,” Ben insisted. “I don't want any part of it. Take the lightsaber too, if you think you can sell it. It means nothing to me.”

“The...lightsaber?” asked Shaarm.

“Nenka picked up a weapon of some sort in the wreckage,” Pakat explained, and then turned to Ben. “What does it do, this weapon? I did not like to ask at the time, when you seemed so worried. Is it a projectile of some kind? An explosive?”

“It is a blade, formed of plasma energy, which emerges from the handle.” Ben said. “It is hot, like a laser. I do not remember how it works, if I ever did know, but I am certain Nenka would had killed himself if he had activated it like that.”

Shaarm looked thoughtful. “Lightsaber...I have heard that word, I am sure of it,” she said. The others looked at her in astonishment.

“You have! When?”

“Let me think about it...I cannot remember, but I am sure it is familiar...” She tapped the floor a few times, considering, and then beckoned for the datapad from Pakat. Shaarm typed for a few moments, and then looked up triumphantly.

“Got it! And yes, I do remember now....Lightsabers- they are very rare weapons, only found on the central planets. They are used by the Jedi.”

She said the word as if it was written Judaai, with all the inflection at the end.

“Jedi?” Ben asked, aware that he was the only one not looking enlightened. “What kind of species are they?”

“It's a group, rather than a race. They are knights, warriors from the Republic.”
“I thought they were a religious organisation; monks or something similar,” said Pakat.

“I don't know about that,” said Chana. “But they have strange powers. I have heard it said that they can fly, see the future, talk to animals. That they cannot die.”

Ben felt bewildered with this new information. “And are there Jedi to be found on this planet?”

“No,” Shaarm answered, with a graceful shake of her head. “No, there were Jedi here during the Ten Thousand Days’ War, but they would have no purpose here now. But tell us, what do you remember about the lightsaber? Clearly it has triggered some recognition for you.”

Ben nodded, aware he was going to have to reveal something he had not wanted to tell his hosts.

“I remember the weapon and the name only from a nightmare I had. I was being held captive; there were several men that I saw, and they were trying to get me to tell them something.” Ben's hand automatically came up to his neck where the weeping burn was concealed by bandages. He didn't have to say more. Chana gasped, wide eyed.

“They burned you with it?” Pakat looked nauseated, disgusted. “Ben, that's...horrible!”

There wasn't much to say to that, other than to agree. Pakat ran a comforting hand through Ben’s hair. Chana and Shaarm were quiet, of which Ben was glad. He didn't feel in need of comfort at that moment. Now he just really, really wanted answers.

“I do not know about you lot, but I need a drink,” Chana said. Shifting out from the tangle of limbs, he went to fetch a ceramic flask of the blue drink they’d had at Ben's first meal with the family. He poured a few generous servings, which the others accepted gratefully.

“If these Jedi are half as powerful as you say,” Ben considered, letting the warmth of the drink soothe his aches. “Then they must have been a formidable enemy indeed. How did you defeat them during the war?”

Pakat laughed quietly. “Defeat them! We did not defeat them, Ben! They came to help us. They brought humanitarian aid – food, fuel cells, medicines. And they negotiated the peace that ended the war. They saved many Kheelian lives.”

Shaarm nodded. “We owe them a great debt.”

Ben was beginning to feel uneasy again. A small familiar spike of pain lanced through his head. “But if this weapon can only belong to a Jedi, then a Jedi must be the one who burned me.”

The Kheelians looked unconvinced. “They would not do such a thing, I am sure of it,” Shaarm said. “They are peacekeepers and negotiators.”

They talked more about the escape pod itself, and Ben's dream of the ship. Half the bottle of vok, as he learned the blue drink was called, had been consumed by the time Grandmother returned from settling the girls. She seated herself next to Pakat and accepted a drink gratefully.

“Grandmother; the Jedi,” Ben asked. “What do you know of them?”

Grandmother frowned. “Little,” she said. “Only what is recorded in the old histories and more recently from the Ten Thousand Days’ War. The datastream...?”

“We have already tried,” Shaarm said. “There is little outside the events of the civil war.” Apologetically, she explained to Ben; “We do not have access to the Republic holonet out here,
although there are libraries in the City from where you can use it. Locally, we can access only data which relates to our own history, needs and troubles.”

“The Jedi are the keepers of peace,” Grandmother said. “They are the Balance. Vessels for the cosmos and its energy.”

Ben considered her cryptic words. “So they do have powers,” he concluded, “but their use is regulated, limited somehow... Do you know if they have mental abilities – power to control the minds of others?”

Grandmother looked taken aback at the question. “What an odd question. I do not know,” she answered. The others shook their heads too.

“I had a different dream, about a man,” Ben said. “Full of energy and frustration. We were walking down a corridor but I didn't remember him, didn't trust him. He wanted me to go with him somewhere. I refused, and he...I don't know...he made me, somehow.”

“He kidnapped you?” Pakat asked, trying to clarify. “Threatened you?”

“No, that's not what I mean. He made me want to go with him; it seemed like a spell or some other influence, and after he spoke, all I wanted to do in the whole universe was go with him wherever he went.”

“Did that man...hurt you as well?”

Ben shook his head. “Not that I remember. He just talked to me, and I went with him to his ship. Perhaps that is how the Jedi captured me. And another thing...Shaarm, you were sure that I did not have a head wound serious enough to account for my amnesia. But if these Jedi can control minds, then maybe they can control memories too. Maybe they erased mine, and made me forget.”

“I cannot believe it,” Chana said, shaking his head. “The Jedi did so much good here at the end of the war. They are heroes to our people, as you know. I cannot believe that they could be so cruel...”

“I was kidnapped, starved, burnt, and and beaten, and you're telling me all that was done by the good guys...?” Ben's tone was unapologetically dry. Must be the influence of the vok. He put a hand to his beard, frowning. “Which, if true, raises its own unsettling and problematic conclusion...”

The Kheelians all gave him a look which clearly showed they were done with ‘unsettling’ for the night.

With obvious reluctance, Chana asked; “What is that?”

“Someone went to great lengths to get some information from me. When they were done, it seems as if they wiped all memory of it from my mind, and then left me for dead. And the only people who seem to be able to do all those things are hero peacekeepers.” Ben felt a cold shiver pass through him.

“So I am forced to wonder….what was it that I did that was so terrible it would motivate peacekeepers to torture someone quite so cheerfully?”

No-one had an answer to that.

They stayed up long into the night, dispatching the rest of the bottle of vok. At first, they talked about the ship, the Jedi, and Ben's dreams. Shaarm wrote down everything that Ben could remember about the fragments of recollection which had come to him – the flashes of torture; electric currents and
booted feet, broken fingers, the 'saber burn, and the two men he had seen. She also made him recall
every time he had suffered a nosebleed or head pains, and made a note of that. She seemed troubled
by it. Tomorrow, she declared, she would set him up under a fake name as a new patient at her
medical facility. The following day there should be few staff on duty, and she take him over to
Tszaaf, to the surgery. She could use the diagnostic equipment there to check he was healing
properly, and to run some tests to see if they could determine what was causing the memory loss.

After this decision was made, the conversation turned to a lighter note. After all, their worries were
based on guesswork and speculation, and no matter how much longer they mulled it over, there
would be no more answers to be had. Pakat was soon regaling Grandmother with the tale of a
disastrous research trip he had been on to the southern deserts, when the team had been hit by the
worst freak monsoon in history, and their entire compound had washed away. The director of the
exploration had been left standing up to his waist in river water trying to hold their last bottle of vok
out of the flood. Soon, the Kheelians were taking it in turns to tell more and more outrageous stories
about their past exploits and adventures. Grandmother, it emerged, had enjoyed quite a wild youth
and had a sense of humour that was bordering on wicked. Ben was both taken aback and delighted
at this new facet of his hosts. With no recollections of his own to add to their tale-telling, he sat
listening quietly, but nevertheless enjoying himself immensely.

Eventually, Ben's headache grew to such an intensity that not even the numbing vok could drown it
out. He was forced to accept some pain-relieving tablets and retire to bed, although not even the ache
in his temples and neck could dampen his mood now. Even the thought of mysteriously powerful
enemies threatening from every shadow could not bring him anxiety tonight. Soon, he was lulled by
laughter and alcohol into a deep, dreamless sleep. His last thoughts were of his former captors. They
must have been the ones to wipe his memory, and therefore, if it was information they wanted, they
must know he was useless to them. Even if they could find out where his pod had crash-landed, and
somehow also knew that he had survived, these Jedi surely would not continue to pursue him.
Would they?

“Pechnar! There was a Pechnar in the valley!”

A Kheelian voice, loud but muffled and marred by static, echoed through the house. Ben, sitting at
the table, started in alarm. Grandmother patted his wrist.

"It is only Nenka,” she said.“On the telewire.” She pointed to a small box on the wall, just as
Nenka's voice issued from it again.

“Uncle Chana! Ben! Are you there?”

She was glided gracefully over to the communications box, and depressed the speaker button.

“Nenka? This is Grandmother.”

Nenka's voice suddenly took on a more respectful tone, though it was no less urgent.

“Grandmother, good day to you. Is Uncle Chana there, please?”

“He is out working, young one. Pakat is here...”

As if summoned, Pakat rushed into the main room from his small study laboratory, passing Ben at
high speed. He took over from Grandmother with a respectful half bow.

“Nenka? Is that you? This is Pakat.”

“Uncle Pakat!” Nenka's voice sounded beyond excited, like he was about to burst. “Is Ben there? You have to tell him there are other Pechnar in the valley! I just heard about it; Taaki was in the shop, she didn't see it of course, but it was—”

Oh, this was not good. Ben struggled up to his feet, limping over to Pakat's side. The telemwire was clearly a two-way system, but Pakat had to wait for Nenka's flow of words to come to an end before he could transmit.

“Nenka, listen. Are they here, in Thet? Start from the beginning.”

“No, Uncle Pakat, they were in Graldit village, apparently. Two days ago, or more. Taaki's cousin saw it, and he told Taaki, and she was just in the shop buying tarvaroot and she told me.”

Grandmother leaned over Pakat impatiently, and pressed the transmit button. “Nenka. Just tell us what she told you.”

It transpired, when Nenka finally got to the point, that Taaki's cousin had been out tending to some livestock in the fields of a village further down the valley when he had seen a figure by the fence. He went over, thinking it was one of the village children, only to discover a Pechnar. The Pechnar had babbled at him in an unknown language, pointing towards the cliffs, with an air of increasing frustration, before turning and marching back up the road out of sight. For Nenka, this was clearly a sign that Ben's friends had come to rescue him. For Ben, Pakat and Grandmother, especially in light of the previous night's conversation, it couldn't have seemed more ominous.

“Did he get a description?” Ben asked, but, of course, Taaki's cousin had only described the alien creature as small, pink and furless. It's hair might have been brownish, but then again, all Pechnar looked the same after all.

“This is good news!” Ben could all but hear the young Kheelian's beaming naive smile through the telemwire. “Your Pechnar friends must have tracked the escape pod you used, and now we just have to tell them where you are, and they come for you!”

“Nenka, you must not do that,” Grandmother sounded worried. “You must not tell anyone about Ben.”

“Why?” How will they known where to come to collect him?” Nenka sounded confused.

Ben looked at the other two. He could tell that they didn't want the younger Kheelian to hear anything of the truth, but Ben knew he was going to need at least the teen's circumspection, if not his active help, if he was to stay hidden. But first Ben had to impress on him the seriousness of their concerns. Without scaring him, of course.

“Pakat?” Ben gestured to the wall-mounted comm-box, high out of his reach. Pakat lifted him easily up to a small table from where he could reach the transmit button.

“Nenka, it is Ben. I am sorry that I didn't tell you this before, but I need your help now. Some memories have returned to me. I think I was held captive by Pechnar, and it was while escaping them that I crashed here. I don't know for sure, but I fear that they have tracked the pod. They have realised that I was not killed in the crash, and now they might be looking for me. I wish that I could believe these Pechnar were friends, but I can't, not when there is a chance they may be dangerous to me or to Kheelians.”
There was nothing but static from the other end of the line. Ben could feel Grandmother glaring at the back of his head but he did not turn round. She may not approve, but he felt he had gained a good measure of Nenka's character up on the moor. The young Kheelian had handled a crashed spaceship, a dangerous weapon, the threatening narms, and not least a limping, bipedal amnesiac alien. The teen had been nervous, yes, but the fact that he had called today to speak to them showed he had not been scared off. He would cope with this too. Sure enough;

“Right,” Nenka's voice was firm. “I suppose even if you are not sure, we will have to guess that they do not mean well, just to keep everyone safe. What should I say if anyone asking about you comes into the shop? So far I said we went to the moor because you're helping Pakat with research on narms.”

“That's good,” Ben said, encouragingly. Too late to hide his presence in Thet completely; too many people had seen or heard of him. If he had an apparently legitimate reason for being here, that might help.

“He could be a visiting Pechnar researcher, from the City.” Pakat added, taking over the comm-box momentarily from Ben. “That should be believable. But I should just say you don’t know anything else if people ask other questions.”

“Right, Uncle Pakat.”

“If any Pechnar come,” Ben added, “Tell them I was here, but that I left a few days before, on the train.” Hopefully then, thought Ben, they will leave you all alone, and pursue me. “Let us, Chana or Shaarm know if you hear anything else.

“I will, Ben.” Nenka sounded excited again. “I have to go; a customer just came in, but I will remember what you said. Be careful! Fare well Pakat and Grandmother.”

The comm-box let out a static buzz as Nenka disconnected. Ben scrambled down from the counter, and turned to look at Grandmother. Her expression was thunderous.

“I apologise,” Ben said. “I know you would wish to keep the children in the belief that there is no darkness in the world. But Nenka is nearly an adult, isn’t he? And he deserves to know the danger that the other Pechnar might prove. If anyone was looking for information on a stranger in a village like this, you would look in the med-centres or tavern first, and in the absence of those, the village shop.”

“How do you know that?” Pakat asked.

Ben rubbed his beard, a little ruefully. “It is what I would do.” he said.

“I am not happy,” Grandmother said. She sat back on her haunches and folded her forearms. “You should have asked us before you told him anything.”

“I am sorry,” Ben said again, “But I still know I made the right decision. Nenka has shown himself to be strong and capable already. If there is danger following me, then the only way I can truly keep you all safe is to leave.”

The two Kheelians stiffened perceptibly.

Ben smiled; “I gather you would not be happy with that solution either. You really want me to stay? Even if it brings strangers to your village?”

“Yes, Ben.” Grandmother said. “It would be unforgivable for a guest to be unwelcome at their hosts
I know," Ben sighed a little, "but I was not an invited guest, and I may bring even more uninvited trouble with me. But either way, I am grateful beyond words for your hospitality. What I can do is ensure that Nenka will not be taken by surprise if people do come looking for me. If they think I am not here, well, then we will all be safer."

Grandmother sighed, and then unfolded her arms, stroking Ben's hair, indicating her forgiveness. "I understand," she said quietly.

Ben accepted the physical contact in contemplative silence. It had been, up until that moment, a pleasant morning. Ooouli and Shaarm had gone into town as usual, Ooouli to school, and Shaarm to the surgery. It was still her intention to take Ben in the next day and run a full examination to check his healing. His previous treatment when he first been found unconscious on the family's doortep had apparently been from a veterinarian in the town, who had owed Chana a favour. To attend a proper clinic he would need full ID which he obviously did not have. Shaarm's plan, as far as he could tell, was to run his treatment under a different patient's name when there weren't other staff around. Ben had been anxious about her risking getting into trouble on his account, but she had brushed his concerns aside. Tzsaaf was a small town, and records were misplaced all the time, she assured him.

After Ooouli and her mother had left, Pakat had closeted himself away in his laboratory at the back of the house to run the water samples they had taken on the moor. Tiki and Ben had ostensibly been "helping" Grandmother in the garden plot, although in reality they were making more of a mess. Ben discovered he did not have what Grandmother called green fingers, although he enjoyed the serenity and sense of life which the garden gave. Tiki had been laid down for a nap for a standard turn or so, and Ben had busied himself repairing some of the electrical items that had been retrieved from the ship. Then the comm-box had let out its loud chirp, and Nenka's voice had shattered the peaceful morning.

Pakat recalled Ben's attention to the present with a pat on the shoulder as he passed by over to the table.

"Do you think that telling them that you have left will be enough to send them away, if they do come here?" Pakat asked.

Ben shrugged. "Honestly? I have no idea, but probably not. If they have followed me all the way here, they would very likely stay long enough to check and make certain. It is tomorrow that I am mainly concerned about. If I was hunting for someone that I knew was injured on an unfamiliar planet, the medical centres would be a key place to lay surveillance."

"If anyone did see you though your new clothes make you look quite different," Grandmother pointed out. "Almost like a native Pechnar."

Ben rubbed his beard musingly. "I could change my appearance further."

"How?" Pakat did not sound convinced. "Pechnar all look quite alike anyway. I do not mean any offence of course," he hastily added when Ben laughed.

"None taken, my friend," Ben assured him. "But I could cut off my beard, change the colour of my hair...all of those things would help."

The Kheelians glanced at each other, almost shocked.

"Kheelians do not change the colour of their fur," Grandmother said. "Its colour is what defines who
you are. How could you change that? It would be like cutting off an arm.”

“Pechnar cut, shape or colour their hair to express who they choose to be,” Ben tried to explain. “Or in this instance, to hide who I was. I think if we looked, we could find something here that would work to dye mine. And do you perhaps have a sharp blade I could borrow?”

One they realised he was in earnest about his hair and beard, Grandmother and Pakat moved into action. Pakat took a few strands of Ben's hair to test against various chemicals in his lab. The Kheelians didn't have anything like a razor, of course, but Grandmother had a small pair of sewing scissors and a small straight-edged kitchen knife which she sharpened to within an inch of its life. She took over the task of trimming Ben's beard and hair when it became clear he was struggling to work the scissors with his healing fingers. Ben could help but feel slightly nervous with the Kheelian's large hands wielding a blade so close to his neck. It was worse when she got round to shaving the injured side of his neck and chin. The wound still felt hot and tight, even after however many days. Ben wondered if his beard would ever grow back through the scar it would undoubtedly leave.

Pakat returned with a hair dye solution just as Ben came back in, drying his now beardless chin. The Kheelian did a double take, staring. Grandmother gave a laugh.

“I was wrong! You do look different.. It is...extremely odd.” Pakat touched Ben's smooth face. “This is very strange.”

It was Ben's turn to laugh. “Well I'm glad that you think it worked. I liked my beard; it would have been a shame to lose it for nothing.”

Pakat showed them the results he had produced with his home-made hair dye. There was a small nut which grew on an edible plant in their garden, which Pakat knew historically had been used to make ink and dye for clothes. He had mixed it with a few other chemicals, and it seemed to have taken to the few strands of Ben's red-auburn hair he tested it on. They took the plunge and gave it a try. It took three applications, but by the time they had finished, Ben's hair was a dark, nut brown. He stared at his face in a small mirror that Pakat held it up, observing he had a slight cleft in his chin and an old, half-moon scar on his jaw. His pale skin looked even more drained against the now dark strands of his hair. His eyes, he noticed for the first time, were a sort of dull grey in shadowed sockets. Ben looked away, satisfied that their work was done, but disconcerted by once again looking into the face of a man he did not know.

The disguise was proved to be successful when Tiki, who had wandered sleepily into the room, gave a shriek at the sight of him and dashed over to Pakat to hide behind his legs. It took several minutes to persuade her that this was still Ben, and even longer for her to go over to touch his new face and hair. The little girl screwed her face up, but didn't cry.

“He's not like Benben any more,” she mumbled into Pakat's shoulder when he picked her up. The grown-ups pointing out that the drawing of folk hero Benborena in her picture book didn't have a beard either had not helped.

Grandmother took Tiki off the to kitchen to set about making an afternoon meal. Within a few moments, Tiki seemed to have sufficiently recovered from her shock, and childish shrieks of laughter quickly floated out into the living room. Pakat looked Ben over once more, as if comparing him to his memory of the previous day.

“I think you should not be recognised,” the Kheelian concluded after a moment or two. “You really do look like a child now! You will need to wear a scarf to cover the bandages on your neck, of course, which they may look for. And you should probably remove your bracelet.”
Ben turned back in surprise. “My what?”

“This?”

Pakat tugged on Ben's sleeve and revealed the thin metal band on his wrist. Ben stared at it in astonishment. Of course, the bracelet. He had noticed it the first day he had woken up here, but after that it had slipped his mind completely. How odd that he should have forgotten it. Anyone searching for him would, of course, be looking for such an obvious marker of his identity.

“Yes, of course.” Ben tugged at the band futilely for a few moments. It really would not fit over his hand. Pakat returned with some soap, but even coating Ben's wrist with it was not enough for the bracelet to slide off. Ben inspected the band closely. The red veins seemed to glow with some inner fire, and the thin lines looked more like scrawling letters now that he thought about it. He turned his wrist over, and saw the lines extend all the way around, up to a narrow line. Ben ran his thumbnail over the mark; it was a join where the two halves of the band met. He pushed at the joint, but couldn't get enough pressure with his one hand to lever the pieces apart.

“Can you try?” He held out his arm out to Pakat. After a while the Kheelian managed to work his broad fingertips between Ben's wrist and the metal, and pressed in on both sides of the band. There was a faint click. The bracelet bent apart on an invisible hinge, falling away from Ben's arm.

For a moment, Ben felt nothing. There was a strange sound like a distant river.

Ben saw Pakat hold up the bracelet, looking at it closely. “It's beautifully made,” he was saying. “Put it somewhere safe until you can wear it again.” He lifted up Ben's hand and dropped the bracelet into it.

The rushing sound grew louder, like the rising of a great wave or the burn of a starship's engine. Ben felt all sensation drain out of him. Cold paralysis burst out from his chest and flooded into his limbs. He watched as the silver band fell from his numb fingers, and he fell after it, into darkness.

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Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU again to all readers, kudos-givers, lurkers and commenters! Your impressions, musings and reactions are very welcome and I love reading them.

P.s. I should point out that this hasn't been betaed so if anyone spots any mistakes/typos please do let me know so I can fix them!
The Will and the Way

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He might have been drowning.

Sound and time and emotion roared around him; crashing waves of sensation. Once or twice the current ebbed enough that he could catch a breath, and then the paralysing rushing power of it swept him away once more. The weight of everything and nothing pressed down on him like an immense load. He could feel stars exploding, atoms blinking out of existence, the swirling forces of the universe. He could see the distant past, endless futures, the tireless, unending motion of the cosmos all enfolded in a beautiful, glorious, burning light. He was scattered, shredded into wisps of bare consciousness, flung out into the dazzling, sublime oneness of every thing.

He tried to fly into the light, but something held him back. Looking down, he saw his own body, a vile sack of blood and tubes and revolting fluids, speared with cracked bones and wrapped with brittle skin. He saw failing organs and dying cells, a stinking mass of necrosis and corruption, struggling for life amidst a sea of writhing fear. He looked on the repulsive thing with pity. It was holding him back from that glorious light, and it would be an act of compassion to let it die, to end its fragile, broken existence. But he found he could not, not while there was life yet. That choice did not belong to him. He relaxed his grip on the grotesque thing, and felt its lungs spasm. Oxygen flooded into its starved cells. The fear which had mired the body in its dark cloud flowed away, and hope fluttered in the darkness.

He had to go back. Something was telling him he had to go back, to take up residence again in that fragile broken shell. To live. To be mindful of this moment. He was not reluctant or afraid, there was no emotion here, only peace. He would do as he was asked. He would become whole again. He drew the scattered pieces of himself together and-

His existence suddenly shuddered. Before he could steady himself, the all-encompassing light flickered and blinked out. The awareness and knowledge and serenity it had left behind was ripped from him. Paralysed by agony, he was once again forsaken; blind and dumb in the dark.

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An alarm is sounding.

The pod is out of control. It's all going wrong. He lost consciousness, just for a moment, and now he is crashing; he will no doubt be smashed to pieces on the planet below. He has always said he hated flying and still he-

No. That was before. He had seen the escape pod in the marsh. That was before.

The ringing noise did not falter, however, and he became aware that it was inside his head. Now, he saw a light. Barely a tiny candle flame to the perfect, infinite, omniscient light he had known before, but it was there. There was a distant echo of sound, perhaps a voice, and the feel of hands on his face. That feeble, base light grew in intensity, and soon shards of agony were spearing into his eyes. He tried to block it out, but his body was numb and his hands only twitched uselessly. The light stabbed into his retinas again, and the voice cleared.

“That's it,” it said, in Basic. “Blink your eyes again. Come on, Ben, come back to us. I want you to
move or say something, so that we know you are all right. Ben?"

He managed to roll his head away from the painful burning brightness that sent nausea coiling in his belly. His body felt unbearably heavy.

“t’s not my name,” he said, mumbling. The hands that were tapping his face stilled.

“Then what is your name?” *Give me the names,* he heard, in echo.

The sound of the voices, present and past, blurring together was almost as painful as the light in his eyes.

“Do you know where you are?” *Tell me where they are*

“Can you can remember my name?” *Give me the codes*

“Just say something so we can tell if you are okay,” *Just tell us what we want to know, and I'll stop hurting you*

“I'm not going to tell you anything.” He laughed as he looked up at the man with the mad eyes. “This little exercise is completely futile, and you and I both know that. Much nastier and far more creative beings than you have tried to intimidate me, and all of them failed. You may as well save us both the bother and release me. That, or kill me now.”

He closed his weary eyes as he continued. “To be honest, I am starting not to care what you do, as long as I no longer have to listen to the sound of your ceaseless babbling. Why don't you go away and let me sleep?”

One of the voices continued to talk for a while longer, but he blocked it out, and eventually it fell silent. He was finally left alone with the pain in his head, and slept.

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He drifted on the edge of consciousness for a long time, and woke up to a jarring sense of *deja vu.* He was lying on the floor of a room. The light was dull and gloomy, but he could make out some features. The ceiling was very high and shadowed; the curved walls looked like they were made of rough plaster or mud.

Of course. The shipwreck, the village, the Kheelians…

Ben rubbed his eyes and let the memories coalesce. Every muscle and joint in his body ached. He felt as if he had just run a marathon, or fought a long and weary battle. He was in his room in Shaarm’s house, lying on his small pallet bed in the side room. There was no way of knowing what time it was, but the house around seemed quiet and still. He sat up painfully, pushing aside a mound of blankets, and the world span. At the edge of the bed was his walking staff, an empty basin and a bottle of water. The presence of the basin, and the taste in his mouth as he drank, attested to the fact that he apparently had thrown up at least once. Had he perhaps been ill?

Ben's nose tickled and he put a hand up to his wet face. Blood smeared across his fingers. He pinched his nose, just as his questing left hand found a towel beside the bed. He clamped the cloth to his face, and closed his eyes. What had happened? He shivered, cold and numb.

After several minutes, Ben finally felt the blood slow, and then stop. As he moved to put the towel down, silver glinted at his wrist. He shoved his sleeve up, heart pounding, and saw that the thin, innocent little bracelet was clasped once again around his arm. The very sight of it made him quake
with horror. Ben tried to pull the thing off, but only succeeded in bruising his hand. Wrenching at the clasp did nothing. He even tried using his teeth to pull at the join, but to no avail. The metal disgusted him, the feel of it on his skin was suddenly abhorrent. He had to get it off, and he was going to need help to do it.

Painfully, he staggered up to his feet, mildly horrified at his own weakness. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but before this recent crisis he had been on the road to healing. Now, every part of him hurt; muscles cramping and joints over-extended. His head throbbed with unremitting pain and his ribs and abdomen burned; the surgery wound on his belly an angry tongue of fire. His damaged hip was agony as he tried to put his weight on it. Even the puncture wound in his leg, which had been healing nicely, ached fiercely. It was a worrying relapse.

Leaning heavily on his stick, Ben managed to shuffle to the door, firmly holding the dizziness and pain in check. The living room was quiet and empty. The muted light seeping through the domed roof made his eyes water, but did show that it was midday or early afternoon. Small sounds were filtering in through a corridor, and so he followed them out towards the rear of the house and the garden. The brightness and chill of the day outside was too much for his overtaxed head, so Ben stopped inside the doorway, leaning against the wall and shielding his sensitive eyes with his hand. Squinting he could see Chana quietly working at one of the raised planting beds. The Kheelian was laying a row of small tubers in a hollow in the earth. There was a peacefulness and simplicity to the task that suddenly made Ben's soul ache for the loss of his own fleeting glimpse of serenity. Out here, there was harmony. Inside, he felt nothing but chaos.

After a minute or two, Chana look up and noticed him by the doorway. He put down his tools and softly called out across the garden for Shaarm, quickly moving back over towards the house. Chana's broad arm around his back felt like safety, and Ben revelled in it for a long moment before gently pulling away.

"Get it off," Ben instructed, holding out his arm towards Chana, with the shiny little bracelet glinting in the sun. His voice was hoarse with disuse and caught a little in his throat.

"Ben!" Shaarm had arrived. Her tone was soft and there was soil on her hands as she took hold of his wrist gently. "Ben, what are you doing up?"

He would not be swayed or distracted. "Please, get it off."

The two Kheelians looked at each other, concerned, and clearly out of their depth.

"Come inside," Shaarm suggested. "I can see the light is hurting your eyes. Chana can make some tea and we'll talk about it."

"I can't stand it any longer," Ben told them, pulling at the metal again. "It's wrong."

"I know, I know," Chana said, soothingly. He lifted Ben up carefully, and tucked him into the crook of his elbow. "Let us see what we can do about it."

Chana carried him back into the house and sat him at the table. While Chana brewed the tea, Shaarm quickly inspected Ben, peering into his eyes and ears, noting his complaints of headache and muscular pain, taking his pulse and checking his temperature. The examination had Shaarm frowning, and draping several thick blankets around Ben's shoulders. He huddled into them, shivering.

"Pakat is devastated," Shaarm told him, ruefully as Chana brought over the tea. "He can't bear that he harmed you, even if it was by accident. He was called out to deal with a narm crisis in the night,
or he would not have left your side.”

“What happened to me?” Ben’s voice was still rough. His fingers constantly worried at the bracelet, unable to bear the cold, numbing sensation against his skin. Chana sat down beside him, pulling Ben over to lean against him, sparing his aching muscles.

“You have been asleep for almost forty-two turns,” Shaarm told him, softly. “Do you remember deciding to disguise your appearance? Pakat suggested you should remove your bracelet in case someone was looking out for it. Well, the moment you took it off, you collapsed. He thought at first you had fainted, but they could not wake you up. He and Grandmother brought you into your room, just before you had the first seizure. I got back here as fast as I could when they called. It was my decision to refit the bracelet; your breathing was very suppressed and you bleed heavily from your nose. We were very concerned. After about six turns, you started to stabilize, and you eventually regained consciousness although you were very disorientated and in shock. Since then you have been sleeping, although from what we can tell you have been suffering from sound and light sensitivity, nausea and muscle aches.”

Ben listened to this litany and slowly sipping the hot tea. His brain, it seemed, was a total mess, and his body not far behind. The Kheelians had clearly been highly agitated on his behalf once again, although Shaarm of course seemed completely calm. Ben hated to be the one to disrupt them once more, but he knew didn't have much of a choice.

“I can't explain what I am about to ask,” he said, determinedly meeting Shaarm's eyes, “and I know it is not fair to expect you to keep saving me. But, please. You have to remove it.”

Shaarm was already shaking her head. Chana was tense at his side.

“Absolutely not,” she said, without pause. “It is clear to me now that you are suffering from more than just the physicals wounds of the ship crash and the torture. You have some pre-existing medical condition; whether your memory loss is related or not, I do not know, but it seems likely. However it functions, this band you wear is some form of medical support. It suppresses your seizures and migraines so effectively that we did not even know about them. You need this device, Ben.”

“I have to get it off,” Ben tried to explain, hoping he wasn't sounding as desperate as he felt. “There is a wrongness to it. It is suffocating me. Taking it off was like...gaining a sense I never knew that I had, or an entire amputated limb suddenly growing back. Imagine being blind your whole life, only to suddenly see a glimpse of the sky for the first time... How I did not feel it before I have no idea; perhaps simply because I could not remember any other way of existing. Now it is unbearable, like a great rock pressing on my skull.”

Shaarm shook her head again, but this time it was Chana who spoke, gently, as if to a child. “I don't think you fully understand how serious this was for you, Ben. You had five seizures before we refitted the bracelet. You stopped breathing several times. For a while, your body seemed to be just shutting down as if it couldn't handle any more damage. For several turns we truly feared that you would die.”

Ben rubbed his beardless chin. Five seizures? No wonder his body felt like it had been through a trash compactor. He sighed, feeling guilty for even asking the Kheelians to help him do this. But having even just glimpsed a sense of that perfect light and felt the rightness of it ring through his spirit like a bell….It could not be denied. Something powerful and eternal had willed this, and that was not as frightening a thought as it probably should have been. Perhaps he did have a psychological condition after all….Well, that was by-the-by, because whatever this recent trial had uncovered, it was that Ben's own will had a core of durasteel when he needed it. And this was one of those times.
“I am sorry,” he said again. “I did not mean to cause you fear and stress, and I do not mean to now. But this thing must be removed, and if you won't help me, I will find some way of doing it on my own.”

It wasn't a fair ultimatum, but he was desperate and exhausted and in pain. It was the best he could do.

“Besides,” he added, to soften the harshness of his words a little. “Perhaps it is this device itself that is suppressing my memories. I feel that much of the physical reaction last time was because I was unprepared. I know now what to expect, so hopefully it will not be as bad…”

“Stopping breathing is not the result of a surprise, Ben!” Shaarm said, now sounding properly angry. “You can't choose not have a seizure just because you anticipate it! This is madness. I cannot let you do this.”

“Shaarm...I really do not think we have a choice.” To Ben's surprise, Chana backed him up. The Kheelian reached across the table, and ran a gentle hand down Shaarm's mane. “Ben is more stubborn even than you, it seems. He is going to find a way to do this. At least we can do what we can to help him.”

“I do not know what help we can give if he is intent on harming himself,” she said, though her tone belied the sharpness of her words. “I wish you would not do this.”

“I know,” Ben said, “and believe me, I would not put you through it if I thought there was another way. But I experienced something incredible, and I have to find out what it was.”

“Tell us what you saw.”

Ben hesitated. “I cannot fully describe it. A bright, encompassing light, perhaps. An omniscient force, a sense of endless peace…”

Shaarm shared a look with Chana, frowning. “Ben. Those are common sights for those near death,” she said, more softly. “Caused by the release of chemicals and misfiring electrical currents in your brain as it ceases to function.”

Ben shook his head. “I know what I felt,” was all he said.

“Even if I did consider letting you remove the band,” Shaarm asked, adding; “not that I have any intention of doing so, how could you assure me that the same thing will not happen again? That we will not spend two days watching you slowly die while we fight to save your life?”

It sounded as if she had just managed to avoid saying 'your ungrateful life' at the last moment.

Ben sighed. “I can't,” he said. “I have no guarantees. Honestly, I have no idea what is going to happen. I feel like I have been asleep my entire life and have just woken up with a very, very bad feeling about this bracelet. I just really hope that you can trust me.”

Shaarm made a surprisingly undignified sound rather like a snort.

Seemingly out of the blue, Chana made a suggestion. “Perhaps if he was sedated, the effects would be lessened?”

The other two looked at him.

“Not fully sedated,” Chana hastily corrected. “I just thought that if he breathed enough valiform that
his muscles were relaxed, he might not be in as much pain.”

Shaarm turned her gaze on Ben. The Pechnar shrugged. “I don't know. It might work. I have to be able to think though, so it cannot be much.”

“You will rest for several more turns at least,” Shaarm ordered firmly. “I will check your vitals at regular intervals. If I am satisfied that you are gaining strength at a sufficient rate, I may, MAY consider letting this happen. And only then under constant supervision. And I would reserve the right to my medical discretion. If I feel in any way that you are coming to harm through this exercise, I will replace the band immediately, and you will not object.”

Ben smiled. Her demands weren't what exactly he wanted, but he apparently knew enough about negotiation to realise it was the best deal he was going to get. Any arguing or attempts to compromise on his part would probably make her withdraw her help entirely.

“I agree to your terms,” he said. “We have an accord.”

“I have not said that I will permit this yet,” Shaarm reminded him, pointedly. “Only that I may consider it. Also you must eat something. You are still far too thin. It concerns me.”

Ben did not argue. He just sat back against Chana's warm side, relief flowing through him. In a few short turns, he would be rid of the foul thing. While they had been talking, Ben had been endlessly pulling at the metal band. Shaarm, who had apparently observed this new nervous tick and was not as angry as she made out, gathered up a roll of bandage, and wrapped his wrist from hand to elbow, insulating his skin from the metal. It was not much, but every little helped.

“I have one final requirement,” Shaarm said, as she tied off the end of the bandage. “You must wait until the children, Grandmother and Pakat return home. They will be very upset if they did not have a chance to talk to you.”

Ben sighed, but nodded. He had been hoping he could convince Shaarm to act now, and that it would all be over by the time the girls returned from their walk up to the waterfall with Grandmother. However, with both Shaarm and Chana so convinced he was going to be dead by tomorrow, Ben could not really protest. Besides, it felt like a long time since he had seen the girls, and he found he missed them.

Shaarm took Ben back to the side room where his little bed was, while Chana prepared some food. Not surprisingly, it was more phuff dumplings in the grey sauce. As he sat up in bed, spooning in the mush, Ben vaguely wondered what it would be like to eat food he actually liked the taste of. Just one more thing he couldn't remember.

He slept again, and woke up two complete turns later, astonished that his body could still need to sleep after two whole days of unconsciousness. But he did not feel much better for it; his head was a pounding mess of pressure, the ache of it spreading down his neck and spine. His eyes were stung by the dim early evening light, and his nose now trickled blood almost constantly.

It was becoming clear that he was running out of time.

The girls, when they got back, were delighted to see Ben awake but picked up on the fact that something was wrong almost instantly. Tiki threw herself into his arms, while Ooouli wrapped her own long arms around his shoulders and demanded to know what was happening of her mother.

“You know Ben is not well,” Shaarm told her calmly, no trace of the anger and distress she had displayed earlier. “And that he was very sick the night before last. He wants to try a treatment this
evening that might help.”

Ooouli, of course, was a smart kid, and instantly focused on the her last words. “Might help? But what happens if it doesn't help? You should have gone to Mama's surgery two days ago, but you didn't. Are you getting sicker?”

Ben tried to allay her fears; a tricky task given they were his fears too.

“I don't know, Ooouli,” he said. Tiki, who had remained silent, tightened her grip on his shirt with her hand, and pushed her head into his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her short mane of fur. “I hope that this treatment will work. I believe it will. And I know that your mother is going to be watching over me the whole time, and your fathers too, to make sure nothing does wrong. So don't worry. Think good, happy thoughts all evening, and that will make it better.” He tugged on Ooouli’s ear, affectionately. “Why don't you tell me about what you got up to at the waterfall today?”

Although he had wanted to, and still wanted to, get the bracelet off as soon as possible, Ben found the last few turns with the family passed in a blur that was over too soon. The girls played and chatted as usual over the course of the evening, but were subdued and quiet when the time came for Grandmother to take them off to bed. Pakat did not return.

“If we are going to do this,” Chana said, looking at the other two. “We should get on with it. I do not think I can handle any more waiting.”

The others agreed. The time had come.

Ben made his own way back in to the room where his little bed was, while Chana and Shaarm gathered up the medical equipment that might be needed. Ben lay back, anxiety coiling in his belly as he watched them set up an IV stand, blankets, an array of drugs, oxygen, and the valiform breathing mask. Shaarm took Ben's vitals using the little round metal device that sat on his breastbone. It was called a zol, she told him. She noted his readings down to give them a baseline from which to monitor his condition. Chana handed Ben the breathing mask for the sedative.

“No chance we can talk you out of this?”

Ben smiled. “None. I'm sorry. But I'll do my best to stay alive.”

Chana frowned a little. “You had better,” he said. “Pakat will never forgive himself.” He looked to Shaarm. She nodded.

“Very well. We are ready.”

“Just out of idle curiosity,” Ben asked. “And given that I'm not exactly a registered citizen...what precisely will you do if I die?”

Shaarm glared at him. “Hide your dismembered body up on the moor and pretend you never existed. So you had better not die.”

Ben laughed.

“I won't, then. I promise. See you on the other side. And...thank you. For everything.”

He brought the mask up to his face, and took a slow breath in. Chana took up his place at Ben's shoulders, tense and ready. Shaarm raised his arm, and unclasped the bracelet with a click.
The world went away.

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Chapter End Notes

I know, I did it again...what a meanie.

As ever, I loved your feedback; thanks so much for taking the time to leave your messages!
Transfiguration

The light. That beautiful, terrible, all-consuming light. Ben wanted to dissolve into it, to flee away into its comfort, its control, its peace. He felt the connection to his body falter as his tethered spirit fought for release. No! He clamped down firmly, dragging himself back. He couldn't leave yet. He had promised. He forced himself into the body, even though it felt as if he wasn't quite connected, merely occupying the same space, hovering inside cold flesh.

Ben fought for control, forcing in a slow, tortured breath. That pristine light that had been held at bay for a moment while he struggled was pouring into him now. Before it had been like drowning. Now, it was more like a fire. Burning up from his core and down his limbs into his tingling hands. He felt his body start to shake uncontrollably and his breath stuttered in his chest. Distantly, a world away, someone called out. He couldn't hear the words over the thunder in his head, but he felt a hand on his arm. They were going to cut him off again, leave him stranded in the dark.

No! Not yet!

He didn't know if he managed to get the words out or not, but the hands went away. Relief flowed into him, and the light followed. His consciousness was dragged away, out into the infinite universe. He could touch everything, feel the brush of every living mind, manipulate the cells of existence, and wield the very physics of the galaxy to his will.

He sensed the minds of Chana and Shaarm at his sides. Not as formless swirls of emotion, like before, but fully-formed consciousnesses. He could feel their life force, blisteringly bright. Beyond them were the girls, twin stars in the cosmos of his senses, and Grandmother with them. Further off was Pakat, anxious, sorrowful. Nenka, and Porra, distant but no less present. Further still, another life, and another, and another. Ten, a thousand, a million lives, good and evil, friend and foe, light and dark, all interwoven seamlessly into the fabric of the universe. He could touch all of them. Somewhere, someone said 'Master!?' It felt a little like dying, but there was no death, there was only the Force.

And the Force awoke.

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"Come on, wake up. If they catch me too, we're going to be in a lot of trouble. Please, I'm not above begging, just this once, if that's what it takes to make you happy. Wake up!"

He blinks around at the metal room. Looks up, and is almost lost in crystal eyes of the brightest blue.

"That's it," the owner of the eyes says, encouragingly. "Now, quick, before they come back. I've bandaged your leg, but it needs proper treatment. Where else are you hurt? You're covered in blood."
Ben shakes his head to silence the ringing in his ears, but the man takes it as a response.

“Okay, that's good. Think you can get up?”

Get up? But he is chained....then he notices for the first time that his wrists and ankles are free. The cuffs lie smouldering on the floor.

“I'm sorry about this,” the man says, tapping his fingers on a thin bracelet of metal around Ben's arm, glinting cold in the light. “But I don't dare try get it off until Yoda or someone has had a chance to look at you. You seem pretty spaced out...if that's a repressor, you could be in psychic shock or something.”

The other man is touching him, holding Ben's arm, and his other hand is laid on Ben's shin. Ben pulls his arm free, and then focuses all his effort and pushes the hand off his leg.

“Don't touch me,” Ben says, and is pleased that his voice sounds so calm.

“O-kay...” the other man sounds wary, but does as Ben asks. “But I think you're going to need some help to get up, looking at the state of you, and we have to move.”

Ben tries to climb up to his feet. His damaged leg instantly gives out and he falls against the wall. The other man reaches for him again, but Ben shakes him off. The man sighs, but moves away to the door of the metal room, peering out.

“Okay. We're still good; no-one in sight. Is there any point in me asking you if you can walk?”

“Who are you?” Ben asks, still clutching the wall. His head thums with pain.

“Wait, what?” asked the other man. “Did you just ask- Fierfek! What did they do to you?”

“I don't know,” Ben says. He knew he should be panicking, filled with adrenaline, but he just feels dull and distant, as if it is all happening a long time ago, or very far away. “I don't know who they are and I don't know who you are.”

“Kriffing hell!” the man curses again, and mutters almost to himself. “I should never have let you out of my sight. Look, I know you, okay? You're going to have to trust me, even if you've forgotten who I am for now. Besides, I'm the guy who just unchained you from a wall and is helping you escape from the crazed torturers. How bad could I be?”

“Better the devil you know,” mutters Ben, under his breath, but the other man hears and snorts a laugh.

“Typical. You forget everything else, but somehow we get to keep your crappy sense of humour.” He glances out to check the coast is still clear. “We'll fix this. But first we have to get out of here. Come on, old man. Follow me.”

Against his limited and untested better judgement, Ben does.

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“BEN!”

The shout was in stereo, as two voices called out to him at once; Ooouli with surprise and delight, and Pakat with surprise and alarm. Ben froze, and for a moment they held a perfect, silent tableaux.
Ooouli, seated on the floor, pointing. Ben, half-way through standing, and with one arm outstretched. Pakat at the table, turned almost towards them, and behind him was the glass he had knocked off the table with his elbow as he rose. It hung beyond the edge, suspended in the air, gently spinning. It was a full three metres from Ben's fingertips.

For a moment, no-one moved as if held under a spell. Then Tiki shrieked a sudden laugh and clapped her hands with delight, and the spell broke. Ben started like he had been electrocuted and his arm jerked. The glass dropped like a stone, and struck the hard tile, shattering into a hundred small shards. No-one seemed to even notice the small destruction; their attention was fixed on Ben.

“You did it again!” Ooouli crowed. “I knew it was real!”

Tiki laughed again. There was the sound of footsteps and blur of movement over Pakat's shoulder. Alerted by the ominous combination of shouting and breaking glass, Chana burst into the room, taking in the scene in a glance.

“What happened?” Chana demanded.

“Ben did it again!” Ooouli announced, dancing around the room. “He made the glass fly!”

Ben shook his head but said nothing. His hands were clenched firmly at his sides, the only way he could resist the urge to stare at them.

What, in all the universe, was going on?

Chana and Shaarm had not really been able to agree what had happened the previous night when Ben had made them remove the bracelet. Shaarm's account had focused on Ben's medical condition. She recounted that he seemed to have fallen asleep at first, his eyes moving rapidly beneath closed lids. Then his breathing had dropped, and he had suddenly started to twitch and shake. Afraid Ben was falling into another fit, Shaarm had wanted to replace the bracelet. Despite appearing unconscious, Ben had called out, telling her to wait. The shakes eventually subsided without going into a full seizure, and so she had agreed to his wishes, for the time being. Over the next few turns, Ben had then apparently gone through waves of awareness, ranging from near-catatonic unconsciousness to apparent hallucinations. At times, his breathing shallowed out so much that his oxygen levels dropped alarmingly below what they thought was acceptable. They managed to bring his saturation back up by fitting him with a rebreather mask. Shortly after, his core temperature had plummeted, but warming blankets had eventually brought it back. They had brought him back.

Chana had instead recounted Ben's delirium. The Pechnar had called out strange names and had spoken in other languages that they didn't know. While Shaarm had observed Ben's seizures, Chana had sensed a great presence, a power pressing down on the room. Where Shaarm had seen oxygen levels and scales of consciousness, Chana had seen golden light suffusing Ben's skin, and a force flow through his body. Both Kheelians said they felt that Ben was changed, down to the level of every cell. The man looked the same, spoke and walked the same, but was undeniably different.

Ben couldn't deny that. He felt changed. He felt...complete. Whole, for the first time that he could remember. It wasn't just to do with his injuries either, even though they were significantly improved over the day before. The constant pressure inside his head had disappeared, and with it had gone the perpetual headaches that had plagued him. He was yet to have another nosebleed. The muscle aches and weakness he had experienced yesterday were no more, and even the ache from his broken bones was lessened. In a strange way, Ben felt as if he could almost see the injuries inside his body now; dark fracture lines running across his ribs, and tight bruising inside his abdomen and swollen organs. A crack marred the right iliac wing of his pelvis. His survival truly had been quite astonishing.
But this change, whatever it was, went beyond the physical. Ben was strong, energized, in control. He no longer felt the rolling swell of fear, pain, anger, joy, gratefulness that had washed over him day by day since the crash. Ben had discovered that he could gather the emotions up and push them away from him. It let him feel calm and centred, regaining balance where before there had been none.

And now these...these powers had appeared.

Ben had known something else had happened from the moment he had woken up. Shaarm and Chana had each recounted their version of the night’s events, but there was something off about it. They had been too casual. Nervous, almost. It wasn’t until he sat up and looked about him that he started to put it all together. The curving walls of the room he slept in had always been decked with shelving, stacked with a clutter of tools and boxes, stores of food and materials. Now, the shelves were empty. Baskets and boxes were stacked neatly up against the wall, beside sacks and tools. At the door was a pile of swept-up broken pottery and cracked metal. The jars had disappeared entirely, besides a few shards of glass in the corner. It was as if a thunderstorm had torn through the room.

Shaarm had seen him staring at the damage. It hadn’t been his fault, they assured him. Probably a freak weather event. A very localised earthquake that had caused everything to suddenly fly from the shelves the moment Ben had started to hallucinate. It could only be coincidence.

Ben had spent a few turns of the morning after his awakening dressing, washing and eating, and getting to grips with the renascent condition of his body. Without knowing why, he had chosen the garden as a place to sit while he worked out how he was feeling and what precisely had happened. On top of everything else, there was also the memory that had come back to him as he had slept. A dark cell, and a young man who cut his bonds and dressed his leg. But what did it all mean? Ben had closed his eyes, almost as if following some ancient teaching, and centred his mind, breathing out his stress, and emotion and anxiety. It took a long time, but slowly, slowly, the tensioned flowed away, and everything came back into focus.

His introspections had been suddenly halted by the compelling certainty that the girls were on their way back towards the house. Everything else had been forgotten, and he had quickly found his stick and went out into the front garden to meet them. The children had seen him by the path and had sprinted up to meet him, falling over themselves to throw their arms around him, and rub his hair and his re-growing beard (Tiki complained that it was ‘prickly’). Grandmother and Pakat had followed up the path shortly after, and that too was a joyous reunion. It may only have been three days since he last had seen them, but the intensity of what he had experienced in that time made it feel far longer. Pakat had continued to apologise so profusely for his part in Ben's collapse that Ben had to physically put his hands over the Kheelian's mouth, and firmly assure him that he had probably saved Ben's life by it. He still didn't know exactly what the bracelet had been doing, but it had not been good.

Ben tried not to think about the smashed glass and empty shelves in the room where he had been sleeping, or the look on Shaarm's face.

Unfortunately, the reality that there really was something strange happening did not take long to reassert itself. Ben had been working to complete the repairs he had previously begun on some of the electrical items from the crashed ship. His hands had remembered how to do the work, even if his memory could not. The girls were lying stretched out on the floor below, drawing. The magnetic pliers he had needed to fix a crystal in place were on the far side of the table. Without thinking, Ben had held his hand out and suddenly, the tool he had wanted just dropped into it. Ben had stared at the pliers he held in astonishment. For a moment, he doubted his memory, thinking he must have forgotten going over to pick them up. And then he had seen Ooouli staring.
First, the broken items in the side room where he slept. And then flying tools. Those two instances he might put down to misperception or tiredness, or yes, even freak localised earthquakes. But now here he was, barely half a day after the incident with the pliers, watching Chana sweep up smashed shards from a glass he had somehow just levitated.

“I did not believe it,” Pakat said faintly to Chana, before turning a bewildered look on Ben. “How...?”

Ben shook his head. “I don't know.”

Pakat picked up Tiki and held her close, a defensive reflex not lost on Ben. In a shocked voice, the Kheelian asked;

“What are you?”

The small sting of hurt from Pakat's words was unexpected. Ben breathed the emotion out.

“I'm sorry,” he said, not knowing what else to say.

“Do it again!” cried Ooouli, still dancing with delight, oblivious to the adult's tension.

“Ooouli, I don't think...” Ben began, but Chana, surprisingly, interrupted.

“No, she is right. We have now learned that you can smash up glasses as well as a storeroom of pots and pans. I want to see what else you can do.”

Ben glanced at him, but despite the apparent sharpness of his words, the tone was mild. Ben saw no condemnation in the Kheelian's face, only curiosity.

“I don't know how it works,” Ben said, cautiously.

Chana grabbed a garishly-painted jug from the shelves behind him and placed it in the middle of the table, stepping back. Ben raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure you don't want to try something less fragile?”

Pakat spoke up, at last, although he still looked rather disconcerted, and had not put Tiki down. “It was a gift from Shaarm's father. Everyone hates it.”

“Well, if you're certain...”

How was he supposed to do this? Ben concentrated, staring at the jug. He willed it to move, tried to picture it lifting off the table, or falling. Feeling rather foolish, he held up his hand, and gestured towards the jug. It did not even wobble. After a few silent moments, he dropped his arm with a sigh.

“Maybe it's too heavy,” Ooouli suggested. She scrambled to her school bag and took out a pencil. She laid it flat on her palm and held her hand low so that Ben could see it. “Try this.”

Still nothing happened. Ben looked intently at the pencil, wondering what he was doing wrong. The last few times had been so automatic, instinctual, that he hadn't thought about what he was doing. Perhaps he was thinking too much? Instead of the pencil, his gaze drifted to Ooouli. He remembered feeling her and Tiki's spirits as bright as stars in the ether of the universe. He could still sense them now; Ooouli’s presence, her life-force, perhaps, and Tiki's too; and Chana's, strangely alive and shimmering; and Pakat's, dimmer and intangible but no less present. He closed his eyes, following the sense of them, focusing in on the energy, the power, the force that now flowed through him like a
Ben opened his eyes just in time to see the pencil roll across Ooouli's hand. The girl closed her fingers over it at the last second and smiled, delightedly. Tiki seemed to feel she was being left out of the fun. She kicked gently at Pakat's knees until he put her down, upon which she shuffled over to her sister. Pakat followed, clearly curious despite his misgivings.

“So the vase seems to have been too heavy,” Chana mused. “Even though you moved heavier items before when you were unconscious...”

“Are you sure you didn't have your hand tilted?” Pakat asked Ooouli, who answered firmly in the negative. “Otherwise that would compromise the results...”

“We should be writing this down.” said Chana. He disappeared and came back a moment later with a datapad. Pakat took it out of his hands.

“I'll record,” he said, firmly. “You come up with the test parameters. Although we should first see if we can replicate the same result.”

Chana grinned. “Fair enough,” he said. “Let us try the pencil again. Same as before, Ooouli.”

Ben closed his eyes, but now he was starting to get a feel of what he was looking for. After a moment or two, the cheers of the others confirmed his success. He opened his eyes to see the girls dancing, and Pakat making several notes.

“Try again,” said Ooouli, and held out her hand. Ben kept his eyes open this time, finding the shape of the object in his mind. He barely had time to fix on it before suddenly Ooouli turned her hand over, letting the pencil drop. Startled, Ben made a mental grab for it and...

The pencil hovered unmoving in the air. He had caught it! Ben froze, trying not to move, attempting to keep his breathing even and his mind clear. His outstretched hand trembled. The Kheelians leaned in, observing the floating pencil. Pakat crouched, and moved his long hand over and under the pencil, as if checking for wires or supports that might hold it up.

“Incredible,” the Kheelian said, marvelling. He took the pencil out of the air, and looked over at Chana. “This is unprecedented.”

Chana nodded. “Let's try the vase again.” He grabbed it off the table, and held it out at shoulder height. “Ready?”

“Wait,” Ben felt somewhat alarmed. “Chana...a pencil is one thing, but that vase is significantly larger. I couldn't move it before; I can't be sure I can catch it now.

“We told you,” said Pakat, starting to smile, “No-one likes it anyway. It has almost suffered several ignominious ends. A sacrifice in the name of science is a far more noble cause.”

Chana nodded. “Exactly,” he said, and dropped the vase.

Ben flinched, but there was no crash. Instead, the vase hung a hands-breadth from the floor, spinning gently. Everyone breathed out a collective sigh. The vase wobbled, and Ben lowered his outstretched hand, tilting the object cautiously down until it touched the floor. Tiki clapped.

Pakat nodded, musing out loud as he typed rapidly. “So you can catch objects that are falling, but not levitate them. This magic seems to manifest itself more when you are taken by surprise.”
“It is an instinct.” Chana agreed.

“He can lift items, Papa” Ooouli said. “Some tools flew across the room into his hand this morning when he was working.” Then, to Ben, she added; “I don't think you realised, so I didn't say anything.”

This discovery caused the testing to begin to earnest, and the group decided to move outdoors into the yard at the front of the house to get more room to work in. Ben was reluctant to risk smashing up any more of the family's crockery, so Ooouli fetched a box of Tiki's toys and Pakat carried them outside, tipping them out onto the grass. As they tested Ben's abilities, Pakat took notes and Chana recorded the results on a small holovid recorder. They began with a toy speeder-bike; Ben lifting it above the ground, varying its height and speed. They discovered the magic worked whether Ben had his eyes open or closed, although he could move the toys faster if he could see them. Similarly, he didn't have to gesture with his hand, although he found it made concentrating on the object much easier and its movement less random.

After half a standard turn, he had successfully moved the speeder-bike, a selection of plastoid animals, a book, and Benben the doll, either lifting them, or catching them from falling. Next Chana wanted Ben to try moving the objects in different directions. They started with placing to toys out of Ben's reach and having him call them over, as Ben had apparently done with the tools earlier in the day. It felt to Ben as if he was using his will to summon the items to him, and it was by far the most difficult task he had tried so far. The book hit him squarely in the eye the first time he tried. Benben the doll rocked from side to side, span on the grass, and rolled over a few times before Ben was able to call the doll into his outstretched hand.

“Good. Now try pushing something away from you,” Chana directed. “Here.” Tiki's box had also contained a brightly-coloured ball, and the Kheelian placed it carefully in front of Ben.

Pushing things away seemed, at first, to be easier than calling them. Ben concentrated on the ball, taking a slow steadying breath and letting his mind clear, before tentatively sending a burst of force towards it. The ball shot easily off across the turf like it had been kicked. The two girls instantly followed in hot pursuit, yelling.

Controlling the direction of the ball's movement, and the size of the push he needed to move it, involved a much greater level of concentration. After a few tries, Ben found he was either barely moving the sphere, or losing control of the push, and sending it flying across the lawn. The girls clearly much preferred this second option, and chased the ball, shrieking wildly. Ben waited until Tiki was just about to catch it, and then gave the ball a small nudge. It spun erratically off-course and she ran after it, shouting “No, Ben! Cheating!!”

Chana's laugh proved to be infectious, and it wasn't long until the rigours of their scientific experimentation were abandoned. The Kheelians stood up on their back legs, throwing the ball to each other, while Ben would use his powers to push it in an unpredictable direction, or catch it out of someone's hands. The girls raced their fathers to catch it, yelling, laughing, and before too long, gloriously dirty.

The game lasted long into the evening, and only came to a halt when Ben paused mid-catch, somehow sensing the return of Grandmother and Shaarm. The pair were walking up the road from the village, but they were beyond the slope of the hill, out of sight in the fading dusk. A few moments after Ben was aware of them, the pair came into sight, and Ooouli and Chana shouted out a greeting. The Kheelian women wandered into the garden to be greeted with an armful of laughing children. Chana grabbed Shaarm and swung her around. She gasped in mock-surprise, pushing him off and dropping onto all fours, just in time for Pakat to pile into both of them.
“What has been going on here then?” Grandmother asked, laughing, as Shaarm spluttered indignantly on the floor. Ben smiled at their antics; he had so often only seen the serious side of these beings, he forgot that how joyful they could be. Shaarm had tackled Pakat back to the floor and was firmly sitting on him. Tiki wrapped her long arms around Ben’s middle, and he rubbed the fur of her arms, relaxing into the childish embrace. She had the strength to re-break all his ribs if she had wanted, but he had not even the slightest trace of fear.

“What has taken possession of you lot!” Shaarm was busy scolding, but with a twinkle in her eyes. “I leave you alone for one day, and just look. You are all of you a disgrace. Dirt everywhere.”

“We were winning at ball!” Ooouli cried out, leaping onto the pile of adults. Ben heard Chana, at the bottom of the pile, grunt as her elbow met something soft. “Me and Tiki! We were beating Dada and Papa, and Ben too. Even though Ben was cheating. He can move things with his mind now.”

“What?” Shaarm sat up, suddenly.

“We were honestly being very careful, and very scientific,” Pakat tried to reassure her. “I have notes to prove it.”

“Scientific.” Chana echoed, nodding.

“Oh were you.” Shaarm rose nimbly to her four feet. She glanced swiftly at Ben but seemed reassured. “Well, unless he has gained the ability to shift mud with his mind, it’s straight to the cleansing room with all of you, before you go anywhere near the kitchen.” Ooouli tried to protest, but Shaarm rubbed her head, affectionately. “You can tell me all about it after you are clean. So Ben has a few new surprises does he? Well, Grandmother and I have one for him too. I will tell you later. Go!”

Grandmother prepared dinner while the ball-game players cycled through the washroom. Ben’s new Pechnar clothes were pretty muddy, so he found the old ones that been adapted for him and put them back on for now while the new ones were in for cleaning. Ooouli inspected him critically when he came back into the main room, combing his cleaned hair with his fingers.

“Mama, is Ben still in disguise? I think his fur colour is coming back.”

She was right. He had noticed his reflection earlier; flame-coloured roots were lighting along his scalp. He had already taken the opportunity to shave off the newly-grown stubble of his former beard. It had been itching like crazy. Fortunately his broken fingers were pretty much healed so he didn't need to get help with that this time round.

Tiki arrived freshly washed shortly after, clutching a handful of beads. She plonked herself down in front of Ben, thrusting the beads and trinkets at him.

“She wants you to do her fur,” Ooouli tugged on the back of Ben's hair. “You do hers and I'll do yours!”

They fetched the leftover dye mix that Pakat had made and Ooouli carefully set about re-dying Ben's hair, painting the nut-brown mixture into the roots to concealing the glimmers of copper red that shimmered there. In the meantime, Ben straitened narrow sections of Tiki's mane fur, twisting brightly coloured glass and wood beads into the strands. Ooouli offered advice whenever he seemed to be stuck on what to do next. Some the trinkets refused to stay in place, and he started plaits and narrow sections of hair to hold them still. His fingers moved automatically, and he suddenly knew he had done this before. That child's hair had been straw-like, coarsened and bleached blonde by the sun, but he had wrestled it into a narrow stubby braid that hung behind one ear. Over the years, that
hair had softened to golden waves, and the braid grew and grew. Another time there had been long hair; fine, glossy bronze fading to slate grey. He remembered that the man with the long hair had hurt his hands once, and Ben had braided the man's hair out of his face for him; it had hung down his back in a long, neat queue for weeks. Ooouli's voice over his shoulder jolted him out of his reminiscence.

"Ooh, I like those! Teach me how to do that!" She was pointing at the array of plaits which now decorated the younger girl's mane. The Khelians' three-fingered hands made the task of plaighting somewhat difficult, but the girls were patient, and by the time Shaarm called them over to the table for dinner, they had both managed at least one neatish braid in the other's mane. Ben focussed on teaching, and not on the memories he had just experienced. They were just stray fragments of memory, from who knew how long ago. He felt no real emotion from the reminiscence, only a slight clinging regret that he did not know more. The people he had dreamed of, the older man and the blonde boy. There was no real connection there, if there ever had been. He couldn't tell if they were important to him or not. Now they were just echoes.

Dinner comprised a type of stringy black noodles that Shaarm had brought back from the town. They seemed to be considered a special treat. Unfortunately, the food smelled something like melting plastoid to Ben, and he declined his portion with an apologetic smile. Fortunately Shaarm had already considered his mercurial taste buds, and instead handed him a plate of fruit slices mixed with small white spongey cubes that tasted of flour. It was a very welcome change after days of orange dumplings. While they ate, Pakat and Chana caught Shaarm and Grandmother up on the day's events.

"It really is real, Mama," Ooouli assured Shaarm. "Ben really can do it. Like a kirnaya."

"What is a kirnaya?" Ben asked, the word being one outside his vocabulary.

"A being with supernatural powers, from the children's picture books," Shaarm answered, somewhat distractedly. "They do not exist. Forgive me, Ben, but I just do not...I believe you, of course, but..." She shook her head, frustrated. "This is beyond anything in my experience," she confessed.

"Show her!" Ooouli said, like it was the simplest thing in the world, and Ben supposed it was. He reached out a hand towards Tiki, who was sitting at the other end of the table, and focussed. The little fabric doll, Benben, lifted out of the girl's hands and drifted across the table. Shaarm gasped, and Tiki laughed.

Ben spread his fingers slightly, concentrating, and moved his hand. Benben the doll flopped up onto its stuffed legs and wobbled from one to the other, dancing across the table. Pakat and Chana whooped and applauded. Grandmother nodded to herself, and Shaarm just continued to stare at the doll. After a moment, her gaze shifted to Ben, and her eyes widened slightly.

"Ben," she said softly, and brought a hand up to gesture at her own face. Ben felt a tickle on his upper lip and dabbed at it with his hand. His fingers came away coated with blood. Kriff.

The doll dropped onto the table. Grandmother handed Ben a wadded-up napkin, and he cupped his hand around his nose as discretely as he could. He had been using his new skills intensively all day; hopefully this was just a result of working his still-healing psyche too hard. Shaarm seemed to gather herself together.

"He can lift things, and move them, as you saw," Chana was saying. "Push objects away and catch them when they are falling. His reactions are fast."

"I can sense new things as well," Ben admitted. "My hearing and sight seem to be more acute than
before. I can...well, feel things just before they happen. I can tell who is in the house, even if you are in a different room. Earlier I knew when the two of you were returning from the village before you came around the bend in the road.

“You have healed more quickly too,” added Pakat, thoughtfully. “In the last few days you have been much healthier.”

Shaarm still hadn't said anything but she was giving Ben a strange look, as if something unsettling had just occurred to her.

“What is it?” Ben asked.

“It's nothing,” she said, with a forced smile, although Ben could sense she was still troubled. “You really are full of secrets. Well, I did say we had a surprise for you too...”

Grandmother produced a folded plastoid wallet from a pocket of her robe, and handed it to Ben. He took it, curious. Inside was a small flimsiplast card, about the size of his palm, with a datachip embedded in it. Text in Kheeli characters was embossed on the front.


“It is an MedIdent card,” Grandmother explained. “It means you will exist on the medical database and can access any medical treatment you require from now on, in a proper Med Unit. Invaluable, given how often you seem to need it...” She offered him a crooked smile.

Ben was completely taken aback. “How did you get it?” he asked, turning the card over in his hands.

“A combination of Grandmother’s political influence and the resources I have at the surgery.” Shaarm explained. “Grandmother sourced the chip with your fake data on it from someone who owed her a favour, and I can authorise the reissue of lost MedIdent cards. It is not as good as a full Ident card I am afraid, but I think it will do. In the majority of places, a MedIdent is difficult enough to fake that most people will accept them as proof of ID. If you wanted to buy travel tickets for instance, or use the public data services or the university, no-one will bother to check if you claim that you have lost your full Ident. As long as you have an address and MedIdent together, it should be enough for you to get to wherever you want to go, or do whatever you want to do.”

Ben turned the card over again. He had been granted a gift, and he wasn't sure the Kheelians really appreciated quite how great a gift it was. More than just access to the medical facilities, they had given him a key to unlock life on this planet. If Shaarm was right, he could get transport, resources, and accommodation with this card. Maybe even a job, if he could be persuasive enough. He could survive here on his own, without the need to rely on the charity and compassion of those like Shaarm and her family. He could belong. Because even more than all these practical considerations, they had given him an identity. He had an existence. A name. He was real again.

He swallowed, and then said; “Ben Waken?”

“Yes, I am sorry.” Shaarm said, with a laugh. “I did not have time to call home and ask you what name you wanted. I know Pechnar in this area usually have two or three names, and it was the first that came to mind.”

"Not the name I would have chosen!” Grandmother said, clearly a conversation they had already gone through. “Naming you after an historical figure? It sounds like the best way of saying 'this name is fake' that I can think of.”

"Well, I like it,” Ben defended his new name. “It sounds distinguished.”
“It sounds daft,” snorted Grandmother, though there was a twinkle in her eye.

“Besides,” Pakat chimed in. “Not everyone will immediately think of Benibor Waken. And it is a proper name in its own right. Wasn't there a research assistant in your department at university called Waken?”

“That was Wakin,” Shaarm corrected. “But I think it will do. It sounds properly Pechnar anyway. And it suits you.”

Ben smiled. “Thank you, very much. I truly mean that. Thank you. I know this was not easy to get hold of, and it means a great deal to me. I will repay you.”

Grandmother huffed in faked irritation at his words, and left the table, gathering the children off to bed as she went. Ben caught her in a hug as she went past. “Thank you.” He said again, quietly into her fur. The Kheelian rubbed his hair gently, and with affection, and then went out. The girls bid them all a sleepy goodnight, and the married trio and Ben were left alone.

For the first time, they talked about the future.

“What will you do?” Shaarm had asked. “Although, before you answer, I should say that as far as we are concerned, you are part of this family now. We have talked about it, and we are all agreed that you are welcome to live here with us, for as long as you wish. Particularly after the next Growing season, when Grandmother will have left. Then there will be more space.”

“Left? Why, where is she going?” Ben asked, surprised.

“To live with her new family, of course,” Pakat answered, as if this was obvious. “She has been with us for almost two years, and in a few months she will go to be hosted with her new family at the Tora residence, across the valley.”

"Her new family?” Ben was thoroughly confused. “I feel I may have missed something here. Is she not part of your family”

Eventually the Kheelians realised his misunderstanding. Grandmother, it turned out, was not actually a blood-relation to Shaarm's family at all. The name Grandmother itself was something of a mistranslation on Ben's part; she was more accurately the Great Mother, and was an elected leader for the district. In order to share the burden of leadership, and for the leaders to properly assess the needs of the populous, it was the custom for a different family to host the Great Mother or Father in their home for periods of two or three years. When he had confessed that he had thought Grandmother to be Shaarm's mother, the Kheelians were most amused. Although, they pointed out, they did not think Grandmother would be, as she was actually younger even than Pakat. Ben rubbed his chin, shaking his head in surprise. He had been with the family for almost fourteen days, and yet there was still so much to learn about their culture.

“So, will you stay?” Chana said, drawing them back to the point of the conversation. “We want you to, but of course it is up to you.”

Ben considered, although really he had made his decision already. “I do want to stay, of course. Truly, I would like nothing more. But there are questions which I must find the answers to.”

“Like how the ship crashed,” Chana guessed. “How you lost your memories...”

“Yes,” Ben agreed. “And these powers that I have. I need to learn where they come from, and if they are dangerous. I want to know about the people that I see in my dreams, and what they mean. Also...I feel a compelling sense of something uncompleted. As if I had responsibilities somewhere
which are now being unfilled. It is somewhat frustrating, but if I have abandoned some duty through losing my memories, even unintentionally...I cannot truly feel at home here until I know that is not the case.”

The Kheelians nodded, understanding.

“You are not intending to go soon, though?” Pakat asked. “And I hope you will not stay away long.”

“No, not soon.” Ben said. “Perhaps next season, like you said. Although there are other issues of concern which may accelerate the timetable. Most important to me is this possible pursuit we talked about before...although no-one has been seen yet, I am not yet sure that my staying here is not going to put you all in danger. I have kept as low a profile in the village as I can so far. But I can't stay inside the house forever. If I am going to stay here, I intend to pull my weight, and that means work of some kind…”

Ben trailed off, taking in the expression on Pakat's face. It had suddenly taken on a tight, anxious look, edged with guilt.

“What is it?”

“I am sorry, I should have told you before,” the Kheelian said. “But with everything that happened, it slipped my mind… You recall the day that we removed your suppressing bracelet?”

Ben nodded, uncertain where this was going.

“Well, Porra called me up to the moor; some of our survey equipment had been smashed up by the narms, and...anyway, we went up to the site of the wreck.”

“The narms had been there.” Ben guessed.

“Yes, they had climbed all over it, but they weren't the only ones,” Pakat explained. “Ben – Pechnar had been there.”

“What?”

“At least three different footprints,” Pakat continued. “They turned over everything. The whole site was taken apart. I am sorry, I should have told you before.”

Ben frowned, shaking his head. “Oh, this is not good.”

“We don't know what they were doing up there, or how they found the ship,” Chana took over the tale. “But it seems fairly clear that they were looking for you. And they will have seen that you were not killed in the crash.”

“The narms had trampled mud over everything,” Pakat added. “But as far as we could tell from the prints, it looked like the Pechnar were there only a day or two after us.”

“I walked around the site,” Ben remembered. “And after Nenka found the lightsaber, I walked for a while. If they were looking for signs of another human, they would have seen my footprints.”

The Kheelians nodded; clearly they had already considered this.

Shaarm leaned forward. “If they were able to follow your prints, even as far as where Chana picked you up and carried you, they would have seen that you were travelling towards the eastern edge of the moor. And that means you must have been aiming for one of the nearby villages – there is
nothing else out here.”

Another unpleasant turn of events. Ben folded his arms with a sigh. Fear, guilt and worry all tried to clamour equally for his attention. He ruthlessly pushed the emotions from him, and drew on his calm centre.

“Well,” he said, slowly, trying to think. “It's not ideal. But we knew someone was likely to be looking for me, and that they would probably find me sooner or later. I suppose that you haven't changed you minds about wanting me to leave? Even if it could bring more people here?”

The Kheelians all shook their heads, faces fixed with determination.

“Like you said,” Shaarm spoke for the group. “We knew already that someone might come looking for you. Even if you left tonight, this second, anyone determined enough to find you is still going to search every house and farm in the valley. Besides, we have changed your appearance, and Nenka has been telling everyone in the village that you left for the City last week. If anyone comes, we can keep you hidden better here than out there on your own.”

Ben nodded. “Very well,” he agreed, eventually. “I don't like it, but I suppose my staying here despite probable discovery certainly won't be what they'll be expecting!”

“By the way,” Pakat asked, his nose wrinkled, “What is a human?”

“Oh!” Ben realised for the first time he had even used the word. “Well, I am, I suppose. I did not remember that I knew that.”

“A human? What a strange name.” Shaarm shrugged. “I suppose knowing that word might prove to be useful when you get to the City. Still...I like Pechnar better.”

“Me too,” said Ben, honestly. He turned the flimsiplast of his new MedIdent card over in his hands a few more times, and then tucked it safely into his pocket, where it sat alongside the metal bracelet. Artefacts of his old life and his new life, side by side.

By now it was very late, and the group was too tired to decide on anything more. They agreed, on Ben's insistence, that before Shaarm and Pakat went off to work in the morning that they would hold a council of war. They would formulate a proper plan of action for what they should do if, or more likely when, the other 'humans' came to the house looking for Ben. They all hoped that feigning ignorance and disinterest would do the trick, but Chana said he had a few ideas of places Ben could hide if they were required to prove his absence.

Ben soon went to sleep, tired out from using his powers almost constantly throughout the day. Despite the new hints of encroaching danger, he felt more hopeful about his future than he ever had before. He had an identity, and a home. He knew what he was – a human. He had strange new powers, but he had also learned that they could be controlled. More than this, Ben had been shown again that he had friends here. The Kheelians would stick by him, help him, hide him. He was not alone. They would draw up a plan tomorrow to keep him hidden from the people hunting him, without drawing any danger on themselves. With their help, he felt like he was going to make it.

But trouble, of course, never abides by anyone’s schedule. And when the farmstead was attacked later that very same night, the danger came from a source that none of them had anticipated.

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TBC!

Thanks for the great response to chapter 9, everyone. I had a terrible week and you made my life about 400% better. Big love!

I'm not super happy with this chapter, I rewrote it about a hundred times but to no avail. Its all necessary build-up to my favourite chapter though (that's chapter 11 but don't tell anyone, shhh....)
Something is wrong.

It beats like a drum in his ears, against the pounding in his skull. Ben feels cool metal against his spine and bare feet. There are crashing sounds and a loud bang from outside the hull. His whole body shakes, juddering against the forces that rock the craft. The ship stretches out in both directions, but he only has eyes for the left-hand tunnel, towards the cockpit. From the left, out of sight, someone issues a string of profanities.

“Sith-kripping-hells! Yes, they've definitely spotted us!” A voice announces. “Could they not have just sat with their thumbs up their asses for five more karking minutes?...”

There is another bang, and the ship shakes.

“Yeah, we get it!” The voice shouts, “You've made your damn point! However, allow me to retort...”

There is a dizzying sense of motion, and the ship turns. The owner of the voice must be flying.

“Anytime you want to pull yourself together, Master, and get up here...” The voice continues “They are right on our tail, and I could actually use a little help. Yes, that's right, I asked for help. I'm sure you were running low on ammunition for mocking me, so as you currently look like shit I'm giving you that one for nothing.”

The ship shakes again at another near miss, and time slides away from Ben for a while. It distorts itself around him, folds up, and then is suddenly settled by a physical sensation; the drip of blood onto his lip. He opens his eyes and gazes out at a sea of stars. The viewscreen is right before him now, and seeming almost close enough to touch is a pale green planet, like a marble of seaglass. He is in the cockpit. He has been moved and didn't even notice.

The blood is dripping down his chin now, and he reaches up to wipe it. He tries to, at any rate, only to find his arms are bound. He is seated in the cockpit, and his restrained. Without ceremony, Ben takes a deep breath, and goes off the deep end.

He has been struggling frenziedly for less than ten seconds when there is a shout from his right, and someone is at his side.

“Whoa! Careful, careful, you'll hurt yourself. It's all right.”

Ben sees the blue-eyed man crouch down at his side. He throws his head back, wrenching his shoulder against the restraints.

“It's okay,” says the man, reaching for his arms. “You're not a prisoner anymore, remember? I just put the seat-harness on you because you looked like you might pass out and end up face-first on the durasteel. Here, stop struggling, and I'll...”

The other man disentangles the blanket wrapped round him enough to reach the harness, and slaps
the release button. The straps fall away. Ben fumbles at the other man for a second and then shoves him away, bolting out of his seat and across the room.

The man stumbles at the shove but quickly regains his balance. “What, is the chair on fire?” He jokes, but feebly. Ben's bad leg gives out as he tries to put weight on it, and it pitches him into the wall. He puts his back to it and stills, watching the man with the blue eyes carefully. The man, in turn, is watching Ben, his scarred face torn between consternation and uncertainty.

“You're starting to worry me here,” the man says. “I need to know if you can just hold it together until we get back to the fleet. They've lost sight of us for now, but we're not out of the woods yet.”

“What sort of ship is this?” Ben asks, just to test his voice. He thinks the man looks pleased.

“Refuse Collection Mark VI, G-class. It's the best I could do at short notice, although it's the sort of subterfuge I normally rely on you for. Got me right up to the station completely un-noticed on the way in, shame the way out wasn't quite so smooth. We'll have to ditch it as soon as we can for another ride now. Though no matter how soon we end up dumping it, I expect the smell will probably cling to me for the rest of my life.”

There is a moment's silence, before Ben says; “I don't know you. Where are you taking me?”

The man shoves his hands through his hair in a clear sign of frustration. Ben's heart-rate spikes. He has no idea what this man is going to do.

“Look,” the man starts, losing the fight to keep his tone level. “I understand that something weird has happened to you. We will figure it out, okay? You're going to be all right. But this is not the time or place to keep going over it. You just gotta trust me to get us back.”

“You made me go with you.” Ben says, remembering. “I didn't want to, but you...made me.”

“Fierfek!” The man curses again, and then sighs and looks away. “I knew that was going to bite me in the ass. I am sorry, but I had no choice. We had to-”

He is cut off as an alarm suddenly bursts into life. A bright light bursts past the viewscreen. The man's gaze turns away from Ben, just for a moment, as he looks towards the console.

This is the chance he has been waiting for, and Ben seizes it. He pulls his arm out from behind his back and the silver cylinder in his hand gleams in the half-light. Ben's thumb finds the button as if by instinct, and the blade ignites with a sound like a shriek. The blue-eyed man's head whips round. His eyes widen and his hand slaps at his hip where the weapon should be hanging. It comes up empty; Ben had snatched it from the man's belt during that artfully-distracting panic attack. Ben holds the weapon still, the blade pointing straight at his captor. He remembered that blue blade light as soon as he saw it. Remembered how it had burned him.

There is the sound of a small explosion somewhere, and the deck rocks.

The man raises his hands. “That's really not a good idea” he says, voice impatient. “Where are you going to go? In case you hadn't noticed, they've just caught up with us. Those crashing sounds are very, very bad people trying to shoot us out of the sky. I've got a lot on my mind right now, and I could really do without this as well.”

Ben ignored him, keeping the sword trained on the man's face. The weapon gives off an intense heat, and the hilt in his hand is humming and alive with energy.

The man watches the wavering blade. “Do you even know what you're doing?” he asks.
“I'll figure it out. Even amateurs get lucky,” Ben answers, more boldly than he feels. “Move back.”

The man steps back, up against the console, hands still raised. He is starting to look anxious.

“Don't follow me,” Ben says, and then darts back, out of the hatch slamming it shut behind him. He sprints up the corridor. There is another explosion, and he stumbles. A second alarm sounds, louder than the first. He hears the man in the cockpit yell a muffled curse, but he doesn’t stop. He has to find a place to hide, a way to escape...

He sees a shadow in the corridor wall on his right; another hatch. Limping to it, Ben sees a panel on the wall. He breathes out a desperate sigh; it says “Emergency Escape Pod.” He deactivates the weapon, just as the ship gives two violent shakes. The man has not followed him yet, too busy trying to fight off this new attack.

Ben slaps his hand down on the door release. His mind might not remember how to launch the pod, but his hands dart over the panel and he just hopes they know what they are doing. The hatch slides open and he throws himself in. He just has time to hear another siren join the ringing alarms, a mechanical voice stating; “Thirty seconds to Emergency Escape Pod launch.” Closer, a man’s voice yells out.

“No!”

Ben slams the hatch shut behind him.

Six seats. The waste disposal ship was small; this will be the only escape pod. That means the man can’t follow him if he gets away. Everything starts to spin. He drops the weapon onto the floor, forgotten, and falls into a seat, ramming his arms into the crash harness. Lights and panels are bursting into life around him; his hands swipe at them. Ben is thrown to one side as the whole craft shakes violently; echoing death throws from the ship above. There is a voice calmly counting down, a hiss and a crack, and a feeling of brief weightlessness. Then the pod bursts from its restraints and away into the black, and he knows he is falling.

Strange sensations; spiralling weight, distances and time, and bright lights on all sides blinking and dancing. His head is so heavy.

The pod is out of control. It’s all going wrong. He lost consciousness, just for a moment, and now he is crashing. In just a few moments he will be smashed to pieces on that beautiful sea-green planet rushing up to meet him. He tries to reach the controls but his hands twitch uselessly, his head is filled with a rushing noise like boiling water and distant bells clamouring. The ground races up towards him, he closes his eyes, and-

Ben opened his eyes, and bolted upright with a start. He was breathing hard, heart racing and head pounding. It was a dream, just another dream. No...another memory? It must be, could only be, the crash that had brought him here. He struggled to maintain his calm, to claw back who and where he was. After a few moments, the pure panic started to drain away, and he could breathe again. Head in his hands, Ben knew there was little chance of him falling asleep again that night, not after the shock of the dream impact. As he climbed to his feet in the dark of his room, a sudden realisation struck him. The panic of the dream had faded, but the sense of foreboding, of peril, had not. Indeed, now he was aware of it, every sense was alert, strung out. Something bad was going to happen very soon.
He scrambled to the door, and out into the dark house. There was nothing but peaceful silence. The family slept, quiet and untroubled. Ben limped to the main entrance as quickly as he could and put his shoulder to the huge door. With an effort, he forced it open, and stepped out of the house.

Everything was cold, and so still. Ben stood out in the yard, waiting. The darkness was intense, with only a few distant lights of the village casting the ridge into a pale silhouette. The cliffs were a deeper black behind him. There was profound silence, with only a light rustle of the icy wind disturbing the frost-tipped grasses at his feet. *Danger!* whispered his senses.

A bright flash in the distance suddenly caught his eye. A trail of red light silently flared up, arching against the black canvas of the sky, before dropping without a sound out of sight behind the ridge. Ben blinked the after images from his eyes, and waited, pulse racing. The light did not come again.

He turned and went back into the house. He closed the door firmly behind him, and found it did not have a lock. Ben had not yet seen the Kheelians sleeping rooms, but he knew which one Shaarm shared with her husbands and went directly to it. He knocked quietly, but the compelling voice inside whispering *danger, danger is coming* made him push the door open before waiting for an answer. The room contained little furniture apart from a low sleep-mat similar to Ben's own bed. On this the Kheelian trio were sprawled, limbs tangled together like sleeping wookiee pups. Ben found a paw he thought was Shaarm's, and gave it a shake, calling her name softly. He heard her mutter something from under the pile of fur, and he graciously backed out of the room to allow her to rise in peace.

After a minute or two, Shaarm followed him out into the main living room, pulling the door to behind her. She was fastening a long blue robe, and yawning.

“Ben, what is it?” she asked, yawning again. “Are you ill?”

He shook his head impatiently. The delay had not helped his feelings of anxiety one bit, and he found he was pacing.

“I have a very bad feeling,” he said. “Something is about to happen, or maybe has already started. I can't explain it, I just know we have to do something. Right now.”

Shaarm looked at him in silence for a beat or two. “Is this to do with your powers?”

Ben shrugged, and then nodded.

“What sort of bad thing?”

The human frowned. “I don't know. An attack, perhaps. Something is coming. Also, I just saw a red light in the sky. I would call it a warning flare, if you have a similar technology.”

Shaarm went from sleepy to alert in half a second. She grabbed his arm.

“Someone lit their flares? Where? When?”

“In the hills, in the direction that the largest moon rises.” Ben answered, “A moment or two before I woke you.”

Shaarm left his side and trotted over to the main door of the house, throwing it wide. He followed her silently, and they looked out into the dark and quiet night. The sky was black and endless and unsullied by lights. They stood, silent and still together for several minutes under the dome of night, but nothing happened. Eventually Shaarm sighed, and lead him back inside, closing the door on the
She looked at Ben and he felt himself being fully scrutinised as if every moment of their interactions together analysed and considered. After a while Shaarm nodded slightly, as if to herself. Then she said;

“I will wake the others.”

Ben let out a sigh of relief. She believed him.

“I'd better get dressed then,” he said.

It was the work of a few moments to pull off his sleep shirt and exchange it for yesterday's clothes, and of a few moments more to tie on his make-shift boots. Yet by the time Ben returned to the main room, all four of the Kheelian adults were awake, and fully dressed. As Ben entered the space, Pakat came back in from outside. Chana and Grandmother were consulting a holomap of the valley. The Kheelians were quiet, but far from panicked. Ben was forced to remember that they had, until far too recently, been embroiled in a devastating war. He didn't know how long ago it had ended, but it seemed to be within the memory of the adults at least. Perhaps his hosts had endured many of the tribulations of war. Perhaps the threat of attack was nothing new to them.

“What's are our options?” He asked as he climbed up at the table.

“We used flares in the war to warn of imminent attacks,” Chana explained. “Some of the more remote areas still keep them stockpiled, just in case of accidents or natural disasters.”

“We haven't seen any more go up,” Shaarm clarified. “I would be more willing to believe what you saw, Ben, was a comet or a trick of the light or even another crashing ship, were it not for what you sense. Your 'bad feeling'. It has not abated?”

"No. If anything, it's getting worse.”

“Then we must assume it was a flare, and someone is in trouble out there,” Pakat concluded. “It must be one of the eastern farmsteads. Niko and her people, perhaps.”

“Then I certainly must go,” Grandmother said, “and make sure my people are safe. It's my duty.”

“I will go with you,” Ben volunteered, but Shaarm was already shaking her head.

“No, I think not, Ben. Not that I do not think you perfectly capable should the situation call for it, but you must not forget that it was little more than a ten-day ago you fractured your pelvis and six ribs, and they are not yet healed. In all honesty, you would only slow us down, and may re-injure yourself.”

Ben sighed. He sincerely objected to being treated like an invalid, particularly as they were going to be travelling by Shaarm's landspeeder and not walking, but he had also learned that little would sway Shaarm once her mind was made up.

“I will be going,” Shaarm declared, “In case someone has been injured and they are calling for help.”

Chana and Pakat glanced at each other, and the former nodded. “I will go, too,” Pakat said.

Without any further discussion, the trio donned their warm outer cloaks and coats. Shaarm had a large bag, medical supplies perhaps. Pakat had a long duralumin staff, similar to Ben's, but apart from that, the group carried no weapons. Chana and Ben saw them to the door.

“We will head towards the eastern farms,” said Shaarm, loading her medical bag into the large
speeder while the others climbed in. “And see what is happening. I hope the flare going up was just an accident, or a teenagers’ prank, but we must find out.”

“So do not be concerned,” Grandmother told Ben. “We will be back soon.”

Ben merely nodded. “May luck be with you.”

Pakat gave them both a firm hug, and then the engine hummed into life, echoing in the quiet night, and the speeder was gone. As he and Chana turned back inside, Ben closed the door as firmly as he could behind them.

The pair sat down to wait. They drank their tea, and another cup after the first, and looked out through a high small window at the dark sky. Half a standard turn passed in quiet conversation, before they eventually fell silent again. More time passed. Ben looked at the clock and realised two turns had gone by since the others went out. It was not late enough to start being worried. There was no reason why they would have got in touch. No reason to expect a call. Or a flare.

Just as the thought passed through his mind, another light burst the darkness as the small screen on the teewire system lit up - an incoming call. Chana jumped, knocking over his cup in his hurry to get to the panel. A faint, quiet voice issued from the crackly speakers. It was a Kheelian woman, but it was not Shaarm or Grandmother.

“Shaarm! Chana! Please answer...Shaarm!”

Chana was at the communications box in a second.

“Yes, this is Chana, I'm here. Is that you, Niko? What's happened?”

“Oh, I give thanks! We are under attack, I can not tell how many. We have barricaded the door but I do not know...”

The line crackled for a moment and her voice dropped out.

“I can barely hear you,” Chana said, urgently. “Niko, who is attacking? Is it Pechnar?”

“What? No!” Niko's voice sounded puzzled. "Why would Pechnar... No, it is the narms. There are dozens out here. They are throwing themselves at the doors, climbing on the roof, but we saw more heading out into the night.”

“We saw your flare,” Chana said. “About two turns ago. Did Shaarm reach you? Or Pakat?”

Niko's news was not good. “We did not light any flares. Ours got spoiled by damp and would not light. Someone else must have been attacked too. We have not seen Shaarm, or anyone.”

“What are you going to do? Is anyone hurt?” Chana's voice sounded oddly hollow.

“They attacked one of the boys... he is badly bitten but we will be fine, as long as we can keep them out until morning,” Niko said. “Don't go outside, just warn the-”

The line crackled loudly and Niko was gone. Chana depressed the speaker button several times but there was only a dull, buzzing sound.

“The line has gone dead,” Chana said. “That is what they used to do in the war. Cut the lines.”

He looked at Ben. “Shaarm and Pakat are out there. What if...”
Ben shook his head. “We can't worry about them now. They will look after themselves. We have to focus on the moment - do what we can until they get back.” He crossed his arms, rubbing his chin as he thought quickly. Pictured the sprawling layout of the house that he had seen looking down from the meadow above.

“Chana, how many entrances are there to the house?”

The Kheelian considered. “Five I suppose…no, six, if you count the garden door.”

Ben's heart sank. “I do. And how many windows? Large enough for someone my size to climb through?”

“Um…Eight.”

“What about roof access? And is there any underground areas like a cellar?”

“Two hatches, one in here, one in Pakat's office. They go up onto the roof panels. There is no cellar.”

Sixteen entrances into the house, if Chana had counted correctly. Even if all five adults had been present, they couldn't hope to properly defend half that number.

“Very well,” Ben said. “It's a lot, but it can't be helped. We have to block off as many of those entrances as we can. Use furniture to block doorways, lash windows shut, wedge bars across the hatches. If they attack and get in, I want to be able to limit the number of fronts we have to fight on.”

“You cannot even reach the door handles,” said Chana, with a faint ghost of teasing to his tone. “You had better let me start. In the meantime, you go and wake the girls.”

The children's bedroom, when Ben located it, was similar in design to the adults, but had wide brightly-coloured cloth hangings on the walls. The girls were tangled together in sleep on a low mat. Tiki sat up the moment he entered, sucking her thumb and rubbing her eyes sleepily. He quickly crossed over to them, and knelt down at the edge of the mat. Tiki held out her hand to him and then curled up at his side when he took it. He gave her a nudge.

“Come on Tiki, Ooouli. Wake up.”

There was no response from the older girl but for a slight twitch of her ears. Ben had to lean over and give her shoulder a gentle shake. “Ooouli, darling. You need to wake up.”

Finally she stirred. “Ben?” The girl yawned, drowsily. “What is the matter? Am I late for school?”

“No, it is still night time,” he said. “I'm sorry to wake you, but you both have to get up. I need you to help get Tiki dressed.”

“What's happening?” Ooouli asked again, sitting up and looking more alert. “Where is Mama?”

“She had to go out, with Grandma and Pakat. We think someone might be hurt on one of the farmsteads. I'll tell you the rest in a minute.” It was a lie, but only a small one. “Where are your clothes? In here?”

Ooouli pointed him to the wardrobe while she climbed out of bed. “Are we going somewhere? What do we need to wear?”

“We might be,” Ben answered, noncommittally. “Better choose something warm for you and Tiki.
Hurry now.”

While Ooouli pulled on her own clothes and helped her sister with the difficult buttons and fasteners, Ben searched the wardrobe for the children’s coats which he laid on the bed. He also found a small backpack, into which he quickly stuffed warm scarves, a blanket, Benben the doll and a couple of the children’s favourite books. Anything to keep them distracted so they wouldn’t have time to get scared. Whatever happened, the girls must be kept out of danger.

“I’ll just see how your Dada is getting on,” Ben said, as he backed out of the room. “Don’t forget your coats! I’ve got your backpack ready.”

He jogged back to the main room, taking a moment to grab Chana’s backpack from the main bedroom on the way past. Then he climbed up on the work surface and raided the cupboards in the kitchen followed by the tool shelves in the storeroom, throwing down anything that might be useful in an emergency, and then packing it all into the bag. Ben was just adding some food and candy bars to the children’s backpack when Chana reappeared from the rear of the house. He was looking concerned.

“I have jammed the doors and windows at the back of the house, furthest away,” he said. “But there are three I cannot seal at all, and the windows are just plastoid or glass. They would be easily broken. There are too many entrances, and we just do not have enough furniture here to block them up with.”

Ben sighed, as the Kheelian came to the same conclusion he had. “I know,” he agreed, heavily. “What are we going to do?” asked Chana, quietly, as Ooouli and Tiki emerged from the side corridor. “Unless the others come back soon, we cannot keep the narms out.”

“If we can't secure the building, we can't defend it.” Ben concluded, matching his low tones. “We have to leave. I don't see that we have another option.”

“And go where?”

Ben thought for a mere moment. “The fence. The village. You said it had held against attack before.”

“And if the narms follow us?”

“Then we run,” said Ben, calmly.

“Dada?” Ooouli, holding Tiki’s hand tightly, had appeared at their side. She didn't sound upset, just disconcerted and a bit curious. “Where have Mama and Papa gone? Ben said someone might be hurt.”

Chana sat back on his haunches and hugged his daughters tightly. “We are not sure, but we think there might be someone...some bad people or perhaps the narms...who are causing trouble at the farmsteads. Mama, Papa and Grandmother went out to fix things, and we are going to go and meet them. Look at you two! Up and dressed in the middle of the night? Quite an adventure, isn't it?”

He stroked the girl’s fur, and then added, “Tell you what, I think you should both have a chaal bar, as a special treat. Adventurers need their energy. Just do not tell your mother.”

The girls scampered off to the cupboard where this treat was apparently kept. Chana rose back up onto his four feet, and then noticed the two backpacks on the floor.

“What is this?”
“I took the liberty of packing some supplies,” Ben said. “Just in case of emergencies. Bottles of water, blankets, rope, fire-lighters, a torch, whatever medical supplies were in the cupboard, and whatever food I recognised.”

Chana was nodding, approvingly. “Good. We will take our flares too,” he added. “They are in the store outside. We can get them on the way past.”

“We ought to light one when we go,” Ben suggested. “To warn the others not to come back h-.”

He stopped. The air around him had suddenly twisted, and the nagging sense of danger pooled into his stomach as cold, heavy dread. He looked at Chana, eyes wide.

“Danger is coming. We have to go. Now.”

Chana leapt into action, grabbing up the backpack and throwing it onto his back. “Girls, quickly now. We have to go.”

He urged the girls towards the door. Tiki pulled back against Ooouli's hand, looking distressed. “I need Benben...”

“I've got him already; he's safe in Ooouli's bag,” Ben told the younger girl. He caught up the smaller backpack he had prepared, and held out the straps out to Ooouli. She slid her arms in and he did up the buckle about her waist.

“Quickly now,” Chana beckoned them over, taking her shoulder. “Wait by the door.”

Ben threw on his coat and grabbed the duralumin staff. Chana dashed over stuffing a few more forgotten items in his pocket, and then reached for the light switches.

“Leave the lights on,” Ben said, as the four of them gathered by the door. “It'll give the impression we stayed. It will take them time to break in, and hopefully once they've figured out we aren't here, we'll be well away.”

Chana nodded. “Good idea,” he said, putting his hand on the door handle. “Are you ready?”

Ben pulled the children to his side. They tucked in beside him, still and quiet. Ben met the Kheelian's gaze and nodded. Chana took a deep breath, and slowly slid the door open.

Quiet. Stillness.

Ben tensed, ready for an attack, but there was no spike of imminent threat in the steady warning that hummed in his consciousness. He couldn't feel anything nearby. He stepped into the doorway beside Chana, senses strained out into the night. All was still and utterly dark outside the circle of light from the house. Only one moon was yet visible, a huge low disk hanging heavy and swollen on the horizon. The cold breeze whispered past, bringing with it a bitter chill. Ben waited another few seconds until he was certain.

“It's safe for the moment,” he said.

Chana nodded. “I will get the flares,” he said, and loped out into the dark towards the store huts.

“Come on, Ooouli,” Ben beckoned the girls out of the house. “Quickly, can you help me with the doors?”

The children, reluctant but obedient, stepped out into the night. With Ooouli's help, the main front
door was closed, and they wedged it shut as best they could. Within a moment, Chana was back with a wrapped packet under one arm and something silver in his hand. He thrust this towards Ben.

“Here,”

Ben took a silver cylinder from the Kheelian. Metal, heavy, with black raised detailing. The lightsaber. He let out a long breath.

Chana, meanwhile, had torn open the package and was holding a handful of small tubes. He was frowning. “Ben. If we light these, it is going to do the opposite of keeping the others away. If Pakat sees flares go up from the direction of our house, he will be back here faster than a skrallrat on a hot rock; Shaarm too.”

Ben considered for a moment, clipping the 'saber onto his belt. “How many flares do you have?”

“Three.”

Ben nodded. “Okay. Light one now, to get their attention. Then let off the second, and I might be able to do something.”

Chana didn’t waste time arguing. He stuck the end of the tube in the ground, lit the fuse, and stepped back, calling; “Girls, close your eyes!” There was a spark, a smell of sulphur, and the blinding red light burst out with a hiss, and shot up into the air. Ben squinted, focussing on it, on the shape of the rocket, the chemicals burning inside, its speed and direction….

He could do this.

The first flare hung in the air for a long moment, and then slowly faded out.

“Oh,” Ben instructed, holding up a hand. “I’m ready. Light the second flare.”

A spark, a chemical smell, and the second flare flashed into life, streaming up into the night sky. Ben concentrated, felt the power he controlled wrap around the object and start to move it. He twisted his hand, manipulating that bright light until it streamed a pattern across the sky. ‘THET’, read the burning light. And for good measure, he added a pointing arrow too. They could not possibly miss that. The flare flickered, and went out.

“That was the word for the village,” said Ooouli. “The symbol for Thet.”

“Indeed it was,” Ben gave her a smile. “You taught me that.”

“Let us just hope Pakat or Shaarm was looking in the right direction when we lit them,” Chana said. “Come, we have to go. Quickly and quietly now.”

They crossed the meadow of black grass, which led up to the lip of the dell where the house was nestled. It was as they crested the ridge that they got their next unpleasant shock of the evening. The night was not wholly dark. Out in the distance to the east, a farmstead was burning. It was too far off to make out any more details, but the orange flames were like a beacon in the darkness. Ooouli gasped, and Tiki hid her face in Chana's jacket.

“Come on,” said the older Kheelian, grimly. Without a backwards glance, he led them out of the dell and onto the earth path. The welcoming lights of Shaarm’s house disappeared below the top of the ridge, and they were left in the dark.

They moved as quickly as they could. Chana led the group at the front, with Tiki stumbling at his
side. Oouuli came next, and Ben brought up the rear, moving as fast as his more limited stature and injuries would allow. The night remained cold and quiet. Ben's senses were stretched and over-extended, straining into the dark for any sense of approaching danger. Chana, too, was tense, ears twitching this way and that, listening for a threat, but there was nothing.

Ben couldn't tell how much time had passed, long enough for the adrenaline of their escape to wear off, before he became aware that Oouuli was crying silently. He moved up to her side and ruffled his hand through her mane of hair.

“Oh, dear one, don't cry,” he murmured, aware she was trying to keep her tears hidden from her sister. “It'll all be all right.”

“I am frightened,” Oouuli whimpered, dropping her head.

“Of course you are,” Ben whispered back, fiercely. “That's because you are clever, and therefore are probably thinking too much about what might happen. I'm frightened too. But you are also brave. And that means not letting the fact that we are afraid stop us doing what we need to do, isn't that right? And what we need to do is to make sure that Tiki and your Dada are safe.”

“But what about Mama and Papa?” She sniffed. “No-one is looking after them.”

“Well they will be looking after each other, of course,” Ben replied, giving her ears a tug. “And Grandmother is with them. I can't imagine anything scary trying to take her on, can you?”

Oouuli smiled a little through her tears, and shook her head.

“That's right,” Ben encouraged. “So no more tears. Let us focus on this moment, and the task we have. Help me listen out for anything that you might hear on the road behind us. I am sure your young ears must be better than my old ones.”

More time passed, and they moved on in silence. The second moon, a narrow waning crescent, had risen beside the first, dim and unsubstantial. The cold wind whistled chill fingers through Ben's clothing, and carried with it a smell of smoke. From the anxious glances that Chana was throwing over his shoulder, Ben could tell they were not making good time. He was significantly slower than the four-legged Kheelians, even Tiki, and the worst of his injuries, his hip and thigh, were starting to ache at the punishing pace. Each breath of the icy air into his lungs made his healing ribs burn. But they must nearly have reached the village by now. The security of the fence could not be far ahead.

He was just stumbling up from a slip into another unseen pothole as a wave of threat, the strongest he had felt so far, flooded over him. He lunged for Oouuli's elbow, pulling her back. The road turned around a large rock outcrop ahead and out of sight. Chana was at the corner.

“Stop!” Ben called out, urgency making his voice louder than he meant. Chana paused, looking back, anxiously.

“Stop,” Ben said again, tense with cold dread. “They're ahead of us.”

“What?” Chana darted back over to Ben, pulling Tiki along with him as he ran.

“Over here,” said Ben, leading them off the path to the far side of the outcrop. “Look.”

They peered around the rocks. Further off, in the distance, were the dim electric lights and scattered torches of the village. The road stretched up to it like a grey ribbon. The light of the dying moon lit an area of the road that seemed to heave and swell with motion, and they saw their attackers for the first time; a pack of dark bodies, a dozen in number, slinking along the edges of the road in the dark.
Chana swore.

“They are blocking the road to the village,” he breathed, holding Tiki close, “It is an ambush. How did they get ahead of us?”

Ben shook his head. “I don't know. We only guessed that they would only target the outlying farms...I wonder...” He thought back to the flare he had manipulated to flashing the name of the village across the sky. “Surely they cannot read...”

“Of course not,” Chana whispered, “They are just animals. What are we going to do?”

“We have to get to the village,” Ben said. “Can we cut across the fields?”

Chana nodded. “It will be a longer way around, but I know a way. Come on.”

A rough tangle of bushes forming a hedge bounded the road where they stood. Chana stood up on his back legs and lifted Ben over, followed by Tiki. Then he and Ooouli pushed their way through the undergrowth and they were out in open fields.

“Quickly now,” the Kheelian whispered. “We have to be fast and quiet.”

The girls nodded, faces pale and wide-eyed. Their white fur stood out ghost-like in the dark.

They set off across the uneven frozen mud, the Kheelians moving at a fast lope. Ben had to run to keep up. They had crossed two fields before they heard a barking, snapping noise split the quiet of the night behind them. It was taken up by two other narm calls, off to their right.

“Oh, that can't be good!” Ben panted, out of breath. He thought he could hear a distant engine, and shouting voices.

“There is a house ahead,” Chana had Tiki up on his shoulders now. “It's Kadat's place. We can hide there.” He leapt across a ditch dividing two fields. Ben followed, scrambling through the freezing water. His make-shift boots slipped on the cold mud, and he dragged himself up the other side. He took two steps after Chana.

Danger! his senses flared, and then something huge struck his shoulders and threw him forward. In the space between falling and hitting the ground, he heard one of the girls scream and Chana give a yell. Then he struck the floor, hard. He lay winded for a fraction of a second before teeth snapped by his ear, and his instinct to survive burst into life.

Fight!

He rolled, throwing the weight on his back aside, and kicking out. The narm on his back unbalanced with a snarl; Ben punched at its face, knocking slavering teeth aside. He kicked hard again and teeth came for his throat, hot foul breath on his skin. He brought his arm up, turning his head aside as the teeth snapped shut over the duralumin staff in his hand. He shoved hard, his left hand wormed to his belt and closed over the lightsaber hilt. The ice blue of the blade split the night brighter than the flares had done. Eyes watering, he kicked out hard with both feet, and slashed blindly with the blade. He barely felt the blade's impact, just a soft resistance as it skittered off the hard spines on the creature's back, but it worked. The narm yelped and the weight of it fell away. Ben rolled again, shoving himself up onto his feet. He darted forward, slashing again at the dark shape and striking it across the muzzle. The narm gave a howl, and disappeared into the dark. The smell of burnt keratin and skin filled the air.

Ben turned and sprinted towards Chana, his fur glinting golden in the blue light. He was up on his back legs. Two dark shapes were throwing themselves at him, and Ben could sense a third running up from the right. He couldn't see the children. Ben sprinted forward, throwing up his hand and
The force of the push was sloppy and barely controlled, but two of the narms were hurled aside, yelping. Ben swung the lightsaber up and leapt forward. The blade struck the third, who was hanging from Chana's arm, across the back. The creature dropped to the floor and turned on Ben, snarling. He spun around smoothly, reversing the 'saber, and the blade flashed out like lightning. The narm gave a barking howl, and slumped sideways, before falling still.

Chana had dropped down onto all fours. Ben was at his side in a second. The girls were hiding behind him, huddled together.

“Ooouli, are you hurt? Tiki?”

Tiki just stared, eyes wide and shocked. Ooouli shook her head. “We are okay, Ben,” she said. “Dada?”

“I am fine, Ooouli,” the Kheelian answered, though his voice sounded strained. In the blue ‘saber light, Ben could see blood staining the fur of his arm and darkening the side of his tunic. Chana met his gaze and shook his head quickly.

“Come on,” Ben said, trusting that the Kheelian knew when he was able to keep going. The human waited for a moment to sense that there were no more narms nearby, and then deactivated the blade. It would draw too much attention. The darkness seemed even more absolute without it; his night-vision completely burned away. Chana pushed the children ahead of them, and they set off again, stumbling through the mud.

Ben kept up at first, but soon his own pain began to break through the curtain of adrenaline that had numbed him. He had hit the ground hard with the full weight of a narm behind him, and his ribs and pelvis were on fire with pain. It felt as if he had jarred every break and burn the crash had left him with. He gritted his teeth and ran on.

He had just killed a narm. A living creature. As far as he knew, it was the first time he had ever killed anything. They were just animals, blast it! They could not help the millennia of evolution and instincts that made them what they were. He had no desire to kill them, to kill anything. But he knew, quite clearly, even as the horror of the death poured through him, that it had been a decision he did not regret. Kill, or be killed. And he would not permit the Kheelians in his charge to be killed. He had an obligation, and he would do what he must to see them through this.

Two more fields passed in a blur, before Ben realised he had fallen far behind. Chana was just a pale speck in the darkness ahead, waiting for him to catch up. He had Tiki up on his shoulders now, and Ooouli waited anxiously at his side. Ben struggled up to them.

“Don't wait for me,” he ordered, breathless. “Keep going.”

“We have arrived at Kadat's house,” Chana said, and pointed. “Can you sense anything?”

Ben looked over the dark structure up ahead of them as he crouched, trying to breathe. The house was a similar dome-shape to Shaarm's, but only had one corridor of extensions off its single round structure. It was in full darkness. He concentrated, but could feel nothing in or around the house.

“I don't think there's anyone there,” he gasped. “Kheelian or narm.”

Chana nodded. “Can you make it?”

Ben didn't answer, but took hold of Ooouli's sleeve, leading her down the hillside towards the house. Chana forced the door open, and the four of them piled into the dark house, closing the door behind them. They did not turn on the lights. Ben scrambled up onto a low table, and peered out of the
window for a long count of a hundred. Nothing appeared from the darkness. It seemed, for the moment, that they hadn't been seen.

Chana was kneeling next to the children when he climbed down, his huge arms wrapped around them. Ooouli was shaking hard with cold and fear, and Tiki was crying.

“I want Mama,” the little girl was whispering into her father's fur.

Ben saw Chana's backpack by the door. He grabbed blankets first and wrapped them around the children's shoulders. Once their crying had quietened, he got Chana and the girls to sit down. He persuaded the girls to eat another chaal bar each to boost their energy, and while they were distracted, he checked Chana's wounds. They consisted of a nasty tearing bite to the right arm and a gash across his belly from the narm's claws. Ben washed the wounds out as best he could and thickly bandaged them under layers of dressing. The wounds were still bleeding but he didn't have the time, light or supplies to do more now.

“And you?” Chana asked him quietly, as the two of them downed the water they had brought. “Where are you hurt?”


Chana decided the village was close, perhaps ten minutes at his usual pace. Ben thought they should double that for his and Tiki's slower speed, and then double it again for their injuries. And there were possibly as many as a hundred narms out there. They weren't going to make it.

“We could consider staying here,” Ben suggested, in low tones. “The narms don't seem to have found this place, yet. If we can hold out here until sunrise, we'll have more chance of getting to the village in daylight.”

Chana peered out of the window, anxiously. “I do not know what to do,” he said. “The children are exhausted. We might be safe here. There is shelter, food, supplies. But it is equally as possible that we get trapped. Also, if Shaarm and Pakat learn that we have not made it to Thet, I know they will leave the safety of the Fence to come back out to search for us. Then we would all be in danger.” He looked at Ben. “What would you do?”

Ben considered for a moment, listening to what his sixth sense was telling him, and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “I think...we ought to leave,” he said. “The narms that attacked us... I don't think they will be scared off for long. I can sense them nearby. They know where we are and they will be back sooner rather than later, and in greater numbers. I would rather be that bit closer to the village and safety when that happens.”

Besides, he could see Chana's wounds were continuing to bleed though the dressings. The Kheelians had impressive stamina, but it wouldn't be long before the big creature started to weaken. Ben didn't think he could defend all three of them. They had to get the children behind that palisade fence as soon as possible.

Chana nodded. “I trust what you say. We will go.” The Kheelian made to turn away, but Ben grabbed his arm.

“One more thing,” he said. “I can feel the narms getting closer. When they attack us again...if I shout for you to run, I want you to do what I say, all right?”

Chana started to disagree, but Ben cut him off. “Listen! I'm slower and weaker than you. You can
get both the girls to safety but not if you are waiting for me. Besides, I have our only proper weapon. I can hold the narms off and give you time to secure the children; we agreed that they were the priority. It may not come to it, but if it does, you run and you don't look back. Do I make myself clear?"

Chana sighed, and then nodded. He gripped Ben's shoulder in silent agreement, and turned away.

Tiki, exhausted with running and with fear, was almost asleep in Ooouli's arms. Chana lifted her and she woke slowly, clinging silently to his fur.

“Sorry to wake you, my darlings, but we need to set off again,” he murmured, quietly, stroking Ooouli's hair. The girl nodded. She stuffed their blankets into her backpack, buckling it on. Ben thought she looked scared, but determined.

“Here,” said Ben, and held out his walking staff to her. She took it, but looked surprised.

“Ben, don't you need this?”

“Not anymore,” he said with a smile. “But I was thinking, I've got my 'saber to scare the narm off with. If they turn up again, you might need to be able to persuade them to leave you alone. I've found a good bop on the nose helps no end. Here….”

He pushed the pole between the straps of her bag so it was fixed to her side but left her hands free. If they got separated, or Ben and Chana were both too injured to help, it would be unlikely that the girl would have enough strength to seriously deter the narms alone. But Ben felt better that she at least had some sort of weapon. She would have a chance.

“We should refill our water bottles,” Chana suggested. “Kadat must have a well at the back of the-”

There was a sound of breaking glass somewhere at the rear of the house. Ben's senses went into overdrive.

“They're here!” He shouted, just as something threw itself against the front door. Barking howls rose up from outside. The door shuddered, but held.

Blast it! They were trapped, just as he had feared. Ben snatched the lighsaber from his belt, putting himself between the shaking door and the Kheelians.

“I can hear at least two. How many are there?” Chana demanded, looking around with an air of desperation.

“Probably more than two,” Ben answered, a little grimly. Truthfully he had no idea, but it was at least half a dozen. “They're in the back of the house!” He warned, eyes fixed on the door.

“Just watch the front!” Chana yelled. The Kheelian glanced around, and then rose up on his back legs, pushing at the ceiling. A panel swung down from the dome – a roof-access hatch like the ones he had seen at Shaarm's house.

The door shuddered again. The barking was inside the house now, somewhere behind them. Chana grabbed Ooouli, then Tiki, and lifted them up above his head through the access hatch, pushing them up to safety.

“Stay there!” He bellowed. Ben saw their pale faces peering down at them through the dark.

There was a loud thud followed by a crack, and the front door gave, bursting inwards. A narm stood
in the doorway, and Ben ignited the 'saber. The blue light painted the narm's spines grey, and Ben saw a black slash across its flank. This was one of their attackers from earlier. He darted forward with the blade and the creature yelped and slunk back, eyes fixed on the 'saber. He slashed at it again, and it darted out of sight, into the night. He knew it would be back.

There was a tearing sound behind him as Chana unceremoniously ripped a long curtain from the wall of Kadat's house. He tore the fabric free, leaving a long heavy metal pole. A very passable weapon in the Kheelian's large hands.

Barks sounded all around them, and two narms ran through the doorway, just as third and fourth burst into the rear of the room from the back of the house. Fighting back to back with a creature easily three times one's own size was no easy feat, but there was no time to consider their tactics. Ben just kept the comforting bulk of Chana at his back as he darted with the 'saber again, trying to hem the creatures against the wall and stop them pushing into the house. One narm went for his wrist while the other attacked his left-hand side. He jabbed at the creature at his left, sending it back with a howl, span out of the reach of slashing claws, and brought the blade back, severing a paw. Pain in his leg as teeth gouged at his calf, trying to reach the hamstring. With decreasing reluctance, he plunged the blade into the narm's soft underbelly, and kicked the dying creature away.

"Get ready, Anakin!" He yelled, over the thuds, yelps and snarls coming from behind him. "As soon as one of the exits is clear we're going to have to make a break for it."

Chana's reply was drowned out as a narm leapt from the doorway right at Ben's chest, knocking him back. Ben rolled to the side, letting the weight slide off, then scored a long sizzling hit down the creature's body. It stumbled backwards, falling over its own feet, and dashed from the house with an inhuman shriek.

The doorway was clear. Ben paused, glancing back to see Chana knocking his last narm aside. Three others lay around the room, but whether dead or stunned, he neither knew nor cared. Then, the momentary lull of the battle was broken by a chilling sound from outside, one that they had both been dreading. A cry; female, young.

"Tiki!"

Chana turned and charged past Ben, out into the night. Ben was about to follow, then paused. His mind echoed the voice of Niko, the Kheelian who had called them.

*They are throwing themselves at the doors, climbing on the roof...*

Ben looked up, and saw the hatch in the ceiling above. It was easily five metres above his head, perhaps six. Without another thought, he leapt, using his powers to *push* at the ground below. The move worked; his fingers closed around the edge of the hatch and he pulled himself though, up on to the domed roof. The cold struck him instantly, and his hands slipped on the ice-coated panelling as he scrambled to his feet. His instinct had proved right. There were the girls, still on the roof, white coats like pale wisps of cloud, teetering on the edge. Prowling in from opposite sides were two narms, their spiny coats oil-slick black. He didn't dare risk *pushing* them with his powers, not with the girls so close, and then in the moment of his indecision, the nearest creature leapt towards Ooouli with a bark.

The girl, wielding the duralumin staff Ben had given her like a club, struck the narm firmly across the muzzle, sending it skidding towards the roof edge. Ben didn't wait to see more; he launched himself at the second narm, 'saber singing as he activated the blade and sliced down towards the creature. The first blow landed well on the creature's shoulder, just above where the spines gave way to bony plates. The narm was driven back. But when Ben twisted round for another strike, a third narm he
hadn't seen ducked under his swing and barrelled into his side. His make-shift boots lost their tenuous grip on the icy roof and Ben was thrown sideways, the 'saber knocked from his hand. He heard Ooouli shout “Ben!” and saw her hand out-stretched; he missed it by inches, and then there was a sudden strange sense of dislocation when his body didn't hit the panels as he expected but continued to fall. He went over the edge.

He couldn't see the girls, didn't know where Chana was. His impression of the house in the dark had been of open grassland around the walls and he decided probably wouldn't land on rock. Ben knew he needed to roll so that the main impact wouldn't land on his spine or head, but really there was no time to consider much beyond the fact that a six-metre fall was going to seriously hurt. Then he struck the ground and found out just how much. Everything went white with agony. Sound compressed down to just his heartbeat and the grinding of bone, and the throb of pain, pain, pain. He never knew how much time he lost lying there in that haze, but it was not long enough to come to terms with the agony. Without warning, he was jolted back out of his daze with a jolt of forewarning. He heard a cry, and his eyes focussed on a distant white shape high above him. Ooouli was going to fall too.

Ben launched himself up and forwards, throwing his hand out. There was a distant shout and she slipped; he saw her drop like a stone. Screwing up every ounce of his will, he shoved all the power he could muster forward and up. His arm tensed under the strain, jolted as if with an impact, and…

Safe. He had caught her. Ooouli floated face down half a metre from the cold ground, arms crossed over her head, face turned away. Ben's arm twitched with the strain, and he lowered her unevenly to the floor. She was safe. He managed a single breath.

Ooouli rolled over, shaking herself, and then she was up and dashing to his side. “Ben!” She wailed, and he could hear her panic. “They threw Tiki down! They took her away! Dada is chasing them...”

He didn't have the time or breath to answer her. He grabbed at her arm with his, and hauled himself up. Everything span wildly and he sort of lurched rather than stepped. His left hand seemed to be immovably pressed to his ribs, so he left it there, concentrating on gripping onto Ooouli with his right. The 'saber lay in the grass at his feet; he summoned it into his hand and they didn't stop running.

“This way!” Ooouli said, dragging him away from the house. He threw his arm across her back and managed to hold himself more or less upright. White specks, like Kheelian children against a dark night sky, darted in front of his eyes. He tried two more breaths, coughing shallowly, and felt his rib cage flex and pop.

Ahead was a large pale shape. Chana had stopped running. A narm, the one with the 'saber burn on its muzzle, was backed up against a boundary wall. Chana was blocking its escape. The narm had dragged Tiki with it; the young girl's forearm clutched in its jaws. Its yellow eyes were fixed on Chana, and the Kheelian circled, curtain pole raised ready to strike. As Ben and Ooouli staggered over, they saw the narm's eyes dart to them. Ben freed his arm from Ooouli's shoulder, and stepped up next to Chana, flicking the lightsaber into life. In the blue light, the narm gave a muffled growl low in its throat, and shrank back against the stone.

“Let her go,” Ben said, slow and quiet, throwing as much power into the words as he could. The narm stared at him, unblinking. Its muscles tightened perceptibly beneath its spiny hide and Ben thought for a moment it would attack. Then it slowly opened its jaws and, with almost ostentatious care, let the girl's arm drop. Then it gave a short bark as if announcing yours! and suddenly darted forward, bowling Tiki over. Before any of them could react, it bounded past Ooouli and disappeared into the night.
The immediate threat passed, Chana and Ooouli threw themselves towards the little girl at a speed born of terror and desperation. Ben stayed where he was, but sank down onto one knee, overwhelmed. He could hear Ooouli saying her sister's name over and over, but it was a few moments before their tangle of arms loosened enough that he could see Tiki was moving and talking, and finally could tell that Ooouli's tears were of joy and relief. Tiki wasn't badly hurt. They were going to be okay.

Ben knew they were still in terrible danger, but just for a moment as he knelt there he lost focus, and everything just faded out. Sharp pain was flaring hot and heavy in his chest and shoulder, and radiating out into his back. Breathing was getting increasingly difficult, and it felt as if there were great weights squeezing his lung. He knew what those symptoms meant all right; he'd re-broken a bunch of ribs and probably lacerated or punctured a lung to go with it. If the latter, he only had a short amount of time left before his chest cavity filled up with air or blood, and then he would be of no more use to anyone. They had to get moving. He shivered, hard.

Someone was lifting him up under his arms, and the additional pressure on his chest jolted Ben back into awareness enough to straighten his legs under him. He stood, pulling away from the pain, coughing. It was Chana, of course, shaking him a little desperately.

“We have to go,” The Kheelian urged. “How badly are you hurt?”

Ben didn't answer, too busy coughing, trying to get his breath back. There was a lot of blood in his mouth and he could feel his sleeve was wet. He met Chana's gaze and then looked away. Ben could see Tiki over the Kheelian's shoulder, clinging on to his back. She looked stressed and terrified, but she seemed to be all in one piece. Ooouli was crouched at Ben's side, also looking worried.

Ben's left arm was still wrapped around his chest, trying to support his ribs. He shoved the 'saber back into his belt and put his right arm over Ooouli's shoulders.

“I can carry you too,” said Chana, stoutly, but even if Ben thought he could, he needed to be on the ground in case they were attacked again, and Chana needed his hands free. Ten minutes, Chana had said. Ten minutes to the village.

“Perhaps later,” was all Ben said. “Let's go.”

Chana nodded, and they ran.

It wasn't long before they heard the pursuit around them come to life. Distant and not so distant narm barks and howls split the night. The hunt was on. The four of them ran, as fast as Ben's faltering strength could carry him; fields of frozen grass or sharp corn stalks whipping around their legs. Once they crouched low and silent in a ditch as above them two narms passed by. The moons had completely set in the last few minutes. Dawn could not be far off, but at that moment the night was absolute and Ben was all but blind as he let Ooouli pull him along. He thought he was about to pass out as they rounded a corner and specks of light danced in front of his eyes. Ooouli gave a quiet gasp, and he realised instead they were seeing the lights of the village through distant houses. They had made their way back to the road.

They crossed another field and then a garden, slowly approaching the back of a dark building. They paused in the shadow of the house. The road lay just ahead.

“We will have to go along the road,” Chana whispered, close at his side. “The only gateway through the fence is there. There will certainly be narms watching it.”

Ben nodded, and took a few preparatory breaths. They ducked low, creeping forward to the front of
the house. Cautiously, the two adults peered around the corner, looking up the line of the road. Ben could see several more houses and open gardens fronting the street on both sides; all were dark and looked abandoned. A few hundred metres beyond them, the road turned a corner, and he could just see the edge of the Fence beyond the last outlying house, dully gleaming in the lights from the village. The creatures seemed to be expecting their prey to come down the main route; looking to his right, up the road away from the village, Ben could see the shapes of at least a dozen narms, maybe more, prowling dark shadows across the pale road. Looking left, between the Kheelians and the Fence, five narms sprawled across the road, watching.

Chana swore softly under his breath, and they ducked back into the deeper shadow.

“How are we going to get past?”

Ben didn't answer. He wasn't sure he had enough breath left, even if he had been able to think of a way. He was shaking hard and each inhalation was a little shallower and more ineffective than the last. In a moment, he was going to cough again and they would be discovered.

“Have to run for it,” he ground out, through gritted teeth.

“But-” Ooouli whispered. Ben shook his head.

“No time. Ready?”

He knew this was a terrible idea. But if they could take the five narms in front of them by surprise, they might perhaps make it to the Fence before the others caught up. Perhaps. Ben took a moment to gather himself together, closing his eyes and trying to draw the last tattered remains of his will together. The power, that incredible force, was still there, strong and unyielding, but his grasp of it was weakening as his strength failed. It was now or never.

“Go!”

They burst out from the shadow of the house, the flash of the lightsaber blade flaring into the dark, burning their eyes. The narms saw them and sent up a great howling and barking and they sprinted for the road; Chana was like an unstoppable avalanche at Ben's side, Ooouli a pale shadow ahead. The five narms ahead of them leapt forward, snarling. Ben thrust out his hand and threw two aside; the third received matching blows from Ooouli and Chana's staffs. A fourth narm fell beneath the lightsaber. The fifth cowered back and they passed it at a sprint. Behind them, the pack of narms were gaining; they could hear barks and snarls, the thud of bodies and scratch of claws on the road.

Then, Ben's own body betrayed him. The torn leg muscles he had entirely forgotten about gave out, and he fell, striking the ground hard. His chest spasmed weakly, constricting in agony, and blood filled his mouth. The sabre dropped from his nerveless hand and rolled away. The nearest narm was metres from his feet, so close he could see the crest of spines around its head.

“Dada!” Ooouli shrieked up ahead, but Ben didn't turn to look towards her. Not knowing what he was going to do, Ben rolled over to face the pack, held up both hands and felt the force of his power flow out through him. He threw it all forward and commanded \textit{Stop}!

The two dozen barking and howling narm voices fell silent, one by one. Their mad chase slowed to a trot, and then they stopped where they stood. Fifty yellow eyes stared at Ben from the darkness, as bodies heaved with breath. Slowly he struggled up to his feet, staggering, not dropping his hands or lowering his eyes for a moment. \textit{Stop}, he thought again, \textit{staysstaystay}...

The nearest narm swayed slightly on its feet as if to take a step. It whined low in its throat, puzzled,
and clawed at its head.

“Stay,” Ben croaked, staring into its eyes.

“Ben!” He could hear the sound of movement behind him. Chana was coming back, the idiot!

“Go!” Ben yelled, not daring to turn. His arms were shaking, and he spat out a mouthful of blood. He could feel his hold over the creatures wavering. Two more started to claw at their heads, growling. “You promised,” he managed, with what felt like his last breath. “Go, now! Go!”

At last the sound of his desperation broke through to Chana, and Kheelian grabbed the children and turned away. Ben heard them running behind him, and then Chana turned the corner, and his sense of them faded away. They were gone. Safe.

As if that knowledge had freed him, Ben felt his control crumble, and then dissolve. He dropped his shaking hands, and the spell broke. The narms scattered across the street began to stir, and shake themselves, yapping and whining with confusion. Ben knew he should be running while they were still recovering their senses. He swayed a little, dizzy, and then suddenly he found instead of running he was kneeling on the cold ground. His breaths were nothing more than shallow gasps now. Coughing was agony. Ben threw his hand out to steady himself, and his fingers closed on the hilt of the lightsaber.

The nearest narm let out a low growl and began to stalk towards him. Ben raised the 'saber in shaking hands, igniting the blade. He spat a gobbet of blood onto the roadway, and stared up at the narms closing in, defiantly.

If this was to be the end, he would damn well make it worthwhile.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry-not-sorry...
The narm growled, low and feral. Ben saw three more creatures stalking up on his left, and another moved just outside his eye line to the right. They were closing in.

Ben tightened the grip of his shaking fingers on the 'saber hilt, and stared back, bold and unbroken.

“Come on, then,” he hissed, spitting blood. “I don't have all night.”

The narm crouched, muscles bunching beneath its spiny hide. Ben tensed, ready for jaws to come flying at his throat.

There was a commotion at the back of the pack, outside the circle of 'saber light. Ben heard barks and snapping, and saw shapes moving in the dark. The creatures near him turned their heads. A narm had appeared from the darkness at the edge of the road and seemed to be barking at the others. The newcomer had a 'saber scar down its muzzle.

Something was going on. Ben tried to keep track of what was happening, but he accidently drew in too deep a breath and the world swam. Little daggers of agony speared into his lung. He closed his eyes, gasping, trying to concentrate on not dying. Around him, the barks and howls echoed strangely across the empty street. Through his racing, thready pulse and oxygen-deprived brain, it was as if in those howls he could hear the word gone over and over again.

Ben dragged his eyes open. The scarred creature was facing off against a large green narm with a dark stripe down its spine. They were circling him on the edge of the ring of 'saber light, though their yellow eyes were fixed on each other. Scarface barked, and the large narm answered with a howl of gone!

“Yes, they've gone,” Ben said. “The Kheelians have gone – they won't be coming back.”

The pack turned their eyes on him. Scarface snarled, low. It sounded like the word stole. Soon the sound was taken up by the rest of the pack. Stole! Ben heard on all sides. Stole! and Taken!

“What was taken?” he mumbled as his vision swam. There was a rushing sound in his ears.

Taken! Stole! Gone! came the barks on all sides, and then from somewhere he heard the word kill.

The green narm, the leader perhaps, set up a great howling, and one by one, the rest of the pack added their voices. Ben shivered. The sound chilled him to the bone, but not with fear. With sadness. At last the melancholy noise fell quiet, and Scarface looked at Ben with its yellow eyes. It yipped out a short phrase, and Ben heard;
We die.

The rushing in Ben's ears turned into a roar. His abused lung failed to take in one breath, and then another. It felt like the end.

The roaring got closer, and he realised it wasn't his own struggling heartbeat, but the sound of an engine. The narms realised at about the same moment, and ran forward, howling. Lights flickered in the distance, bouncing strangely off the empty houses and the narm's hides, and then blindingly bright headlights seared down the road. Even as Ben threw up his arm to cover his eyes, he saw a landspeeder racing up the street from the direction of the distant fields. The narms barked and howled, and he heard shouting, far off. Narms fled past him into the dark, and Ben gave one last push, and dragged himself up to one knee. Two narms were bowled aside by the speeder, and it screeched to a halt at Ben's side. A voice that seemed familiar yelled his name, but he could see nothing against the streaming lights.

"Ben, Come on!" The voice cried again, and large hands seized him and hauled him over, and up, and the ground fell away. There was a confusing rush of sound and light and pain, and then voice shouted "Go! Go! For stars' sake...." and there was a thrum of engines and they were moving.

"Pakat?" He mumbled.

"Ben! What happened? Where is Chana? We've been searching for you and..."

Ben groaned, and pushed his arm out blindly. "Can't breathe," he managed to say. "...Up..."

Pakat grabbed his arm and pulled him up into a sitting position on the floor of the landspeeder. Ben leaned forward, curling up around the pain, tucked against the edge of the vehicle. He was panting, gasping, anything to try and pull in air. It was a crowded; there were several other Kheelians crammed into the small craft. Pakat was crouched at his side, lit weirdly in the swaying lanterns.

"What happened? Where are you hurt? The children..."

Ben gripped Pakat's wrist, tightly. "They're safe," he gasped. "Chana took them ahead...Thet..."

"Oh, I give thanks!" Pakat was trying to move around in the small craft, while it jolted and shook.

"Nenka, pass me the lantern...Oh trzôk, Ben!"

Ben's eyes drifted shut against the flickering light. He could hear the horror in Pakat's voice; he didn't need to see it on his face as well.

"Is that a Pechnar?" said a Kheelian voice he didn't recognise. "It does not look very well..."

"He's hurt," said Nenka, on the other side of the craft.

Pakat seemed to ignore the other voices. "Ben, do not worry. You are going to be fine." And then, in a quieter voice to the driver, he said; "Better step on it, Porra."

"Where's Shaarm?" Ben whispered, realising the family was not yet all accounted for.

"She is fine," Pakat reassured him, in low, calm voice, as he checked over Ben's chest and head with a feather-light touch. Ben was reminded of the night Pakat had calmed him after that first nightmare.

"She is at the village, treating the injured. When we realised neither you nor Chana had made it, I...Anyway, it looks like we found you just in time."
“Pakat, listen to me...the narms...” Ben had to tell Pakat what he had just learned. It was dreadfully important. He opened his eyes, reaching for the Kheelian, but just then there was a light ahead. He saw dull metal gleaming in the dark and realised that they had finally reached the Fence. Porra gave a shout, which was echoed somewhere ahead. Hinges creaked, and the speeder passed through. There was a ‘clunk’ as the gate shut behind. They were safe.

There were Kheelians everywhere. Ben saw them on all sides as they sped down Thet's main street – crammed into the doorways of houses, or peering shell-shocked into the night. Some were crying. Porra drove them up to a large building that Ben vaguely recognised, before Nenka was carefully lifting him. Moving hurt even more this time, probably due to the loss of the adrenaline which had keep him going for the last who-knew-how-many turns. He didn't fight it when the world went cloudy and indistinct; in fact, it was rather pleasant not to hurt for a few moments. He was jolted back into awareness as Pakat eased him down onto a floor, propping his back against a wall.

Something was wrapped tightly around his leg. Ben coughed weakly a few times, but he could feel his strength deserting him by leaps and bounds. Pakat frowned and wiped what must have been blood off Ben's chin.

“Stay with him,” Pakat instructed his nephew. “Let me know the moment he gets any worse. I have got to find Shaarm and see if Chana made it.”

Pakat disappeared. Someone who must have been Nenka wrapped a blanket around Ben and tucked something soft between his head and the wall.

“Do not worry, I will be right back,” Nenka said, and he too disappeared.

Ben opened his eyes and took in his surroundings for the first time. He had been brought indoors, inside the building which had previously housed the village shop where Nenka worked. Shelves and tables had been shoved to the walls and the large space had become an impromptu refugee camp. The room was filled with Kheelians who had fled from their homes in the valley. He could see a few clusters of family groups, and a number of elderly. Some were clearly injured, clutching bandaged limbs or huddled over the forms of loved ones. Children darted here and there. A few Kheelians were eating. No-one was sleeping. In the distance he thought he could see Grandmother moving around, checking off names against a list. Making sure everyone was accounted for, perhaps. He couldn't see any other members of his family.

Nenka reappeared at his side with a bottle of water. He held it up to Ben's mouth. The man managed a few sips.

“Shaarm is out by the gates,” the teenager said, in an apologetic tone. “I know she'll be here as soon as she can.”

Ben nodded, and managed to ask; “Chana? The girls?”

“They are around here somewhere,” Nenka evaded. “I'm sure they are fine.”

“The narms...are they in the village?”

“Oh, no,” Nenka reassured him. “They can’t get past the Fence. There are still some loitering outside the gates, but they won’t get in. They will have gone by sunrise.”

“Tell me...what happened.”

The teenager launched into a full narrative of the night's events, clearly glad for an instruction he could easily follow. “Well, Choha was up in the Broadfield with a sick *caprius*, and he saw the first
flare go up. By the time he got back here, a second flare had been lit on the other side of the valley and he decided it was serious. He sounded the alarm and got everyone up out of their beds in the village. Everyone thought he was imaging things, of course...it is well known he likes a few cups of vok before a cold night in the hills. But then Taknat got a call on the wire from Niko to say they were being attacked, and then the line went dead; we think the narms tore up the cables."

Nenka stopped suddenly, mid-sentence. He peered at the man's face, frowning with concern.

“You've gone a very strange colour,” he said, sounding worried. “Is that meant to happen?”

“Oh,” Ben gasped, not really paying attention. “I have?”

“Your skin is sort of white and cold. Your mouth had gone blue.”

“I think, perhaps,” Ben whispered, “I might need you to get Shaarm now...”

He was still conscious when Shaarm arrived, but not very. He heard her call his name across the room, and rolled his head towards the sound. Nenka leapt up on his back legs beside him, waving.

“Here! He is here, Shaarm.”

She crossed them room with the apparently unhurried pace of medics everywhere, and crouched down at his side. He was unbelievably glad to see her.

“Ben? Can you tell me what happened? Ooouli said that you fell.”

He opened his eyes at the name. “You've seen Ooouli? Tiki?”

Shaarm smiled a little. “They are fine, Ben. Chana too. I was just with them.”

Ben let out a sigh of pure relief. Pakat and Nenka had been so vague he was starting to worry that the trio had never made it.

Shaarm, in the meantime, had not been idle in the moments since her arrival, spreading open her medical bag and laying out various items.

“You were telling me about the fall,” she prompted, sliding his left arm with meticulous care from where it was wrapped across his ribs, and laying it gently in his lap.

“From a roof,” Ben said, trying to conserve his breath. “Kadat's house. Broke some ribs, lung...”

She pushed the ragged remains of his coat and tunic aside and inspected his chest, palpating across the delicate ribcage gently with her large hands.

“Kadat's house? How long ago did this happen?”

Ben considered. He didn't really know. It felt like a lifetime.

“A turn?” he guessed. Shaarm's mouth tightened. She grabbed a stethoscope and listened to both sides of his chest and his back. Then she took his pulse and temperature using the zol device, stood up, and dragged Nenka aside where he had been hovering anxiously.

“Find that drunkard Choha,” she snapped at him. “Get him here right now, and tell him to bring whatever oxygen and analgesics he has. Go!”

The teen sprinted off, and Shaarm dropped back down at Ben's side. Despite everything, he was
trying not to grin. Shaarm was a wonderfully gifted and caring surgeon, but she was clearly used to her patients being asleep when she was working, not listening to every word.

“Ben,” she said, sounding a little stern. “This is quite serious. I believe that you have re-broken your ribs. One has punctured your right lung, leading to a pneumothorax. I need to make a small incision in your chest to release the pressure of air filling the pleural cavity.”

Ben nodded. He had been correct in his self-diagnosis then. “All right,” he said, surprised she hadn't gotten on with it already.

She shook her head, a little impatiently. “I know where to make the incision on a Kheelian. However, your physiology...It is just too different. I could guess, but I could make things worse. I need a second opinion from the veterinarian. He will hopefully have some pain medication we can try. I am concerned about your blood pressure and oxygen saturation, but you just need to stay calm and still for a little bit longer.”

Ben would have groaned if he had the breath to spare. He had never been one to shy away from a challenge, but his spate of bad luck recently was starting to get ridiculous. Shaarm occupied the time by cleaning and dressing the torn skin of his bitten leg, they layering him in blankets, and finally checking his pulse every few moments. Ben just tried to think of anything but the pain.

Fortunately it was not long before Nenka came bounding back into the hall, dragging behind him a tall but slightly mournful and bedraggled-looking Kheelian, clutching a large bag. This must be Choha, the vet who had treated Ben when he had first limped down off the moor.

“At last,” snapped Shaarm. “The oxygen?”

The new Kheelian, Choha, pulled a small canister and rebreather mask out of his bag, handing them over distractedly. He was staring at Ben. “Oh yes, it is definitely the same Pechnar. But I thought he had left the village last week?”

“Does it look like he left the village?” Shaarm retorted, ramming the small canister of compressed gas onto a re-breather mask. “Now either shut up, or help me. Preferably both.”

The breathing mask was made for who-knew-what shape of creature. It covered almost Ben's entire face when Shaarm slid the mask on, and didn't seal to his skin, but it worked. Ben took his first oxygen-rich breath; felt the coolness of it pour down his airway and some of the tightness relax.

The two medics fell into a speedy debate mainly comprised of medical jargon and acronyms that Ben was too busy breathing to try and work out. The discussion was focussed on three main issues: the location of the incision, the possible need for a chest drain, and what dosage of the caprius tranquilizer Choha had brought it would be safe to give Ben as pain relief. At this stage, Ben would happily have taken the lot, consequences be damned. Nenka hovered by Ben's side, holding his hand. Within minutes, the surgeon and the vet seemed to come to an agreement, and Shaarm was laying out a scalpel.

“We need to lay you down, Ben,” she said. “Nenka.”

Nenka and Choha between them carefully helped him slide down the wall until he was lying flat.

“Ready?” Shaarm said, pulling on a pair of white three-fingered gloves. Choha leaned forward, and suddenly pressed down on Ben's shoulders firmly. Ben actually felt the rough ends of the collar-bone he didn't even know he had broken grate together. If he could have, he would have screamed.

For the third or fourth time in as many turns, his vision faded to an indistinct grey as pain robbed him
of his ability to think and to breathe. He could vaguely feel hands on his chest, distant voices, and then a small sharp little pain high in his chest. There was a faint sound like a small pop, a hiss of air, and sudden, incredible relief. The pressure which had been squeezing his lung like a wet rag been to seep away, and one after another, his breaths began to work again. He lay for a long while just revelling in his own breathing, before he noticed a sensation of cooling comfort flowing through his veins, and the pain began to bleed out of him. He felt his over-taxed and exhausted muscles relax for the first time in turns. A slightly too-deep breath caused him to cough, and he went to push the oxygen mask aside.

“I'll get it.” That was Nenka, still at his side. The teenager wiped the blood off Ben's mouth and gave him a sip of water before returning the rebreather mask. Ben opened his eyes and took in a small IV pouch now hanging off a nail in the wall, and followed the tube to his arm. Glanced to his other side, he saw Shaarm was crouched with her stethoscope pressed to his side. She had a slight frown. Turning over her shoulder, she called to the distant figure that was Choha.

“Yes, it is working but I think we still are going to need to drain. Get everything prepped.” She started rummaging her medical bag, cursing.

“What's wrong?” Nenka asked, above Ben's head.

“He is just too small for our tools and I do not have any paediatric equipment here. The chest incision was larger than I hoped. I need to partially cover it to stop more air getting in...Something plastic, flexible...”

Ben didn't want to attempt to interrupt his breathing by talking, but luckily Shaarm noticed him fumbling at his right-hand coat pocket. She reached in, and pulled out a rectangle of laminate flimsiplast the size of Ben's palm. His new MedIdent card that he had put into his pocket only the previous night. She smiled a genuine smile.

“Perfect,” she said. The flimsiplast was taped over the incision on three sides, forming a valve to allow air to pass out of his chest. His blankets were returned, and a cooling-patch placed over his broken collarbone. Ben was starting to feel the combined effects of oxygen, pain relief and warmth dragging him into lethargy, when Shaarm gave his wrist a gentle squeeze.

“Look,” she said, and pointed to the distant entranceway. Ben rolled his head, and saw Chana standing in the doorway. Tiki was tucked into his right arm, and Ooouli was pressed into his side.

“No, Ooouli,” he was saying, quietly, “Ben is resting at the moment, so we should let him be for now. You can come and talk to him in the morning, I expect. You've seen him now, so perhaps you might finally consider going to sleep?”

They were all filthy, caked from shoulder to foot in mud, and they looked exhausted. But they were alive, and really, nothing else mattered. Ooouli saw his open eyes and he saw her wave, shyly. Ben raised his right arm and waved back. Shaarm pushed his wrist down, firmly. “Stop that,” she snapped, but he was too busy smiling, loopily. Chana led the girls round the other side of the room and out of Ben's line of sight, presumably to find some space to sleep.

They were safe. Everyone was safe.

Ben let himself sleep too.
Chapter End Notes

No cliffhanger! Who'd have thought it?
TBC next week.
The Stolen Sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“For stars’ sake, stop scratching it.”

Ben frowned, aware he was about to sound like a petulant child. “I can't help it. It's itchy.”

“We knew the medication was likely to produce some sort of reaction.” Shaarm told him. “You were lucky it was nothing worse than a rash and mild fever.”

Ben continued to scowl, but ceased scratching at his neck. He had slept deeply for several turns, waking a few turns after dawn from a vague and disquieting dream. In it, a boy, barely out of childhood, had stood on the passenger deck of a ship, letting it carry him away from everything he had ever wanted, everything he had ever known. He had been rejected one last time, and now his fate was ignominiousness and failure. He thought the boy was probably himself.

The crying of a Kheelian baby had woken him, and he had opened his eyes to find it full daylight outside. A number of Kheelians were still scattered around the room, sleeping, although others came in and out, conversing in low whispers. None of them had been Shaarm, Nenka, or any of the others he recognised. Ben lay for a while, feeling hot and feverish, achy and uncomfortable. Despite the IV painkillers, his chest still hurt abominably, but he could at least breathe; something he was never going to take for granted again. His chest was black and purple, and the skin that had avoided the bruising was puffy and reddened with an itchy rash that seemed to have spread at least to his arms and neck.

Shaarm had arrived after about half a turn when Ben had just decided to investigate the improvised collection of medical equipment surrounding him. If he could detach himself from it then he could probably get up and find out what was going on. As well as the IV and oxygen mask, a long tube was poking out from his ribcage. The tube at the other end was sealed with tape into the top of a plastoid water bottle, now half full of water, blood and other gunk. How unpleasant.

“Ben, what the sky are you doing?”

Oh dear. Rumbled.

“Good morning, Shaarm.” He tried disarmingly cheerful. “Interesting night, wasn't it?’

Shaarm was neither impressed nor distracted. “Stop touching that,” she snapped, sitting to inspect the tubing. Ben dropped the smile. She sounded as irritable as he felt. Worse, probably. He wondered if she had managed to get any sleep at all. He doubted it. She took his pulse and vitals, frowned at his temperature and hen finally agreed that the drain could come out.

“If you think you could manage to stay still,” she muttered, as she pulled on a new set of gloves, “it would make my life very much easier. For once.”

Ben did manage to stay still while she removed the drain. The feeling of the tubing being pulled from his chest was one of the weirdest and most unpleasant sensations he could imagine and he gritted his teeth, looking around the room as a distraction. The Kheelian mother had soothed her baby, and the two were rocking together quietly. These people had had their sense of security and peace had been shattered, probably forever. What would they do now?
As Shaarm cleaned the site of the chest drain over thoroughly, and then sealed the slit skin with an application of hot adhesive paste, Ben asked: “How bad was it?”

Shaarm glanced at his face. “It was...bad. Your lung completely collapsed, probably down to the size of a tarvaroot, and the lacerations were bleeding into the chest cavity. The tension in your chest was so severe it was starting to put pressure on your heart. How you made it here on foot, I will never know, but if you had-”

He stopped her gently. “I meant here. How bad was it here?”

"Oh,” she sighed. “I see. Well we have at least fifteen wounded, although you are the most severe of those. I give thanks that it was mostly the adults. Three Kheelians...did not make it. Two were killed in the fire at Taknat's farmstead. The third bleed to death from bite wounds.”

Ben grasped Shaarm's forearm, holding it tightly. “I am so sorry,” he said. Shaarm accepted his sympathy quietly, and continued.

“After we left the house, Pakat, Grandmother and I headed over to the nearest farm. It was them who had lit the flares, but the few narms that had attacked seemed to have been scared off. We checked the property was secure and were trying to decide if the creatures were gone for good, when we saw a light from a fire. A group set off walking for the village while a few of us went over to the fire in the landspeeder. It was...horrible. Apparently they had tried to use burning torches to scare the narms away, and it had gone wrong. We saved everyone we could but the farmstead was gone. By then we were hearing of narms everywhere, and we were desperate to get back to the house. One of Taknat's children saw your flare – how did you do that?”

Ben shrugged with his one good shoulder.

“We took you at your word that you had escaped, and we didn't go back to the house. We started ferrying people to the village in the landspeeder. We went out and back four or five times to find missing groups and you still had not appeared. It got more and more difficult, and we were attacked on the road several times. I had to stay at Thet and treat some of the injured, but Pakat and some of the others went out one last time to look for you. About a half-turn after he left, Chana arrived at the gate, carrying the girls and bleeding everywhere, saying you were holding the narms off in the street and we had to go back for you. I am ashamed to say that few of our people were keen. You were only a Pechnar after all, and they were unarmed and on foot. Chana managed to get a few to agree to help, though he would have gone after you alone if he had to, when Pakat and Nenka arrived back in the speeder. They had found you in the road, surrounded by a circle of howling narms. You seemed fairly disorientated so I do not know how much you remember.”

“I certainly remember that,” Ben said. “And unlikely to forget it again, I can assure you.”

Shaarm had been busy while she was talking: dressing the incisions, retying Ben's tunic and coat, and strapping his left arm up in a tight sling to keep the weight off his broken shoulder.

“I suppose it is safe to assume you want to get up immediately? I want to stress first how careful you must be. Several important blood vessels seem to pass close to the broken bone in your shoulder, and the broken rib that caused the pneumothorax is still misplaced. Any undue movement on your part will probably re-puncture the lung and you will be right back where you started, except we now have no more oxygen and very little pain medication left. No running, twisting, lifting and as little standing up as possible. And certainly no sword fighting. Are you listening to me?”

Ben nodded. In this instance he had every intention of doing exactly what his doctor ordered.
“It will hurt to breathe, but you must try and take deep breaths and cough as much as you can. This will bring up any remaining fluid, and prevent your lung from getting infected. The rib will have to be repositioned surgically, but not until we can get to the Medical Centre in Tszaaf.”

Shaarm lifted Ben gently up onto his feet and held him upright for a moment as his equilibrium settled. He tested his weight on his bitten left leg, but it held well. He could see it had been firmly bandaged while he slept. Shaarm held out two items to him, his walking staff and the lightsaber. Ben took them both in surprise.

“Where did you get these?”

“Ooouli wanted you to have your stick back,” Shaarm explained. “And you had the lightsaber in your hand the entire time. Do you not remember?”

She moved forward, placing a hand on the back of his neck and another on his back and suddenly she was cradling him in a gentle, heartfelt embrace.

“Thank you,” she said quietly in his ear.

“What for?”

“You know what for,” she answered.

They left the temporary camp and headed out into the village with Ben riding on Shaarm's back. Grandmother was holding a meeting with the villagers, she said, and she wanted to hear what they had decided to do. Within a few minutes they had arrived at the meeting hall. It wasn't a grand building, formed as it was of rough panels open on two sides to the village square, with a sloping duraplast roof. It looked like it might also double as a market place. About a hundred and fifty Kheelians were crowded into the shelter. As they arrived at the back of the crowd, Ben could see Grandmother sitting on her haunches at the font. A male Kheelian was addressing her. He was short and narrow in the shoulders for his species, with bright yellow fur the colour of new butter.

“They say that they encountered a few of them near the fork in the road,” he was saying. “The narms growled a little but quickly turned aside and ran off across the fields. We do not know if they were scared off, however, or if they are just gathering again somewhere else. Either way, there do not seem to be any of them around the outlying village houses. But we cannot be certain that-”

The Kheelian stopped speaking suddenly, noticing Shaarm. She had slipped around the side of the crowd to join up with Pakat and Chana, who were near the front to the right. As the yellow Kheelian went abruptly silent, staring, the other Kheelians in the crowd followed his gaze and all turned to look. Shaarm crouched onto her haunches, letting Ben slide down off her back. Chana and Pakat each touched his hair lightly in greeting, but said nothing. The eyes of the Kheelians were still fixed him, and Ben stepped slightly into Pakat's shadow, uncomfortable under their scrutiny. Shaarm gave a faint cough to draw their attention back.

“Please,” she gestured towards Grandmother. “Continue.”

Grandmother nodded at the Kheelian.

“Yes,” said the male, still distracted. “Yes. Well, we cannot be certain that the narms are indeed
“I acknowledge this.” Grandmother said. “Ben's status as a villager of Thet is not in question.”
This seemed to put the matter to rest. A Kheelian woman near the back of the group returned to the main issue.

“What do the narms want?” she asked. “Why are they so desperate?”

The question was again directed at Grandmother, but she seemed to sense that Ben knew more of the matter than he had yet said. She looked at him, questioningly. Ben sighed.

“Because they are dying.”

There was silence again.

“Ben, how can you possibly know that?”

“They told me.”

The room erupted into noise. It took a few moments for Grandmother to regain quiet, during which time Ben wondered just exactly what he was doing. He could see from the stunned faces of his hosts that they were wondering the same thing.

“I think you had better explain that,” Grandmother said, when peace had been regained.

“I was trapped by the gates with Chana and the children,” Ben started, considering how to explain what he had experienced. “The narms were blocking the way but I held them back long enough for Chana to get the girls to safety. Once Chana had passed out of sight, they seemed to lose interest in attacking. They were barking amongst themselves, and I found once I was listening that it wasn't just sounds. I could hear words in the noise. Something had gone. At first I thought they meant the Kheelians, but it was something else. It had been stolen, or taken away. Without it, they are dying. There was such a sense of sadness...”

There were voices on all sides; questions, denials. Grandmother looked to Pakat.

“Pakat. You are our expert in this matter. Have you ever heard anything like this before?”

The Kheelian shook his head. “No, Grandmother. No-one has ever associated them with language use before. They are pack animals, with a complex hierarchy and a high level of intelligence, but animals nonetheless. Although they have only been captured for study singly and no-one has ever been able to observe a group so closely...”

Pakat crouched down at Ben's side so they were more of an even height, though he continued to look up at Grandmother.

“If Ben is saying that the narms can communicate with spoken language...that is unprecedented. Before I would have said they were creatures with only a little greater level of sentience than a caprius...”

Ben shook his head. “We are speaking not of sentience but of sapience. Of thinking, reasoning, communicating beings, with a sense of identity and rational thought. Perhaps even morality. This attack was co-ordinated and planned. They knew when and where to attack, and how to separate groups. They used decoys and ambushes, but even though they had several chances to kill us when we were attacked, they aimed to disable only. They are not beasts.”

Pakat nodded, standing up, looking distracted but thoughtful. He seemed to be speaking to himself. “That would mean that Maku's social pyramid theory is correct, and if combined with the new behavioural emulation study they did last year...” He trailed off into silence, clearly reviewing the
matter through the academic studies he had read.

“It was injured, though,” announced the yellow Kheelian that Ben was trying hard not to intensely dislike. “The Pechnar was injured. Chana said that it nearly died. It seems such a fragile thing...How do we not know that this was all just a hallucination, a delusion, brought about by pain?”

“I know what I heard,” Ben answered, a little stubbornly.

“Grandmother, Ben says that the narms used words...” A quiet voice came from the back of the crowd. Ben stood up to see the speaker, and saw Porra, Pakat's colleague, who had been driving the landspeeder last night. “But I want to know...how did Ben understand those words? If the narms have developed their own verbal language...how could Ben possibly understand it?”

“I'm not sure,” Ben admitted. He had been wondering the same thing himself. “Pakat told me once that the narms and Kheelians may share common biological ancestry. Perhaps there is some basis to the language that is also from the same root? That is my guess.” Privately, he wondered if his ability to understand their dialect might not be more to do with his powers, but he had no intention of sharing that detail with an already on-edge and borderline unfriendly audience.

As if thinking the same thing, Shaarm said; “Grandmother, if I may… You know that Ben has a lot of talents. He is very good with animals, and with languages. You can see how fluently he speaks our tongue, even though most Pechnar cannot manage it after many years. He is very special.”

There was some murmuring, and then a Kheelian woman who hadn't yet spoken said; “But I do not understand...why did they go after the children?”

Ben turned to look at her in astonishment. He had not observed it at the time, but now it suddenly seemed clear. How the narms had trapped him and Chana in the house and gone after the girls; how the narm with the scarred face had dragged Tiki away from them all into the night. They had indeed been targeting the children.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Ben said, sitting down, wearily. “And I would not even want to guess.”

“If all this is true,” said Grandmother. “And the narms are not the savage unthinking beasts we thought them to be, how do we proceed from here? We want to go back to our lives, to have our children feel safe. How do we achieve this?”

There was silence for a long time, and then it was Shaarm that spoke next, trying to summarise. “Grandmother, the narms have not attacked us before, not since the bad days in the War when everyone was starving.”

“That would suggest they are not inimical by nature,” Ben added. “Something has changed. Something was 'stolen', and they think that it was the Kheelians that are somehow responsible. If we can find out what that thing is and return it, then perhaps this will all be over.”

There was some nodding in the room now, particularly from Grandmother.

Ben looked around. “Can anyone think of anything that might have changed in recent weeks? Have there been any constructions on the moor or building of fences in land that was former narm territory? No changes to the landscape that they might object to, such as quarrying, or moving large stones that might be landmarks?”

There was a general shaking of heads across the room. Grandmother looked at Pakat.

“Your researchers have disturbed nothing?” she asked.
Pakat shook his head. “The only major change was Ben's shipwreck. We removed as much of the debris as we could, although I do not see how they could claim it was stolen from them. If anything they might complain about the wreckage that still remains.”

Ben frowned. “And the behaviour of the narms started to change weeks before my arrival. No, I do not think that is the problem. But it is something to bear in mind.”

“Even if we work out what it is that we are supposed to have stolen,” the yellow Kheelian said. “I still do not see how this helps us. If we return it, the narms will just think that they can demand whatever they want and we will just surrender it. What if what they want is our children, for some savage purpose of their own? We must resist them, not give in to them! We must fight!”

“No, we must not.” said Ben sternly. He scrambled awkwardly up onto the crate so they could all see him, and addressed the room. “Listen to me! You have just been attacked, injured, displaced from your homes. You are frightened and vulnerable, but you must not react in fear. Yes, you have been reminded that the creatures with whom you share this valley can be dangerous. But you have also learned that there might be reason to think they are something infinitely more complex and fascinating than any of us previously believed. If we can learn to communicate with them – just imagine what you could learn from them and them from you. But this is your one chance to make that happen. This is the only war that we should be fighting; the war against ignorance, fear, division, and separation. How do the words of the tea ritual go? We thank our parents for the gift of our present...This is that present right now, this chance is our gift. We have an obligation to strive for peace wherever we can. Let us not turn aside now.”

Ben stopped speaking, out of breath. There was a silence so profound he thought he could hear his lung straining. The Kheelians stared at him as if frozen, and no-one said a word. And then, quietly from the back of the room, he heard a quiet voice say;

“Stand.”

Ben looked through the crowd to see who had spoken. “Stand,” Porra repeated, a little louder. Another voice, this time from the other side of the shelter, spoke up.

“Stand.”

Then two more;

“Stand! Stand!”

Soon twenty, then forty, voices were all shouting Stand! Stand! Concerned, Ben glanced to Shaarm, but she was smiling and nodding, encouragingly. Pakat stepped over and whispered in his ear.

“It means they agree. They stand with your opinion.”

By now, most of the room had added their voices, though Ben couldn't help but notice Shaarm and her husbands remained silent. Grandmother raised her hands and the room went quiet again. Ben awkwardly sat down on the crate.

“Very well,” Grandmother said. “Does anyone else wish to speak? Boki?”

The yellow Kheelian, Boki, shook his head, glowering, but said nothing.

“Then it seems that there is a consensus. We will try and communicate with the narms, and make peace with their grievance if they will allow it. I appoint Ben the Pechnar as my voice during the negotiations. Pakat and Porra shall be my advisors. Taknat shall represent the Kheelians whose lives
were lost. Now go, and be with your families. Take rest and food. Mourn our dead. Soon we may return to our homes.”

The Kheelians all bowed low to Grandmother. Ben slipped off the crate he was sitting on, and did the same. Grandmother bowed back. And just like that, it seemed the meeting was over. Grandmother led the way to the rear of the shelter, and then the Kheelians dispersed out into the sunlight in twos or threes, talking intently. There was more than one glance thrown back towards Ben and his family.

Ben stayed standing until all of the Kheelians had departed, and only Shaarm, Pakat and Chana were left. Ben turned to them, suddenly feeling awkward. Had he spoken out of turn? Chana crossed the space between them in a single bound and engulfed Ben in his giant arms.

“You are well! You are well, oh, I give thanks…”

The light behind him eclipsed as someone wrapped themselves around his back, and then there was the sound of another thud followed by pressure. Shaarm and Pakat had also thrown themselves into the hug. Ben patted an arm, too muffled to do more, and just revelled in the comfort of their affection for a moment. Then his sling was jostled as someone shifted, and a little sound of distress was dragged from him before he could stop it. The group instantly broke apart, and Ben found himself being lifted onto the crate again as carefully as a china doll. He clamped his hand onto his collarbone, where the flare of pain refused to die back to a dull ache. Ben craned his head around, trying to see Chana.

“What about you? You were bleeding badly…”

Chana pushed up his sleeve to show Ben his right arm; clean and securely bandaged. “It is nothing,” he said. “See? In a few days, the arm will nearly have healed, and this one,” he tapped his belly where narm claws had sliced at him. “This will be gone in a week. You should worry more about yourself, and what Shaarm will do to you if you injure yourself again!”

“Ben, we were so afraid,” said Pakat, sitting at his side and checking him over carefully. “When we found you in the street, I really thought...well...” He stroked Ben's hair. Chana, hovering at his other side, was rubbing a hand on his back.

“Not this time,” said Shaarm, stretching her front legs out before her, and then lying down like a sphinx. She looked exhausted, but pleased.

“I am fine, I assure you,” Ben tried to say, but Shaarm cut him off.

“No, you are not. You will be. But you are not yet.”

She was right of course. The strain of his small expenditures of energy this morning has already used up what little strength he had, and he was feeling the full affects of the fever combined with lack of pain relief, food and sleep. Perhaps all of that was what had caused him to talk so much in a forum he was not familiar with.

“That was quite the speech, Ben,” said Chana, gesturing to the room.

“Yes, I feel that I need to ask what just happened. I get the impression that I may have acted inappropriately in some way…”

“No, not… inappropriate, as such. There were some traditions, protocols of speaking at the meeting that...well; we did not tell you so of course there was no way you could have known…”
Ben groaned. He had made an idiot of himself, he knew it.

“I am sorry...”

“Please, do not apologise. Just so that you know; traditionally, all questions or statements are made to the Grandmother or Grandfather, as the elected official. Then another voice may offer Grandmother the answer, if they know it, but citizens should not speak directly to each other. It is meant to improve her ability to manage the dialogue in disputes.”

Ben nodded, numbly. He had been rude. Uncivilised.

“I must find her and apologise...”

“There is no need.” Grandmother herself had appeared from behind Chana. She joined the group, lying down beside Shaarm. “You cannot be held accountable for not following a rule that you did not know of. Besides, being a Pechnar gives you great liberties where the other Kheelians are concerned. Pechnar brains are so tiny that they cannot be expected to know any better after all! And it meant we got to hear some of your refreshing honesty...Many things perhaps others of us would have liked to say but cannot.”

Shaarm and the others were nodding. “Decorum prevents anyone from calling 'stand' with another family member's views,” said Pakat, “but we were cheering you on.”

“And everyone was cheering you on for showing that slop-eating tržk Boki what for.”

“Chana!” Shaarm scolded.

“What? Everyone was thinking it. You showed him what we all think of his fear-mongering.”

“If these negotiations are to succeed,” Grandmother drew the conversation back. “Then I want to know everything that you know about the narms, Ben. You understood their language using your magic, is that right?”

Ben assured her that there was little more to tell than he had already recounted. He had controlled the narms somehow using some force- whether it was to tame them, compel them, or even just physically hold them back, he wasn't sure. It had been instinct, like catching Ooouli as she fell. After the spell had worn off, he had heard them speak the words he had already described, and they had seemed sad, melancholy. There were two narms that he would recognise again; one was possibly the leader. He did not know if they understood him, but it seemed possible.

Grandmother nodded slowly at all of this.

“Very well. All of you, take my advice. Go now and rest; none of you have slept enough. Rescue poor Nenka from the girls and find some food. Ben, I am going to need to call on you again if we are going to speak with the narms, so you must be well rested. Listen to Shaarm's instructions, and do try not to get hurt again.”

Ben smiled. “I will do my utmost.”

As they left the hall, Ben riding on Shaarm's back, he wondered again just what he had signed himself up for. What did he know about negotiating the end of a war between alien species? The thought of it was beyond terrifying.

They found Nenka, Ooouli and Tiki curled up together in a patch of sun by the wall of the village store. Nenka was reading out loud to the children from one the books Ben had packed for them;
Ooouli had managed to keep hold of her backpack despite everything that had happened. The girls were curled up on their older cousin, seeming to be almost asleep. Nenka glanced up as they approached, smiled tiredly at his aunt and uncles, and then saw Ben climb down from Shaarm's back.

“Ben! You are all right!”

Ooouli and Tiki scrambled to their feet. Shaarm just had time to warn them to be careful before Ben was wrapped in Ooouli's arms. Tiki stumbled up a moment later and Ben was dismayed to see a cast on her right foreleg. He remembered vividly the narm with the scarred face dragging Tiki along by her arm and, just for a moment, anger surged up inside him; hot and sudden and overwhelming. He heard Shaarm's calm, quiet voice at a great distance explaining that it was only a greenstick fracture, and would heal completely within three tendays. Ben forced the rage from him, exhaling the emotion out on his shallow breaths, and focused on the moment, on the children alive and laughing in his arms.

They returned to the area in the camp where Chana and the girls had snatched a few turns of restless sleep the previous night. Tiredness and lack of food was sapping all of their strengths, so Pakat doled out blankets to the injured Ben and Chana, and to the children, while Shaarm and Nenka raided the stores for some food that wasn't entirely processed sucrosa. They came back triumphant with packets and boxes, just as the tea Pakat was preparing on a small solar-powered stove lent by one of the villagers began to steam. Ben's fever was making him shiver under the blankets, and the hot drink was very welcome. Even more welcome was the vacuum-pack of green mush Nenka had found for him. He had no idea what it was but it did not contain tarvaroot that Ben found so unpalatable. And even more welcome than the food and warmth was the little glass bottle containing a few painkilling tablets that Shaarm had found. She crushed one into small pieces and stirred it into the packet of green mush. Ben wolfed it all down, not even noticing the taste. The others finished their meal in record time, too tired to talk, and too comforted by the food and warmth and safety.

Shaarm disappeared for a while to check on the other injured Kheelians, while Pakat arranged the sleeping area. Ben could barely keep his eyes open, and soon found himself tucked gently into the crook of Chana's elbow as the Kheelian dozed. The children were already asleep at Ben's back by the time Shaarm returned. She leaned over the sleeping children and gently checked Ben's vital signs. Finally satisfied that no-one was about to die that very moment, she smoothed out his blankets and flopped down by his head. Pakat was the last to join the pile, wriggling in beside the children, before relaxing with a deep sigh.

*Just like wookiee pups,* Ben thought, faintly amused, and then fell deeply asleep.

The family slept soundly through the afternoon, finally catching up after the drama of the previous night. The pain medication Shaarm had given Ben knocked him out cold for a while, although it was not strong and it eventually began to wear off. He awoke after about three turns of dreamless sleep in a cocoon of warmth and contentment with his Kheelians curled around on all sides. He lay quietly so as not to disturb the others, trying to ignore the pain in his chest and hip, and attempted to find that state of relaxed almost-meditation he had felt that afternoon in the garden. It remained elusively out of his reach, but he felt better for the attempt. After about a turn, a girl about Nenka's age approached, and shook Pakat's shoulder gingerly. Could he please wake up his Pechnar, she said, because Grandmother needed to see them both at the Fence.
Pakat mumbled something and rose, shaking himself a little. He glanced over and saw Ben was already awake. Ben nodded at him to show he had heard the instruction. Sliding out from under Ooouli's arm, Ben picked his way carefully over the sleeping pile and joined Pakat and their guide at the doorway. Dusk was drawing on as they made their way down the village road to the gate. The evenings fell quickly at this time of year, Ben had been told, and he had already noticed the increasing shortness of the days against the long, cold nights. The first pale moon had risen, hanging low and bulbous in the sky. Grandmother was waiting for them by the gate, with four or five other Kheelians standing around. Ben stayed where his was on Pakat's back, appreciating the visual advantage the extra height afforded him. He looked out through the metal struts of the Fence, and it was only a moment or two before he saw movement in the long grass beyond the empty houses.

“How many are there?” he asked.

“Only two or three at the moment,” Grandmother answered. “But they have been watching the gate. More will come now the sun has set. If you are going to try and communicate with them, Ben, I think this will be your best chance.”

Ben nodded. She was right, of course. He and Pakat found a sheltered spot out of the chill wind where they could see the Fence, and they waited. After half a turn, Shaarm joined them, and she had brought with her some blankets, a few packets of food, and a cup containing more bits of a broken-up pain tablet. Ben accepted the items gratefully. The tablets were only mild, but he needed something to take the edge off the pain if he was going to be able to think straight.

The evening drew on and the sky passed through shades of orange, apricot, and grey before finally fading to black. The second moon had risen now, a mere whisker of silver to its crescent, and the two cast eerie mismatched shadows across the faces of the watchers. The glow from the few electric lights of the village passed through the bars of the Fence drawing a semi-circle of sharp striated light on the ground before the gate. Every few minutes, the shadows flickered weirdly as shapes darted across the space. Ben could hear them moving with a rustle of grass like a breath of wind. He could feel them gathering around the village. But nothing happened. The narms did not attack. The Kheelians sat safe in the village peering out at the shades of night, while the narms waited out there in the dark and watched the Fence.

Ben knew that he could be a very patient man when it was required. But in this instance, he was fairly confident that the situation was not going to be improved by further inaction. He stood up, decisively, and pulled the blanket off his shoulders. He laid down his walking staff, straightened his sling, and removed the 'saber from his belt so it hung lose and deactivated in his hand. He had taken four good steps towards the gate before Shaarm and Pakat realised what he was doing. Ben was gratified to find that his patience was even better than he had supposed as he waited calmly for their stream of objections to run their course.

“We are in a stalemate,” he explained, when they had both finished telling him what a terrible idea this was. “Someone needs to make the first move, and it seems only right that it should be me. Perhaps it is why I am here.”

He bowed briefly, but respectfully, to Grandmother, nodded to the Kheelian at the gate to open it, and slipped out of the narrow gap before there was time for any further discussion.

The gate shut with a reassuring thunk behind him. Ignoring Shaarm's half-whispered but furious curses behind him, Ben stepped out into the ring of light. He walked, slowly and steadily, about twenty paces from the gate. Ahead, the orangey artificial light blended with the pale silver of the moons in a liminal blur across the grass. Ben could see scattered pairs of yellow eyes reflected in the darkness. He stopped walking and stood still, folding his arms into his sleeves, letting the cloth fall
over the lightsaber. He was ready to fight if he had to, but there was no reason why he should have
cold hands in the meantime.

Ben did not have to wait long. The opening of the gate had caused a flurry of movement at the edge
of the pool of light and it wasn't long before three narms slunk forward out of the dark. They circled
him slowly, two of them passing to his right and left, and out of his sight. Cutting off his escape.

*Easy now,* he told himself. *No need to panic just yet.*

Ben was not at all surprised to note that the narm in front of him bore a long lightsaber scar down its
muzzle. The creature was crouched to the ground, growling low and deep in its throat, hackles
raised. Ben reached into that flowing river of force that was his constant companion and tried to
gather a sense of the narms in front and behind him. Alertness, and curiosity were there. Wariness.
Fear. But no imminent intent to cause harm.

“I am here to listen,” he said, slowly and clearly. “Tell me what was stolen.”

Scarface growled and then jumped up, barking. Ben felt movement behind him as one of the narms
leapt at his back, a rush of air as jaws snapped shut inches from his skin. He didn't flinch, sensing no
immediate danger. For now they were just trying to intimidate him, testing his resolve.

“I'm here to listen,” he repeated. The narms barked and howled wildly in response, voices echoing
around them from the dark and away into the distance. The scarred narm darted forwards again,
pushing its muzzle up to Ben's coat, sniffing. He stood still while Scarface and the other two narms
sniffed him all over, occasionally pausing to growl and snap at each other. An exchange of barks and
howls followed, and then Scarface let out a low yelp which sounded to Ben just like the word *egg.*

For a moment he was thoroughly confused. What the blazes...? Then he suddenly remembered
Ooouli's excited voice, exclaiming *it looks like an egg!*, and he remembered the crashed space craft.
The narms had recognised his scent from the ship.

“Yes!” He said, trying not to sound too excited himself. “That's right. The egg. Egg.” He tried to
pronounce it as the narms had, copying their short yipping sounds. The narm on his left leapt up at
him briefly and then spun away, barking. Scarface barked back and then glanced sideways at Ben. It
barked the word *egg* again, and Ben repeated it, grinning. He tried not to feel too foolish that his first
attempts at negotiating resulted in four grown creatures standing in the dark happily shouting the
word egg at each other.

“Very well,” Ben continued, trying to watch the narms' body language carefully, all the while
keeping a firm mental touch on the flow of power in his mind, alert for any sense of danger. “Very
well, you know I came from the egg...the ship. Is that what was stolen? You want the ship back?”

Ben couldn't tell how much of what he said the narms understood, but the lack of interest in
Scarface's expression was not difficult to interpret. Not the ship then.

“What is gone? What was stolen?” He tried again. The narms were circling around him again, and he
could tell from their barks and growls that they had understood the question and were no longer
happy. One of them howled something he couldn't interpret, and then he heard a clear word.

“*Sky.*”

Ben frowned. “Sky? You are saying the Kheelians stole the sky?”

“*Sky! Sky!*” The narms barked, and dashed around him. “*Stole!*” There was a chorus of barks from
the night around, loud and angry. Ben tried to think. What could that mean? It wasn't as if the sky
over this planet was teaming with aircraft or satellites, or even blocked by an atmospheric forcefield that the narms could take objection too. Ben glanced up to look at the clear night sky with its two moons and faint scatter of distant stars. The vista no doubt appeared the same as it had for five hundred years or more.

The narms continued to howl out their anger around him. There was movement behind Ben again, but now he got a sharp sense of warning from the force; this time one of the narms was going to attack. Ben drew the 'saber out from his sleeve and stepped aside sharply as jaws snapped shut on the air beside his ear. Ben held the 'saber out, unlit but ready, and, using his firmest and most authoritative voice, said;

“No! You will not do that again.”

The narm dropped back down to the floor, snarling, snapping its teeth. Ben kept eye contact until the narm stepped back, its gaze going instead at the lightsaber hilt. There was a flurry of growls and yaps.

“Storm light.” said Scarface, suddenly quite clearly.

Storm light must be lightning. That would be the only parallel the creatures might have for something like the plasma of the 'saber blade.

“Yes. Storm light. You know what this is then. You recognise this.” Ben said, in the same tone, holding out the 'saber. “I am here to talk, but I will use it if I must. Don't attack me again.”

“You steal,” Scarface snarled. “Kill you all.”

Ben ignored the words. It seemed to be a show of a bravado rather than a genuine threat. “I know many of you are dead,” said Ben. “Some of us too. We don't want to kill any more. We want to give back what was taken.”

That caused some confusion. The narms whined and growled to each other in low voices but made no intelligible reply. Ben tried a different tack.

“Where is the head of your pack?” He asked, but the narms did not understand. “The alpha? Your...leader? He has a stripe on his back, here...Where is he?”

Ben didn't understand the answer, but the end result was the same. Not here.

“What is his name?”

Scarface answered in a complicated series of descriptive images that took Ben a moment or two to translate into words. “He Watches The Dark. Is that his name?”

Scarface barked.

“That is our leader,” Ben said. “Grandmother.” He pointed back towards to Fence where the Kheelians waited. “She wants to meet He Watches The Dark, to talk. To give back the, uh, sky.”

There was much howling and yelping to accompany this statement. Ben waited patiently for it to come to an end. He thought he was probably close to losing their attention. It was time to wrap this up.

“Where? When?” This would be a real test of the narm's intellect and world view. Did they possess a sense of time and space that could be articulated?
The narm to Ben's right barked, and then lowered its head to the ground. It dragged its muzzle through the dirt, marking a faint pattern. Ben moved over to look. The creature drew two rough circles, side by side. Then, it made sure Ben was watching, and wiped the second circle away with its paw. Ben was both astonished and impressed. The circles were perhaps meant to be the moons. So the narm was showing the time when the moon went away. Dawn? But the narms were nocturnal.

While Ben had been watching, Scarface too had been drawing. His picture was more difficult to interpret. It had two perpendicular lines, and next to one, the narm had wedged a stick into the earth. Ben didn't know what he was looking at until two white pebbles were added, and then he suddenly recognised a map of the moor. The stick was marking the huge treestump of Grandfather Kender, that seemed to function as everyone's landmark. Ben nodded.

“I know the place. We will come.”

“Back sky!” demanded Scarface.

“Yes, we will bring back the sky,” said Ben, trying not to consider how the blazes he was going to do that. “In the meantime you must do something for us. We will meet you, but you must go now. Back to the moor and leave the valley. Only then will we come to meet He Watches The Dark.”

Again, he had to endure a chorus of howls of defiance and growls and yelps, before the narms slowly fell silent. To his surprise, Ben saw movement away in the dark at either side of the road. The narms were slipping away. The shapes were moving northward, back towards the moor.

Soon, Scarface was the last one left. He growled, and snapped a little at Ben, just to show he was still the one in charge.

“Thank you,” said Ben.

Scarface hissed, and slunk away into the dark.

Ben waited until the night around was dark and still, and his senses told him that the danger had passed. He turned back to the gate, and the waiting Kheelians.

They certainly had a lot to think about.
The scenery passed by in a slow drift of green and brown. Ben rested his head back, and let the wind ruffle his hair. Tiki was curled in close to his side, watching the landscape mutely. He was glad of her closeness and warmth; the cold brush of the wind was chilling as it whipped over the landspeeder. The land around was a steady undulation of fields, some with crops or livestock, and some with rows of solar panelling, shining like fish scales in the cool daylight. Here and there were isolated farmsteads or stands of large purple bush-like plants, the closest thing to trees that he had yet seen. Ahead, the vague shimmerings of light and shade that had hinted at the distant town of Tszaaf were slowly coming into definition. Soon, individual buildings could be made out, and Ben started to get a feel for the size of the place. It was certainly much more significant a settlement than Thet; he could see at least a thousand structures, possibly more, scattered across the horizon. They would soon arrive.

Ben shivered, pulling the blankets closer, and coughing shallowly into his hand. It had been a hard night. The small amount of movement he had attempted the previous day had still been too much for his weakened body, and by the time they had returned to the sleeping area, he had been in a lot of pain. Shaarm's tablets had proved all but useless, and the vet's painkiller had just made him feverish and even more uncomfortable. Around midnight he had developed a cough that he couldn't seem to shift. The night dragged on, and by the time the morning arrived, Ben had been exhausted. Shaarm had checked his vitals and listened to his lungs with a distinct frown. Shortly after, it was announced that the village's two landspeeders would be taking a convoy of the injured to Tszaaf for treatment at the main medical centre. Ben found himself bundled up in blankets before he could protest and ushered into the back of Shaarm's speeder with four other Kheelians and Tiki at his side.

They left the village without incident. The road was clear and empty, and there were no narms to be seen. Ben just hoped they would honour their agreement to return to the moor until the following evening. At least that had been one mystery easily solved – the time that the narms had wanted to meet. Ben had described the creature's drawing of a single moon the previous night, and the Kheelians had instantly understood. In two night's time, one moon would be full, while the second would be cast so completely in its shadow that it would vanish. The arrangement occurred every eight-hundred days. Ben had marvelled again at that; the narms had a way of recording and anticipating the patterns of the cosmos. Remarkable. His thoughts turned unbidden back to the riddle that he had done little but puzzle over since the previous night. The stolen sky. The Kheelians had stolen the sky. What did that mean?

The journey to Tszaaf had perhaps taken a standard turn, and so it was still early as they approached the quiet town. Ben looked for a fence, similar to the one which had saved them in Thet, but there was no sign of such a thing. It was only when the speeders passed over a bridge covering a wide ditch did he recognise any defensive capability of the town. It might once have been filled with water as a moat, but right now the ditch was dry and dust-filled.

The town itself was noticeably more substantial than the village the Ben was familiar with. The round buildings were primarily of stone or brick, and unlike those of Thet, some had two or more storeys. The streets were wider, and here landspeeders were not an oddity. Their own convoy of speeders passed by several domestic side streets, a market place, a park and eventually a grand-
looking building faced with plates of stone and metal. Ben peered over the side of the speeder and saw a platform and beyond it, silvery rails, gleaming dully in the morning light, disappearing into the distant haze. Train tracks.

Tiki patted Ben's arm and pointed to another building they were passing; a two-storey construction with large windows set back from the road, with each stone in its walls painted a different colour.

“Oouuli's school.” Shaarm called back from the front.

The medical centre, when they arrived at it a few minutes later, had grown from around a core of an old stone building. Extending off and up in all directions were wings and extra storeys of duracrete and brick as the building had been extended at least four or five times to catch up with a growing population. The oldest stone-built section, fronted by large stone pillars, seemed to still be the main entranceway, for as soon as the two speeders stopped, a door flew open and four Kheelians in dark blue robes trotted out. Three of the group started helping the injured Kheelians down from the speeders and leading them into the surgery, while one, a young male, came over to Shaarm.

“Stars and Sky! Shaarm, what happened?” He exclaimed, looking over the injured. “Why did you not call?”

“Narms,” Shaarm replied, shortly. “It is over, for now. But I have brought ten of the most wounded with me. Three died.”

“Trzk...” The nurse swore, shaking his head. “You need help out there, it is too isolated. Have you called...”

“Not yet,” Shaarm said. “I just need to focus on one thing at a time right now.” She lifted Tiki out of the back of the speeder. “You remember my daughter, Tiki? Tiki, you have met Yalani before. He is going to look after you.”

Tiki had a suddenly bout of shyness and turned her face into Shaarm's shoulder. Yalani laughed a little and stroked her fur. Then his eyes turned to Ben and perceptibly widened. He recovered from his surprise quickly however, and in a soft voice said;

“Oh! Well hello. I am Yalani...what is your name?”

“This is Ben,” Shaarm said. “He is staying with us at the moment and got caught up in the attack.”

Someone called Shaarm's name from the doorway, and she glanced away.

“I have to go and prepare the surgery,” she said, apologetically. “I will leave you two with Yalani; can you please get them registered so we can start as soon as possible? Here is Tiki's MedIdent.”

Shaarm kissed Tiki, ruffled Ben's hair, and disappeared after her colleague. Yalani reached over towards Ben. Ben pictured the Kheelian's huge hands gripping his shattered rib cage, and quickly stood up.

“It's alright,” Ben said hastily, sliding over the edge of the speeder onto the ground. “I don't need help.”

The Kheelian stepped back with a smile. “Of course you do not. Do not worry,” he added, soothingly. “I am not going to hurt you. Everything is going to be fine. Come on.”

The Kheelian picked up Tiki and easily swung her onto his shoulders. Then he led the way into the medcentre, walking slowly to accommodate Ben's limping pace. The room Ben found himself in was
painted a rich earthy orange, and was lit with more electric lights than he had yet seen in one place. A desk was arrayed along one wall beside a long ramp which went up to another floor. The injured Kheelians from Thet were crowded around the room as the uniformed staff, nurses or doctors, he wasn’t sure which, went from casualty to casualty talking details and making quick assessments of injuries.

Yalani led Ben over to a quiet area out of the way of the rest of the chaos and lifted Tiki down. She grabbed Ben's hand with her good arm and clung on, looking around unhappily. There was no sign of Shaarm. Ben gave her hand a gentle, reassuring squeeze. There were, of course, no chairs, so Ben took a seat on one of a number of cushioned mats scattered across the floor, Tiki curled in against his side.

“Good,” said Yalani, encouragingly. “Now, just wait here a moment. I will get a datapad and be right back.”

The Kheelian disappeared across the room in the direction of the entrance desk. On the way, he stopped and exchanged a few words with one of the other doctors. The other Kheelian glanced over at Ben surprised. Ben frowned, uncomfortable with this level of scrutiny, but it couldn't be helped. Shaarm's previous plan of sneaking him in the medcentre at a quiet time had gone very wildly awry; this was probably the busiest it had been in years.

Yalani returned after a few minutes with a datapad and two cartons of drink. Ben opened Tiki's for her, and then sipped his with caution; it was some sort of sweet fruit juice. In the meantime, Yalani scanned Tiki's MedIdent card, which gave a faint beep, and then quickly entered some details.

“So, you were attacked by narms, eh?” He said, in a tone of slightly forced jollity. That must have been scary.”

Ben tried not to feel irritated by the Kheelian. He presumably thought Ben and Tiki were about the same age. A reasonable assumption given their similarity in size, although in this case a flawed one. Ben said nothing. Tiki nodded, and then uncharacteristically spoke up.

“Dada and Ben fighted them off. Ooouli hit one with a stick.”

“Ooouli...oh, you mean your sister. She hit a narm with a stick? Good for her.”

Yalani ran a small hand-held triage scanner over Tiki's arm. “Tsk, broken arm, poor girl. How did this happen then?”

Tiki didn't answer, pushing her face into Ben's shoulder. Ben decided it was time to intervene; Tiki had been through a lot that night.

“So, are you a nurse or a doctor, Yalani? Forgive me; I am afraid I am not familiar enough with your uniforms to distinguish the insignia...”

The Kheelian looked at him with surprise for a second time. “I suppose you would say I am a nurse, although I mainly work on the equipment here. May I have your MedIdent? Thank you. I must say you speak our language very well, Ben. How long have you been in Thet?”

Ben smiled faintly. “Fifteen.”

“Years?”

“Days.”
The Kheelian stared, and for the sake of his cover story, Ben elaborated slightly. “I am a colleague of Pakat’s, from the University. I was conducting research out on the moor.”

“A...a colleague? You are not a child? I thought...I am sorry!”

Ben smiled again, briefly. Shaarm had given him the last of the tablets before they left that morning, and the pain relief had long since worn off, along with some of his vast stores of patience.

“No need to apologise,” he said, but didn't elaborate.

Yalani didn't ask anything else but quickly ran Ben's fake MedIdent card. Ben watched, slightly wary, but the machine just issued the same faint beep as the fake was accepted.

“Oh...!” Yalani looked at the screen. “You have been in the wars...Internal injuries, burns, suspected fractures...What happened?”

“Transport accident,” Ben answered. Of course Shaarm would have updated the card with his recent medical history. He should have expected that. Ben gave Yalani a brief account of the new injuries he had received in the flight from the narms, and the Kheelian made some passes with the small scanner. He noted everything down in the datapad, frowning the entire time.

“I need to go and organise your full scans,” he said. “I am afraid none of our equipment is calibrated for Pechnar biology, but your standard readings are on the card so I can work from that. Are you all right if I leave you here for a little while? Are either of you in pain?”

Both shook their heads, and Yalani excused himself and left, disappearing out through a far door. Ben stroked Tiki's hair affectionately as he looked about the room. The other nurses were still taking notes from the patients, although some of them had been led into side rooms for treatment. More than a few glances were being thrown his way. Ben ignored them, closing his eyes. He let his mind settle, and it inevitably wandered back to that same endless question. How had the Kheelians stolen the sky? And how could he possibly hope to return it? He had one day to figure it out.

“Ben?”

“What is it, Tiki? Are you all right?”

“C’n I have a story?”

“Oh yes, of course,” Ben answered, and then hesitated, feeling slightly panicked. He didn't know any children's stories. More than that, he remembered nothing beyond the last fourteen days, and there was little child-friendly material he could draw on there. Very well, he would just have to make something up. Tiki curled up on her side, broken arm stretched out, and her head resting on Ben's knee. He drew his fingers through her mane.

“What sort of stories do you like?” he asked, playing for time.

“Nice ones,” she answered.

Helpful.

“Very well. There was a-“

“...Doing it wrong,” Tiki interrupted. “Have to say Once upon a time.”

“Oh. I apologise. Once upon a time...Better? Once upon a time there was a...um...princess.”
Tiki stuck her thumb in her mouth and huffed in an unimpressed way. Ben quickly revised the story.

“A princess who was also a ... warrior, and a diplomat, and a musician, and a thoroughly nice and well-rounded person. All right?”

Tiki nodded again his leg and he took it as permission to continue.

“The princess was the leader of a beautiful kingdom. The land was lush and green and the kingdom prospered. The princess herself was noble and good, and all of her people loved her very much.”

Tiki made a humming sound. He hoped it was approval.

“One day, some rather despicable people came to the kingdom. They wanted to overthrow the princess and rule the land themselves. They brought with them a huge army.”

“...were narms?” said Tiki in a small voice.

“No, definitely not narms,” said Ben firmly. “They were... hmm...robots.”

Tiki nodded, satisfied. Robots were good.

“The villains built a giant wall around the kingdom,” said Ben, starting to get into his stride. “They were merchants, you see, and the wall meant no-one could come in or out of the kingdom, and so the townspeople couldn't get to the market to sell their food and goods. If the merchants could overthrow the princess, they knew they could take all the kingdom's resources for themselves. But the princess was very stubborn and very clever. She sent out secret messages across the land, and called all her friends together to help her defeat them.”

“...is the Princess's name?” asked Tiki, with a yawn.

Ben cast around for something plausible.

“Her name was Padmé.”

Tiki nodded. Apparently the name was acceptable, which is good because Ben had just completely made it up.

“What she look like?”

“Well...” said Ben, starting to flounder. “She has very long fur, deep blue, like the colour of the sky reflected in water. She is not tall but commands a great presence when she speaks. She is very beautiful and her eyes are kind. Because theatricality and appearance are essential in politics, she wears her clothes like armour, to impress and intimidate the other kingdoms. In her palace she has fifty gowns in a hundred different colours. Some are decked with gold and feathers and some even have jewels or strings of glowing lights.”

Tiki stuck her thumb back in her mouth. Apparently Ben was doing a reasonable job.

“Where was I? Oh yes. The princess was trapped by the evil merchants and had called her friends together to help her. She had lots of friends so all who could came to her call; famous pod-racer pilots, and knights, and good droids, and, of course, the princess's ten lady bodyguards who never left her side and used to go about in disguise. The princess used her diplomatic skills to persuade another local kingdom to fight with her, and soon she had a great army of her own to stand against the robots. It was an historic battle but after many turns, the princess and her friends prevailed. The evil merchants were captured and the robot army was defeated.”
“What happened next?” asked Tiki.

Grief hit Ben like a punch to the gut, and for a moment he couldn't breathe. The intensity of the unexpected emotion that burst from him was more than he could bear, drowning him in a torrent of anguish. Something terrible had happened at the end of the battle, he knew. Something world-changing. He gasped a little, trying to force back unexpected tears. He could feel Tiki sitting up at his side, concerned, and his put his hand over his face so she wouldn't see his expression. His stomach felt like a cold stone in his belly, his mind skittered away from some dark horror…

“Ben?” It was Shaarm's voice. Ben dashed the tears from his face and looked up. Shaarm was crossing the room towards them. She looked confused.

“Are you okay?”

He nodded and made a positive sounding hum. He didn't trust his voice. His hands were shaking.

“I am just taking Tiki in for her x-ray,” Shaarm said, still giving him an odd look. “It will only take a moment, and then I will be back.”

"All right,” Ben managed.

Shaarm carried Tiki off through one of the doors, and Ben was left alone. The feelings of grief and rage and terrible despair that had undone him had already dissipated, leaving just a faint hint of unease, and tear tracks on his face. He found out the location of a cleansing room from one of the assistants and scrubbed his face in cold water, trying to scour away the cloying emotions. What the kriff had just happened?

Shaarm, true to her word, was back within a few minutes. She led him up the ramp to the second storey of the building and into a large, oval room. In the centre of the room was a raised circular platform, shaped like a dish, with various stands of equipment positioned around. On one side of the room was a small bank of jury-rigged computer equipment, connected with intercrossing wires and scraps of open circuit-board.

“This is our medical scanner,” Shaarm said. “It is far from state of the art, but it does the job. Yalani has just finished in putting your standard vitals, so hopefully it should now be calibrated for your biology.”

Ben nodded. “What do I need to do?” he asked.

Shaarm lifted him up onto the platform. She slid the sling off his arm but left his other clothing in place. “Just lie down,” she instructed. “However you are comfortable is fine, but try not to move. You shouldn't sense anything, but the scan might take up to a full turn as you have multiple injuries. Do you have anything in your pockets?”

Ben handed over the lightsaber and his MedIdent card. In his other pocket he found the metal inhibitor bracelet. He had forgotten he was even carrying it. With a shiver, he also handed it to Shaarm.

Shaarm waited until he was lying down and comfortable, and then raised a bar at the edge of the platform. A curved screen rose up over the top of the dish and down onto the far side, sealing Ben in under a small tent-like dome. There was a small clear screen in one side of the opaque fabric, so that he could look out and see Shaarm at the computer bank. There was a small electronic click, and Shaarm’s voice filled the space.

“Are you all right, Ben? Can you hear me?”
“I am fine, Shaarm,” he answered out loud, wondering where the microphone was.

“Very well, I will start the scan. Just speak up if you feel uncomfortable for any reason.”

“I will,” he agreed. There was a faint vibration and a pins-and-needles sensation in his feet as the scanner began its work. After a moment, this was joined by a faint humming and an intense high-pitched sound that set his teeth on edge. It certainly did make him uncomfortable, but he held his peace. He doubted the Kheelians would even be able to hear it, let alone do anything about it.

“How are the others?” He asked, as a distraction.

“They are being seen by the other nurses now,” Shaarm answered, through the microphone. “It looks like none should need any serious surgery, although there are a couple of the injured who I should like to stay in the medcentre for a couple of days for observation.”

“And Tiki?”

“She is fine too, Ben. Her arm was set properly and has already started to knit. There is no need to worry.”

“Good.” Ben breathed shallowly, trying to relax. There was quiet for a few minutes as the machine did its work. After a while, there was another click, and Shaarm’s voice filled the machine's chamber.

“Ben...What happened just now?”

Ben frowned. “What do you mean?”

“When I came out of the pharmacy, and you were sitting with Tiki in the waiting room. You looked...devastated.”

Oh. That.

“I honestly do not know,” he confessed. “I was telling Tiki a story to keep her entertained, some silly thing I made up about a princess and some villainous merchants. Then I just had a very intense feeling of sadness. I can't explain it. Perhaps it was just an after effect of Choha's pain meds.”

“It did not look like just sadness to me,” Shaarm said. “It looked like utter desolation. Perhaps the story was neither as silly nor as made up as you think.”

“Perhaps,” Ben said, uneasily.

“You may have been drawing from pieces of buried memory,” Shaarm continued. “Trust me, that is a good sign. You have already remembered a few things about your past; the ship you travelled on for example, and the lightsaber. And that strange name you called to Chana when you were fighting together.”

Ben was bewildered. “I did what?”

“Oh, I am sorry; I thought you had talked about it. Apparently you called out a name he did not recognise when you were fighting at Kadat's house, although he couldn't quite recall it. Kinanar or Amaykeen...something like that?”

Ben remembered just in time not to shrug. “It means nothing to me, I'm afraid.”

The following half standard of the scan was spent in silence, both lost in their own thoughts.
Eventually, the machine issued three beeps, and the high-pitched whine and hum of the scanner fell silent. Ears ringing, Ben looked up as the dome-like canopy folded back to reveal Shaarm.

"All done," she said. "Sit up slowly; you will probably be dizzy.

The results of the scan, she explained, were no worse than they had expected. The machine had produced a long laundry list of the physical injuries Ben had accrued over the past two ten-days, and even he couldn't help but wince as Shaarm read them all out. First were the older injuries that he had arrived with; some almost healed, but all still visible to the scan. This included broken carpals and metacarpals in both hands, fractured ribs, a poorly-relocated shoulder joint, hyperextension of the spine, puncture wounds, intra-abdominal bleeding, damage to his kidney and liver, a break in his right pelvic ilium, and numerous burns, lacerations and contusions. Overlying those in a palimpsest of pain were the results of his recent encounter with the narms; broken collarbone, broken ribs, and the damage the tension pneumothorax and following treatments had caused to his lung, not to mention the nasty bite wound to his left calf. All were compounded by what Shaarm had described, with a frown, as fairly serious malnutrition. It seemed the Kheelian foods that he could eat were not providing him with sufficient nutrients that his human body needed.

Ben sighed. Just one thing after another.

The results of the scan, however dismal, did provide Shaarm with enough information to come up with a surgical scheme to repair the worst of the damage. She pushed Ben on a Kheelian-sized holo-trolley through to a different part of the medcentre where the surgical bays were located. Yalani and one of the other technicians had already prepared one of the surgical suites while the scan had been taking place. Ben was keen to get the surgery over and done with as soon as possible, and Shaarm agreed that they could start more or less right away. While she went to check on Tiki, Ben changed into a loose gown, and then allowed the nurse to attach an IV as Shaarm had directed. He was unconscious before she returned.

The surgery to repair his ribs and lung lasted a couple of turns. Ben awoke groggily to the sound of Shaarm's voice reciting something. He opened his eyes to find he was lying on a sleeping mat on the floor, with Shaarm at his side. She had Tiki tucked between her front feet, and was reading out loud from a datapad.

"What time is it?"

Shaarm looked up with a smile at the sound of his voice.

"It is 30 past 16 turns," she said. "Welcome back. You were asleep a little longer than I expected and I was starting to get concerned. Do you have any pain? How are you feeling?"

"All right, I think, all things considered. Tired." There was a dull, distant sort of pain in his chest, but it felt numbed in a way that only heavy duty painkillers could achieve. Apart from that he felt quite groggy but yes, not too bad. "How did it go?"

"Everything went fine, Ben." She positively beamed. "The displaced ribs have been realigned; I had to use a thin metal plate to splint two of the worst but they should now heal without further complications. The small tears in your lung have been repaired, as have the incisions I made. I have also checked the surgical sites for the repairs we made to your liver when you first arrived, and everything is healing well. The scan showed me that your other fractures are aligned correctly and should begin healing without any further assistance. I give thanks you did not damage your pelvis
further when you fell; that could have been most serious indeed.”

Ben nodded, too groggy to worry much about it for now.

“Sleep,” Shaarm told him. “You will feel more alert in a turn or two, and we will talk again then.”

Ben nodded again, but something was nagging at him. “How did the Kheelians steal the sky?” he asked her, fretfully. “I don’t understand what it means. But I can't work it out by tomorrow, everything will fail.”

“Stop dwelling on it,” Shaarm shushed him. “In just two days you have already made an armistice with the narms and saved the village. Beyond that, you have shown us creatures we thought no more than savages are highly intelligent, something that we never dreamed of. The last few days have brought out the best and worst of ourselves, but you have opened our eyes to new wonders even in our own world we thought we knew so well. Ben, you should know that whatever happens tomorrow, you have already given us great gifts.”

She smoothed her hand across his forehead, and sighed. “Now, you must sleep. I have to do some tasks while we here are in town, but I will not be long. If you need anything, press this buzzer and one of the nurses will come.”

Ben nodded, but could already feel sleep welling up again. Shaarm let Tiki give his hair a gentle stroke.

“Sleep well,” he heard Shaarm say, and he was closing his eyes.

But as it turned out he did not sleep well at all. The anaesthetic still coursing through his system pulled him down into a horror of nightmares, a dreamscape of war; echoing with the sound of explosions and alarms, then screams and tearing metal, and a fatal impact. They are trapped in the dark, confined, bounded by sparks and pain and the bodies of their comrades, and they can only wait. Someone will come. He is trapped, and can only breathe in the smoke, listen to the sound of fifty other breaths that dwindle out one by one, falling silent in the dark until there are only two left breathing. No-one came, and all he can do is grieve.
A moment long awaited....

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The dream lingered on, and Ben woke with the taste of sorrow and ashes in mouth. Ben blinked open his eyes, peering around the room. Shaarm was not there. He sat up, cautiously, taking in his surroundings for the first time. The room, unlike others he had seen, had straight but non-parallel walls painted in the now familiar earthy russet orange. The walls diverged towards a large window at the far end of the room. There were two other sleeping pallets in the room, but both were empty. A small door to one side hinted at the possibility of a washroom.

Ben looked about him and noticed a small pile of items at the side of the bed. The lightsaber, his MedIdent and the repressor bracelet were stacked in a shallow basket. A neat stack of clothes was topped by his folded sling, and on top of that lay a sheet of plastipaper. It was a note, written in an ostentatiously clear and rounded hand. Shaarm had picked up on his trouble with the written characters.

He read the first word; Dearest- followed by a shape he didn't know. Angular, but with a pleasing symmetry. It could only be his name.

Dearest Ben,

I apologise for leaving you alone, but I must undertake some tasks, on Grandmother's behalf, while we are in Tszaaf. Among other things the Kheelians who died, their passing has to be registered. Also I must see to it that supplies and building materials are ordered so that we can make our repairs. And so on. If I am not back when you wake, please stay in bed and rest. If you are hungry, call one of the nurses – I have left instructions about your dietary needs. REST.

Shaarm

Beside the signature was a wide, untidy scrawl of pencil. Beneath this was one more small explanatory line of text:

Tiki writes you hello. S.

Ben folded the letter back up neatly, and laid it beside the pile of clean clothes. Despite Shaarm’s words, he needed to get up. He couldn't just lie here. There was a prickling presence in his mind, like pins and needles coming from the place where the power resided. It was strange and unnerving and slowly itched against the back of his skull. It did not make for a restful mental state.

Forcing the unnerving sensation out of his thoughts, Ben’s eyes strayed back to the door leading to the washroom. Surely Shaarm would not have left him clothes if she did not expect him to get dressed. And they appeared to be new as well. It would be a shame to put them on when he was quite so...ripe. Stars, when had he last had a proper wash? Far too long. Being clean would definitely
be good for him. Shaarm could not possibly disagree.

Having quite satisfactorily justified his disobedience, Ben looked about for his staff. It was leaning in a far corner, apparently out of reach. Ha. A quick motion of his hand had the prop flying into his grip, and he levered himself up. He was stiff and in pain, but he had certainly lived through worse. He limped over to the small door and it was indeed a small washroom. Judicial use of his powers managed to operate the 'fresher controls which were positioned high above his head. The 'fresher was sonic. He would have liked the comfort of hot water on his aching muscles, but at least this way he saved his bandages a soaking. The bandages themselves were plentiful, wrapped in thick layers around his chest and torso, neck, right thigh and left calf. Shaarm had clearly taken the opportunity to check on the progress of all his old wounds too.

He stayed in the 'fresher until the grime had finally finished working its way out of his hair and off his skin, but too soon, he started to feel chilled and dizzy, and was forced to climb out. The new clothes Shaarm had left seemed to be the same cut and style as his other set of Pechnar clothes, except this time the shirt was dull orange with a grey sleeveless jacket. Ben got dressed awkwardly, and then added his old Kheelian green coat on top of his other layers to try and get warm. He didn't think it was possible to feel any more grateful that he already did, until he found that the parcel of clothes also included a warm blue scarf and an actual pair of boots. These were second, or possibly third, hand and extremely solid, with thick soles and hard synthleather surfaces. They were both too long in the foot and too narrow, but he could not have cared less. He had proper footwear again. Ben put them on, and then wound the thick scarf around his neck, and couldn't help but notice it conveniently hid the bandaged burn on his neck. Finally he hung the sling over his neck and carefully shoved his arm into it.

What now? All dressed up and nowhere to go. There was little to engage his attention in the room, with its minimalist décor and decoration, and view over an unremarkable back street. Perhaps he could try meditating again? Ben carefully took a seat on the pallet bed, mindful of his wounds, and then his eye fell on the lightsaber. He had not really had a chance to look at it properly. After that first fleeting glance on the moor there just had not been time. He turned the weapon over, inspecting it. It was very well-made, he was certain of that, but all the same it was not quite right. The grip was too narrow, and it was oddly heavy at the base of the handle. It had no balance to it. The design was effective, certainly, it just...lacked elegance.

He tried to recall to his mind the dream he had been having the night the narms had attacked. The lightsaber had been a part of it, he was sure. He remembered taking it from someone and escaping...somewhere...Ben shook his head in irritation. Like a drawing on wet paper, the details had dissolved away as soon as he grasped at them. Had the man in the ship been the same man who had burned him in the cell? He just could not recall their faces. Given the presence of the lightsaber in both parts of the memory, it seemed likely. Although he was sure the second man had said he was helping Ben to escape. But if the two men were different, what were the chances that two of these lightsaber-carrying Jedi were involved in these events? And if he was dreaming of just the one man, to what end did he first torture Ben, and then claim to be saving him?

Ben laid that riddle aside for the moment, and picked up another. The bracelet. Once again, the cold thin metal made him shiver slightly as he touched it. What was it for and why had he been wearing it? That it had an association with his strange powers didn't seem to be in doubt, but what that association had been, he didn't know. Did wearing the bracelet give him the powers when he took it off, like charging a battery? Or was it merely a medical aid, as Shaarm had suggested? It was still possible that it was the thing that had wiped his memories. If only he could somehow find out more. He couldn't draw conclusions without first having some evidence to interrogate.

The nurse, Yalani. He had said that he worked with the hospital equipment. He had calibrated the
scanner for Ben's DNA. Granted, the Kheelian was probably unlikely to also happen to be an expert on alien mind control devices, but if there was anyone who might be able to tell Ben something about medical equipment, it was Yalani. Now Ben just had to find him.

Mind made up, Ben rose, picking up Shaarm's note and shoving his few meagre possessions into his pockets. A stolen weapon, a fake ID and a bracelet that might have been designed for torture. Quite the collection. Out of habit, Ben made the bed and hung up the towel he had used. Now to make good his escape.

Ben went to the door, and pushed it open a crack. Peering out, he could see a circular room with a round desk in the centre. Radiating off the round room were nineteen long tapering rooms, similar to his own, and on the twentieth side was one long corridor. At the desk was a petite Kheelian female in a nurse’s uniform. She was currently reading a datapad, but she would see the moment he opened the door. Very well, he would just have to wing it.

Ben adopted a confident pose and strode out across the room. The nurse looked up.

“Oh! What are you doing? You are meant to be resting!”

Ben didn't stop walking, but gave a light laugh, as if this had all been quite the misunderstanding.

“It's all right,” he said with a smile. “I am just stretching my legs. Everything is fine. Back in a moment.”

“Wait!” called the Kheelian, sliding out from behind the desk. “I really cannot let you leave. Shaarm was most insistent. Please, go back into your room.”

Damn. He would have to try something different. Ben closed his eyes briefly, and mentally reached into the stream of power which now flowed through his subconscious. He pictured plucking a thread from the flow, and wrapped the shimmering suggestion around the words he was going to use.

“It's okay,” he said, letting the power flow through his words, compelling her to believe him. “The walk will do me good. I won't overdo things, and I won't leave the building, all right?”

The nurse looked as if she was about to argue. Then her expression softened, and she sighed.

“I suppose it’s okay,” she agreed. “It might do you good, as long as you don't overdo things.”

Ben smiled, and walked to the door.

“And don't leave the building!” she added as an afterthought. “All right?”

Ben slipped out of the ward into a main corridor, leaving the nurse to resume her seat with a faintly dazed expression. He wondered if he should be rather more concerned by what he had just done. This power ought to be terrifying him beyond all reason, and it was rather more terrifying that it didn't. It felt right. Like it was part of him. Or perhaps he was still just high on painkillers.

The prickly, itching feeling at the back of his mind swelled. He ignored it.

It took him a little while to learn that Yalani would be found in the technical bay, and then a little longer to find out where that was. When he had finally hobbled his way across the building and down two storeys, Ben finally located it. He knocked twice on the grey door, and when a distant voice called out something indistinct, he took it as an invitation and went in. The room was an electrical paradise. Hundreds of tiny drawers covered one curving wall, each appearing to contain thousands of small electrical components. Cables and leads hung down the walls. A long, low
workbench ran down the centre of the room, bristling with cables and chips, monitors and soldering irons. Two Kheelians in hospital uniforms, a male and one of the purple-furred Kheelians Ben hadn't been able to figure out yet, stood on one side on the table. Both looked up at him with open-mouthed surprise.

“Look!” gasped the male. “It's a Pechnar!”

“Really?” Ben gasped back. “Where?”

The Kheelians gaped at him. Ben sighed.

“I am looking for Yalani,” he said. “Is he here?”

“Yal!” The male Kheelian shouted towards one of the side rooms, without taking his eyes off Ben. “Someone to see you.”

There was a muffled reply from the distance. The purple Kheelian, who was still staring at Ben, said; “Is it true that the Grandmother in Thet made you a Speaker after you summoned down lightning bolts to kill all the narms?”

Ben resisted rolling his eyes. “Does that even sound like it could be true?”

The Kheelian hesitated. “Not...really.”

“Well, I think you have the answer to your question then,” said Ben, who was too busy worrying about just how far gossip about him had spread.

Yalani emerged from the back room. “Oh,” he said, not sounding terribly enthused. “Hello Ben. Are you not supposed to be in post-op recovery?”

“Probably,” said Ben. “I need your help with something. What can you tell me about this?” He held out the metal bracelet. Yalani took it delicately between his finger and thumb, and peered at it.

“What is it?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Ben admitted.

Yalani went over to the work bench and laid the bracelet on a microscope plate. He turned on a screen that projected a magnified high-definition image onto the wall.

“Hmm...” he murmured, turning the thing around, slowly, and then running a small scanner over it. “Well it is not just a trinket, that is for sure. It is certainly a device of some kind. There is a tiny chip in here, and it is still active. Here, you can see the small dermapads where the electrodes touch to the wearer's skin….fascinating...”

“What is it for?” said the purple-coated Kheelian, as the other two onlookers came over to look.

“Oh, I have no idea.” said Yalani, still staring at the glinting metal. “But as for what it does...Well, there I have a lot of ideas. It is designed to be worn, that is clear, and therefore probably influences the body in some way. I could come up with more than a few theories; perhaps it regulates electrical currents in the body to mitigate against cardiac arrest, or counterbalances a hormone deficiency, or relieves chronic pain. I remember reading once about a scientist who was trying to create a device that would deactivate white blood cells and histamines on instruction to treat immune system disorders and allergies. They never could get it to work. But I can tell you one thing for certain; this was not made by or for any Kheelian. The workmanship is...well, it is alien.”
“What are those patterns all over it?” One of the others asked. “Is that writing?”

Yalani frowned. “I don't know. Maybe.”

“All the uses you just mentioned are physiological,” Ben mused. “Could it have a neurological, or even psychological effect?”

The other male Kheelian spoke up. “Sure. If it can act in any of the ways Yalani just described then in theory there is no reason why it could not interact with the nervous system in the same way. Why do you ask?”

“And where did you get this thing anyway?” Yalani added.

Ben decided to open up a little. “I have been having a few issues with my memory, and I was wondering if this might be causing them. I've had it as long as I can remember.”

“Do you still wear it? Because the effects would not last once you take it off.”

Ben answered in the negative. Perhaps it was not related to his memory after all.

“What is that?” The purple Kheelian interrupted, pointed at the viewscreen.

“Where? Here?”

“The pattern does not match.”

Yalani zoomed the magnification, and sure enough, to one side of the join, a hairline crack ran through the design.

“Well,” Yalani said, leaning back. “We might not know what it does or how it does it, but we know it probably does not do it well. The workmanship is incredible, but a break like that will cause a serious flaw in its effectiveness. But without testing it on someone, I do not think I can tell you much more about it.”

“Interesting,” said Ben. “Well, thank you. I'm not sure what I just learned, but I feel like I did learn something. I had better be going, because-”

Too late. There was a brief single knock, and Shaarm pushed open the door. She saw Ben and sighed.

“Why am I not surprised.” she sighed.

“Ahh,” Ben said. “Yes, I have an explanation for why I didn't stay in bed like you told me to, and trust me; it's a very good one.”

“I'm sure it is,” said Shaarm. “I'm beginning to think the only way to ensure that you do something, Ben Waken, is to utterly forbid it.”

Ben tried to look contrite, but his face didn't seem to be built for it.

“Come on,” Shaarm sighed. “You are being discharged anyway. But you absolutely must ride on the holotrolley down to the exit.”

Ben didn't even think about arguing. He collected up the bracelet and meekly followed Shaarm to the door. On the threshold, he turned back to the nurses.
“Thank you for your help. Oh, just one more thing. If someone told you that the sky had been stolen, what would that mean to you?”

There was a moments' thoughtful silence as the Kheelians mused.

“That access to space had been blocked somehow,” Yalani said. “The use of space ports forbidden, perhaps. Or smugglers had forced space-traders out of business.”

“Or that your complainant has been forced to live underground? Perhaps they blame someone else for preventing them seeing the sky,” was purple Kheelian's suggestion.

“I have a second cousin called Skye,” the male Kheelian offered. “Although I don't think anyone would complain if she was stolen.”

Ben smiled, and nodded. “Thanks again,” he said, and they left.

Shaarm was quiet as she pushed the holotrolley down to the entrance hall. Ben tried to gauge her mood, hoping he hadn't made her angry.

“I'm sorry about leaving the recovery bay,” he offered after a while. “But your note only said rest, and I felt that making use of Yalani's knowledge would answer some of the questions I have and that would make me feel far better than rest, so...”

“Oh, that?” Shaarm said, off hand. “I am not cross. Besides, a bit of gentle exercise to walk off the anaesthetic was just what you needed. I did not write that in the note because I assumed you would wander off whenever you wanted to anyway.”

Ben chuckled. He needed to stop underestimating her.

“Are you all right?” he asked instead. Shaarm still looked distracted.

“I am sorry,” she said. “Doing the death notifications...it is always difficult. Forgive me if I seem somewhat preoccupied. I too am worried about tomorrow night. But enough of that- did you manage to find out anything from Yalani?”

Ben turned the bracelet over in his hand. “Possibly,” he said, but didn't elaborate. Nothing was certain, and his mind had already turned to what felt like a more immediate danger. Since he had woken up, there had been a strange feeling in his mind. Something was close. He couldn't have said what, but it was like nothing he could remember feeling before. He thought he knew what it was now. A presence. A presence that was both turbulent and portentous. Not heavy, but \textit{weighty}. Vital. Powerful. His mind seemed to shy away from examining too closely, sparking with electric static along the threads of his consciousness. He did not take such a warning lightly. Ben rubbed at the stubble on his chin and tried to think.

They collected Tiki from a friend of Shaarm's at the reception desk. Ben handed his MedIdent over again, and after a few minutes, it was handed back alongside a stack of medications, IV bags, and tablets.

Ben eyed Shaarm loading all the medications into a set of bags, and adding packs of hot and cold compresses, new gas cylinders, and packets of bandages and dressings for her own depleted
supplies. Shaarm bid a quick goodbye to the on-duty staff, and then the little group headed for the exit. Ben rested his hand on Tiki's head, ruffling her stubby mane and ears.

“I hope there is still plenty of credit on my tab...” He said in a slightly joking tone to Shaarm, gesturing at the stack of IV fluids. He honestly had no idea how much all his treatments were costing the family.

“Relax!” Shaarm instructed, with a smile. “You could probably have fifty more operations and still have left half of the money from the shipwreck salvage. Not that I am recommending that,” she added, hastily. “No more medical disasters, if you please, Ben.”

Ben laughed, and they stepped out together into the late afternoon sunshine. In contrast to the empty quiet streets they had seen early that morning, the town was now bustling with activity. Speeders and pedestrians passed up and down the street, and there was talking and shouting, and the sound of distant animals braying.

Shaarm had already explained that they did not need to wait for the others to head back to Thet. The Kheelians who weren't staying in the medcentre overnight for observation had already gone back to the village with Porra. She had parked the landspeeder just outside the door of the medcentre. Ben and Tiki waited as she loaded the packs of medication that she carried, stowing them under the seats. Tiki sat back onto her haunches, and her hand snaked into Ben's. He tucked his cane under his arm and gave her hand a gentle squeeze, glad of her company, and thinking the pair of them must look quite a sight with their matching slings. He frowned. His skin was tingling.

Suddenly, Tiki tugged at his hand a little and spoke. “Look,” she announced. “Another Ben!”

It took Ben's eyes a moment to track what she was looking at, her gaze fixed across the street. For a micro-second he froze, unable to believe what he was seeing. Then his reactions caught up, and he released Tiki's hand, dropping into a crouch and rolling sideways in the same motion behind the only cover available; the stone pillar that held up the portico on the front of the medcentre. He put his back to the stone, crouching low and breathing hard. Adrenaline and shock rushed through him, and his mind burned. It had been like looking into the sun. The lightsaber hilt was somehow in his hand. Tiki was staring down at him.

“Ben?” Shaarm had looked up from the back of the landspeeder. She looked around, and saw Tiki, and then Ben, huddled and hiding. “What are you...”

Ben shook his head, urgently, and held a hand up to his lips. Then he gestured over his shoulder, across the street. Shaarm, thank the stars, caught on quickly. She ducked her head, as if she was looking for something in the speeder foot well, and glanced across the roadway Ben saw her shoulders tense the moment she saw what Tiki had seen.

Another human.

Ben twisted, carefully, and peered around the edge of the column, across the crowded street. Being prepared for the onslaught on his mind barely helped to mitigate the effect of it. The Pechnar standing on the other side of the street was maelstrom of thundery force and lightning-bright shards of energy. The tempest swirled around the still figure who stood facing them across the open space. He was tall, taller than Ben, but his features were shadowed under a long dark cloak and menacing hood. Ben couldn't see his face, couldn't guess where the other human was looking. The power surged towards him, searching. The man tilted his head, as if he was listening.

There was a strange sensation then in Ben's mind. A presence, as if a ghostly hand had brushed across his consciousness. His body reacted on instinct and his mind repelled the intrusion like solid
object. He drew himself away, shrinking back from that burning light, and what felt like huge stone walls that he had never noticed before sealed tight around his mind. Enclosed. Protected. The searching presence was gone.

They waited for a moment in a silent tableau. The other human made no movement towards them, but nor did he turn away. Ben slowly drew his head back, and glanced at Tiki. The girl seemed to be puzzled rather than frightened. His first instinct had been to pull her to safety, but intellectually he had instantly overridden the compulsion. Dragging the girl down with him would only have attracted more attention, and besides, it was very unlikely the Kheelians would be in danger if he were not with them. The best way he could protect them was to make sure the human did not suspect them of any involvement or association with himself by hiding as quickly as possible.

“What do we do?” whispered Shaarm, drawing him back to the present, out of the fortress of his mind. She was still pretending to rummage for a lost item in the landspeeder, keeping her head down.

“Get Tiki, and take the speeder,” Ben murmured, low enough for her to hear. “Keep moving and don't look back.”

Shaarm did not argue. She lifted Tiki up into the back of the speeder and will one last wide-eyed glance at Ben, the two of them drove off up the street. Ben gave thanks again for the little girl's natural reticence. She didn't make a sound as they drove away, but looked at her mother and back to Ben with a puzzled look.

Ben waited a few long moments until the pair was out of sight. He stayed low; if the man had seen Ben as he walked out of the medcentre, even at a glance, then the he would probably continue to look around from him at the same eye-level. Ben risked another glance from behind the pillar.

The other Pechnar was still standing there, although he had slightly turned away and was looking up the street. Ben noticed for the first time the amount of attention the other man was getting; Kheelians stared at him as they passed, and a small group of children had actually stopped to look at him. They maintained a wide berth though, and none of them tried to touch the Pechnar's head or hair. Perhaps he was not considered to be familiar enough for such a greeting, or perhaps the cloak put them off.

The man ignored the attention, and raised his arm, activating a device on his wrist. Ben tensed slightly, but the man merely brought his wrist up to his mouth and appeared to be speaking into it. A communicator of some kind. That meant there were probably more of them. Definitely time to go.

Ben forced himself to loosen his grip on the 'saber handle, and replace it on his belt. He picked up his walking stick from where it lay at his feet. Even if it came to a confrontation, he would not fight here. There were far too many innocents who would end up in harm's way. He glanced around. The pillar had been his only option of hiding place at the time, but it was isolated. He would have to walk out in the open for some distance to get to the side streets on either side. He should certainly be seen. A distraction. He needed...there! A group of youngsters, young teens probably and wearing the same green school robes as Ooouli, were wandering slowly along the street, laughing and pushing each other playfully. Ben waited until they were between him and the watching Pechnar and made his move. Keeping his head low, he darted out from behind the pillar, and straight back through the medcentre door. He didn't stop to look back but limped as fast as he could across the entrance hall, and down a random side corridor. There was no sound of anyone following. He turned a corner, and almost ran into a purple-haired Kheelian. He couldn't be sure, but thought he recognised the Kheelian who had been assisting Yalani earlier.

“Hello again!” Ben said, brightly. “Listen, could you do me a small favour and point me in the direction of a way out?”

“Oh. Yes, but you just passed it. It's back there.” the Kheelian asked, with a look of surprise.
“Ah, I was thinking of a back way out?” said Ben, resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder. “It's a long story, but rather urgent.”

The Kheelian pointed further along the corridor. “Well, I suppose as you know Shaarm you could use the staff exit. It's down there. The code is 8141.”

“I give thanks,” said Ben, quickly. “Oh, one more thing- if you happen to see another Pechnar back there looking for me, could you possibly tell them I was never here? Thanks awfully.”

Ben wasn't sure how much of the brooding storm his mind had sensed had been coming from the man, but he did not dare to halt his flight and find out. The presence was still there, battering against the stone fortress of his mind, getting closer and closer.

The back door gave out into a small alley. Ben chose a random direction and set off, limping as quickly as he could away from the medcentre. Another intersection. To the left, a dead end. Ahead, the rear walls of houses, a broken-down speeder, someone's refuse bins…

The storm was coming. He could sense it behind him, closing in fast. Where was he going to go?

“Ben!”

He glanced up at his name, and saw Shaarm, beckoning him from the idling speeder. Frustration and anger warred with relief, and he jogged over, using his powers to boost his uneven jump up into the back of the speeder. Tiki patted his hair delightedly.

“I told you to go!” Ben told Shaarm. He fussied Tiki's ears.

“As if!” Shaarm snorted. “I have invested far too much effort in keeping you in one piece for that. Keep your head down in case there are more humans. Here.”

She tossed him a blanket. Ben slid down into the base of the foot well and pulled the cover over his head. Shaarm revved the engine and the craft sped off.

As he lay hidden on the floor of the landspeeder, curled up around his aching chest, Ben tried to process everything that had just happened. The Pechnar had come to Thet, and there was not a shadow of a doubt in his mind that they had come for him. His long conjectured pursuit had finally proved itself to be a reality, and yet here he was, letting Shaarm take him back to Thet, rather than fleeing for the hills. What on the blazes was he thinking? He knew what these Pechnar were capable- actually, if he were being truly honest, he had no idea what they were capable of. The little he remembered were just snatches of fear and horror. What would they do to him if they found him? *What would they do to the Kheelians?*

There was no longer any choice in the matter. He had to leave, for all of their sakes, before this got any worse.

But then “Sky,” he heard the narm voices call. “Stole!” and “We die.”

He still had one more duty to fulfil first.
Kudos to alyyks and Marauderess5 - Ben was indeed dreaming of Point Rain, one of my favourite CW episodes.

Some real life issues happening for me right now...so please forgive me if updates continue to slip by a day or two (thank you to everyone who was concerned last week, you guys are the best). But I'll let you know if things are going to get held up any more than that - it should all be okay.
He Watches The Dark

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It seemed the narms had kept their word.

As it was recounted to Ben later, his confrontation with Scarface the previous night had been the last anyone had seen of the narms for two days. The morning following the confrontation, Shaarm had decided that it was worth the risk to take the injured, including Ben and Tiki, by road to Tzsaaf. She and Porra, each with their ark of injured, had set off without any further hesitation, and the remaining villagers had watched the landspeeders depart from behind the safety of the Fence. They had all been expecting at any moment to see the vehicles swarmed by ambushing shapes, but instead the speeders had passed steadily and quietly out of sight, and the narms made no appearance. Grandmother had next sent out scouting groups of the youngest and fastest Kheelians to check the area around. The remains of the narms' destruction were everywhere, but of the beasts themselves there was no sign.

The Kheelians who had lost their lives were quietly laid to rest in the burial ground on the hill behind the village. According to the customs of their people, the bodies were each curled up into a large earthenware jar, into which were scattered handfuls of seeds. The jars were covered over by a mound of earth, and when the Rising came around again, the flower seeds would grow, and paint the hillsides with colour.

The villagers began the slow task of returning the evacuated Kheelians to their homes, a business made all the more melancholy for the knowledge that three of their number would never be returning home, and an entire family whose farm had burned had no home to return to. Several households from within the village arranged to host displaced families while rebuilding took place, while others formed large groups to accompany elderly or frightened Kheelians back to their homes, and to help them with their repairs.

Grandmother had her hands full with the most needy of her people for the time being, and had decided to stay at the village that night. Chana, Pakat and Ooouli had formed a larger party with several others of their nearest neighbours from the valley to make the return journey, taking with them tools and resources borrowed from Nenka's stores. Although the distance home was not long, they stopped several times along the way to assist other Kheelians. One of their detours took them to Kadat's house. The old Kheelian and his frail wife had been fortunate – despite the fight which had taken place within the heart of it, their home had mostly gone unscathed. The narms had been too busy with Ben and the others to cause much damage. The corpses of two narms lay on the carpet in the living room; one was missing a paw, and the second had been eviscerated. Ben had killed them both. Pakat and Chana dragged the corpses from the house, and buried them at the edge of the fields. Ooouli had stood with her back to the house the entire time, and would not go inside.

Just after midday, they had finally reached their own home by the cliffs. For a long time, the Kheelians had just stood staring at it in dismay. Chana's effort to block the windows and doors had not kept the narms out for long, and it looked as if an army of them had torn through the place. Pakat stepped over the twisted remains of the front door, shivering. If Ben had not insisted that they leave for the village, Chana and the children would still have been in the house when the narms arrived. The night would almost certainly have ended far more tragically.

They had stood staring at the ruined furniture and torn furnishings of their home for a long time, before it was Ooouli who had eventually called them to action. Tiki and Ben would be home from the hospital in a few hours, she had told them, and she didn't want them to see the house like this.
Tiki would be upset, and Ben's forehead would do that wrinkly thing which meant he was worried but didn't want them to know. The trio had quickly set about tidying and cleaning the devastation the narms had left. Pakat worked on repairing the electrical generator while Ooouli collected up their scattered possessions, and Chana dragged broken pieces of furniture outside.

Shaarm's father's vase, they discovered, had finally received the ignominious end it deserved.

By mid-afternoon, it had become apparent that one of Grandmother's teams had repaired the communications cabling that the narms had torn up somewhere outside the village, and Shaarm called on the comm-box. Ben's surgery had gone well, she had told them, and they would be setting off for home in a few hours after he had rested. This had renewed the group's efforts, and by the time dusk had fallen and they heard the engine of the landspeeder coming up the hill, the broken furniture had been cleared away, the smashed glass and plastoids swept out, and the missing roof panels were replaced.

Shaarm carried Tiki up to the house with Ben at her side. Pakat met them by the new front door, which appeared to have been improvised from a panel of the salvaged ship. Even after their hours of work, the damage to the house was clear to see to the newcomers. There was barely a window in the place that was not covered by temporary plastoid sheeting, and the dome of the roof had been patched in several places. The roof in Ben's sleeping room had caved in entirely. Shaarm and Ben hid their dismay, however, and let Ooouli show them all the items she had salvaged. She gave them a tour of the repairs she and her fathers had already made, and then announced that dinner was almost prepared. From Ben's perspective, this latter news was the best he had heard all day. He hadn't eaten anything since the previous night in preparation for the surgery, and the smell of the food as they came in from the cold quickly reminded him he was starving.

The family gathered on the floor to eat their meal as the table was still being used as a workbench. For the Kheelians, Chana had thrown together a hot, rich, red-coloured stew. Ben's meal consisted of sliced fruit, a bowlful of small pebble-shaped 'nutrient biscuits' that Shaarm had bought that afternoon from a pet shop, and a very large serving of painkillers. Perfection.

Everyone was too tired to attempt any further work that night. There was no question of the girls sleeping in their room after all the disturbances of the past few days, and Ben's bedroom was still full of debris, so the family began moving sleeping mats and bedding into the main bedroom where Chana, Pakat and Shaarm slept. Tonight, no-one would be alone.

Ben took advantage of the Kheelians' distraction and slipped outside, needing a moment alone. He leaned against the wall of the house, sipping the last of his tea, and looking up at the shadow of the cliffs. This time tomorrow, he and Grandmother would be in negotiation with a species with whom he could barely communicate and had no real idea what it was they wanted. The stakes? The peace of the valley. Saving the Kheelian way of life, their principles, and yes, perhaps even their lives.

No pressure, then.

"A credit for them?"

Ben startled. He hadn't noticed Shaarm following him out of the house. "I'm sorry?"

"Your thoughts," she clarified, settling against the wall beside him. "Your mind is an unfathomable place, Ben, and I was just wondering what was on it this time."

"Oh. Well, actually I was just thinking about how every time I thought I was communicating with the narms, I was either in quite a lot of pain, oxygen deprived, or on really jolly quantity of painkillers," Ben confessed, a little ruefully. "I was wondering what exactly I have gotten you all in
Shaarm smiled, but didn't laugh. “I meant what I said in the hospital,” she said. “You have already done quite amazing things while you have been here, Ben. I believe you are quite capable of at least one more.”

They stood in silence for a few more minutes before the rancor in the room reared its ugly head.

Shaarm finally broached the subject.

“That Pechnar, in Tszaaf. Do you know him? Do you know what he is?”

“I couldn’t see his face.” Ben sighed. “But I could feel him, if that makes any sense. Like pins and needles on my skin and inside my skull. And then when I saw him, it was like looking into a solar flare. He was...incandescent.”

There was another brief hush. Ben heard one of the girl's laughter drift out from the house.

“I was not much older than Nenka is now when the war ended.” Shaarm said. Ben, startled by the abruptness of the curious non sequitur, looked up.

“Barely more than a child, although I would not have said so at the time. The war was all we had known. For many of us, born in the war years, we had no real concept of peace, even though the worst of the fighting had tailed off by then. After the first five years of the war, fifty percent of the population were dead. After a decade, the economy was ruined; there was no more ammunition, and barely enough food to go around. And yet the war, that unkillable beast, lingered on for seventeen more years, without energy, without hope, sapping our resources and culture and our lives down to nothing. But we endured, somehow, and eventually peace was forged and we were saved. I remember seeing them at the peace treaty parade. They were small of course, the first Pechnar I had ever seen, but they seem like giants in my memory for their strength and wisdom. They had saved us from the worst villains we had ever had: ourselves. But I remember quite clearly the sight of them, so humble even in their greatness – they wore layers of simple tan tunics, and long, deep brown robes the colour of wet peat.”

Ben frowned, realisation dawning. “Who?”

“The Jedi, of course,” Shaarm said. “And I don't think there can be much doubt the Pechnar who tried to follow us in Tszaaf was also one.”

Ben sighed. “Of course. I should have known. He did not feel quite like anyone else I have met. The power... But why was he there? What can these Jedi possibly want from me?” Ben felt a passing tug of frustration and fear, and gripped his tea tightly. “Why can't they just leave me alone?”

“You mean you have not yet figured that out either?” Shaarm said, with the ghost of a smile. “Poor Ben. So perceptive in everything but your own self. It is because you are a Jedi too.”

Ben stilled, his heart giving a sudden painful jolt. “No. That's not right. I...”

Shaarm nodded. “I have had this theory for a while, but the night after we removed the bracelet, I was sure. You were not even conscious but everything in the room lifted up in the air like in a cyclone...Such unbelievable magic. And then, afterwards, you were moving the children's toys with your mind. You healed more quickly. You learned entire languages in the course of a few days.”

Ben was shaking his head. Everything was coming undone.
“Remember what Grandmother and Chana told you about the Jedi?” Shaarm persisted. “I don’t know if you can fly, but you certainly caught Ooouli when she was falling. Several times you have seen that something is going to happen before it does. You can control the narms, and talk with them. You did not die, even when at least three times you should not have survived. And your lightsaber—”

“It is not mine.”

“But you know how to use it. Chana saw you fighting the narms. The way you moved…it was seamless. Perfect.”

“But the Jedi tried to kill me.” Ben objected. “They were torturing me, I remember it. I do not belong with them.”

Shaarm’s tone gentled. “Are you certain of your memories? We do not yet know what happened,” she said. “And all I can tell you is that the Jedi are good. There must be something else here that we are not yet seeing.”

“So what are you saying?” Ben argued, off-balance and unhappy. “The Jedi are good. Should I stop hiding then? Hand myself in to him?”

Shaarm sighed, and looked back across the garden. “No. While I believe that you are a Jedi, or perhaps were one, I also believe in your instincts. Terrible things have been done to you, and you are cautious, wary. I cannot fault that. For as long as you feel your pursuit is a threat, we will treat it as such. They will not find you.”

Ben nodded. He was suddenly bone-weary, tired of this endless doubt and double guessing. He had previously been content to be nothing more than Ben Waken of the Shaarm Residence, Tzsaaf District, but now he yearned to know, for good or ill. To have at least one tangible memory that he could trust. To be something more than an undefined canvas, painted in shades of fear and doubt.

Ben woke early again the next morning, once again finding himself securely boxed in on all side by sleeping Kheelians. He managed to extract himself from Tiki’s grip, step carefully over Pakat and Ooouli, and somehow to sneak out of the room without waking anyone. They must all be exhausted. Ben made his way from their now communal bedroom to the kitchen, and after a trip to the water pump in the garden and with a fair amount of rummaging in cupboards, he made himself a cup of tea. He sat down to think.

Last night’s conversation with Shaarm was preying on his mind. A Jedi. Could Shaarm be correct? Ben knew how to use the lightsaber and he had certain powers, those were unequivocal facts. The Kheelians called it magic. He didn’t know what to call it. The Kheelians praised these Jedi as negotiators and peacekeepers, but he only knew that they seemed to have captured and tormented him. There was no place for both to be true, and besides, why would they torture and interrogate one of their own? Ben frowned, and ruthlessly forced the questions and doubt away. He did not know the answers, and dwelling on his uncertainty would not make answers appear. He had only a few short hours to figure out the riddle of the narms. This was no time for distractions.

Unfortunately, the rest of the day comprised little but distractions. Grandmother arrived within a turn of the others waking up; accompanied by Nenka and four other Kheelians that Ben did not know. They were to be the members of the diplomatic party who would accompany him and Grandmother
up to the moor later that night. Kerra and Dega were introduced first; a brother and sister pair of a stature quite unparalleled amongst the Kheelians. They each towered at least a head above Chana, and were twice as broad as Pakat in the shoulders. Ben wasn't sure what their diplomatic skill set was, if any, but they ought to provide a sense of shock and awe if it came down to a fight. Next came Yanto, one of the few Kheelians that Ben could recognise as being elderly. He walked with a slight limp and a hunch that seemed arthritic, although his fur had not dulled in colour and his eyes were clear. Yanto, Ben found out later from Chana, had been a regional commander of one of the last battle groups during the final years of the War of Ten-Thousand Days. His military training had apparently saved many lives during the narm attack, and it was that insight which Grandmother looked for now. The forth member was named Taknat, and Ben already recognised that name as the owner of the farm that had burned to the ground, killing two members of her family. The Kheelian stood tall and dignified, undimmed by loss, although the grief was visible in her pale skin, and the depths of her eyes. She would not be joining them that evening, but was there to give her voice to their discussions of that day.

The final members of their group were to be, of course, Ben as translator, Pakat for his knowledge, Grandmother herself, and Nenka. The teenager had been a last-minute addition to the group, and was there to represent the younger generation of Kheelians and make their voice heard in decisions that would affect their future. Pakat's colleague Porra had apparently also been invited to attend, but had bowed out, citing a 'lack of diplomatic skills'. From the relieved looks on the others' faces, it did not seem that the self assessment was considered to be unjust.

Ben could not help but observe that Shaarm was conspicuous in her absence from the compiled party. He was apparently not the only one who noticed. While Pakat and Chana produced tea for the guests, Shaarm drew Grandmother aside, although not far enough that they were out of Ben’s earshot. It was a curious conversation; the words sounded like those of an argument, but their tones were mellow and understanding.

“Grandmother,” Shaarm began. “You know I am not one to question your decisions—”

Grandmother snorted. Shaarm ignored her.

“But I really think I should be there tonight. It is my duty and right as your current host to be at your side in all political endeavours...”

Grandmother waved her objections aside. “You know there is no-one whose opinion I value more. But you have your family to think of. You should stay here with them. Get Ooouli ready for returning to school.”

“You are taking half my family with you,” Shaarm pointed out. “Need I remind you that Ben underwent serious surgery yesterday and ought to be under constant medical supervision? I am his doctor.”

Ben stirred in his quiet corner, unable to pretend he hadn't heard. “Please, don't bring me into this!” he begged, light-heartedly. “I am perfectly fine without supervision, thank you very much.”

“Oh Ben, darling,” said Shaarm, sweetly. “Do shut up. You are a walking medical disaster and you know it.”

“She is not wrong,” Grandmother helpfully added. Ben held up his hand in mock surrender.

Shaarm turned back to Grandmother, and her light tone grew more serious.

“It is not just Ben. We do not know what the narms intend. If something happens and, I give thanks
not, someone is hurt, I am by far the most qualified field medic in the valley. You might well need me, Beyata.”

The use of what was presumably her given name made Ben look up, and Grandmother paused for a second before answering. Ben realised he was seeing a whole new facet of intricacy to their relationship: no longer as leader and subject, as guest and host, or even those sharing the burden of parenting, but now also as friends.

“I know,” Grandmother answered with a slight sigh. “But it is a risk we are going to have to take. Because if something does happen, it will be exactly then that I need you here. If something happens...well there is no-one I trust more than you to keep a cool head and to act and lead in a way that is integral to my wishes, and to our values. Please. Stay here.”

Shaarm finally nodded, and sighed. “Oh, very well,” she grumbled.

Ben leaned in towards them, slightly apprehensive at the tone of the discussion.

“Do you really believe that the narms might still prove to be a threat?” he asked. “That they might attack us again? Because, under those circumstances, I feel I must object to Nenka joining us. Your desire to include young people in decisions about a future that will affect them most is admirable, but I don't think we can condone taking an untrained child into danger.”

“I believe the danger may be real enough,” Grandmother replied. “We really know nothing of the narms after all. I am certain that you, Ben, have considered the threat they still pose. But you need not worry on account of Nenka, for he is no longer a child.”

Shaarm nodded. “He came of age on the day before last.”

Ben frowned. That meant the young Kheelian had spent his first night of adulthood at Ben's bedside, watching the broken human bleed and gasp for air. That was probably quite high on the list of things young people did not hope to happen on their landmark birthday.

Grandmother gathered her advisors together then in the main living room to discuss their requirements for the evening’s diplomatic endeavours. Ben begged leave to be absent from this part of the process, claiming a need to read up on the history of the narms first before he felt he could add anything. In truth, he wanted the Kheelians to have this conversation themselves. He was just the translator after all, and he would offer advice during the discussions if needed. But he would not negotiate this peace for them. As much as he had disliked the prejudiced Boki that he had encountered at the town meeting, the Kheelian had made one good point – Ben was not one of them. Oh, he felt blissfully at ease here, and the thought of leaving filled him with dull horror. He had no doubt that he would learn to belong, over time. But for now, he was still a stranger. He did not yet possess a grasp on the intricacies of the history and needs of the Kheelians to be able to input on a negotiation like this. For the peace to be firm and lasting, it had to come from the deep-seated cultural needs and fears of the Kheelians themselves.

As such, Ben retired to Pakat's laboratory, a room which proved to be really just a study with a large desk, and chemicals and equipment stored against the walls. He settled down to read up on the narms from the stack of datapads and flimsies Pakat had given him. The devastation that the Kheelian civil war had wreaked upon the pursuit of knowledge and scientific research was immediately apparent; most of the surviving documents were transcribed from antiquarian research a hundred or more years in the past. Huge gaps in the data clearly showed much had been lost during that conflict, and there were no new studies until the last decade or so. Ben went over the scanty records intently, searching for anything that might help them all get through the following evening intact.
After about half a standard turn, there was a knock on the door and Ooouli came in, clutching a glass of tea and another datapad. “The grown-ups are still talking,” she said, looking a little pleading. “And I need to catch up on my school work. Can I…?”

Ben accepted the tea bribe, and gestured to the rest of the room. “Be my guest,” he said.

Ooouli settled down happily at his side, and there was silence for a few more minutes. Of course, where Ooouli went, Tiki was never far behind. The little girl hovered in the doorway, BenBen the doll tucked into the sling on her forearm. Ben beckoned her inside too, and she bounded delightedly over, and slumped on Ben's feet with a colouring book. Chana arrived next, and settled next to Ooouli without a word. Ben was not at all surprised when Shaarm also joined them a few minutes later. Ben was soon forced to abandon his reading, but he couldn't deny that presently the proximity of his family was far more precious to him than any knowledge gained. Particularly as he couldn't deny the growing awareness building at the back of his mind that this was all coming to an end.

It was late afternoon when Grandmother's meeting eventually finished. They had come up with a list of their requirements for the negotiations, and had discussed at length the outcome of success or failure. None of them had been able come up with a convincing suggestion for what had prompted the narms to attack, or what exactly had been stolen from them. Grandmother looked at Ben questioningly and he shook his head, frustrated. He had nothing.

Evening would soon be falling, however, and the group would need to leave if they were to make it to the meeting place on the moor by moonrise. They had no choice but to go without whatever this item was that Ben had promised to return, and hope the narms would be forgive its absence.

Pakat and Chana quickly threw together a meal for them all, and the Kheelians who would not be going with them prepared to say their goodbyes. Taknat had been the first to leave. As she passed through the door, she had turned and caught Ben's eye.

“I am sorry for your losses,” he had said, his voice low. “We will do what we can to make sure this does not happen again.”

The Kheelian nodded, and then, introspectively, she said; “They say you saved Shaarm's family. I wonder….that night when you came down from the moor. If you had turned right instead of left, you would have come to my farm first. I wonder if then perhaps you could have saved mine.”

Ben and the Kheelians watched in silence as she disappeared down the lane into the evening light.

They left for the moor as the sun was setting. The dying light cast their shadows as long, sinuous shapes as the group made their slow way towards the cliffs. No-one spoke as they walked. The valley around them seemed hushed and tense, with only the susurration of the wind giving a low, mournful sound to the gloaming. Even the narrow rivulet of water, all that was left of the once mighty waterfall, seemed hushed and whispering as it trickled over grey rock. They passed up the stone steps one after another as dusk fell around them; silent, crepuscular shadows against the deepening night.

Ben rode on Nenka's back, holding onto the young Kheelian's pale fur, watching the steps slowly fall away behind them as the colour leeched out of the monochrome world. A single star was awake, hovering over the lip of the cliff in the twilight sky. Finally, they reached the top of the steps. The
rock stacks of the Grey Kings formed a sombre row along the cliff edge, and they passed beneath their hulking, muted shadows without a word, and out onto the moor.

Ben turned to look back, just as the orb of the solitary moon crested the far horizon, casting a pale lustre of silver light across the moorland before them. It was bewitching in its stark beauty. Someone, Pakat perhaps, let out a sigh, and the tension which had trapped them in silence slowly ebbed away. They were here, now, on the moor, at night. They had breached the territory of the narms, and there was no turning back. In a way, it made it easier.

Pakat led the way, and they set out across the moor. The Kheelians' fine night vision allowed them to easily pick their way through the treacherous footing without misstep by the distant shimmer of the moonlight and the faint illumination of the two lanterns they had brought with them. The wind whispered a cold breath across the mire. Despite the fact that he was wearing every scrap of clothing he owned, Ben shivered.

“Are you all right?” Nenka murmured, ever concerned.

Ben smiled. “Yes, I am all right, Nenka. Truly. By the way, I hear that congratulations are in order.”

Nenka's head tilted, puzzled. “What for?”

“I was told that you had reached your majority?”

“Oh, you mean my Age Day?” The casualness had a slight air of affectation to it. “Yes, thank you. But it is mostly ceremonial, and only really matters to the older folks.”

“Either way, it is an event of note,” Ben remarked. “And I am sorry for how it ended. Having to spend the evening watching over a bleeding unconscious casualty could not have been much of a birthday event for you.”

“Oh, I don't know...” said Nenka, cheerfully. “You did not actually die, so it could have been much worse.”

Ben smiled at the teen's irrepressible spirit. “Regardless, I want to thank you for your kindness. Knowing that there was someone by my side when I was injured...it was a comfort.”

Nenka only hummed in response, but Ben felt the muscles in the Kheelian's shoulders pull back with pride.

They walked at a slow but steady pace for a full turn before they saw any sign of the narms. It was Dega who first spotted them. She ducked back from her position at the front of the group and whispered quietly.

“I see movement. Ahead, and to the right.”

Ben strained vision staring into the night but could see nothing. Instead, he closed his eyes, and focused his other senses. He reached into that endless current of force which ran through him, always. He could sense the narms tracking them through the dark; brief sparks of essence flaring low in the firmament of the night. At least twenty of them, on both sides. The narms did not try to approach the party, but Ben could sense them watching, keeping pace with the Kheelians as they made their slow but steady way across the moor.

At last, the jagged silhouette of the broken tree-stump known as Grandfather Kender appeared, black against the mercury moon. Pakat led them up to a shallow terrace at the edge of the riverbed, and they came to a stop.
No-one spoke. The wind whispered quietly to them in the dark.

All around, Ben could feel the narms, watching and waiting and prowling in unceasing motion beyond his sight in the dark. Every so often, Pakat's lantern would pick up a glint of eyes, or a flash of teeth before they were gone. The narms made no sounds, and did not approach. The Kheelians waited.

And they waited.

Ben began to recognise the stalemate. After two turns he at last came to the conclusion that he was, once again, going to have to be the one to break it. Ben slipped down from the bank, rising to his feet.

“Stay here,” he murmured to the others, and walked steadily out onto the plateau towards the gathering of the narms. Ben stopped about a hundred paces from the Kheelians, placed one of the lanterns before him, and knelt down in the pool of its light. He adopted a meditation pose, and rested his right hand, the one not bound up in a sling, loosely on his knee. Ben closed his eyes and breathed out slowly, gathering his calm centre and opening himself up to the power that hovered just below the surface of his being. The gathered narms formed a pulsing mass of life in front of him, a seething organ of raw vitality and atavistic substance. In contrast to the reassuring warmth of the Kheelians at his back, all concern and anxiety, the narms were a broiling mess of untamed and savage emotions; hate, fear, desperation, and a need so overwhelming it was like a hunger, driving them on.

One single spark of life separated itself from the others and began to approach. It was fear and suspicion and hate all rolled into one, but there was an air of determination about it too. Ben waited until the creature stopped moving before he slowly opened his eyes. Crouched across from him on the edge of the pooling lamplight was the narm with the scarred face. It drew back its mouth, showing him its razor-sharp teeth, and then barked wordless sounds into the dark.

Ben froze for a moment, his calm on the edge of deserting him. He couldn't understand. It had all been a hallucination or a delusion, or-

“...here,” growled Scarface, the words finally becoming clear. “You here.”

“Yes, we're here.” Ben echoed, breathing out his doubts. “As I agreed.”

The narm snapped its jaws and barked angrily again. “Too many,” it snarled, staring over Ben's shoulder towards the Kheelians. Ben ignored its protestations, correctly identifying them as nothing more than posturing. No limit on the number of delegates had been specified, after all.

“What is your name?” Ben asked. It seemed undiplomatic to continue referring to the creature as Scarface, particularly when it had been Ben's own hand that had caused that scar.

The narm issued a series of barks and howls. Ben couldn't quite grasp the shape of words, if there were any, and instead an image formed in his mind of a young narm challenging an older alpha, and the bigger creature's jaws tearing two digits from the attacker's paw. Ben ran the event through a filter of language and distilled it to a name.

“I see. May I call you Six-Claw?”

The narm barked an affirmative.

“My name is-” Ben began, but Six-Claw cut him off.

“Know you,” it said, “Little Bird Stormlight Killer Hear Speaker.”
“No,” Ben corrected, uncomfortable by the emphasis on killing in the narm's description. He had killed several narms, that was true, but he did not want that to take an emphasis in the negotiations. “My name is Ben.”

The narm hissed. “Not a name.”

“Fine,” Ben sighed. “But the one you've given me is rather a mouthful. If you won't use Ben, Little Bird will do.” He was rather puzzled by that component of the epithet but this was not the time for clarification.

“I am here with Grandmother. We want to talk to He Watches The Dark.”

“Little Bird stormlight kills,” Six-Claw said. “You kill him.”

“No,” Ben replied, firmly. “We are not here to kill anyone. We are here to talk and to listen.”

Six-Claw suddenly howled loudly, taking Ben by surprise, and began to prowl towards him. Two other narms slunk out from the group and came up on either side. The narms began to sniff him all over, pushing snuffling muzzles into his clothing and against his face. Ben remained still as a stone, not shifting an inch from his serene pose as cold noses and hot stale breath pressed in on all sides. A test. This had to be another test. Unless the narms were somehow attempting to smell out his integrity, or sense, perhaps, honesty of intent.

One of the narms sniffed against his hip and let out a little yelp, obviously recognising the lightsaber hanging from his belt. There was a flurry of movement behind him and a huff of breath ruffled the hairs on the back of his neck. Slowly, delicately almost, he felt tiny beads of pressure against his skin as two rows of teeth gripped the back of his neck. He froze.

With extreme care, Ben let out a breath and drew all his will together, forcing his control into place with an iron grip. All his focus crystallised onto those twenty points of pinprick pressure around his cervical vertebrae, and the exhalations of hot breath on his skin. Somewhere, far off and very distant, he felt a wave of dismay and horror from the Kheelians and one of them shouted. Without moving his upper body or head a millimetre, Ben threw his arm out to the side, palm open. *Wait. Just wait.*

It felt like an endless eternity, but he finally heard Six-Claw issue a short yip. The teeth clasped about his neck gently loosened and disappeared. Ben opened his eyes to find Six-Claw standing across the lantern-lit circle, eyeing Ben with something like approval.

“Satisfied?” Ben asked, raising an eyebrow. “Threatening me is not enough to turn us to violence. We have no desire to be your enemies.”

Six-Claw turned away without replying, and barked an instruction to one of the other narms. They were to fetch their leader.

Ben tried to suppress the urge to rub his neck, and to ignore the sensation of phantom teeth. The narm had not even broken the skin. He called over his shoulder to the waiting Kheelians.


They moved over together, clustering at Ben's back. Pakat was at his side in an instant, tilting his head forward to look at the man's neck.

“Ben, what...?”

“Just a test,” said Ben, pulling away from his grip, and standing, stiffly. “They were trying to
provoke me into a reaction to see if I would attack them. Not to worry, I am fairly sure they won’t try it again.”

“You are fairly sure?” Dega was glaring around. “That's a comfort.”

“Hush,” Ben called the Kheelians to attention. “They're coming back.”

The narms in front of them parted, and the large alpha male Ben had seen before emerged. Six-Claw slunk after him. The beast was tall and broad, and the distinctive stripe down its back was a dark slash in the pale lamplight. The two narms stopped at the edge of the circle of light.

“What happens now?” Grandmother asked, watching the narms carefully.

“I'll introduce you, if I can,” Ben informed her. “And then it's rather over to you, I'm afraid.”

He turned back to the narms, and gave a formal half-bow. “He Watches The Dark. This is Grandmother, our leader. Here is Pakat, who has studied your people, and also Dega, Kerra, Yanto and Nenka, citizens of the valley. Grandmother, this is the alpha of the pack. He is called He Watches The Dark. Beside him is Six-Claw.”

Six-Claw, who was lying on his belly, barked a series of terse words to He Watches The Dark. Ben couldn't catch all of it, but heard his new moniker, Little Bird, mentioned as well as Grandmother's name. He took a moment to observe the way the two narms interacted. Six-Claw was deferential, clearly a subordinate in the pack, and Ben wondered if He Watches The Dark had been the alpha who had bitten off his claws. Ben shifted his attention to the alpha himself. He was prowling from side to side at the edge of the circle of light, dominance and aggression bleeding from his body language. But Ben could sense something else from the creature too. Was it...nervousness? Uncertainty? For all that he seemed to have full dominance and control over the pack for now, Ben could tell He Watches The Dark had not wanted this confrontation. The throng of narms behind the leader were twitchy and unsettled, and not just due to the presence of Ben and the Kheelians. These events had some other more political motive. Perhaps He Watches The Dark had been at risk of losing his position in the pack during an unsettled time, and was forced to assert his authority by attacking a bigger and stronger enemy.

Either way, it wasn't a good sign.

Silence fell, and Ben took the opportunity to begin the negotiations. He gestured to Grandmother to make her first statements.

“We greet He Watches The Dark and his people with respect, as neighbours, not as enemies. We have come here tonight to negotiate the cessation of hostilities between our peoples, and to find a way to return to peace.”

It didn't take much to realise the language was going to be far too complicated for the narms. Ben passed on the message, as simply as he could.

“We do not want to fight you. No more killing.”

Six-Claw and the other narms hissed, angrily. He Watches The Dark barked once and they fell silent.

“Sun Giants steal,” He Watches The Dark said, his voice so accented it was barely understandable, even to Ben. “They steal. They kill. They lie too?”

“He thinks we are lying,” Ben translated for the other Kheelians, then turned back to the alpha.
“No. We do not lie. No more killing.”

“You kill many. Strength is yours.” Six-Claw was up on his feet now, watching the group. The words were, oddly enough, deferent. Respectful, even. Ben had somehow impressed these warlike people by murdering their fellows. It was not a comforting thought.

“Why are they blaming us?” came a voice from behind Ben. He thought it was Dega. “They attacked us, after all!”

“They tried to kill the children!” That was Yanto.

He Watches The Dark snarled, clearly unashamed.

“Not kill!” Six-Claw barked. “To take, take precious Sun Giant cubs away. Then lying Sun Giants give up, give back sky.”

Ben ignored the shudder of horror he felt pass through the Kheelians at the thought of their children as hostages. It was past. He drew the negotiations back to the subject in hand. “We need to decide what both parties want to achieve from these discussions if we are to make any progress. No more threats. Grandmother, please tell us your terms.”

Ben again translated as Grandmother listed their requirements for peace.

“We are not lying. We do want peace. We want you to stay on the moor, and we will leave you alone. In return, you must not attack the farms, and you will not come into the valley.”


Grandmother ducked down to whisper to Ben. “What did he say?”

“He is reminding me that I promised to return this item you are accused of stealing, and I have not done so,” Ben answered in Basic. “I think they might be rather cross when they find out I don’t have it.”

Thieves! Sky! Stole! came the calls of the narms all around them. Ben noticed with concern that the creatures were beginning to circle behind them, closing them in on all sides. An unknown narm, as large as the alpha, leapt from the group and snapped at Six-Claw, growling. Ben could not catch what was said, if anything, but Six-Claw did not look happy. The newcomer leaned in aggressively. The two circled each other for a moment, hackles raised. He Watches The Dark barked again, and the newcomer backed off.

“Little Bird!” Six-Claw turned back to Ben, snapping his name, demanding an answer.

“Yes, I did promise,” Ben agreed. “And if it is in my power to give it, I will make sure that you get back your-”

“You have sky?” growled Six-Claw “Or not?”

Ben sighed, aware what a storm his words would probably unleash.

“No. I don’t have it.” He had to raise his voice to shout over the barking and howling that followed his statement. “But I will try and find it. I just need to know more about-”

“Thieves!”

“Steal!”
The other narms were no longer listening, and their aggression was doing nothing to calm the Kheelians.

“We did not steal anything!” Dega shouted.

“Kheelians are not thieves!” Nenka added, hotly. “Or liars!”

The narms howled back, but Ben’s eyes were drawn to a discrepant area of stillness where the aggressive new narm who had faced up to Six-Claw earlier was staring at He Watches The Dark. There was a group of perhaps a dozen narms at his back, who were all snapping and growling at the others. There was an angry exchange, and Ben picked up what he thought was the new narm’s name: Bites At Shadows.

Pakat crouched down next to Ben. “This is not good,” he remarked, very quietly. “Look at that group over there. They are not deferent to He Watches The Dark, like Six-Claw and the other narms. Chins up, eye contact, standing too close...I believe that large one there is competing to be alpha.”

Ben nodded. “And I would put down good credits on him making his move soon. I already got the impression He Watches The Dark has not done well out of this crisis. One wrong move here and we end up in the middle of a narm civil war.”

This was getting out of hand, and quickly. Time to intervene before something got hurt.

“He Watches The Night,” Ben called, respectfully over the racket. The alpha narm only half-turned his head towards the human, engaged on the barking narms around him.

“Please,” Ben said. “Tell me more about the sky that is missing. I do not yet understand. Six-Claw! Please!”

Six-Claw caught Ben’s eye, and Ben held his gaze firmly.

“Tell me about the sky,” Ben commanded again, this time adding a generous twist of suggestion to the words. “Is it like this sky? The sky above us here?”

Ben pointed up at the night sky above them with its single solitary moon and scatter of pale stars. Six-Claw derisively snapped his jaws.


Ben clamped down hard on the frustration he could feel, forcing the emotion to dissipate harmlessly from him. He needed to focus.

“I am sorry, but I don’t understand.” He said, radiating calm through his tone and body. “Tell me why the under-sky is so important.”

“It the way!” He Watches The Dark spoke up again, and Ben had to concentrate hard to understand his words. “Father underworld. Under-sky way.”

“Without fathers, we sicken,” added Six-Claw. “We die.”

More little threads, but what did they mean? Behind him, he heard Grandmother’s raised voice and the Kheelians quieted. She turned to Ben.

“What is going on?”

“It’s to do with their ancestors,” Ben deliberated, trying to grasp the little clues he had been given, to
take those threads of knowledge and weave them together into a tangible truth. “The stolen sky...it is not just a thing. It’s more than just a symbolic link to the ancestors. It is a spiritual pathway to another world...to the under-sky.”

He glanced at his feet on the black earth, and the threads ran through his mind, and suddenly the pattern was clear. The stump of the great, dead tree. Grandmother at the well. The moorscape with its thousand empty gullies like wrinkled cloth. Tiki playing on the stepping stones by the shallow pool, and the trickle of the waterfall in its dry, stony bed.

“It’s water.”

“What?”

Ben breathed out, his thoughts swirling. “It’s the water,” he said again, just to check he had spoken aloud. “The water is disappearing; you told me as much yourself. The river is drying up, the waterfall is almost gone. The narms are dying because they don’t have enough water.”

“Of course!” Grandmother was nodding, a little astonished.

“This is all just about the water shortage?” One of the Kheelians asked, incredulously.

“Partially, but it is not just the physical requirements for water.” Ben tried to explain the images he had seen created through the narms broken words. “As far as I can tell, to them the sky they see reflected in the water is a window through to another world – the under-world, where the ancestors are. Without the water of the moors they are suffering, both physically and spiritually.”

“I am sorry about that, but it is hardly our fault!” Kerra said, hotly. “And no reason to attack us. Three of our people are dead!”

“The climate has been changing since the war,” said Pakat, who was looking pale under his golden fur. “There is little rainfall, and the rivers are drying up everywhere. But I think actually perhaps we have made the situation worse here. Partially, at least. There was a study to suggest that the new wind farms dried out the peat on the moors, but we needed power for the towns urgently, and they decided it was worth the risk. And then they built that dam out at Vaknalt...They didn’t predict there would be repercussions this far out, but I have been wondering...”

“He Watches The Dark said that some of the narms were sick,” Ben said, with a heavy heart. “They think that it is caused by being separated from their ancestors, but I cannot help but think...”

“The ruptured fuel cells from the shipwreck?” Pakat guessed. Ben nodded.

“But that too was not your fault,” Grandmother reminded him. “No more than the city dwellers building a dam is ours. You did not intend to crash the ship, or to harm the narms.”

“I know it is not my fault,” Ben acknowledged. “But it is my responsibility. And regardless of whether their reasons were justified or not, the narms did attack us. And now we need a solution.” he eyed the narms, who had been closing in, restless and impatient. “Rather quickly.”

Grandmother was about to agree, when Bites At Shadows, the narm who had challenged Six-Claw earlier, suddenly darted out towards her. She quickly took a step back.

“No speak!” the big narm barked, snarling. “Enough Sun Giant words. They lie. Give us nothing. They should not come here!” Three more narms were at its side, snapping and barking. The Kheelians automatically backed in closer to each other as He Watches The Dark and Six-Claw barked at the newcomers, snapping and circling.
Ben felt the tension and threat suddenly undulate and swirl up around them, and that familiar sense of warning strike out, clear as a bell. He stepped firmly back, between the Kheelians and the narms, trying to resist reaching for the 'saber at his waist.

“I am Alpha!” He Watches The Dark was howling. “Strong! I attack Sun-Giants! I kill them! I bring them here! Alpha! Get back. I am Alpha!”

“Not strong,” Bites At Shadows snarled. “Not Alpha. Sun-Giants lie. He Watches The Dark lie. I will be Alpha!”

Without another word, Bites At Shadows leapt straight at He Watches The Dark, teeth bared for the other's throat. Before he could move to defend the pack leader, two of Bites At Shadows' supporters had lunged at Six-Claw, bowling him to the ground with a snarl.

Ben backed up to Grandmother. “Time to for us to go,” he said, with mounting alarm. “Whoever wins this, they won't tolerate us here fo- Look out!”

The warning came too late. The narms, driven into a frenzy by Bites At Shadows' attack, had turned on each other with howls and shrieks. Five of them, however, had turned their eyes on their new enemies, the Kheelians. Pakat threw the first to the ground as it leapt towards him, rearing up to catch it on his broad forearm. Dega went down under the unexpected weight of a second snarling narm on her back, but there was no time to go to her assistance either. Two others, spying an easy target in Ben, dove howling for the slighter man, teeth flashing in the lantern-light. Ben had the lit 'saber in his hand in a flash of blue lightning, but somehow, inconceivably, Nenka was faster. The young Kheelian threw himself in between Ben and the teeth of the narms quicker than thought.

“No!” The shout was all Ben had time for as the dark forms of the narms collided with the pale gold of the young Kheelian. Something hot sprayed across Ben's face. Nenka fell beneath the narms onslaught, knocking Ben aside. Ben impacted hard with the ground, getting a mouthful of dirt, but continued the momentum, rolling up into a crouch, lightsaber raised. It took a single shove of force energy to throw the nearest narm back, and one leap to bring him to Nenka's side. The lightsaber blade flashed in the night, and the narm crouched over the fallen Kheelian screamed, and then crawled away with a snarl and a whimper. Ben took a second glance back to take in the condition of his charges; Dega had not yet got up, but the others were still on their feet, and holding their own.

“Fall back!” He yelled to them. “Face outwards, and cover us!” Then he dropped to his knees at Nenka's side. There was blood everywhere, bubbling from the torn throat and staining black into the teen's golden fur. Nenka's mouth moved silently, but Ben wasted no time with words. He tore the sling from his arm and clamped the cloth down firmly onto the gushing wound, closed his eyes, and threw himself into the Force.

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Chapter End Notes
Well done all you smarty-pants who guessed it before Ben did! You win a handful of delicious cat biscuits.

I feel like this chapter is a giant mess. Hopefully it doesn't read like that; I just very much wanted to get something out there for you all. As ever, let me know if you see any heinous typos.

Thanks to everyone who sent me good wishes over the last week. Bad times are still rumbling on, but we are fighters and never give up.
Mud.

The earthy-rich smell of it; decay and water and roots.

The scent of blood.

A chill wind rustled past. It carried whispers.

“...we’re not going to make it out of here...”

“...will not allow it....”

He shivered, aware of a cold that chilled to the bone.

“...too late...”

“...she will save us...”

His eyes were open, but the world was nebulous black and grey, shifting shadows in his vision.

One focal point of warmth, a hand resting on his back, was like a furnace. Everywhere else was bitterly cold.

As his body shuddered again with shivers, the hand disappeared. Cloth shifted across his shoulders, tucked in against his chest with careful fingers. The comforting weight of the hand settled again on his shoulder.

Ben cast out with sluggish senses, trying to make sense of the uncertain world around him. He could hear barks and howls, distant but too close for comfort. He should get up, arm himself, be ready for an attack. But his body was numb and empty, no longer his to command. Even breathing seemed a colossal, insurmountable effort. So he just lay on his side unmoving, staring dully at the only thing his eyes could focus on; his own pale hand curled loosely on the dark earth.
“Any change?” a voice murmured somewhere distant. There was no answer, but movement at his side. Warm fingers wrapped around his own ice-cold ones, and Pakat’s face swam into his field of vision, blurred and indistinct through the darkness.

“Ben? Can you hear me?”

He lacked the strength to answer, but blinked, slowly. Pakat’s expressive face tightened with concern, and he smoothed down the blankets Ben was wrapped in.

“You will be alright.” The Kheelian said softly, comfortably, but he looked up at another Kheelian standing beside him with an anxious glance. “I will be back over when I can.” Pakat gave a quick, worried smile, and disappeared back into the night.

Ben spent several moments fighting against the crippling weakness. Summoning all his strength, he managed to mouth Nenka’s name. He repeated it five or six times but no-one seemed to understand he was trying to talk.

“It is all right,” Yanto, who was sitting at his side, murmured soothingly.

Ben closed his eyes for a moment, trying to work out what had happened. He didn’t remember much after pushing his hands wrist-deep into Nenka’s blood, and then hurling himself into the current of the Force. Snatches of image and sensation. The control of his will, taut as a bow string, all fuelled by an iron determination that no-one dies today, you hear me, no-one else dies, and then he had been pouring himself, his own life-force into those shredded cells, infusing the tissue and vessels with life and healing, forcing the sinews together. He had had no concept of what he was doing, except that it was intoxicating, mesmerising. Only a distant echo of a voice had broken the spell. Enough! By the Force, you’ll kill yourself! From the feel of his body, he almost had.

He was jolted back into awareness by Dega crouching down by his head. “I have some tea here,” she was saying to Yanto. “It would be better hot, but he should probably drink something anyway. Can you get him to sit up? I think he may choke otherwise.”

The two Kheelians easily lifted Ben’s listless form into a sitting position, leaning him back again the stump of the tree. Too weak to even raise his own head, Yanto cradled Ben’s skull gently while Dega tipped the flask against his mouth. Then his head was rested back towards his shoulder, and Yanto cocooned him in his blankets. The tea had been welcome, but what Ben desperately needed right now was food. He felt hollowed out, his energy reserves destroyed, but there was no way to communicate that. Instead, Ben watched the Kheelians, trying to gage their current situation. They looked uncertain and unnerved, but not actively afraid. Safe for now, then.

From his new vantage point, even with his limp head falling to the side, Ben could see a little more. Several metres away was a small mound of the Kheelians’ backpacks. Beyond, in the distance, was a lake of light where the lanterns the Kheelians had brought were standing. The circle of lamplight illuminatned three large shapes that must be Grandmother, Pakat and Kerra. Beyond them were dark, uneven, undulating shadows, which could only be the pack of narms. Ben reached for his powers to check for a warning of danger, but he came up empty. The power was still there, flowing around him like a flood, but he himself was as insubstantial as smoke and his grasp faltered. His head echoed with nothing but formless static. He was cast adrift.

Time passed, and Ben’s awareness came and went with it. A sudden cacophony of howls and barks split the night air, jolting him back into wakefulness. The light of the distant lanterns appeared to be moving, and after a few moments, he heard hurried footsteps. Pakat was back, accompanied by Grandmother and Kerra.
“They have agreed!” Grandmother said, calmly, relief rising from her words like steam. “I think we are going to be allowed to leave.”

“They will not attack?” Another voice asked.

Pakat replied; “Grandmother got He Watches The Dark to give his word.”

“Whatever that may be worth...” said the other person.

“We will shortly find out,” Grandmother answered. “Come; let us go, as quickly as we can.”

The Kheelians quickly dispersed to gather their possessions. Ben heard Pakat’s lowered voice ask; “Have you seen any improvement?”

“Not much. We think Ben was trying to speak earlier.”

A shadow fell across Ben as Pakat crouched down in front of him, looking anxiously into his face. He noticed the Kheelian was down to his shirt sleeves; no doubt Pakat’s coat and tunic were currently forming Ben’s blankets.

“Ben? Can you hear me?”

Ben rolled his head against the tree stump in what he hoped resembled a nod. He felt his fingers twitch against the Kheelian’s palm. Pakat smiled.

“Good. You are going to be all right. We are going home now.”

“Nenka?” Ben said again, and this time, a whisper of sound actually emerged.

“He is over there,” Pakat pointed. “Still sleeping, but he is going to be okay, Ben.”

*How is he even alive?* Ben wanted to ask. *What on earth happened to us? Why aren’t we all narm breakfast right now?*

All he managed was a faint “What...?” but Pakat mostly seemed to understand.

“Honestly, I have no idea what happened,” the Kheelian answered. “But I am certain that you did something that saved Nenka’s life. I will tell you what transpired later, but for now, let us just get out of here.”

It was clear that in his current weakened state, Ben was not going to be able to ride on one of the Kheelians’ backs as he usually did. Dega and Pakat quickly devised a solution, using Yanto’s long scarf to bind Ben’s legs and torso to Pakat’s back, so Ben could curl up limply on his front. Ben noted one advantage of his (hopefully temporary) paralysis; there was at last no pain at last from his chest or scapula, just cold dullness. The warmth that radiated from Pakat’s back was blissful, and it was only the strange motion of Pakat walking with an exaggerated care that prevented him from instantly falling asleep again. Instead, he looked out across the broad shoulders and tried to regain a sense of the world round them. It was clear that many turns had passed while he had been unconscious. The world around them was pale still dim, but the flat palette of the sky was lightening enough to make out distant silhouettes in pale monochrome. Dawn could not be far off.

As Pakat moved over to join the other Kheelians, Ben finally had a vantage point from where he could see Nenka on his makeshift stretcher. Despite the fact that Pakat had already told him the young Kheelian had survived, Ben could not really believe his eyes. An obscene smear of gore stained Nenka’s tunic and clumped his fur into black clots, but all the blood was dry and there were
no dressings on his throat. It was true that Nenka’s skin was pale beneath his golden fur, but his inhalations were deep and even and his face was peaceful, without pain. He really did seem to be alive.

Grandmother came up beside them, and silently laid her hand on the back of Ben’s hair. He tried to offer her a smile, and she nodded back. Without another word, the Kheelians set off. They remained close together, with Yanto leading the way, followed by Dega, Kerra and Grandmother, bearing Nenka on his stretcher. Pakat and Ben came last.

Within a few moments they had reached the area where the namrs had gathered. The pack animals seemed to have disappeared, but their eyes could still to be seen glinting in the darkness on both sides of the path. As they slowly passed the watchers, Pakat began to recount what had happened that night and to fill the gaps in Ben’s memories.

Bites At Shadows had tried to usurp He Watches The Dark’s position as alpha, that much Ben remembered. While the two lead namrs had fought, the other beta namrs that followed Bites At Shadows had seen the Kheelians as an additional threat, and had attacked. Pakat had fought two off and had been turning to help Dega, when Ben’s sudden shout had raised the alarm. Without hesitation, the Kheelians had done as Ben had instructed, dashing to the human and standing guard around the fallen Nenka. Pakat had seen Ben cover the gushing bloody wound in Nenka’s throat with his hands, and then a light had burst from between his fingers. No, not a light exactly. More like a pulse of warm energy, which burned like light. Then Pakat had been forced to look away, and focus on the attacking namrs once more.

It had seemed like hours, but in reality it was only a few minutes before the attackers had been forced back, and slunk off into the dark. He Watches The Dark was dragging Bites At Shadows off by throat, and it was clear that the attempted coup had failed. The moment it was safe to turn their back to the namrs, Pakat and Grandmother had dashed over to the fallen youth. Nenka had been still and pale, and blood was still gushing from his throat. Ben was inexplicably unconscious, slumped forward across the Kheelian’s chest. They had bandaged Nenka’s throat as best as they could, although the bandages were soon soaked through, and they had all known it was almost certainly too late to save him. The wound was too severe and they were hours from help. No-one had known what was wrong with Ben. He seemed to be uninjured, but could not be wakened. Unable to move Nenka, they left two patients lying side by side, in the hope that they might retain some body heat against the moor’s cold winds.

The night wore on. The namrs seemed to be ignoring the Kheelians for the time being. Bites At Shadows had been dragged off behind a circle of namrs, and they could only hear occasional barks and yelps which gradually went quiet. After about a turn when neither of the injured had improved, the Kheelians had tried to leave. The namrs had quickly broken away from their huddle and had come running over, snapping and barking at their heels until they stopped moving.

After another half turn had passed, Nenka’s bleeding had noticeably slowed. A short while later, Yanto was changing the bandages and saw that it had ceased altogether. Afraid that Nenka’s heart had stopped, they had frantically searched for a pulse, only to find it strong and his breathing steady. The wounds on his throat were closing as if they were weeks, and not hours, old. But as Nenka got stronger, Ben seemed to grow weaker. His temperature plummeted until his skin was like ice, and his heartbeat grew fainter and fainter. Anxious that Ben’s low temperature might now chill Nenka, they had separated the two, sitting Ben close to one of the other Kheelians and wrapping him up in layers of their clothing.

They had eventually decided that they had to do something. Both Nenka and Ben had to be taken back to the village as quickly as possible, and so far their discussions with the namrs had achieved
nothing. Grandmother had talked with the others, and they quickly came up with a strategy. They could do nothing in the short term about the river drying up, and by the time they had worked to divert a river past the dam, it would be too late. They had plenty of water in the valley, drawn up from the aquifers below the moors, which were deep enough that any contaminants should easily be filtered out. They could bring shipments of water every week, and use the old pulley-operated lift system to transfer containers of water up to the moor top. Perhaps they could even teach He Watches The Dark or Six-Claw to operate it. Later, perhaps, the Kheelians could construct a channel for the water, so that the narms could see their reflections in it again. In return, the narms would stay out of the valley. It was not a perfect answer, but it might solve the current crisis. If they could get the narms to agree, of course.

Grandmother had taken Pakat and Kerra with her and had set off towards the huddled pack of narms to negotiate, while Yanto and Dega had stayed with the casualties. The narms, Pakat recounted, were not at all happy with the Kheelians, and holding the discussions without Ben there to translate the more difficult concepts had been very tricky indeed. There had been a few moments when it seemed violence was going to break out once more. But in the end, Grandmother’s calm nature, and acknowledged stubborn streak, had broken through, and He Watches The Dark had accepted their terms. They had even managed to secure an agreement that Pakat and his team could continue accessing the moor for their research, so long as they stayed away from the narm’s nesting grounds and explored no further than the crashed ship. None of them had any idea if the agreement would hold, but as long as it lasted long enough for them to get down from the moors to safety that would be enough for now. They had achieved peace.

As Pakat finished his retelling, they had passed out of the river valley and up onto the moor. Ben turned his head as much as he could and looked back. The narms had all melted back into the gloom, like fading apparitions. A single narm remained, standing by the great tree stump of Grandfather Kender, watching them. Ben thought it might be Six-Claw. The narm gave one last, long howl into the sky. Then he too turned, and disappeared.

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It was a long, slow journey across the moor, burdened as they were with the injured. Ben slept and then woke, and then slept again, slumped forwards against the warm fur of Pakat’s back. The moor passed by in a dull wash of grey and brown, unchanging. Fragments of Ben’s strength slowly trickled back into him, though he still shivered with unrelenting cold. By the time dawn broke, they were only half a standard turn from the Grey Kings which marked the cliff edge, but the group were forced to stop to let the stretcher bearers rest for a while. Pakat released Ben’s legs from the strapping and went to lay him down too, to rest. Ben gripped his arm, weakly.

“Nenka?” he whispered. Pakat nodded, and carried Ben over to the still unconscious youth and set him down gingerly on his side. Ben pushed himself up on his shaking arms. Without the Force, he could not do much to analyse Nenka’s condition. However, as soon as he pushed aside the cloth of Nenka’s collar, he could see with his own eyes. The flesh of the Kheelian’s throat was deeply scored and jagged with red scars, but the wounds had closed, and bled no more. Ben touched the horrendous injury with numb fingers. The conclusion to the evidence was clear: he had somehow used his powers to force the wounds closed at a massively accelerated rate, to the detriment of his own strength. He was recovering remarkably quickly, but Ben could tell that if he had not stopped pouring his strength into Nenka when he did, he certainly would have died. As it was, Nenka was no longer in danger of bleeding to death or suffocating, but he was far from healed, and the stresses such
an abrupt healing would have placed on the young Kheelian’s system might still prove to be too much. The amount of energy required for such rapid process of angiogenesis was enormous, for both of them. No wonder Ben felt as if he was starving. He quite literally was.

As Ben touched the edges of the wound once more, Nenka stirred under his hand, and slowly the youth opened his eyes. Ben leaned forwards as far as his unsteady arms would allow.

“Nenka?”

The Kheelian said nothing in reply, but swallowed, and blinked a few times. He brought his hand up to his throat, but Grandmother caught his wrist.

“Careful,” she said. “It is not fully healed yet.”

The youth looked to Ben once more. Seeming satisfied that the human was mostly unhurt, Nenka closed his eyes, although he remained awake and gripping Grandmother’s hand, weakly.

Now that he had enough strength to use short words, Ben managed to convey his and Nenka’s rather urgent need for food to the other Kheelians. They had not brought much with them apart from a few chaal bars, some raw tarvaroot and bottles of cold tea, but Pakat also had a handful of Ben’s nutrient biscuits in his pocket. Both casualties were really too weak to eat, so Yanto and Pakat crushed up the solid food and mixed it with the tea, while Pakat held Ben tucked in close to his chest, trying to warm him. It was all Ben could do not to gag at the cold food mush which Pakat tipped into his mouth, but he did manage to keep it down. It went only a small way to easing the painful emptiness in inside, and he was still numb with cold.

They set off again, now in the early dawn light. The stone steps down from the moor proved to be almost impassable to the group. Pakat was forced to untie Ben from his back again, and instead carrying him in one arm to prevent him sliding lose. The steps were treacherous to navigate for Nenka’s stretcher-bearers, but slowly they managed, and astonishingly without mishap. The morning hours were well advanced by the time the made the floor of the valley, and everyone was exhausted.

A strange mood had befallen the party as they made their way towards the Shaarm residence. They were desperately concerned for Nenka, of course, and it was Ben himself harbouring the worst doubts. He had possessed no idea what he was doing during the healing, that was for certain. Pure instinct had unleashed a torrent of the Force, like forging fire, into the youth’s wounds. Fire could bring light and purge infection, that was true, but it was more likely to scorch and destroy if wielded carelessly. What if he had somehow hindered the youth’s natural healing by forcing his cells to accelerate their growth? What if he had put the tissues back together incomplete? What if the forced healing he had induced came undone, and the wounds tore themselves open again? Only time would tell.

But despite these worries, a sense of optimism was also cautiously growing in the group. Nenka had woken twice, and seemed to recognise the other Kheelians around him. Ben, too, was slowly getting stronger. He could now move his hands and lift his own head a few centimetres.

But more than all this, they had succeeded. They had, between them, solved the riddle of the stolen sky. They had devised a method of appeasing the narms’ need for water, and they had made what might prove to be the first steps to a lasting peace. They had won.

Ben was almost falling asleep again as they turned the last corner in the road which led to Shaarm’s house. He was startled awake by the feel of Pakat going suddenly tense, and a voice ahead exclaiming in surprise.
“Hello! Who is this then?”

And then Pakat said; “Ooouli!”

Ben lifted his head to see Ooouli bounding over from where she had been waiting at the edge of the road. Beside her stumbled Tiki, her hand firmly held in her sister’s. The girls dashed up to Pakat.

“Papa!” Ooouli said, dropping Tiki’s hand to grasp her father’s neck affectionately. “You have been ages. What happened? Did you see the narms? Where is Nenka?”

The other Kheelians crowded round as Pakat stared at the girls.

“Ooouli, what are you doing out here?”

“It cannot even be sixth turn yet,” Grandmother added, frowning as she looked up at the sky.

“It is nearly ninth turn, Grandmother,” Ooouli corrected. “You were gone all night! We have been waiting here for ages. Did Ben talk to the narms? He does not look well. Are you sick again, Ben?”

“Just tired, Ooouli,” Ben said, and was pleased that his voice sounded almost normal. Tiki reared up on her back legs and took hold of his hand limp hand, gently. He gave her palm a light squeeze.

“Darling, why are you and Tiki out here alone?” Pakat was starting to sound slightly anxious, and he glanced up the road in the direction of the house. “Where are Mama and Dada?”

“Mama told me to bring Tiki up here as soon as it got light, to wait for you. She said she would follow along in a minute. I had to wait here to meet you, and then tell you that last night some Pechnars came to the house!”

“What!”

“When?”

Pakat and Grandmother both said, at the same moment.

Adrenaline hit Ben’s system faster than a triple-strength caff. He pushed himself up, trying to pull free.

“Put me down,” he instructed, Pakat quickly lifted him to the ground. Ben forced himself up on his arms and leaned towards the children.

“Ooouli, how many Pechnar were there?” he asked, with some urgency.

“Pechnar?” exclaimed one of the other Kheelians. “Why are Pechnar here?”

“Never mind them,” another, probably Dega, said. “We need to get Nenka to medical care as quickly as possible.”

“They are looking for Ben of course!” Ooouli said, ignoring the other grown-ups. “Three of them came to the door last night. They had on these funny brown coats.” She wrinkled up her nose. “They could not speak any Kheeli though, only Basic, like Ben when he first came.”

Tiki, who had now wrapped herself around her father's front legs, scowled in disagreement.

“Not like Ben,” she said, firmly.
Ben reached up, grasping Oouli’s hand, and tugging at it to reclaim her attention. “How long ago did they leave, Oouli?” he asked. “What direction did they take?”

Oouli looked puzzled, and then laughed.

“They did not leave, silly. They are still at the house.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to everyone that left their good thoughts at the end of the last chapter. I appreciated it so much, like you would not believe. I am fine, and I am so sorry about the delay. Not to go into too much detail but as an explanation for my disappearance: a family member is at the end of their life and is requiring pretty much round-the-clock nursing, so I've not been left time for much else. I am not going to be able to post anything new for at least another month I should think, but after that I hope to be back on track, depending on how things go. But your enjoyment and kind words have meant the world to me. Thank you.

And don't worry, there is still plenty more in store for Ben...
Ooouli looked puzzled. “They did not leave, silly! They are still at the house.”

The second jolt of adrenaline felt more like nausea. Ben scrabbled for the lightsaber at his belt and at the same time wondered whether he ought to try and stand now, or stay where he was until they were actually attacked, to preserve his strength. Ben cursed himself under his breath. He had known that this was going to happen; he had decided days ago that the humans would find him eventually, and yet still he had seen fit to stay with the family.

Shaarm must have felt the children were in danger to send them out here. Although, granted, the danger was not immediate as she had clearly kept them at home until after dawn when any roaming narms would have returned to their nests. But the girls were still out here alone, and Shaarm had not followed them. And where was Chana in all this? The family were under threat again, and all because of Ben. What the blazes had made him stay here? Fear? Pride, perhaps? Or a dangerous attachment?

“What is going on?” Yanto was complaining, towering above Ben. “Why are we debating this?”

“Shaarm needs to see to Nenka’s injuries.” Kerra added, in support. “Let us go on. They are only Pechnar. It is not as if they are a threat.”

Ben shook his head and would have argued back, but his nose suddenly began to bleed again. He jammed his hand over his nose and just slumped back against Pakat’s forelegs. The Kheelians did not understand.

There was a brief but intense discussion. Eventually it was decided that the main group should wait on the road while just one of them went down to the house to check that Shaarm and Chana were all right. Then they should report back on whether help was needed, or if the group should go on to Tszaaf without further delay. The debate had just got to the point of deciding who was going to go and who should stay with the children and injured, when they all heard the sound of footfalls on the road ahead. The Kheelians tensed or spun around. Ben pushed himself forwards, and raised the saber. Grandmother grabbed the children’s hands, pulling them behind her, and-

Shaarm came over the crest of the ridge. The assembled group let out a collective sigh of relief, and Ben slumped back, arms shaking. The Kheelian woman did not look surprised to see them; her eyes taking in the scene at a glance. She took Pakat’s hand and squeezed it briefly, and then patted Ooouli’s head.

“You made it,” she said, although her eyes fell on Ben, nursing his bleeding nose and leaning limply against Pakat, and Nenka unconscious on the stretcher.
“Barely,” Grandmother answered. “What is going on?”

“We need to move off the road,” Shaarm said, instead of answering. “In case they decide to leave the house. Follow me, everyone.”

Pakat lifted Ben, tucking him into the crook of his arm, and set off after Shaarm. The group followed, as stealthily as a party of seven Khelian adults, two children and one human could. Shaarm led them from the road and around the back of the ridge behind the house. Keeping out of sight of the many windows, the group cautiously made their way down the side of the dell, and behind the cover of the outhouses and sheds at the back of the garden. Dega peered around one wall up at the house, but all seemed still.

“We are all right,” she said. “I do not think anyone saw us.”

“Go and ask Yanto to tell Tiki a story,” Shaarm instructed Ooouli, with a quick nod.

“Yes, Mama,” Ooouli agreed, and, with a curious look back, led Tiki away from the group. Without another moment’s hesitation, Shaarm hurried straight over to Nenka.

“What happened?” she asked Grandmother as she quickly surveyed the youth for wounds.

Grandmother gave a hasty summary of the night's events, focussing on their peace agreement with the narms, Nenka's injuries, and Ben’s miraculous intervention. Shaarm cast him a shrewd glance but did not ask for any clarifications.

“And you?” Pakat urged. “Is Chana all right? What are the Pechnar doing here?”

“They came to the house at about 23 turns,” she answered, counting Nenka's pulse under her breath. “Three Jedi. They were looking for their friend who crashed his ship on the moor. We told them nothing, of course, and that we had never heard of you. The lead Jedi, he said they had been told we had a human staying with us. I told him that a work colleague of Pakat’s - a Pechnar - had returned to the city the previous week and perhaps they should try there. Then he asked whether, as it was late, they could stay the night before continuing their search in the morning. Of course, we could not refuse.”

“But what about all the salvage?” Pakat asked, sounding fretful. “We are using a piece of the ship’s hull as a front door! They must have seen that instantly.”

“They did,” Shaarm agreed. “Chana said we had been sold the scrap metal by a passing trader, but I do not think that they believed us.”

“Did they threaten you?” Ben asked. The adrenaline buzz was fading fast. Pakat had gently sat him against the wall of the shed they were all hiding behind, but Ben’s arms were starting to go numb again, like before, and he could tell he was listing to the side. He was so damn tired.

“Did they hurt the girls?”

“No, of course not.” Shaarm said, shortly. “They are Jedi! The leader, the one that talked the most, he got rather angry when we claimed we did not know you. Or frustrated, perhaps I should say. But one of the others, a female I think, calmed him down.”

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Ben said, “but I fear it is only a matter of time.”

No-one replied. Shaarm straightened, having finished her examination of Nenka, and turned her attentions to Ben. He allowed her to take his pulse and temperature, and then waved her away. “I’m all right. I just need some food and sleep.”
For once, Shaarm did not disagree. Yanto found the bottle of biscuit-tea slop that they had mixed earlier, and Ben slowly finished off what was remaining. The concoction was so vile that he almost wished he was fully paralyzed again.

“What are we going to do?” Grandmother asked, after a moment of silence.

“I have to get Nenka to the medcentre, and the landspeeder is still down at the house,” Shaarm said. “His life might not be in danger at the moment, but a successful recovery might be time critical.”

“As long as the Jedi are here, you will all be in danger,” Ben said.

Pakat shook his head, but said nothing. Shaarm crouched down at his side. “The Jedi. They told us that they were your friends, Ben. You are so certain that they are villainous? That they mean you harm?”

Instead of replying, Ben closed his eyes. What did he really know, after all? Nothing more substantial than fragments of nightmare and the scars on his body. But someone was searching for him. He could remember that presence, the mind pushing against the weakened walls of his psyche like burning torchlight. And though he couldn’t sense anything right now, too wiped out to feel more than a buzzing of static, he couldn’t dismiss that constant thrum of warning he had felt before; the Force ringing like the tolling of a bell, heavy with foreboding.

He did not want to be found.

“No,” he sighed eventually, looking up at her. “I’m not certain. I don’t know anything. But my instincts tell me that these Jedi are fierce and ruthless, even if I can’t be certain of their intent. And I am, therefore, absolutely certain that I don’t want them anywhere near you and the children.”

And with that statement, he realised his course of action was clear.

“Go back to the house,” he instructed Shaarm, authoritatively, gathering his shreds of strength around him. “Tell them you just found me living rough on the moor, or hiding on the farm. Or in a speeder wreck. Anything you like. I’ll go with them and find out what’s going on. Once they have what they want they will leave you alone.”

“Ben, that is madness!” protested Pakat. “You just said yourself you think that they mean you ill.”

“If it gets them away from here, it will be worth it,” Ben answered, intractable. “Please, don’t argue. We need to do this my way. Besides, I have the lightsaber. I can defend myself,” he lied.

Shaarm sat back on her haunches, folding her forearms. “Can you walk?”

Ben didn’t answer her.

“Or perhaps stand?” She persisted, merciless.


“Can you even sit up at the moment?”

“I am sitting up now!” Ben protested.

“You are leaning against a wall.” Shaarm pointed out. “That does not count. But either way, you are not strong enough to crush a jubaberry at this moment, let alone defend anyone.”

“Aren’t you listening to what I’m saying?” Ben snapped, tiredness making him waspish. “We have
to get Nenka to help, and we have to get the Jedi away from here. They’ll leave as soon as they have me. It’s the only way.”

There was silence, but Ben knew it was no good. The Kheelians were not going to see sense. Blast those Jedi for arriving now, while he was so helpless! He hated to admit it but Shaarm was right. How could he possibly hope to handle this situation when he was too exhausted to access the Force, and when he still couldn’t move anything below his arms? Partial paralysis was not a good way to begin any conflict. They needed a plan, a damn good one, and quickly. Nenka was running out of time.

“Very well,” Shaarm said, drawing Ben from his reverie and seamlessly supplanting his tenuous authority. “This is what we shall do.”

The other Kheelians, sensing a decision had been made, gathered around.

“I told the Jedi that I was leaving the house because I had received word that someone had been injured and needed medical attention. It will not seem strange if I return with someone who is indeed wounded. We will all go back as a group to the house. I will tell Chana that his nephew has been hurt in an agricultural accident, and that we must accompany him to the hospital in the town. The Jedi must realise that they cannot stay at the house without us, if we are all leaving. They shall have to go. Perhaps they will go on to the village, and leave us alone.”

“You couldn’t just tell them to leave?” Ben asked. “It is your house.”

The Kheelians all looked scandalized. “Ben! Of course not!” Grandmother said. “They are guests! Hospitality must be maintained.”

Of course. Ben had forgotten the importance of hospitality.

“And what if they don’t leave?”

Shaarm looked a little lost. “Well, we cannot make them. That would be-“

“Uncivilised. Of course,” Ben sighed.

“What I don’t understand,” said Dega, “is why wouldn’t they leave? If it is your Ben that they are searching for, well, Chana told them turns ago that he was not in the valley. Why are they still here at all?”

_Because they don’t believe you_, Ben thought. Even if Jedi can’t sense prevarication, which he was fairly confident they could, the Kheelians were not natural liars. And even if they had believed that falsehood about the salvaged components of the ship, the house would be full of the signs of Ben’s presence – the makeshift chair at the table, the small cup and plate, a set of Kheelian clothes hanging up to dry, adapted for a slight, human frame. Oh, they know all right. _They know._

He shivered, and turned his attention back to the conversation. Yanto, who had come back to join them, was speaking.

“...are six of us, seven with Chana,” he was saying, stoutly. “Three Pechnar cannot think to hold out against seven Kheelians, Jedi or otherwise.”

“Unless they know that we do not condone violence,” Grandmother asked. “And that any show of strength will be a bluff. Our peaceful ways are no secret. And what about Ben? We will have to leave him here alone, or he will be seen.”
“No, that is no good.” Pakat spoke up. “The Pechnar may want to accompany us when we take Nenka to Tszaaf, and then we would not be able to go back for Ben without raising the alarm.”

“Besides,” Shaarm added, “although Ben denies it, I expect the idiot probably needs medical attention again too.”

“He can hear you, you know.” Ben added, archly.

Shaarm ignored him. Instead she looked about her, crossed the grass, and picked up Pakat’s backpack which he had discarded against the wall. She turned it over, shaking out all the carefully packed belongings onto the grass, and held it up, critically. “I should think one small Pechnar would easily fit inside this,” she said. “You would have to sit quite still though, to avoid detection.”

Ben smiled, weakly. “That is not going to be a problem right now,” he acknowledged. He eyed the backpack Shaarm was holding. It probably was large enough for him to sit inside, if he folded up, and then he would be stuck, unable to see or move, and lumped around on Pakat’s back like a sack of sand.

So they were going to finally challenge the Jedi who had been pursuing him for weeks, who had tormented him and kidnapped him and threatened the people he cared about, and he was going to spend the confrontation stuffed in a bag?

Outstanding.

It was a terrible plan, but it was the only one they had, and there was little else they could do without risking a full confrontation with the Jedi. Before he could come up with any further protests, Shaarm and Grandmother were holding the empty backpack steady and Pakat carefully lowered Ben inside. With some shuffling, they got his knees tucked up in front of him, and then Shaarm packed a rolled-up blanket and a coat around him so that he wouldn’t slump too much to one side. Once they were done, Ben looked up. The Kheelians’ faces were staring down at him through the circle of daylight outside the canvas.

“Are you all right?” Pakat asked. “Comfortable?”

Ben grimaced. “Let’s just get on with this, shall we?”

Shaarm nodded. “Very well. Here.” She handed down the lightsaber. Ben clutched it as firmly as he could in his weak grip and glanced up at her again.

“Good luck,” he said. She nodded grimly, and then closed the lid of the pack, buckling the straps and sinking him into gloom. Ben shifted around as much as he was able in the small space and leaned back into the canvas to wait. Outside, he could hear muffled voices as the Kheelians readied themselves for the upcoming confrontation. Somewhere to his right Ooouli was talking. He couldn’t make out what she was saying. A small stone wedged in his boot was digging into his ankle. His head ached, but at least the nosebleed seemed to have stopped.

A slim beam of light fell onto his sleeve, and Ben saw a narrow tear in the fabric of the backpack to his right. Reaching over, he poked at the gap, pulling out a few threads, until it was wide enough that he could peer out across the grass. Shaarm was crouched over Nenka, administering a painkiller that the youth so clearly needed. Her face was taut and worried. Behind her, the other Kheelians were gathering.

So now Ben could see what was going on, and he could just about hear, he was hidden and he was armed. Now he just had to wait. But his anxious, exhausted thoughts could not be quietened.
Was this the right thing to do? Should he really be letting the Kheelians stand between him and the danger he knew the humans presented? Ought he to have insisted that the Kheelians do as he had instructed, and hand him over to these Jedi? He might not have been able to defeat Shaarm’s iron will, but Grandmother might have been persuaded, if he used the right argument. Force alone knew the last thing he wanted was to end up back in the Jedi’s clutches. But anything was better than letting them stay here, near the Kheelians. Near sweet, bookish Pakat; dependable yet irreverent Chana; stern, compassionate Shaarm. Near the children.

If he could stay hidden, it might just work. It might work if the sheer number of Kheelians now at the house was enough to intimidate the Jedi into leaving. If the Jedi didn’t know the Kheelians were non-violent. If they didn’t know how helpless Ben was. If Nenka could hold out that long.

A wave of guilt, ugly and malignant, threatened to suffocate Ben; curdling in his belly, coating his tongue with a miasma of self doubt and fear. His arrival on this planet and every subsequent action had led from one crisis to another, and then inexorably to this point; to his family in danger and to one young Kheelian who might already die. This was his fault.

Ben clenched his fist as tight as he could, and breathed deep. Peace, serenity, harmony. There is no emotion. He must focus on the here and now. Mindful of the present. No use dwelling on his past failures. Nor, indeed, on that constant if, if, if... There were a hundred possible futures and they all really came down to one probability. This was going to go badly. He needed to be ready for when it did.

The Jedi, in Tszaaf. He had been like a tempest in Ben’s mind, a turbulence of raw power. And he had sensed Ben too, he was certain of that. Would these Jedi be aware of Ben as well? If so, this whole farce with the backpack would do no good at all, and would only serve to both implicate the Kheelians in his concealment, and to impede his ability to fight.

Ben cast out with his stunted senses, but could feel nothing. His own nebulous grasp of the Force was so slight, so ephemeral, that it slid through his fingers like water. Perhaps this weakness would be to his advantage. Perhaps they would only sense from him what he himself felt; a blurring of vague static in the mind. Perhaps his attempt to heal Nenka had weakened him so much he would be all but invisible in the Force, like an echo. A ghost. He could only hope so.

Wait – the Force? When the blazes had he started calling it ‘the Force’?

Before he could even begin to start considering that startling realisation, the canvas around him suddenly shifted as someone grasped the backpack. Ben’s world pitched and swayed as he was lifted off the ground. As the bag was swung dizzily around, presumably onto Pakat’s back, he tried to brace himself, letting out a small “Oooph!” as his own elbow collided with his ribs.

The bag suddenly stilled. A voice, close by, said; “Ben? Are you all right?”

“Oh, I’m – oooph! – wonderful,” Ben reassured him. “Just don’t drop me.”

Pakat, muffled, said, “Sorry, Ben. Right. We are going to set off. I am going to stand up now, so get ready.”

“After you,” Ben said, dryly, and Pakat rose up onto his four legs. Ben just about managed to avoid re-breaking any ribs as the world tipped weirdly onto its side and he slumped against the canvas. He braced himself has best as he could his unresponsive limbs, and then Pakat began to walk. The bag rocked oddly from side to side with the motion.

Unable to see out of the eye hole he had made from this angle, Ben was forced to just lie and wait,
listening to the rustling of the canvas and the sound of the Kheelians moving around him. No-one was talking now; he imagined the anxious faces, tense looks. This was a far from ideal situation.

Without any way to judge the route the Kheelians were taking to the house, the walk seemed to last for an age. Ben lay and just focused on breathing, on trying to push out the tingling in his hands and the weakness in his limbs. It didn’t work. His thoughts turned again to that first Jedi, the one that had appeared outside the medcentre in Tszaaf, and how Ben had somehow, instinctively, defended his mind; those impassable stone walls, that fortress that had sealed tight around his thoughts. He focussed his attention inwards and tried to find those same structures, and strengthen them. If he was wrong in his theory about being too weak in the Force for the Jedi to sense, then he wanted to stay hidden as long as possible before they became aware of him.

The rhythm of Pakat’s motions changed as his walk slowed, and Ben heard him murmur; “We’re arriving at the house.” The Kheelians walked on a little further, and then Ben’s canvas-clad world lurched upright again as the Kheelian sat back on his haunches. Ben shuffled, trying to both sit so he wasn’t putting pressure on his ribs and to line his eye up with the hole in the fabric.

“You should keep still,” he heard Pakat mutter, low.

“Easy for you to say,” Ben grumbled under his breath, but he stilled, having achieved his goal. He peered out through the small gap. He couldn’t see the house of course as Pakat was facing it, but he could see the other Kheelians as they approached like a rearguard. Shaarm must be at the front of the group as Ben couldn’t see her, but behind Pakat came Kerra and Dega carrying the make-shift stretcher, and then Grandmother, and then Yanto, who was holding onto the children’s hands. The elder came over to Pakat’s side, corralling the children until they were safely between the two adults. There was a tense silence, and then Ben heard a knock and the sound of a door opening. The front door to the house.

A nasty, suspicious little thought floated up to the top of Ben’s mind at that moment, unbidden. He had made himself utterly vulnerable, first by wiping his powers out with his incautious, extravagant use of Force healing, and then by letting himself be confined in this bag. If the Kheelians decided to sell him out to the Jedi to save themselves, then there was nothing he could do about it. He was helpless, and it wasn’t a good feeling. Ben chastised himself harshly - such fears were unhelpful, and frankly, laughable. He was entirely reliant on the Kheelians, but they hadn’t let him down before. He had no reason to doubt their intensions. Besides, a few minutes ago he had been trying to make them give him up to the Jedi. Their safety was all that mattered.

Distantly, Shaarm’s muffled voice drifted over to Ben’s ears. She was speaking to someone at the door. Ben heard an indistinct response; Chana, perhaps? Then a new voice. Quieter, higher pitched than the Kheelians, as if from a smaller creature. A human.

Ben tightened his grip on the ‘saber again. All he could see through the hole in the canvas was the top of Tiki’s ears, Ooouli’s shoulder and beyond them, Yanto. The older Kheelian’s expression was tense and worried, but that gave Ben little clue as to what was going on. The girls looked confused and excited and just a little bit scared.

Then, there was movement, and he heard Shaarm’s voice, closer and clearer, saying, “He’s over here.” She was close, and suddenly the light was cut off and Shaarm walked past. Ben saw her shoulder and back, and then for a moment, just light.

Then he saw the Jedi.

Ben slammed closed those solid stone walls of defence around his mind and braced himself, ready for the onslaught....But nothing happened. He could sense nothing from the Jedi but the faintest
murmur on the edge of his senses. As he had suspected, his own Force exhaustion was so severe that the Jedi was all but invisible to him and, it would see, he was to them. Ben breathed out his relief, softly, and studied the figure that stood with its back to them, close enough to touch. The Jedi was bipedal, like him, swathed in a long cloak and hood of dark brown. He couldn’t see its face.

“Here,” Shaarm called, and the Jedi moved away, following her over to where Nenka’s stretcher lay on the ground. The Jedi crouched down by the stretcher and held his hands out over the injured Kheelian. Ben tensed, instincts warning him to keep the Jedi away. But he held himself firmly still, waiting. Trusting Shaarm. After a moment, the Jedi spoke, and his voice carried over to them, barely audible.

“Like I said, I’m afraid I can’t do anything for him.”

Shaarm nodded. “I understand,” she said, although Ben thought she sounded a little puzzled. “Then we must then take him to the medical centre in the town, immediately.”

At this, the Jedi stood up, and turned back towards the house. If he spoke again, his words were lost to the rustles of fabric and Ben didn’t hear them. Shaarm followed him, and Grandmother stepped up from the other side. Ben heard her replying;

“I am afraid that is quite impossible...” and then all three of them passed out of Ben’s eye line again, and their voices were reduced once more to muffled waves of undulating sound.

The group waited, anxiously. Ben strained his ears, desperate to hear something of what was going on. There was the sound of an engine nearby, as someone brought the landspeeder over. Pakat shifted slightly to look, and the house came into Ben’s view. To one side, Dega and Kerra were loading Nenka from the stretcher into the back of the landspeeder. Two of the Jedi were standing in the doorway, watching. The tension was palpable.

A sudden shrieking laugh cut through the air. Tiki was looking up at Ben’s hiding place with delight; she must have just noticed his eye peering through the hole in the bag. The suddenness of the sound made everyone start, and the Jedi on the stairs by the house looked up sharply. Ben froze, feeling those cold blue eyes fall on them. For a moment, no-one moved. He didn’t dare breathe; surely he was about to be seen and then this would all be for nothing. The blue eyes felt as if they were staring directly at him, and he could do nothing but stare back, unblinking.

Then, suddenly, the gaze broke and looked away. He had not seen Ben after all. The Jedi, the one who had spoken to Shaarm, turned around, walked into the house, and disappeared. The second Jedi sat down on the step outside the house. They weren’t leaving. Chana was still inside the house, and the Jedi weren’t leaving.

“What’s happening?” Ben said out loud, throwing caution to the wind, unable to bear the tension, the not-knowing, any longer. For a moment Pakat made no reply. Then Ben heard his voice, quietly, say:

“The Jedi will not leave. They say there is nothing they can do for Nenka and they have to wait for their friend.”

Ben sat forward a little, alarmed. “That’s not right,” he said. “Shaarm said they would leave. We can’t go now.”

“I do not think we have a choice,” Pakat whispered back, sounding stressed and anxious. “Shaarm says we have to go.”
“Chana is still in there. We can’t leave him here alone!” Ben hissed.

Then a soft shadow fell across them, and a quiet voice answered; “He will not be alone.”

It was Grandmother. She was crouched down at Pakat’s side, as if she was speaking to Tiki, though her voice was pitched to carry to Ben.

“Do not worry,” she said, and then she laid her hand gently against the bag. Ben felt a soft pressure and the warmth of her hand through the canvas onto his back.

“Be well, Ben,” she said, simply, and then she was gone. The warmth faded away.

Before he could even think to react, Pakat was moving again. He said “Come on, Ooouli. Quickly now.” The bag swung disconcertingly and then Ben felt it being set down. There was the hum and vibration of an engine: he was placed into the landspeeder. He felt someone sitting down at his side, and heard Ooouli say “Are we going somewhere, Mama?”

Ben shoved the canvas with his hand and a small gap of light appeared beneath the lid of the bag. He peeked out. The backpack was tucked into the ‘speeder, the girls beside him, and Nenka laid out in the rear. He could see the house behind them and standing in the doorway was Grandmother, with Yanto, Dega and Kerra at her back. The Jedi who had been watching them looked very small on the steps beside them.

“Take care of them,” Grandmother called out as Shaarm and Pakat climbed into the front of the ‘speeder, her voice soft and distant.

“We will,” Shaarm answered. She revved the engine, and the speeder took off. As Ben looked back, another Kheelian came to the doorway of the house. Chana. Ben saw him wave, once, before the ‘speeder rose up over the edge of the hollow and turned the corner.

The house was lost from view.

Chapter End Notes

The good news: I'm back!

The bad news: This chapter sucks...

I have not abandoned you; things just got a little crazy for a while there. But now I am returned, and with big plans for Ben. Posting schedule will not be as regular as before (I am now working three jobs, oh boy) but we will make it to the end together.

Big love x
Someone was pinching his earlobe.

It was weird and just a little bit painful. The strangeness of the sensation dragged Ben back towards wakefulness.

“...en? Ben, wake up! I do not think this is working.”

“Try again,” someone else said, and the pinching returned. Ben groaned a little and tried to push away the annoyance.

“That is it,” a voice said, encouragingly. “Open your eyes, Ben.”

He did so, slowly, blinking in a dull, grey light of shifting shapes. A face was peering down at him, looking concerned, and he mumbled a reassurance.

“'m okay.”

“He is awake,” someone, Pakat, said.

“I give thanks,” another voice replied. He thought it was Shaarm. “Ooouli, I am not going to tell you again. Please sit down when we are travelling.”

He was warm. It was one of the first things Ben noticed, tucked in against a broad body under a warm arm. The ground was shifting unsteadily below them, and he could hear engines. Of course, the speeder.

His eyes were trying to close again without his permission, and Pakat gave him a little shake.

“Shaarm says you cannot go back to sleep, Ben, I am sorry.”

Ben wearily forced his eyes open again, and tried to bring the world into focus. He was propped up in the rear of the landspeeder, tucked between Pakat and Nenka. Ahead he could see Shaarm driving, and beside her, Tiki, and Ooouli half standing to peer back at them. Around them there was nothing but formless, shifting whiteness, pressing in on all sides.

"Where are we?” Ben asked.

“Just coming up on the moat at Tszaaf,” Pakat said. “The fog set in about half an hour ago. You passed out as soon as we left the village so we let you sleep as long as possible. Then we could not wake you up.”

Yes, of course, they had driven through the village. And before that they had been at the house. The house where they had abandoned Chana and Grandmother to the mercy of the three Jedi.

“Chana...” Ben said, his voice croaking and dry. “We have to go back.”
Pakat patted his hair, soothingly. “Do not worry about him,” the Kheelian said, though he himself was doing a poor job of hiding his terrible anxiety. “Chana can look after himself. How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” Ben admitted, although ‘utterly exhausted’ would have been more accurate. He was still intolerably weak, his limbs felt slow and sluggish, and his head was pounding. There was dried blood on his face, and the painful stab of pins and needles in his legs was worse than the numbness he had felt before.

“That is no surprise,” Shaarm said, from the front. “You have not yet slept or eaten enough to even begin building back your energy reserves. Ooouli, there is a packet of Ben’s food in my medical bag. Can you... yes, that is it, good girl.”

While Pakat took the packet of food and broke the block up into smaller pieces, Ben craned his head to look at the Kheelian slumped to his other side. Nenka was still pale and worryingly still, but the youth was conscious behind his closed eyes; Ben felt a gentle pressure on his fingers as he reached for Nenka’s hand.

“How is he?” Ben asked.

“He is holding on, for now,” Shaarm answered, in Basic, and then added. “We are almost there.”

True enough, the fog on either side darkened and closed in as they passed over the bridge and then they were hemmed in on both sides by dark hulks looming in from the curling mist. They must be travelling now between the first rows of houses though they could be barely made out. The fog swirled densely on either side, gloomy and unbroken, even though it could not be later than midday. Shaarm navigated them confidently through the shifting, deceiving haze, passing other speeders and pedestrians who pressed in on both sides. Though the sounds were oddly muted and distorted, Ben could not help but feel the town was noisier and busier than he remembered, the mist full of ghostly shapes and half-formed sounds. He peered out into the whiteness as he ate the tasteless food Pakat pressed into his hand, and tried to fill in the blank view with what he could recall of their route to the medical centre. They had passed the railway, he was certain, and a school house. Perhaps a market place?

As Shaarm started to slow the vehicle, Pakat leaned forwards, looking around.

“Where are you going to wait?” he asked his wife.

Shaarm navigated a few turns, and then pulled the speeder in under what looked like a set of low scaffolding in a quieter side street. She stopped the vehicle and the fog-muffled sound of the engine fell away into silence.

“I think this should be out of sight,” she answered Pakat, peering into the gloom. “The fog will do the rest for us. Good luck!”

Pakat nodded. He hopped out over the side of the speeder, and disappeared into the shifting mists.

“Where’s Papa going?” asked Ooouli, curious and unafraid, her young voice cutting through the heavy air. She had obviously just about managed to contain her voracious spirit during the flight from Thet, but now was bursting with questions. Tiki just watched, silently, her cast arm held tight to her front and her thumb in her mouth.

Shaarm stepped easily over into the back of the speeder beside Ben to check on Nenka, and said; “Papa is going to make sure that none of the bad people, the ones who have been looking for Ben,
are waiting for us.” Satisfied Nenka was still stable, Shaarm then turned to Ben, peering into his eyes and taking his pulse. “Someone said that the first place they would watch would be a tavern or a medical centre.”

Ben smiled faintly, remembering his own words from days ago.

“Why did Dada and Grandmother have to stay behind?” Ooouli asked. Ben winced, but Shaarm just sighed.

“You remember the Pechnar who came to the house last night? The ones I asked you not to talk to? We think they are not very nice people that are searching for Ben. Your Dada is going to try and delay them at the house for a while so they do not realise that Ben came with us.”

“How ‘not very nice’?” Ooouli asked, once again showing she was as sharp as a pin when it came to poking holes in an evasion. “Is Dada going to get hurt again?”

Shaarm turned around fully until she was facing the children.

“No,” she said firmly. “Dada is not going to get hurt. Grandmother is there to make sure that does not happen, and Yanto and Diega, and Kerra too. They will be perfectly safe.”

Ooouli nodded, although she did not look convinced. “But, Mama,” she said. “What about Nenka, is he going to be okay? And Ben? How long is he going to have to hide from the bad people?”

“Well, we are really not sure if-”

“Why are they looking for him anyway, Mama? Do you think that-”

Shaarm sighed, rubbed her forehead, and interrupted, gently. “Ooouli, I know that your fathers and I have told you that you can and should always ask questions about the world whenever you want and that it makes us happy and proud to answer them. Well, perhaps, this time you should not take me at my word. Maybe you could just save all your questions up for the time being until Mama is having a less trying day.”

Ooouli sighed dramatically, and sat back. “Yes, Mama,” she agreed, unenthusiastically.

Ben had not yet had time to miss the sound of her voice when Pakat reappeared back out of the fog like a ghost taking form.

“You were right. They are watching the front entrance, just like you thought,” he confirmed in a low voice, leaning over the door of the speeder. “I had to walk past a few times to spot him, but there was at least one Pechnar across the street. What are we going to do?”

Shaarm muttered a word Ben did not recognise, and pushed a hand through her mane in an oddly nervous gesture. “We’ll have to go round to the staff entrance. We can carry Nenka in that way.”

“If they are even a fraction as smart as I think they are, they will certainly have someone watching the back too,” Ben put in.

“How many of them can there be?” said Pakat, looking doubtful. “Three at the house and one here...So many humans would draw a lot of attention.”

“We do not know that the Jedi are all human,” Ben countered. “But even then, they may have allies amongst the Kheelians. You said the Jedi were revered here. It would not take much to enlist the help of a local to watch out for us, eager to assist Jedi business.”
“So what do you propose?” Shaarm asked.

“I’ll wait here,” Ben said, tiredly, “while you go on. It is me they are looking for, after all. Get Nenka to help. I can hide out here until you come back.”

“We are not leaving anyone else behind today,” snapped Shaarm shortly, and that was that. “Girls,” she instructed, “go and sit next to Ben.”

Ooouli and Tiki followed her instructions quickly, climbing into the back of the speeder and curling up at Ben’s sides. Tiki wrapped one long arm around his chest and put her head on his shoulder. Ooouli took Ben’s hand in her left and Nenka’s in her right, and gripped them both tightly. Ben felt the Force, which had been silent since last night, give a flutter in his chest. It would not be enough to protect the children, not yet, but it would return given time. His Force sense was weak, wounded, but not crippled.

Shaarm looked them over for a moment, and then she readjusted Ben’s coat, pulled up his hood and wrapped the scarf up around his neck and lower face to hide his features and the telltale bandages on his neck.

“The fog is a blessing,” she said again, to Pakat. Then she looked back at Ben. “Sit still enough and do not talk, and you may pass for a child if they are not looking too closely.”

With the three of them huddled together in the back of the speeder at Nenka’s side, it seemed more than likely that a casual observer would see only a group of Kheelian children. But Ben knew these observers would be anything but casual. Still, they had little choice.

Pakat leapt into the space vacated by the girls in the front of the speeder, and Shaarm gunned the engine, weaving them out of the scaffolding posts of the construction site and back into the side streets.

The muffled hubbub of sound ebbed and flowed around them as they passed by other speeders and pedestrians, now visible through the haze. It seemed as if the fog was lifting a little, and occasionally Ben would see figures and groups ambling along the street or clustered in doorways. There was a general atmosphere of anticipation.

Crack!

A sharp bang on their left cut through the fog. Ben reacted faster than thought, pure instinct throwing him forward as he pushed both of the children down and curled his body to shield between them and the explosive. It took more than a moment for his exhausted mind to comprehend that no concussive wave had followed the sound, there was no bloom of fire; no blaster bolts or slugs whistled in the air. The sounds he could hear were cheering, not screams. He sat up slowly, forcing his fingers to release their iron grip on Tiki’s jacket.

“Ow,” said the little girl, with a scowl, waving her cast forelimb. “My arm.”

Ben rubbed her ears in apology; “I am sorry, Tiki. I was startled.”

“It is just a firework, silly,” Ooouli told him, with some affection. “They can’t hurt you.”

Shaarm put a hand to her head. “Of course! I had completely forgotten it was Second Night.”

Pakat nodded. “That’s why there are so many people around.”

There was a second bang further off in the distance that echoed oddly down the street. Someone
whooped and clapped.

“There are always fireworks on second night, Mama,” Ooouli added.

“Second Night? What is Second Night?” Ben asked, still waiting for his heartbeat to slow.

“Second Night of Kel-Marr!” Ooouli said, exuberantly. She was clearly excited.

“Kelmar?” Ben repeated, none the wiser. “I am sorry, that word isn’t familiar.”

“It is the festival for the eclipse,” said Shaarm. She smiled, but Ben thought she looked sad. “I am sorry, I should have thought the noise would startle you, but the truth is I had forgotten all about what day it is. So much has happened.”

“We are coming up to the med centre,” Pakat warned, quietly.

“Right,” said Shaarm. “Quiet everyone. Ben, keep your head down.”

Ben ducked his head low against Ooouli’s side, hiding his face, but tilted his chin so that he could see at least a narrow strip of the world outside beneath the hood. He tensed, not knowing what to expect, and not knowing if he would even be able to do anything about it if it did. They drove along the street in silence, passing the med centre on their right. Ben’s eyes scanned both sides of the street, but if the Pechnar was still there, he saw no sign of him.

Shaarm drove them on past the centre and then after about ten seconds turned right into a smaller side street. She made a few more twists and turns until they had worked their way circuitously to the back entrance of the med centre. Shaarm pulled up the speeder and stopped it. They all waited in silence for a moment, scanning the alley and the rooftops around, but there was no sign of anything any larger than a skrallrat. It seemed that they had not been observed.

Shaarm finally switched off the engine, and hopped out of the speeder.

“I’ll be right back,” she told Pakat, punched the access code into the door lock, and was gone. Pakat himself went round to the rear of the speeder and started to prepare Nenka for being moved. The teen looked like he might have passed out again.

Ben looked around at the alley, and then up at the med centre. It seemed strange to think it had been just over two days since he had last been here. That was when he had first seen the Jedi. So much had happened in such a short time.

“Papa,” began Ooouli, and Ben could tell another round of questioning was about to ensue. “Papa, what will happen if the Pechnar do not want to leave our home?”

“I do not know,” Pakat said, sliding Nenka’s blanket free and folding it carefully. “What do you think will happen?”

Ooouli seemed to think about this for a second, and then said; “Ben is going to stay forever, of course, but I don’t think I want the other Pechnar to live with us too. One of them was very bossy.”

“Whatever else happens, my darling, I think it is extremely unlikely that that will occur.”

“But then what do we do? How will we ever be able to go home to Dada?” Ooouli continued, starting to sound worried. “If the other Pechnar cannot be allowed to know Ben is here...”

Pakat stopped fiddling with the landspeeder, and leaned over to talk to his daughter. “I am sorry,
Ooouli, I do not have any answers for you. I wish I did. But we must all be patient and see how things turn out. And trust in Grandmother and Dada.”

Ooouli scowled for a moment, and then she said, “Tiki is hungry.”

Pakat sighed. “Of course. It has been a long morning for us all. As soon as Mama returns we will try and fix that. Oh, I think I hear them coming back. Ben, lie still.”

Ben ducked down at Ooouli’s side again, and Pakat pulled his coat back up until he was mostly concealed. The rear door of the med centre opened with a sharp bang, and Shaarm emerged, followed by four other Kheelians in hospital uniforms pulling a hovertrolley behind them.

“Over here,” Shaarm said, and the medical team quickly gathered around the landspeeder. Ooouli gave her cousin’s hand one last squeeze, and in a matter of moments, the Kheelians had Nenka settled carefully onto the trolley and were wheeling him back into the building.

“Please run his scans and prepare surgery bay two,” Shaarm called after them. “I will be there in a moment.”

Ben watched the medical team go, until they were out of sight, and then slowly sat up.

“Ben,” Shaarm said, calling his attention. She sounded uneasy. “Listen to me. The administrator tells me that humans have come in looking for you, twice, since your surgery. Someone was here last night.”

“They are watching the med centre, then.” Ben said. “It’s as we thought.” This unrelenting, inescapable, blasted pursuit. Wherever he went, the Jedi would still find him. His options were slowly being cut off, one by one.

“What are we going to do?” said Pakat, looking anxious. “They will find out Ben is here the moment we go inside.”

Shaarm looked Ben over, critically. Ben tolerated her inspection for a moment, and then said;

“What is it?”

“Are you certain that your current state is nothing greater than fatigue?” she asked. “Please be honest with me, Ben. I need to know your condition before I decide what to do. You have no other injuries?”

Ben shook his head, keen to assure her. “Nothing that you do not already know of, I promise. I think I used the Force- excuse me, my, ah, magic, incorrectly when I healed Nenka. I used too much of my own energy. I am just exhausted, but I don’t think I’ve suffered any permanent damage.”

Shaarm glanced back at the med centre, and then nodded. “Then there is nothing really I can do for you here?”

“No,” Ben agreed. “And I would rather not draw any more attention to you and Nenka if at all possible.”

Shaarm sighed. Ben understood; it was clear how much Shaarm was frustrated by her own helplessness at the whole situation.

“Very well,” she said. “I have to get back to Nenka, but I do have another idea. You remember Yalani, the technician? He is not working today, because of the festival. Pakat, if you take Ben and
the girls up to his house, he will be able to look after Ben and you can stay there out of sight while I manage Nenka’s care here. I will call up and let him know you are coming. I picked up some saline for Ben – here.”

Pakat nodded, and took the satchel she handed him.

“All right,” he said. “Please let us know as soon as you know anything.”

“I will,” Shaarm said. She hugged Pakat, kissed the girls and ruffled Ben’s hair.

“Take care, Ben,” she said, and went back into the med centre. The door clicked shut behind her. Ben was unnervingly reminded of Grandmother’s parting earlier that morning.

Pakat settled into the speeder’s driving seat, and paused. He looked at the array of controls for a second and hummed, nervously. Ooouli squirmed free of her sister’s grip and said;

“Stay here, Ben.” She climbed over into the front passenger seat. “It is okay, Papa,” the girl continued, sounding very like her mother. “I will help. That one is the ignition.”

Pakat pressed the indicated button and the engine roared into life.

“Papa hates driving,” Ooouli explained over her shoulder.

Pakat nodded, sounding miserable. “It is the worst. I would happily let Ooouli drive if she could reach the controls.”

Pakat cautiously turned the craft around, and under Ooouli’s apparently expert direction, navigated their way back onto the main streets of the town. Pakat drove very much more cautiously than his wife through the clinging mist, nervously avoiding other speeders and groups of Kheelians. Breaks in the fog showed them going in and out of shops, carrying boxes and containers. As the ‘speeder passed close enough to the edge of the street to see clearly, Ben noticed that many Kheelians were setting earthenware or copper dishes on the step outside the houses. All part of the upcoming festivities perhaps.

Ben held Tiki’s hand while his eyes scanned the shrouded roadway, pavements and buildings either side. He saw no humans, nor anyone showing particular interest to them or their speeder beyond that earned by Pakat’s erratic driving. But a sense of foreboding still remained. Ben tentatively reached again for the Force, but it remained little more than a weak flicker, like a tiny flame caged behind his sternum. He dared not ask anything of it now, too afraid that even a breath of air on that frail light would extinguish it entirely. He just needed time and rest, to feed and nurture that flame. As Ben got stronger, the Force too would return. He hoped.

They passed on through the town, up a long residential street lined with small houses that curved up the low hillside. There were fewer people around now and the fog was thicker again, and full of a heavy quiet. Ooouli directed them to the right, down a narrow lane of close-packed round two-storey buildings, most of which seemed to be connected with an interwoven network of covered passageways, like a nerve cluster. Unlike the rest of the town, where modern materials had been used only to build up and out from a core of stone or brick, here every building seemed to be formed of identical pre-fab plates, though all were similarly worn, patched and altered. It was as if the entire neighbourhood had just appeared in one moment and then had been left to age for decades. Instead of the bustling activity in the lower town there seemed to be no-one around, although the area still had a festive air; every building had hundreds of long streamers in bright colours pinned to hang down across the doors and windows, and flags hung limply in the still air from roofs and rafters.
“Yalani lives down here on the left,” Ooouli explained, as Pakat parked the speeder behind a low curved building barely taller than Ooouli. “All the Dhosana in the town live here.”

“Ysella, ysella!” said Tiki, excitedly, pointing into the fog. Ben could see nothing though, and did not know what she meant.

While Pakat lifted Tiki down from the speeder and Ooouli was occupied with the bags Shaarm had packed for them, Ben shuffled to the edge of the craft. He had been testing moving his feet while they had travelled and he was reasonably certain, through the painful tingling in his muscles, that he had most of the sensation back in his legs. Ben thought he was being honest when he had told Shaarm that all he needed was rest and food. Now he just had to determine that his body wouldn’t make a liar of his tongue. Ben intended to regain his independence as soon as possible, and this seemed a reasonable time to test the current limits of his strength. Cautiously, and gripping the edge of the speeder in a tight grasp, Ben swung his legs over the side and dropped down to the ground. It was a pleasant surprise to find his legs held his weight, though he didn’t dare loosen his grip on the speeder. He was standing up at last. It was a good sign, even if he had a long way to go before he was back to his full strength, whatever that was. It could take days. Weeks, even.

“Ben!” Ooouli had spotted him. With another excellent impression of Shaarm’s scolding tones she said; “Should you be standing up?”

Ben felt himself start to sway. “Probably not,” he admitted, as his legs began shaking. Pakat caught him easily before he fell and hitched Ben up onto his back. Ben held on tightly, too satisfied with his returning strength to be concerned with Ooouli’s scolding. Pakat and Ooouli took a bag in each hand, ushered Tiki in front of them, and the group set off up the narrow path.

The small round houses with their weaving interconnected pathways pressed in closely on each side as they walked up the narrow paved route between them. Ben could see many windows, but few doors.

Ben took the opportunity to ask; “Are you sure that Yalani will be happy to have four of us drop in unexpectedly, and on a festival day, too?”

“Oh, Shaarm will have called him by now,” Pakat said. “But either way, the Dhosana have an even stronger respect for hospitality than we do. It is nothing of concern.”

“And who or what are the Dhosana?” Ben asked, intrigued. It was reassuring that he had the energy to be curious again. He must be recovering.

“The Dhosana come from the west continent,” Pakat explained, as they passed into an open space like a courtyard, surrounded by round walled structures. The stone slabs that paved the yard were scattered with hundreds of copper and duralumin dishes, clustered against the walls and under the windows. Curious.

“They are a different sub-species within the genus,” Pakat continued. “You met Yalani before? You did not notice the physiological differences? I suppose Pechnar would not. Strange though; such things seem quite significant to us.”

“And Yalani is a Dhosana?”

“A Dhosan,” Pakat corrected. “Yes. As Ooouli said already the Dhosana tend to live together in clusters like this within the towns where they dwell. All extended family groups, I believe; everyone in the neighbourhood here is related in one way or another. Yalani lives here with his sister.”
“Ysella,” said Ooouli. “She is nice. She teaches history at the school.”

They entered through a narrow doorway, festooned with coloured streamers, into a larger round building a bit like an entrance hall. Brightly coloured sashes of cloth were draped across the domed roof. Eight corridors led off in different directions; Pakat consulted a chart on one wall, and then took the second passage on the left. The walkway twisted and curved round, passing through several more round rooms like hubs where further passages and doors interconnected and led away. At each, Ooouli or Pakat checked a wall chart or a map before picking a corridor. Many of the doors were decorated with flags, and garlands in a multitude of colours were hung along the ceiling of the corridors. Eventually they arrived at a small grey door, hung with hundreds of long streamers in blue and gold. As these shifted in the air currents, they could see the surface of the door itself was beautifully painted with green symbols, perhaps names. Pakat nodded to Ooouli, and she trotted forward and knocked, before scurrying back to take Tiki’s hand.

There was a call from inside, followed by a moment or two of silence, before the door slid open. Yalani looked just as he had a few days previously when Ben had first met him at the medcentre, although instead of his uniform he was now dressed in a saffron yellow tunic the same colour as his fur, and looked perhaps even more confused. Now Ben was looking for it, he could see that Yalani was a little smaller in stature than the other male Kheelians he had met, something he had originally taken to mean he was younger. Yalani had perhaps longer ears too, and his eyes were set a little wider apart than Pakat’s or Chana’s. But how many of these tiny nuances of appearance were the characteristics of a Dhosan rather than Yalani’s own features, Ben didn’t know.

Yalani looked at the ragtag group standing in the corridor with unconcealed surprise.

“Oh, hello,” Pakat said. He sounded rather awkward, and Ben was suddenly aware that perhaps Pakat did not know his wife’s colleague as well as Ben had initially supposed. “Hello. It is Pakat. Shaarm’s husband?”

“Of course,” Yalani said, nonplussed. He glanced at Ooouli and Tiki, and then at Ben. His eyes widened a little. “What are you doing here?”

“Ah,” said Pakat, even more uncomfortable. “Shaarm did not call you?”

“The telewire system is offline,” Yalani explained. “Because of the festival.”

“Of course,” Pakat said. “I had forgotten. Um. Well. You see, we need your help.”

Yalani nodded, and stepped aside, still staring at Ben. “Then you must come in. Please.”

The girls glanced at Pakat for a moment, and then scurried over the threshold. Pakat followed slower, still encumbered by the bags Shaarm had given them, and by Ben on his back. Ben ducked low to pass under the doorframe, and then they were inside the apartment.

As with Shaarm’s house, the front door opened directly into the circular, domed main living space, although there the similarities between the two residences ended. In front of Ben’s eyes the entire room was alive. A strip of guttering ran around the top of the walls, and from this hung a thick curtain of hanging plants that trailed down every surface. The curved walls themselves seemed to be made of some lattice-like framework, for every few centimetres some new cluster of leaves burst out from the walls, enclosing the travellers within a vertical garden. But this was no purely decorative foliage; Ben could see many plants he recognised from Chana’s own kitchen garden back in Thet, and there was an entire section devoted to tarvaroot plants. The tendrils of Ben’s Force awareness pulsed with life.
Ben was forced to pause his delighted observations as Pakat sat up, and Ben took the prompt to slide cautiously down from his back. His feet still held him up, but Ben did not have to test his legs for long as Pakat lifted him over, and sat him carefully down at the Kheelian’s feet so Ben could once more lean against his forelegs. He looked around to see the children were just as engrossed as he had been; Tiki was staring up at the fronds of hanging moss in mute astonishment, while Ooouli was standing on her back legs, poking at a bright yellow plant growing by the door.

A quick call of “Ooouli,” from Pakat had the older girl cease her own fascinated examination of the walls and she dropped quickly to Pakat’s side onto one of the padded sitting mats. Tiki swiftly followed, squeezing into the space between her sister and father.

Yalani, in the meantime, stuck his head round an internal sliding door and called to someone. A distant voice answered. Yalani then went over to a small cupboard, one of the only pieces of furniture in the room, and pulled out a copper-coloured kettle, and a number of cups. It appeared that the Dhosana, whatever their differences, also shared in the tea ritual. The kettle was set on a hotplate to boil and cups were laid out on the floor before them on a gold cloth, and everyone lapsed into waiting silence. Ben glanced up at Pakat, and wondered if he ought to begin explaining why they had come. But the continuing silence from the Kheelians made him hesitate; after all he certainly did not want to commit another social blunder by speaking out of turn like he had at the Thet town meeting. Particularly as Yalani continued to eye them so curiously, but did nothing to prompt a conversation. Perhaps this was a different kind of ceremony than those he had previously encountered at Shaarms, and speech was not permitted at all.

Tiki began to fidget, and Pakat nudged her.

After a minute or so, Pakat coughed and said; “Your Kel-Marr decorations are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Yalani acknowledged, and they lapsed back into silence. At last, the door off the living room slid open, and another figure, who had to be Yalani’s sister, entered the room. From the deep blue colour of her fur it seemed clear that Ysella was another full grown adult, although she was incredibly petite, probably shorter than Ooouli, with a fine, delicate bone structure. She had the same long tapered ears and wide-set soulful eyes of her brother. She walked, however, with a strange uneven gait, and as she entered the room, Ben could see that one of her rear legs was tucked in close to her body, with the foot barely brushing the floor.

Ysella glanced around at them all though her gaze lingered on Ben, eyes wide with surprise. She said nothing, however, but limped over to the group and sat down carefully on a slightly raised cushion clearly designed for her. From close up, Ben could see her brown and grey clothing was sewn with dozens of pockets and pouches, and from the largest pocket in the front of the dress she drew out a small plastoid bottle and a wooden box. After some careful silent deliberation, Ysella chose one small bundle of leaves from the box and dropped them into the now steaming kettle. After one full minute Yalani lifted the kettle, and poured out the tea into each cup as Ysella held it up. She hesitated at the fourth cup, glancing at Ben, but Yalani nodded slightly and so she held out too. The children’s cups were filled with juice from the plastoid bottle. After one full minute Yalani lifted the kettle, and poured out the tea into each cup as Ysella held it up. She hesitated at the fourth cup, glancing at Ben, but Yalani nodded slightly and so she held out too. The children’s cups were filled with juice from the plastoid bottle. Clearly this version of the ritual did not include the children, which Ben thought perhaps explained Ysella’s hesitation in including him. Yalani handed around the cups, passing each over with several touches to the recipient’s head. Ben accepted the teacup and the brush over his hair without a word. Following the others’ lead, he drank the whole bitter scalding cupful down in one go, and managed not to grimace.

The draining of the teacups seemed to suddenly break the aura of tension the room had been under. Yalani sat back with a sigh, and Ooouli wriggled and laughed a little at something Tiki was doing. At a nod from their father, the girls dashed off to investigate the wonder of the living walls.
“We give thanks for the welcome,” Pakat said, looking between their two hosts curious faces. “I am sorry that Shaarm did not give you any advance warning of our arrival.”

Ysella waved the apology away. When she spoke her voice was quiet, but not shy. “Hospitality can and must be relied upon. There are no strangers in a Dhosana home. You must be Ben,” she said, turning to look at him. “My brother told me about you.”

Ben nodded. It might be the warmth of the tea or the sense of peace and familiarity about the home, but he was starting to feel exhaustion creep over him again. He rallied himself and his manners, and said. “And you, Ysella. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She nodded, gravely. “You look ill,” she said.

“A little tired,” Ben replied.

“So,” Yalani said, clearly bursting for answers. “What is it you need help with? Is it the bracelet again? Because all of my tools are at work...”

“The bracelet?” said Pakat. “No.”

“Something for the university then?” Yalani guessed again.

“It is...complicated.” Pakat paused and hummed a little, looking at Ben and clearly at a loss as to how best explain their situation. Ben took pity on him, and decided that he would have to extend a little trust.

He turned to Yalani. “When we met I told you I was a colleague of Pakat’s. I am afraid I was not being entirely honest with you. I do not want to burden you with the complexities of my situation, but it would be fair to surmise that I am...an exile. Other Pechnar are hunting me down, and they have already driven me from Thet. Now there are more Pechnar lying in wait for me at the med centre too. I would never have made it so far without Shaarm and Pakat and Chana, but I needed somewhere to wait for a day or two those who pursue me are gone.”

He blinked, tiredly. Yalani and Ysella were both leaning forward, absorbed in the tale. “So you need medical attention?” Yalani guessed. “What is your condition? Ysella is right, you do look ill, and you seemed far healthier two days ago when you were undergoing surgery.”

“It seems to be a form of severe exhaustion,” Pakat said, saving Ben from trying to address the history of his Force powers and his near disastrous misuse of them. “He pushed himself too hard dealing with the naarm crisis. We think he just needs to eat, to have somewhere safe to rest and recuperate, and then his strength will return.”

“I understand that you could not go to the med centre,” Yalani said, “And we will do what we can to help, of course. But I am not sure why Shaarm sent you here. I am a technician more than a nurse, and Ysella a historian. There are many others who have better medical resources than us.”

“Shaarm trusts you,” Pakat said, straight-forwardly.

“Perhaps she thought we would understand what it is like to be an exile, to be alone amongst strangers.” Ysella added, softly.

It sounded as if the pair would agree to help. Ben closed his eyes, just for a moment, to consider Ysella’s last remark. It had been a long few days.

“As for the first, that is easy enough,” he heard Yalani say. “It would be my pleasure to prepare a
midday meal for us all, if you have not already eaten?”

“We have not,” Pakat replied, quietly, sounding far off. “And the girls especially would be delighted to accept. But I think Ben might have to move directly on to the resting and recuperating part for the moment. Can I...?”

“Of course, this way.”

Ben felt himself lifted up, but he was too tired to open his eyes to investigate further. He was carried and then set down somewhere soft and quiet. Far off, he heard one of the children laugh.

They were safe.

“Something is wrong.”

A voice says; “What is it?”

“I don’t know...I’m not reading any errors.”

The man hearing this is blind. He rolls his head, but he can’t see who is speaking. His arms are trapped. His body is awash with tides of broiling, dangerous pain, and his brain is pounding, as if it’s being steadily crushed under some heavy weight.

“Try again,” says the voice. “Maybe it’s a glitch. I hate working with wetware. Start again from the beginning.”

The closer voice says, right in his ear; “Where are you?

“I...I am...”

He stops. He doesn’t know. Horror trickles, cold and rancid, down his spine. His mind is blank. He is waiting and waiting for an answer to appear, waiting for something to come flooding back, but there’s just...nothing.

"I don’t know,” He says. His voice is a stranger’s, a skeletal croak of sound.

"Still nothing,” says the distant voice, anxiously.

Pain shoots up his arm as the heel of a hand crushes suddenly down on what must be broken fingers. He cries out, into the dark. Closer, the quiet voice says, “I am losing my patience with you. Stop. Resisting. Tell me what standard year it is.”

“I don’t know!” He says again, pleading. “Listen, I don’t-“

There is a sharp, painful sting on his face. A violent backhand across his mouth.

“Quiet!” The voice snaps. “I’ve told you enough times.” Then, to someone else; “Why isn’t this working? A few hours ago you told me it was perfect.”

“I don’t know! But I don’t think this is another trick. I’m sorry, but there just isn’t any data to read.”

“I don’t accept that! Calibrate it again.”
Someone touches his head, and the pressure inside ramps up until it’s like his brain is being squeezed, like his eyeballs will burst right out of his skull. The voice beside him demands: “Tell me your age. Now.”

He groans, and shakes his head.

What is your home planet?”

“I don’t know! What do you want from me?” For all that he is tied down, he feels like he is spinning, untethered, into the crushing, buzzing, hum of pain centred on the side of his skull, and dragging him into the emptiness within.

“I want you to remember!” The voice shouts. “What is your rank? How old are you?”

“I don’t...I don’t know.”

“What is your name?”

______________________________

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a change in pace here for our heroes but they have all been working hard, the darlings.

In other news, I lost my previous beta to real life pressures, so apologies for any typos/horrible grammatical errors.

In other other news, this bad boy is now longer than Hamlet, Ender's Game, the Hobbit, Prisoner of Azkaban and Wuthering Heights. Will the madness never end!??
The Lonely Moon

Chapter Notes

This fic is now over one year old.

What. How.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ben woke up, and didn’t know where he was. This was becoming either an unfortunate habit, or some very peculiar joke that the universe was insistent upon repeating at his expense.

He rubbed gritty eyes. He had slept the deep, heavy sleep of the utterly exhausted, punctuated at intervals by strange and unsettling dreams. He remembered waking a few times to Pakat looking down at him. On one occasion he had been carried out into a larger room full of a clatter of noise and delicious smells. Someone had pressed a plastoid beaker into his groggy hands and he had drunk automatically. The contents had almost made him gag; a thick viscous slime which clung to his mouth and tongue. He remembered washing the slime down with warm water before falling asleep again. He remembered being cold.

He quickly checked his environs. A drip of IV fluids hanging from a low shelf and connected to his left arm was almost empty, so he carefully disconnected the tubing, rubbing at the sore patch on his elbow. He lay the medical equipment aside and looked about. The room was circular, of course, and smaller than the storeroom he had lived in at Shaarm’s house. Instead of a sleeping mat this time he was lying directly on the floor which seemed to be faintly springy, formed of some kind of soft foam from wall to wall. Blankets and bed spaces for at least five others were laid out at random around the room. If the Dhosana enclave had indeed been constructed out of premade housing units, it would seem that each sleeping room was a single bed space large enough for as many family members as could be wedged inside. Interesting.

He closed his eyes, for a moment, and the nightmare was suddenly right there, waiting for him in the dark.

What is your name?

Ben opened his eyes quickly, and shivered. The dream squatted there in forefront his mind, noisome with fear and lingering horror. Another interrogation he thought, but something had been tied over his eyes; blinding and isolating. They had wanted...something, some information that he didn’t know. No - something he should know but couldn’t remember. And that realisation of the state of his fractured memory had been as utterly shocking and disorientating within the dream as it had been when he had woken up to it on the moor. In contrast, it suddenly struck Ben as unnerving to realise how comfortable he had become with his lost memories. After all the business with the bracelet and his powers, and then the narm attack, he had become all but apathetic to the mystery of his missing past. Too caught up in surviving and protecting and hiding to let such a little thing as the loss of his whole world slow him down. Was he really going to just allow this to become his new reality? Permit those integral parts of himself, of his identity, of his life before, to be stolen from him without a fight?
No. And it was about damn time he started doing something about it.

The first thing he ought to do would be to record everything he had remembered so far. Snatches of memory had come back to him at the strangest moments over the past—had it been seventeen days that he had been here? But he had several times dreamt of strange and disquieting events which must be more than the imaginings of his unconscious mind. Last night’s nightmare, for example. He recalled more of it than usual, though the details had already become hazy and unclear. But he remembered the interrogation, sensed the men that had tortured him had not been pleased by his inability to recall the information they wanted. For all their apparent cruelty and madness and brutality, it seemed they at least had not caused his memory loss. Not intentionally. One tiny clue suspended in the empty void of his existence. Perhaps he would eventually have enough fragments to begin piecing together a timeline. A way to find a path through this intangible maze of puzzles and doubt.

Three things then began clamouring for Ben’s attention. Firstly, his bladder, which was making rather urgent and pressing demands. Second; he could hear singing. And thirdly, he was really, really hungry.

One thing at a time. For the first issue to be dealt with, he was going to need to stand. Ben cautiously sat up, testing his balance. He had no idea how long he had been asleep; it could have been days again for all he could tell. Time to see if the rest was having any affect. Carefully, he stood, and to his surprise, his legs held. In fact, everything seemed to be more or less in working order; full sensation had returned to his limbs and extremities, though the muscles were stiff and his hands still tingled oddly. Added to that; his joints and head ached, and the old wounds in his leg, hip and chest throbbed unpleasantly. He was also shirtless; perhaps he had suffered further nosebleeds and someone had taken his shirt for cleaning? Still, Ben knew he would gladly accept all the symptoms he had now and more— even the return of full paralysis— if they were the cost he had to pay to have the Force back again. For there it was, streaming along under his skin. It hummed and whispered, tangible and certain, no longer flowing through his spirit like the light of a sun passing through an empty glass. It burned with its dazzling presence. Oh, and it was glorious. His grasp of it was still sluggish, sickly, but that didn’t matter. The Force was with him. The Force was *with* him.

Ben grounded himself in his body with deep, calming breaths that made his damaged lung and broken collarbone burn, and then he looked around. As well as his shirt, his boots, scarf and lightsaber were also nowhere to be seen, though his green coat and the sling he had been wearing lay bundled up at the head of his blankets. Ben forgot himself for a moment and pushed too far by reaching for the garment with the Force rather than his hands. He was rewarded for his over-eagerness by failure, a spike of pain in his head and a few drops of blood from his nose. Too much, for now. He resorted to picking the coat up by more mundane means, and once more suitably attired, made his slow way out of the room.

The ‘fresher proved to be extremely small, probably little more than a cupboard to the giant Kheelians, but it possessed everything Ben needed for now. After refreshing himself, Ben ran a quick, efficient check of his former injuries. He had theorised that the profound exhaustion caused by his Force healing of Nenka would have halted his own natural healing as his systems fought for resources, and the hypothesis seemed to be correct. The surgery site on his chest was still sealed with that colourless adhesive paste Shaarm used, but there was no other sign that it was healing, and it once again his lungs and ribs hurt like the blazes now that the numbness of exhaustion had faded. The same went for his fractured hip, leg wound and other old injuries. But one injury at least looked improved; when he peeled back the dressings from the ‘saber burn on his neck, the wound was starting to close, with blisters giving way to a thick yellowish scab, and a thin line of fresh pink skin forming around the edges.
He covered the wound again, splashed some water on his face, and then inspected said face in the small mirror over the sink. Hollow, tired eyes stared back, pale skin stretched over thin bones, brown fading-out to reddish straggly hair in need of a trim, and five-days of bearded scruff.

Not his best look ever. He hoped.

He was up, dressed and washed. Target one achieved.

Target two: Investigate singing. Target three: breakfast, or dinner, or whatever meal was available. Targets 2 and 3 not necessarily to be achieved in that order.

Ben headed off down a long corridor, following the soft sound of the distant melodic chanting. The route wound to the left and right, and finally terminated in a closed door. Ben knocked and waited, but no-one answered and the singing didn’t falter. He hesitated for a moment with his hand on the panel, but in the end hunger won out over good manners and he slid the door open and stepped inside.

Ben had thought he would be walking back into the garden room he had first seen, but the space that greeted his eyes now was much, much larger, though the abundance of plant life was just as present. Here, though, the planting seemed more decorative than functional, and instead of trailing downwards the plants grew up; vines and ivy and a multitude of other thickly-leaved climbing plants wound up around seventeen wall stanchions, curling their way up to the domed roof above. The wall between each entwined pillar was painted a faded dusty grey-blue and the carpet was mossy green so that walking into the room gave Ben the feeling of standing on a low hill in the evening and looking out through a crown of trees as the light slowly faded from the dusky sky.

He dragged his eyes from the spectacle and looked towards the singers. In the centre of the room, sitting with her back to him, was Ysella. In front of her were at least a dozen others; females and males, adults and children; clustered in a rough semi-circle. To Ben’s untrained eye he thought they were all of the Dhosana, like his hosts. Some were seated and some standing, and all were singing or chanting or humming. Ben’s eyes automatically sought out his family. Tiki and Ooouli were there, sitting on the end of a row, slightly apart from the others. Pakat was nowhere to be seen. Tiki and a few of the other children stared at Ben as he entered, but no-one moved or broke off their singing. Loathed to be a disruption, Ben slid the door closed behind him and then quietly sat down against the wall.

The rhythm of the song soon pulled him in, and he closed his eyes, letting the haunting melody flow over him. It was not quite a song after all it seemed, and it lacked any of the structural elements one might associate with formal music. Ben could not even be confident that the participants were all singing the same piece; the woven sounds of chanting and singing in different melodies and tempos seemed to rise up and then sometimes to die away entirely, leaving only one solo voice, the voice which formed the framework of the entire piece, to carry them along until the others picked up the sound once more.

After a few minutes lost in the shifting dynamics of the music, Ben started to focus on the actual words themselves. The language was not Kheeli and seemed as unfamiliar to him at first as that tongue had once been. But the song seemed imbued with more than language and soon the shape of a story began to take place in his mind. He saw three beings bonded together for eternity, timeless and unending. One was brighter to the eye, more brilliant than a sun; two were soft shadows and subtle as moonlight, turning in ceaseless orbits through the paths of each others’ existence, sometimes strong and sometimes weak, the perfect balance of waxing and waning. Together, always. Except when they were broken. One travelled too far ahead. One was lost to darkness, and one fell behind. They were eternal, and the breaking would pass. The three will be together again. But for now, she
who is left behind is the last. The lonely one. She must remember her light. Until the time passes. This too shall pass.

Ben blinked his eyes open as the song changed. Two of the participants at the back of the group had fallen silent, and slipped out of the door. After a few minutes, Ben saw another Dhosan leave, and then another, and another, until there was only one last child left behind. Now Ben could hear that Ysella’s voice had been the one carrying the melody, and she sang on, as sure and certain as ever, despite the loss of her audience. The child hummed along with her for a few more moments, staring boldly at Ben. Then it too scampered out of one the doors at the back of the room, without a word.

Ysella continued for perhaps half a minute, and then she too fell silent. The Kheelian girls stopped nodding along and Ooouli jumped up.

“Hello Ben!” she exclaimed, with the same delight she held for him every time.

“Hello,” he greeted her back. “Hello Ysella.”

The Dhosan woman stretched, and then turned slightly to look at him, her head tilted, unsmiling. She nodded once in his direction but said nothing.

“We thought you might stay sleeping for days,” Ooouli was saying as she trotted over to him, “like last time!” Ben let the girl pull him up to his feet, and then they patted each other’s hair for a moment or two, in greeting. Tiki arrived then, and shoved her way in between the pair of them to have her own mane thoroughly fussed.

“I rather thought I had been,” Ben confessed. “How long have we been here?”

“Not long,” Ooouli reassured him, pulling him further into the room. “You fell asleep in the greeting room while Papa was introducing you. Then we had lunch and then Papa and Tiki had a nap too. I did some history with Ysella, and now Papa has gone down to the town with Yalani to find Mama.”

“I see,” said Ben, trying to follow all that. “So it’s still the same day?”

“Yes, silly,” Ooouli said, affectionately. “It is only 21 turns. I am glad you didn’t sleep through the festival.”

“It’s Kel-Marr!” said Tiki, excitedly, tugging on his arm.

“Oh, yes,” Ben said, recalling. “The festival, I remember. But 21 turns is late; shouldn’t you both be thinking about heading to bed by now?”

“No, Ben! It is Second Night! Everything is about to begin.”

“And what, precisely, is ‘everything’?”

“It is fun,” Ooouli assured him. “You will like it.”

“Lights go up in the sky!” Tiki said.

Ooouli nodded, encouragingly, “That’s right, then there are fireworks, and presents, and stories, and everyone eats so much; we always have tarvaroot chips, chaala sticks and fried kirtone buns. Last festival, I was sick. Twice,” she added, with an air of pride.

“My word,” Ben said, faintly impressed.
"Speaking of food," said Ysella, from behind them. "Pakat said you must eat as soon as you awoke." Ben turned, and saw the Dhosan woman was watching them, unsmiling. She gestured towards a door to one side of the room. "He set aside some food in the kitchen which is safe for Pechnar."

"Thank you," Ben said. "Yes, I am rather hungry."

Ysella made to get up, but Ooouli stopped her.

"Do not worry, Auntie Ysa, we will show him how to get there."

Ysella nodded. Ben looked at the woman’s face, sensing an unfriendliness; odd given how beloved she seemed to be of the children, and how unperturbed she had been by their unannounced arrival earlier in the day. He wasn’t sure how he had upset her since then, but he was determined to try and neutralise her dislike, if possible. He took a gamble.

"Can we bring you back anything from the kitchen?" he asked. "Some tea, perhaps?"

There was a moment when he thought she would refuse, but after a brief struggle, his strategy paid off. She agreed.

"Some tea. Thank you."

Ooouli led him down more bewildering corridors into another large round room, ringed with cupboards and cooking apparatus. Ben was surprised to note several cooking hearths scattered around; the room seemed to have a communal function like the lounge they had just left. Ooouli and Tiki located the food Pakat had set aside for them, while Ben set the kettle to boil and, with Ooouli’s help, identified a packet of tea which she assured was the correct type for the occasion.

When they returned, Ben carrying the tray a little awkwardly one handed, Ysella let them set out the tea things in silence, and received her cup from Ben with a nod. One point to him. Time to try a little conversation.

"That was a beautiful song, Ysella," Ben told her, with honesty. "Though it is a shame more of your audience could not stay to hear the end."

Ysella stretched a little, and said:

"If they had not have left, then there would have been no end. The words will continue as long as there are those to hear them. And it is not a song."

"I’m sorry," said Ben, still curious, but trapped on the tightrope between showing interest and prying. "What would you call it?"

Ysella gave him a shrewd look. "Now you are asking for a truth," she said. "Such things - tales, histories, knowledge – they are a currency of their own right in Dhosana culture. They are not given for free."

Ben floundered for a second, uncertain how to proceed. He had no money, beyond the credits Shaarm had been keeping for him, and no idea how to access them. He had very few possessions at all, and nothing he would be willing to barter with. He was about to withdraw his question, if he could, when Tiki spoke up.

"Ben made tea," she said, firmly.
Ben looked up, surprised to hear the quiet child speak, but Ooouli agreed with her sister.

“That’s right, Auntie Ysa. He did bring you tea.”

“I suppose he did,” Ysella said, after a moment’s pause. “Very well. What you heard was The Story, that is, part of the entire history of my people. Shaarm’s people, the Kheelians, they write down the words of their history, trapping them as dead shapes within the pages of books. For the Dhosana, history is alive and ever-growing, and therefore we keep it alive in the retelling through the sound of our voices.”

Ben nodded, remembering Grandmother reading aloud from the Death Lists in Shaarm’s house. It seemed the Dhosana oral history tradition was even stronger than that of the Kheelians.

“Ysella is the Storykeeper,” explained Ooouli. “She is the only one for miles and miles. Most of her stories are in Dhosi, but some she creates just for us, in Kheeli, so that everyone can join in.”

Ysella smiled at the girl, and it transformed her face. It was clear she held the children with great affection at least.

“And, may I ask, the story you were just telling...” Ben asked. “That was a piece of your history?”


Ben nodded, pleased her frostiness seemed to be thawing. He picked up the flask Patak had left for him and took a large swig of what turned out to be warm and slightly sulphurous tasting slime. He managed, through a test of rather remarkable will power, not to immediately throw up. Ben forced himself to swallow the gloop, coughed a little and grimaced. The girls both laughed.

“What...” he stared into the flask at viscous, pinkish mucus.

“It is raw szaari lizard eggs mixed with soured caprius milk.” Ysella explained, herself looking faintly amused at his expression. “Highly nutritious, if not very palatable. Yalani did add a little cinna to improve the flavour.”

“If this is improved, I’d hate to taste it before,” Ben said, with probably more honesty than was polite. He almost saw Ysella smile again.

With some effort he managed to force down the rest of the flaskful and then washed away the taste with more tea. The meal was good for him, he reminded himself. The IV fluids had helped but he needed as much energy from calories too as he could get, if he was going to improve. He already felt much better than he expected he had a right too, after everything that had happened. But this burst of energy wouldn’t last long before he had to sleep again. In the meantime he distracted himself from the noxious sulphurous taste of the raw eggs by listening to the children chatter with their host about doings in the enclave as they ate their own supper of sliced fruit.

Ben’s conclusion that this was a communal area was probably confirmed when a door opened and a Dhosan child wandered in. It may even have been the one who had been the last to leave at the end of the song. Based on its pure white fur, its size, and the supposition that the Dhosana all seemed to be smaller than their Kheelian cousins, Ben put the child’s age at a few years less than Ooouli. Working out its gender would be trickier.

None of the others in the room paid the child much attention, and it bounded across the room and directly up to Ben. Then it reared up on its back legs and stared down at him determinedly.

“Ah,” Ben said, unsure how to deal with the intense inspection. “Hello.”
The child wrinkled its nose consideringly. “'lo,” It replied, then dropped to all fours, leaned forwards, and bared its teeth in a rather alarming fashion. It shoved one grubby paw into its mouth and said, slightly muffled;

“I got a loose tooth.”

“Goodness,” said Ben.

“Look!” demanded the child, wiggling the offending canine back and forth.

Ben duly marvelled. “I can see. Yes, it is loose. I expect that will come out soon. Mind you don’t swallow it!”

“Ha!” said the child. “As if. You do not know anyway, you have not got any grown-up teeth at all!”

“Actually,” Ben corrected, “My teeth just look different to yours, but they are all grown-up teeth.”

He poked his tongue against his teeth in surprise for a moment, before adding; “Well, except three on this side, which...yes, appear to be false. Hmm.”

“Wow,” said the child, with a certain gruesome delight. “Can I see?”

“Me too!”

Ben obligingly opened his mouth, and was soon almost smothered in children as Tiki and Ooouli also clambered over to have a look.

“Why would you have false teeth?” the child said.

“Where are the real ones?” Ooouli asked, poking at the dental implant where Ben’s right premolar would have been.

“I don’t remember,” Ben told them, after he had extracted Ooouli’s giant hand. It was true enough, he hadn’t even known it himself until that moment. It was an unsettling thought.

“You are funny looking,” announced the child with the loose tooth, who then looked to Ooouli. “What is this thing, anyway? Is it yours?”

“'It’ is a him,” Ooouli said, firmly, “and he is called Ben. He is all his own.”

“ Weird,” said the child. Then, with a magnanimous air, it patted Ben on the head and said, “You can stay, I suppose.”

“Well, thank you,” Ben said, gravely.

“See you at the festival!” yelled the child, who snatched two fruits off the tray and dashed off at top speed, back out of the door.

“One of yours?” asked Ben, when the sound of the slamming door had faded. He didn’t think Pakat had mentioned any children.

“That was Falayan. He is mine, to some extent. He is all of ours. His mothers are gone, and so he goes where he pleases in the compound and wherever he stops he will be cared for as long as he chooses to stay. He is a son of the family. That is the Dhosana way.”

“Well, at least I have a name to put to the whirlwind.”
Ysella gave a small sigh. “He can be a handful,” she agreed. “But all the children will be excited by the festival.”

“And that is due to begin soon?”

“At 22 turns.”

“Shaarm said the festival was to do with the eclipse...” Ben said, still intrigued and angling for more information. He had no way to know what the exchange rate between information and tea-making might amount to, so he couldn’t tell how far one pot would take him. Ooouli came to his rescue.

“Can I tell him, Auntie Ysa? Ben has taught me lots of things in the past, so it is a fair exchange.”

Ooouli looked at Ysella, and on her approving nod, stood up as if reciting something.

“*Kel-marr* is the festival of the Lonely Moon,” Ooouli explained. “It is celebrated every eight-hundred days, when *Balla* moon is cast into shadow for three nights. On First Night, everyone stays at home with their families to con-tem-plate. On Second Night – that is tonight, Ben - it is the procession of lights; the lights shine up into the sky to show the lonely moon we are all with her. And Third Night is celebration for the return of the lost moon, and then everyone stays up until dawn to see the sun and the two moons all in the sky together. It is so much fun!”

“It sounds very interesting,” Ben agreed. “You teach very well, Ooouli.”

The girl beamed.

“Your story, the one you were telling when I came in,” Ben considered out loud, turning to Ysella. “That was the story of the eclipse, I take it? I’m afraid I didn’t understand all of it, but I gathered it was about the three- siblings? Lovers? I couldn’t be sure – who are separated, and then find their way back together again. Those characters represent the sun and the two moons, I take it...”

Ysella was staring at him. Ben faltered and stopped, realising something was wrong.

“How do you know that?” Ysella said, quietly.

Ben blinked. “I heard the song,” he said. “I am sorry if I intruded on a private event, I knocked but no-one answ-”

“The Story is told in Dhosi,” she interrupted. “That language is secret. How did you understand it?”

“I-” said Ben, and was then at a loss. Ooouli intervened.

“Ben is very smart,” she told Ysella. “He speaks Kheeli perfectly, and he only learned it just a ten-day ago.”

“No-one learns Dhosi,” Ysella said, still staring at Ben with that unfriendly, slightly suspicious look.

“Of course. I understand,” Ben said, quite resolved that he would not mention it again. He silently cursed. One step forward and two steps back. It seemed he had once again alienated his prickly host.

Fortunately it was at about that moment a door behind them slid aside, and Yalani entered. Pakat was not with him.

The Dhosan greeted Ysella and then stared at Ben in something like amazement.

“Surprised to see me awake?” Ben guessed.
“Astonished,” Yalani said. “Pakat told us how you ran yourself into the ground saving the boy. I thought you would be out of it for days.”

Ben shrugged a little. In truth his strength was already starting to flag, but he had no intention of showing it.

“I heal quickly,” was all he said.

“Still, you do look tired.”

Ben raised an eyebrow, as Ooouli said; “He just met Falayan.”

“Ah. That would explain that, then.”

Yalani still insisted on examining Ben’s wounds and checking his vital signs, on Shaarm’s orders, so the two of them returned to the sleeping room to get a little peace and quiet and to let the children get ready for heading out to the festivities.

Yalani checked all of the wound sites and dressings, and pressed Ben’s ribs and collarbone, much as Ben himself had done not an hour before. The Dhosan also noted his pulse and blood pressure with another zol device, recording everything on a datapad. Yalani readily admitting he didn’t know what any of the readings meant for Pechnar but that they would hopefully mean something to Shaarm. While Yalani was measuring his oxygen saturation, Ben broached the subject which had been bothering him all evening.

“Yalani, I apologise if this seems out of turn, but your sister...I feel that I have in some way offended her but I am not sure how. I would like to fix whatever it is, but...”

Yalani, sighed and sat back. “You must forgive Ysa,” he said. “She... well, she suffers constantly from pains in her leg and spine, and her patience is not what it was.”

“May I ask what happened?” Ben asked.

“The war, of course,” Yalani said, making a quick annotation on the pad. “What else? She was injured in the explosion which killed our parents. Severe nerve damage. It is the reason I learned nursing skills, actually. To care for her, afterwards, though those skills served me well when we came to live here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Ben said, truly saddened.

“It is passed,” Yalani said. “But thank you. Regardless, you should not blame yourself, or regret your actions. Those too are passed.”

“My actions? So I did do something?”

Yalani looked uncomfortable. “Pakat and Ooouli-” and Ben noted he also always used the long form of the girl’s name, rather than the shortened form Ben had given her- “They were telling us what occurred with the narms, and when you and Chana escaped with the children during the Thet siege...At the farmhouse, when the creatures attacked...”

“And...?” Ben pressed.

Yalani looked away. “You gave a child a weapon.”

Ben gaped. “I...”
But the children had been nowhere near the lightsaber. He would never have let them touch it. He had fought off the narms in the doorway, with Chana at his back, holding the back entrance. The narms had broken through, but Chana had put the girls up onto the roof, and they had-

Ben had given Ooouli the staff. He had remembered thinking that she wouldn’t have the strength to hold the creatures off alone, if he and Chana were killed. But at least with a weapon she and Tiki would have had a chance. She had been so afraid, and he had been so proud of her.

“I gave Ooouli an old walking stick! Made of duralumin! It was hardly a live grenade.”

“Nevertheless,” Yalani said, unhappily. “There will be those who think you have endangered her wellbeing by encouraging her to hurt another creature-“

Ben’s indignation was quickly souring to anger.

“Endangered her wellbeing? She saved her sister’s life that night!”

“Ben, I understand,” Yalani said, holding up his hands placatingly. “I do not condemn your actions though I cannot condone them. I, for one, am proud of Ooouli. I said so at the time, to Tiki. But Ysella and others...they see things differently.”

“Those children are alive right now because Ooouli defended them both,” Ben snapped. “Chana and I could not have got to them in time. And Nenka, he was critically injured because he did not know how to defend himself in a conflict. Would you rather they were all dead than raised a hand in their own defence?”

“Of course not! They are children. But the responsibility for that violence must lie somewhere. If they had died it would lie with the narms. They did not die, so in Ysa’s eyes, it lies with you.”

“I can’t believe this,” Ben muttered. That night of the Thet siege had been a victory. He had got the family to safety, and himself too, if rather by the skin of his teeth. Ooouli and Tiki had faced something terrifying, and they had both survived, and come out of it stronger and braver, and no less light-hearted or loving. Yes, of course he would have rather they had never been in danger, had never been afraid, or hurt, or forced to pick up a weapon and fight for their lives. But it had happened, and they had passed that test. There would always be darkness and danger in the world. Someone had to be prepared to fight it.

Yalani was looking at him strangely, and Ben realised that his anger and frustration were starting to bleed through the thin veneer of his calm. Exhaustion was already eroding his emotional balance even further, but he had to remember that he was a guest here. It was not his place to judge the Dhosana values, or tell them how to raise their own children. He had defended their lives, and that was enough.

*There is no passion, there is serenity;* he felt the words flow out of his subconscious into the Force and curl about his tattered self; embracing him, firm but secure, calm. *There is no emotion, there is peace.*

“I apologise,” Ben said, after a moment’s pause. “I respect that your views are different to mine, and that I have offended you and Ysella. Peace and non-violence are most admirable goals and ones that everyone, adult or child, should strive to uphold. But you should understand that I don’t regret what I did. To me, life is sacred over all other things. The children’s’ lives. I believe that with continued guidance and love and teaching they will suffer no ill effects of what happened, and will learn from it.”
Yalani nodded, looking unhappy, but all he said was; “I understand what you are saying. It has been a difficult time for us all, adjusting after the end of the war, living here side by side. Ooouli and the other children like her are very special to us.”

Ben nodded, and at that moment the door slid slightly open. As if summoned, Ooouli put her head into the room.

“Ben, is everything all right?” She asked, glancing between the two of them. “I heard shouting.”

Ben looked away from Yalani, and then sighed a little. “Everything is fine, Ooouli, I’m sorry. Just a little misunderstanding – My fault.”

The girl didn’t look convinced but she stepped into the room, holding out a bundle.

“I brought you your things, so you can get dressed, and another cup of your medicine drink. Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Ben said, not adding he had felt distinctly better before realising he had to drink another cup of szaari eggs. He accepted his shirt - blood free but a little damp - boots and scarf more gratefully. The bundle did not contain his lightsaber, but given the almost argument he had just had with Yalani, Ben decided he was rather glad of that. Hopefully Pakat had hidden the weapon away somewhere safe for the time being.

Ben pulled on the shirt first, and then sipped at the disgusting drink one-handed while Yalani re-tied the sling that lifted the weight of Ben’s left arm off his broken collarbone. Then Ben sat on the floor, setting the cup to one side as he negotiated the handful of the clothing and the heavy boots. He even remembered to shake the stones that had been digging into his ankle out of the left boot before pulling it on. He stuffed the stones into his pocket; souvenirs, no doubt, of their moorland adventure the previous night.

“All you excited for the festival?” He asked Ooouli, as he set about battling the laces one-handed.

Ooouli nodded, but looked to Yalani.

“Will Papa be back in time, Uncle Yali?” she asked.

“He is going to meet us in the square,” Yalani confirmed.

“And Mama?” Ooouli asked, sounding a little anxious.

“I do not know. Perhaps, if she can get away from the surgery.”

“Okay,” said the girl, but Ben heard something in her voice. He abandoned his bootlace for the moment, and stood up until he was as near eye to eye with her as possible. “Ooouli, is everything alright?”

She frowned a little. “It is just silly, but...Tiki is too little to remember last festival. I wanted it to be a proper one, for her. With everyone here. And Cousin Nenka needs Mama now, I know that, but Papa has gone away and we left Dada behind, and...”

“Listen to me, Ooouli,” Ben said, “That is not silly. You want your family by your side, and safe, so you can celebrate together. That is not silly. I know your mother and fathers are thinking exactly the same thing now, and wishing they could be with the two of you, more than anything. I am sorrier than I can say for my part in you all being split up tonight. I wish I could fix it. But you told me the story of the Lonely Moon yourself – tonight is about giving strength to all those separated from their
loved ones. You all look up at the same sky, and you will find each other again. Do you believe me?"

She nodded, her eyes a little wet, but he could see she was comforted. “Yes, Ben.”

“Good,” he said, and gave her a firm hug.

At his back, the door to the sleep room suddenly slid aside with a thud, and what seemed like a small noisy tornado tore into the room. Ben could make a large figure bouncing wildly across the mattress and yelling at the top of its lungs.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go, let’s-”

Yalani tried to capture the white blob as it rocketed passed but missed.

“Falayan, will you please-”

“Come on!” The boy demanded, pulling on Yalani’s sleeve. “We will be late for the festival!”

There was a laugh from the doorway, and Ben saw Tiki was hovering there too, watching with sparkling eyes. All three of the children were dressed in warm coats and scarves, ready for the night air.

“All right, we are coming,” Yalani said. “Is Ysella ready?”

“Yes, she is waiting in the hallway, now come on.” The boy was clearly unable to contain his excitement and dashed back out of the room. Tiki followed him with another shrieking laugh.

“Ben,” Yalani said, “You do not need to come if you do not feel up to it. I am reluctant to leave you here alone, although it is a fair walk into town...”

“I’ll come,” said Ben, finishing his laces and the last of the disgusting energy drink. “I wouldn’t miss it. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t say it but there was no way he was leaving the girls at a time like this. Not when Oououli was feeling so afraid and alone. Not when they didn’t know when Pakat would return. Not when there could be Jedi around any corner. Instead, Ben did up his coat over the sling, leaving the left sleeve empty, and tucked the scarf in around his neck. He was ready.

They met Ysella in the first garden room. Ben eyed her consideringly, but she just looked calmly back before turning away. She had made up her mind about him, it seemed.

The group of them, three adults and three children, made their way out of the apartment and into the corridor. The enclave was a rabbit warren of corridors and rooms, some seemingly private, some shared living spaces and with no obvious difference to Ben’s eyes between them. Plant life was everywhere. Broad-leaved decorative plants, as tall as trees, stood in corners or against walls, or as centre points in large circular rooms. Once Ben glimpsed a long corridor off to his right set up as a hydroponics garden, with plants cascading out of tiered channels down to the floor below. At last, when Ben was completely disorientated, they seemed suddenly to have made their way to an exit. Yalani, pushed open a narrow door, and cold night streamed in. The group followed him out into the dark, and the door closed behind them.

Ben stopped. It was still foggy, and if anything, the murk had grown even thicker than before. The night was cold in a way that ached deep in his chest, and it was very dark, so dark that Ben could barely see his hand in front of his face, or the glimmer of the children’s fur. Ysella, with her dark
blue colouring, was all but invisible. There were no artificial lights at all from the buildings behind
them to break up the all consuming dark that pressed in on them on all sides, only a low, orange
glow along the horizon that silhouetted the buildings of the enclave like a slumbering krayt dragon.
Ben looked up and saw a pale gleam glimmering through the mists; the Lonely Moon, smothered in
her isolation.

Tiki leaned up against Ben on one side, excited and a little bit scared. He rubbed her ears calmingly.

“Ah, they have turned out the town lights already, it seems. Is everyone all right?” Yalani asked.
“Ooouli, have you got Tiki and Ben?”

“Yes, Yalani,” Ooouli answered from by Ben’s shoulder, taking his hand. Ben smiled a little through
the dark. A few minutes ago Yalani had been criticising Ben for putting children into danger. Now
he seemed to have fallen back into his default state of thinking Ben a child himself.

Ahead, Ben could hear Falayan tugging on Yalani’s arm; the child seemed entirely unperturbed by
the consuming darkness,

“Let’s go! Come on, the square is this way.”

“Falayan, you know full well I cannot go as fast as you,” He heard Ysella scold, through the dark.
“If you were not willing to wait then you should have chosen someone else to walk with.”

“But I want to go with you. Ooouli and Tiki are here, and so is their Ben-thing.”

“Then you will have to go at my pace. Come on.”

As the group moved off, Ben realised that, even though his night vision was clearly worse than both
the Kheelians and the Dhosana, he could somehow sense the alleyway around them. He could use
the Force to compensate for the darkness by feeling the shape of the space, and even sensing the way
the air currents moved through it. Even were it blacker than pitch out here, he could still walk safely
through the alley, if he concentrated. That skill could turn out to be rather useful indeed. He reached
out carefully and tentatively with the tremulous Force as they walked, felt the walls on either side,
and ahead, in the direction of the orange glow, he could perceive a mass of life. Many beings must
be standing there, just around the corner. Despite that knowledge, he was still not prepared for the
sight that met his eyes when they rounded it.

Ooouli gasped. They had stepped into the round open space at the entrance to the enclave that Pakat
had led them to that morning. Only now it contained perhaps a hundred Dhosana, and each was
enveloped in a pool of light. The fog around them was glowing like it was a living thing, curling
around their giant forms like a luminescent vapour. The light, Ben noticed after a moment, was
emanating from the hundreds of copper and duralumin dishes and bowls he had observed earlier.
Each appeared to be brimming over with light; candles floated on each radiant surface, bathing the
Dhosana faces in flickering illumination: midnight blue, sunlit gold and white as starlight.

Ben stood, utterly enchanted for a moment, before he became aware of another discussion was
taking place beside him. Yalani had produced a small copper bowl from a sack he had been carrying,
and was filling it with water. Ysella was holding a few candles and a frown.

“No, Falayan,” she was saying. “Ooouli is going to carry the light.”

“Why?”

“Well Tiki is too little, and as for you, well, I do not think I can handle a repeat of what happened
last festival.”
Ooouli leaned over to Ben. “He dropped his candles and set someone’s mane on fire,” she explained.

“It was awesome,” said Falayan, happily.

“Here,” said Yalani, handing the dish with its lit candles careful to Ooouli. “Now, Falayan, Tiki, these are for you.”

He gave each child a long plastoid tube, like a flare casing, which, after a brief shake, began to emit a warm blue glow. Tiki waved hers enthusiastically side to side, and announced:

“Lightsaber!”

Fortunately, for Ben’s sake, neither of the two adult Dhosana seemed to comprehend that statement. Ben gave Tiki’s fur a reassuring pat, hoping she wouldn’t mention the weapon again.

They took their place amongst the waiting Dhosana; Yalani guiding them through the crowd to a spot somewhere in the centre. Around them were adults and children and elderly, clustered into small family groups or with friends or in pairs, but no-one was alone. Ben, as usual, received many stares but no-one approached him to look closer; it seemed there was enough excitement about the upcoming events that his presence was tempered to a mere curiosity.

After a few more minutes, when the last few stragglers had arrived, some silent signal seemed to prompt the ceremonies to begin. All of the dishes of light were lifted up, and then the entire group began to move, walking out of the courtyard and down into the street. The pace of the procession was slow, due to the presence of so many children and old folk, allowing both Ben and Ysella to keep pace easily. The fog shimmered about them, making the procession seem like a river of light that slowly flowed down the hillside, streaming with blue shadows and glinting with highlights of white and gold. As they passed each street more Kheelians, all bearing dishes of light, would merge into the parade like tributaries flowing into a river.

As they reached the base of the hill, Ysella began to sing, a low rhythmic chant that soon began to rise in volume. The Dhosana on each side added their voices, and then Ben heard singers behind them join in, and soon the Kheelian and Dhosan voices all around were rising up like a wave of sound that shook the air. The fog around them glowed and the night sang.

Ben followed Ooouli and Ysella as closely as he could, flanked on both sides by Tiki and Falayan, and with Yalani at his back. By now there must have been a thousand creatures in the procession and Ben felt rather like a small pebble being tumbled along in a rushing stream as the Kheelians towered over and around him. It was strange and disconcerting to be so utterly surrounded by the giant creatures; this was, after all the most number of beings Ben could ever remember witnessing and it was a more than a little awe-inspiring. But he was not afraid. The Force was ringing through him like a clear bell.

At last the procession began to slow again, and peering between the tall Kheelians, Ben could just about perceive an open square in the heart of the town. He could see perhaps a thousand more Kheelians waiting there, light streaming into the fog from the dishes and lanterns that they held like a living vapour. They too were singing, a hundred different melodies and rhythms that Ben could barely comprehend, only the overwhelming sense that they offered strength and patience and courage as they let their light pass up into the heavens to comfort the lonely moon in her solitude.

Soon, the singing began to dwindle into talking and burst of laughter as friends and family members greeted each other, although it did not entirely abate, as here and there pockets of song would still rise up above the hubbub, even after Ysella herself had stopped singing. The crack of the first fireworks took Ben by surprise, even though he had been expecting it, and it was greeted by cheers
Yalani disappeared across the square towards a line of stalls, and returned a short while later clutching a bag of food items. Ben turned down the tarva chips and jubaberry sauce with a smile and a shake of his head, but he agreed to try the kirtone bun he was handed, with a healthy caution. He was astonished to find it the most delicious thing he had ever eaten. It was apparently some form of hot caprius cheese, cooked with a crusted sugary outside and warm creamy centre. Tiki was delighted with his obvious enjoyment. The chaala sticks too were good; cold this time, and crunchy, with a nutty sort of flavour. Not as good as the kirtone buns, but still pretty amazing. Ben didn’t know if any of the festival food had any nutritional value, but if it did, he was quite prepared to live off it forever and never even think about raw lizard eggs ever again.

Just as he was finishing his third kirtone bun, a group of a dozen or so children burst out of the crowd to greet Ooouli, Tiki and Falayan with shouts of excitement and delight. There was much showing off and admiring of small toys and trinkets that the other children seemed to have received as festival gifts. Eventually one of the newcomers noticed Ben, and this time he didn’t escape the inquisitive prods and pats as the children explored this new curiosity that Ooouli and Tiki had brought. Although their attention eventually waned when he failed to do anything more exciting than smile politely, their actions were enough to draw some attention from the nearby adults. They too began to stare, curiously.

Ben began to consider if this had all been a mistake. He was certainly enjoying himself, no doubt about it, and watching the creatures around him so relaxed and at peace was soothing after the chaos and fear of the past few days. The procession of light: that had been utterly captivating in its otherworldliness. But it seemed wherever he went he drew attention to himself, and Shaarm had sent him and the children to lay low at Yalani’s house deliberately to avoid such a thing. The Jedi were still out there, after all. Perhaps they were even here, at the festival, though Ben could not sense them. He doubted even the Jedi could pick out one human at night, through fog, and in the midst of two thousand excited Kheelians. But added to all this; he was tired, so tired. Despite being awake less than three turns, the exhaustion and the endless cold was creeping back up on him. Yalani had been right; it had been a long walk into town, further than Ben had walked for a while. He wasn’t entirely confident he was going to make it back up the hill at all. But that was a problem for later, and for now he was content. For attending the festival had led to kirtone buns, and in Ben’s view, nothing that involved fried kirtone buns could possibly be a mistake.

“Mama!”

Ben turned at Ooouli’s yell, and there were Shaarm and Pakat, materializing out of the fog like apparitions. Tiki and Ooouli threw themselves into their parents’ arms, laughing with delight. Ben stayed aside as they reunited, before he was suddenly pulled into Pakat’s gasp too and firmly hugged. After a flurry of conversation, the children scampered away to fetch food for their parents. It was probably needed; Shaarm looked exhausted, and Pakat didn’t seem much better. They had all had long days and several sleepless nights of fear and worry, so there was no surprise in that.

“Yalani said you were awake, and had joined the festival,” Shaarm said, turning to Ben and mussing with his hair, “I couldn’t believe it.”

Ben nodded a little, smiling in his joy at seeing her. “The threat of more szaari eggs would get anyone out of bed. Nenka?”
Shaarm sighed a little.

“We have completed the surgery. He will live,” she said, reassuringly, but Ben could see Pakat was upset.

“But ...?” Ben persisted, looking between the pair.

“There was...severe damage before the tissues grew back at an abnormal rate. Some vessels did not reattach correctly.”

“There is permanent damage,” Ben guessed, with a sinking feeling.

“He will retain problems for the remainder of his life,” Shaarm confirmed, “but at the very least he will have one, thanks to you. It is possible he will not be able to speak again, but there is nothing more we can do for him now, until his strength improves.”

Ben frowned unhappily. He remembered the teen reading aloud to Oouoli and Tiki when they were frightened. The way he had genially haggled with his uncle over tarvaroots in the little store. His reassuring presence at Ben’s side when he had been lying injured and near delirious during the narms’ siege at Thet.

“I should like to visit him,” Ben said, “if that would be possible.” The man had sworn to protect the Kheelians that night on the moor. He had been determined to make peace with the narms; resolute that no-one else would die. Well, no-one had. But Nenka had paid a terrible price for Ben’s inability to uphold his unspoken oath, and, more critically, for Ben’s failure to understand and utilise his own powers properly. He knew what is was Shaarm wasn’t saying.

The Kheelian woman frowned. “He is very weak,” she warned.

“Please.”

Shaarm sighed. “Very well. Perhaps tomorrow. But he will be asleep. It may be a long time before he wakes.”

Ben suspected Shaarm was still not being entirely candid with him, but he was too tired to push her now. This was as much of a concession as he would get. He nodded his thanks, and shoved his lose hand into his pocket, unable to avoid shivering a little in the cold. Shaarm inspected Ben critically through the fog.

“You look tired, Ben. You probably should have remained at Yalani’s house. Nenka was not the only one who almost died last night.”

“Perhaps. But I... I didn’t want the children to be alone,” Ben said, with a slightly abashed look. Shaarm broke out into a sudden quick smile, which disappeared as Ben asked: “Have you heard from Chana or Grandmother at all?”

“No,” she answered. “There is no telewire or any comms running at the moment. Apart from the trains, everything is shut down for the festival. But do not worry; Chana would have found way to send word if there was a problem, I am sure. We can only hope that the narms have kept their word, and that the Jedi have moved on.”

Ben nodded, but he still had a bad feeling about all of it. He hated leaving Chana and Grandmother, who had been so good to him, alone up there to deal with the spectres of Ben’s past. The Jedi were, by rights, his problem and his alone. Sooner or later he was going to have to face them, and there may not be time to wait for his full strength to return before that happened. Ben certainly did not
want to confront them, but he also did not want to put anyone else in danger on his behalf.

Shaarm and Pakat were soon distracted once more by their children, who were excitedly pointing out all the sights of the festival to their parents. Feeling himself growing slightly dizzy with tiredness, and keen not to attract any more attention by doing something horrible like collapsing, Ben took a quiet seat on a shadowed doorstep of a nearby house. Here he could watch the festivities around, and keep a look out for anything more threatening, but remain more or less out of sight. To his surprise, Ysella came to join him.

“Bad leg,” was all she said in response to his questioning look.

They rested for a while and, in a more or less companionable silence, watched the children playing. Ooouli and Tiki and Falayan had been joined by four more children, three Kheelians and a Dhosan, and they were laughing and darting about in the fog, engaged in some game of catch. Yalani, Pakat and Shaarm were talking intently about something as the latter two ate and watched the sights of the festival. Somewhere musicians were playing strange, haunting music and all around them the fog gleamed gold from the light of a thousand candles. Above their heads, bursts of colour from the fireworks splashed across the palate of the sky and over the moon’s pale face.

“I would like to ask a question, if I may,” Ben began, quietly, as he watched Ooouli lift her sister up so that Tiki could look over the crowd. “I still have...six chaala sticks, if that is enough to exchange for an answer?”

Ysella looked faintly amused, but she nodded and took the snacks. “I must hear your question before I decided if that is a fair trade.”

“It is about Ooouli...Yalani said she was special. She and the ‘other children like her’, I got the impression he was referring to something more than normal protectiveness for younglings.”

Ysella nodded. “All of the children of the Peace Years are precious to us, but the first generation born after the end of the War is particularly special. They came to symbolise all of our hopes for the future. She is one of these, though she is younger than most. Like many of the first Kheelian children, she has a Dhosi name, just as many of the first Dhosana children have names from the Kheeli language. It is a good name, an old name, from the roots of our language before it divided. Perhaps this is why you have found some trouble pronouncing it; I have heard you call her ‘Ooouli’...”

But Ben had stopped listening. Something had clicked in his mind as Ysella spoke, and, as all the little pieces of evidence quietly fell into place, he came to a sudden realisation.

“The Ten Thousand Days’ War....” he said. “It was between the Kheelians and the Dhosana, wasn’t it? Your people were the Kheelians’ enemies.”

There was silence.

“It is not a time we like to speak of,” Ysella said, eventually. “But yes. Once, not so long ago, we were terrible enemies. Many horrific things were done, on both sides, before the War ended.”

Ben watched the children playing, and the adults talking, and all around, Dhosan and Kheelian alike laughing and celebrating.

“Your peoples do not seem to be so very different now,” he observed.

Ysella laughed. “This is a good day,” she said. “There are many problems here, and at times they seem insurmountable. But yes, today the festival brings us together. The story of the Lonely Moon is
one both cultures share. And every day we find more similarities between us, or perhaps it is that our cultures grow more similar. That was the purpose of the migration scheme, after all. It was a condition of the peace agreement – groups from each culture whose homes or towns were destroyed were resettled across the continents to areas dominated by only Kheelians or Dhosana. To integrate, and to learn, and to understand.”

“That was an...interesting approach,” Ben said, both impressed and rather taken aback. “I must say it seems a little calculated. Cold, perhaps.”

It was more than cold, Ben knew. While the outward purpose of the enforced migration might be the integration of both groups, it was instantly apparent to Ben that the Dhosana who now lived in Tszaaf were all but hostages to the goodwill of both nations. They would be the front lines, the first casualties, should hostilities ever resume. They were the keystone of peace. Ben remembered, with a touch of bitterness, the town meeting at Thet, and Boki, the Kheelian who had been riling up the villagers for revenge against the narms, using their fear and prejudice to drag the Kheelians down a road that could only have ended in a bloodbath. We will never be safe here again. Perhaps these peoples’ violent pasts were not as repressed as they hoped. Peace was ever a journey, not a destination.

“Don’t you miss your homes?” Ben asked, “And having your own people around you?”

Ysella gave a half smile. “Every day,” she said. “The Dhosana long for the forests of our homeland; it is so unbearably flat and brown in this land! But if it is the price of lasting peace, we will gladly pay it. As we work to keep our own traditions alive, so too must we learn those of our former enemies. We must adapt or we all die. But perhaps you understand now why we are so dedicated to our path of peace. No teachings of violence or encouragements of aggression can be tolerated, because then everything we have worked for and sacrificed will come under threat.”

Ben nodded, slowly. “I understand,” he said. “Though I still believe in the circumstances what I did was correct and necessary. Were I presented with the same situation again, I do not think my actions and choices would be different. But yes, I admire your dedication to your stance. Non-violence is the ultimate path to peace, even if there are those who must take up arms to defend it, on behalf of those who can, or will, not.”

Ysella looked at him then, long and intensely. Above them, the lights of a thousand flickering candles streamed up into the night towards the lonely moon.

“They tell me,” she said, “that you killed the narms on the road to Thet and never looked back. Then, not two days later, you forced the Kheelians to see those creatures as sentient beings, and then yourself negotiated for peace with them. Ben the Pechnar. The negotiator. The killer. The exile. Who are you?”

“A collection of half-truths and hyperbole,” murmured Ben, with a small smile, and then sighed.

“I don’t know,” he said.

They watched the sky in silence.
Ben gets his fight back and gets into fights. Verbal ones, at least. Sorry this chapter is so loooong. It just all wanted to get told.

Enjoy the calm, folks. There’s a storm coming...

In other news, I’ve kind of been building up a playlist for this. Anyone got any interest in that sort of thing? And thanks again to everyone who comments, leaves kudos or even just lurks and enjoys. Your kind words are a breath of fresh air in my stale world.
Gifts

Chapter Notes

How is this chapter so long. How. I thought about making it two chapters. Should it have been two chapters? I have no sense of perspective anymore. Time and reality are escaping me. My brain is broken. Send help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone slept late the next day, as seemed to be an accepted part of festival tradition. After all, it had been a long few days for everyone. Indeed; shortly after his conversation with Ysella on the doorstep, Ben had fallen fully and deeply asleep where he sat. So much for his intention to maintain a vigilant eye open for his pursuers – anything could have happened while he slumped there, oblivious. Fortunately, nothing had, and if any Jedi were in the town that evening they stayed far away from the festivities. A few hours later, as the festival wound down, Shaarm and Pakat had carried Ben and Tiki, both asleep, back up to the Dhosana enclave on the top of the hill, with Ooouli, Falayan, Yalani and Ysella at their sides. Everyone had collapsed gratefully side by side in the sleep room for several blissful hours, uninterrupted by fear or nightmares.

Peace, however, was not long lived. Falayan had woken them all around 10 turns, bouncing around the sleeping room and shrieking like an incoming TIE fighter. Ooouli and Tiki were soon also leaping about in excitement, their parents dragged out of their beds shortly afterwards and soon the entire household was awake, stumbling sleepily one by one through the ‘fresher and out into the living area of the house. Ben took his own turn in the ‘fresher and then braided the girls’ manes for them, weaving the tiny beads and charms into the fur, while the other adults made tea or dressed. Shaarm was one of the first ready, and after a quick farewell she left them, returning across the town to her patient at the medcentre. She would return later, she assured them, with any further news. They mustn’t worry. Falayan also disappeared a short while after; apparently he didn’t think much of Yalani’s cooking and usually went around the enclave enjoying breakfast at several different apartments before he would return at some point later in the day to receive his Kel-Marr gifts. To Ben’s surprise, Pakat agreed to Tiki’s mumbled request, and let her and Ooouli go along with the boy. The girls were often separated from their age mates by the isolation of their home out by the moor, Pakat explained to Ben. It was good for the children to experience other homes and cultures and be with other children where possible. And it would be good for Pakat to experience an extra few hours in bed.

Although he quite seriously considered doing the same thing, Ben found his mind was too wakeful and unsettled to attempt more sleep. Even through his weak, cold and numbed state, the previous day had been an exhausting whirlwind of emotions. Some good, though not all. There had been fear, of course, guilt and uncertainty too, and frustration, all mixed up with the wonder and relief and love he had felt. And as the Force began to stir in him as he slowly regained his strength, Ben was starting to feel again a sense of disquiet. Whether that was a warning sent by the renascent curl of the Force unfurling in his chest, or if it was just his own mind becoming aware of how close he had come to death once more, he could not be certain. Perhaps the disquiet was the Force. Ben could feel the echoes of the damage he had done deep in his mind. When he tried to touch that bright current, his grip felt shaky and weak, like it would give out at any second. Like resting one’s weight on a broken
bone or overstretching torn joint. Not painful, precisely, but frail and unsteady. He dared not use the Force, not yet, for fear it would shatter entirely. He needed to rest. Reinforce the damaged part, shore up that weakness. Somehow.

His hosts spent the morning otherwise engaged. While Pakat napped, Yalani set about preparing a meal with a great deal of gusto. Ysella was occupied on some private matter of her own elsewhere; Ben had thought she seemed tired and drained this morning, and could almost sense her pain. The walk to the town had been a long one for her as well.

Ben retreated alone to the garden room he had first entered and took a seat on one of the low mats. He didn’t really know what he was doing, but some powerful instinct was scratching at the back of his mind, telling him that he had to try and centre himself somehow or this feeling of dislocation, of weakness, of being overwhelmed and adrift all at once was going to only get worse. Still uncertain, he closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. Nothing happened at first as he instinctively tried to push a connection through the damaged pathways in his brain. That hurt, and it didn’t work either. Instead, he relaxed, not trying to touch the Force but just letting himself sink into it. Better. The Force drifted, slowly at first, across his consciousness like waves, ebbing and flowing through the essence of his being with the tide of his breaths. He loosened his hold on awareness, letting himself be washed along with it like driftwood. There was warmth here, and comfort and purpose, though he sensed the currents of the Force were deep and unknowable, and at any moment he could slip beneath its surface and drown. But there was no fear. There was only the Force.

Actually, that was not entirely true. There was not only the Force. There was, not a voice, perhaps, but a presence here. A feeling of intent. A sense of searching, of hunting. He had awoken something here, deep in the flux of the Force. An eagerness. A hunger. His mind touched another, just for a moment, and he fled, far away.

It felt like he had been lost in the flood of the Force for an age when Yalani woke him from his slow contemplations with a touch to the shoulder. Ben came back to awareness, blinking. Only a single turn had passed. He was in the apartment in the Dhosana enclave in Tszaaf, and breakfast was ready. Ben followed the Dhosan male into a small eating room he had not yet seen, lost in thought. He felt improved. Stronger in himself and his sense of the Force was more complete than it had been in days. The damage inside his head was still there, but he had worked around it. It was like he had splinted the weak limb, until it could heal on his own.

But that hadn’t been the sole purpose of Ben’s search of the Force. He had hoped to gain some sort of insight from his meditations. Guidance, perhaps, on what he should do or where he should go. What to make of that low note of undefined foreboding that he could now feel humming through him, or of how to hide from the Jedi when they returned to Thet. What that searching essence might be which had brushed so ephemerally against his mind before he had fled from it. But he had found no answers. No signposts telling him to take this path, or that. Was that even how the Force worked? He honestly didn’t know. Perhaps he was still just too weak to sense it properly. What he had found, though, was a new sense of clarity, of focus. The Force, whatever it was, was his ally. He must allow it to guide him, where possible. And if it wasn’t possible, well, then he must make his own decisions as carefully and as tactically as he could. Yes, he was concerned about what they would find when they returned to Thet. But he would not let that fear consume him.

He wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time, where the lightsaber was, but there was no chance to get Pakat alone to ask. The adults ate their meal together in a small dining room. No chairs, of course, but Ben was content to sit on the floor to one side of the tall table. It was a quiet mealtime; Ysella and Ben were both lost in their thoughts and the children were absent, out playing with their new friend. Yalani and Pakat held a hushed conversation about the events which had happened in Thet and out on the moor, though Ben noticed the Kheelian mentioned nothing of the Jedi or Ben’s
lost memories. As Ben choked down yet another cup of raw lizard’s eggs, the conversation turned to what the Third Night of Kel-Marr would entail. No procession tonight, although they would again all make the long walk down to the town as the townsfolk gathered together to see the moon reappear at end of the eclipse. But that was later in the evening; first the day was usually spent visiting neighbours and friends in the town, attending performances of art or poetry, and the children in a household traditionally received presents from their parents and relatives.

The others rose from the table one by one to clear away the dishes or engage in other household tasks but Ben remained where he was for the moment, lost in thought. He recalled Ooouli’s halting, uncertain words from the previous day, her concerns that Tiki would miss out on a ‘real’ festival because they were away from home and the family was divided, uprooted. This certainly could not have been within anyone’s idea of what a proper festival would entail.

Ben mentioned his concerns to Pakat, but the Kheelian tried to reassure him.

“Do not concern yourself, Ben, it cannot be helped, and I know the children understand that. If we had known, of course, that we would be away for the entire festival, we would have brought some of the children’s presents and decorations with us, to make them feel more at home. It was just unfortunate timing. Ooouli is a good girl; she understands that Nenka’s needs had to come first, and if Ooouli is content then Tiki will be too. You are not asking because of the gift-giving, are you? Honestly, there is no need to provide anything; the gifts are just trinkets really, small tokens. I expect we will have a small celebration when we are back at home, and the children can have their gifts then. When we are all together.”

Ben nodded, though he thought he detected something more in Pakat’s tone. The Kheelian still looked tired and a little stressed. It had been clear from the start that Pakat was far less comfortable with complex social situations than either Chana or Shaarm would have been. He was coping, but the intricacies of his research or the isolation of the moors suited him far better than managing a sick human, several lively children and their sometimes prickly Dhosana hosts without either of his more confident spouses to take the lead.

With this in mind, Ben asked; “And you? How are you feeling?”

Pakat gave a little laugh and a slightly sad twist of smile. “I am fine. But I do wish Chana was here,” he said.

“Me too,” Ben agreed. “And Grandmother. But we’ll see them again soon.”

Pakat went off them to help Yalani with some task, but Ben couldn’t help but continue to turn the situation over in his mind. Lack of activity was starting to eat at him again. Until they learned more of the situation back at Thet there was little he could do and that chafed at him. He inevitably returned to his standard pastimes of thinking and worrying. Guilt, he supposed, was the root of that. Guilt at his role in stirring up the narms, of failing to anticipate the danger to Nenka, of somehow drawing these Jedi to him. Guilt at uprooting the Kheelians and forcing them apart on this one day when they should be together.

But enough. He would not wallow in self-pity. That achieved nothing. He could not reverse time, restore the Kheelians to their homes. He could only learn from his mistakes and protect them from this point on. Show them how much he appreciated their unconditional acceptance of him. And not just the adults - Pakat was right; Ooouli had a kind and generous heart, and Tiki a level of perception and curiosity that belied her years. He was not sure he believed in luck, but something beneficent had been at work when his weaving path through the universe had crossed with theirs.

Ben shoved his hand into his pocket as he thought. His fingers brushed against the now familiar
metal of the suppression bracelet and then closed over something unexpected. He drew out the two small stones he had shaken out of his boot the previous night and stared at them. Pale, almost white, and smoothed round by the action of some long-ago river.

Hmm.

Ben found Yalani in one of the hydroponics bays, standing up on his back legs as he tended an ugly succulent with bulbous purple fleshy leaves like bruised fingers hanging from an overhead trough. Across the room, Pakat was crouched beneath a humidifier, fiddling with the controls and humming. Ben caught Yalani’s attention and explained his request, but the Dhosan only looked puzzled. He explained that all of his precision tools were in his workshop back at the medcentre. But there was a Dhosan in the compound who created art sculptures from engraved glass and transparisteel. He might have tools of the type that Ben needed. Ben should really ask Ysella.

The directions Yalani gave were rambling and vague, but Ben eventually found his way down several winding corridors back to the large common room with the climbing plant pillars. Ysella was there, pulling on the large loose coat she had worn the previous night, clearly about to go out. She waited as he explained what he had in mind, and what he was looking for.

“Yalani mentioned an artist, Katapti, who might be able to lend me the right kind of tool?”

Ysella considered him with that odd, side-on look. “Yes. I should think Katapti may have tools that could do such a task. But he would not lend them to an outsider I am afraid, and besides, your hands are too small to use Dhosana tools. He might do the work you want for you as a commission, if you could offer sufficient payment.”

Ben frowned. This whole thing was meant only to be a nice gesture for the children and now it was becoming rather more complicated. There were still the credits that Shaarm was storing for him, but he still had no knowledge of how to access them, so that wouldn’t do. Ysella was still watching him and no doubt drawing her own conclusions about his situation.

“Perhaps you have something to offer as trade?” She suggested, but Ben again shook his head. He had ever fewer possessions than he did credits: the clothes on his back, a fake Ident card, the suppression cuff. He thought briefly of the lightsaber. It would be wonderfully symbolic to trade the weapon for an artist’s skills, to exchange a mechanism of death for children’s trinkets. The thought was delightfully civilised. But no, he did not seriously consider it, even for a second. Whatever the Dhosana might think of him, he would never be responsible for allowing such a dangerous thing fall into the hands of the innocent.

“I really don’t have anything, I’m afraid,” Ben said. “Never mind, it was a foolish thought. I’m sorry that I interrupted you.”

Ysella seemed torn for a moment. Perhaps she was warming to him after their talk to previous night, or maybe she merely approved of his plan. Whichever it was, she suddenly said;

“He owes me a favour, you know. Katapti. I might be persuaded to use it for you, if you could offer me something in a currency that I value. You come from a different culture to mine, a different place. I asked you last night who you are. Tell me of yourself, or part of your people’s history. Even a folk tale. That would be my price.”

Ben felt suddenly bereft then, destitute, as he had not felt for a long time. Being without credits or possessions was of no real concern to him – he would find a way to survive. But being without his past, his identity? It was that which truly made him a pauper. The Kheelians had filled much of the void his lost memories had left within him, but the emptiness was still there, nonetheless. He cleared
his throat and made a decision.

“I am afraid you have chosen yet another currency in which I am deficient. As much as I would wish it otherwise, I have nothing of my people to offer you either. I... I have no memory of my life before I arrived in Thet.”

Ysella stared. She made to speak, then stopped. She stared again.

“Is that true?” She eventually asked.

Ben nodded. “Every word.”

Her eyes widened. “Then that sounds like a rare tale, indeed. I would very much like to hear it. Tell me how you came to be here and it will be more than sufficient payment, I am certain.”

And so Ben told her everything. It was a relief, in a way, to just let all the hiding and secrecy go, for a little while. To share it all with someone who found it as strange and bewildering as he did. Someone who had maybe once felt as lost and isolated among this new culture as he himself had, even if only for a moment. Ysella was a good audience too; she listened, wide eyed, with her head tilted to one side, first sitting, and then eventually lying down on her forelegs as the story lengthened.

Two things only did Ben keep to himself; the lightsaber and the Force. For obvious reasons he knew she would not approve of the weapon and he had no desire to restart that argument a second time. And as for the Force... well, for one thing he knew Ysella would not believe in it. She would be as sceptical as Chana and Pakat had been and, like them, she would demand proof, demonstrations. The thought of it made him...uneasy. The Force felt such an integral part of him now; more private, more intimate than his own body. It was not his to display or flaunt; a conjuring trick exhibited for the benefit of the cynical. It was beyond belief or disbelief – it simply was. And it was the only real thing he had. His one true possession.

It took some time for the tale to come to an end – longer than Ben had intended. Perhaps half a standard turn passed as he told of his awakening, his constant battles with injury and the search for the crashed ship. Then came the narms and the flight to Thet, the negotiations on the moor, Nenka’s injuries and the arrival of Jedi in the night. Ysella was silent throughout, asking no questions and she remained silent after he finished speaking. After a moment, she said, quietly;

“You lost...everything. Your past, your people. Your history. How can you bear it?”

Ben smiled. “I bear it because I must. What other choice do I have? Besides, there is much that I have found, too.”

Ysella was silent again for a moment.

That is quite an extraordinary tale,” she concluded, at last. “Quite unlike anything I have heard before. Were you not standing here in front of me, I should call it a work of fiction. But I have seen your injuries and heard the talk of the Kheelians who were attacked by narms, so I know there is truth in it. I wish we were not in the middle of that tale now, so that I was able to hear how it all ends. But one thing I do not understand – why are these Jedi pursuing you? Or is their arrival nothing more than coincidence?”

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “But the galaxy is too large, I think, for me to believe in coincidence. Do you have stories of the Jedi in your own tales?”

“No, I am afraid not.” Ysella answered, to his disappointment. “Nothing other than their involvement in the War, and to be honest, even then I had thought them little more than a myth.”
“They are real. Shaarm saw them,” Ben said. “At the peace parade.”

“Did she?” Ysella said, surprised. “Another story I shall have to hear. But I give thanks, to you, Ben. That tale was indeed a rare gift. I have no doubt you shall one day regain all that you have lost. I will see Katapti now, and he may have your task completed by the end of the day.”

It was, in fact, even sooner than that. Ysella returned by mid afternoon, holding a small velveteen bag, which she passed to Ben with a wink. The girls and Falayan had returned perhaps a turn before and were playing some sort of ball game outside in the courtyard with Pakat. Ben waited patiently until there seemed to be a lull in the game before he called the girls over. They came scampering up and proceeded to shower him with affection, patting his head and untidy hair. He led them inside to the garden room before kneeling down and holding out the bag. Both of the children sat so they were more on a level with Ben. Tiki glanced at Ooouli, uncertain, but the older girl was looking curious.

“I hear that it is traditional to give gifts during the Kel-Marr festival,” he said, glancing at Patak. “I am afraid I have very little to give. These are just small tokens, to show that...well, to put it simply, I feel honoured that your paths through this existence somehow, against all odds, intersected with mine. You are both quite extraordinary, and I am richer for your trust and affection and the kindness of your hearts. All the things that have happened to me, everything I have lost...I believe they were a fair price to pay.”

The children looked stunned and when he saw Pakat wipe at his eyes, Ben wondered if he had been a little too honest. He held out the bag, first to Ooouli and then to Tiki. They reached in and then opened their hands. In each child’s open palm lay a white stone bead, carved from a river pebble. They were simple in design, spherical and carved with clean lines. Ooouli’s had three thin bands etched around the centre and Tiki’s a pattern of seven small circles. The artist, Katapti, had done a perfect job.

“They are carved from stones from the moor, where I came from.” Ben said. “I hoped that they might remind you to always seek out good things from bad places.”

“Oh, Ben!” Ooouli beamed, beyond delighted. “It is so lovely! It looks like the moon.”

“Want to wear it?” Tiki insisted, holding the bead back out towards Ben. “Please?”

“Of course,” Ben agreed. He took the beads back and pulled left arm free of its sling. Carefully he braided a strand of the girls’ manes behind each right ear. The white beads, woven into the strands, glimmered against their pale fur like water droplets. The girls admired each other’s plaits, delighted, and then turned back to Ben.

“We give thanks!” Ooouli said, formerly, but with a grin.

“Thanks!” Tiki echoed.

“Girls, did you not have something for Ben, too?” Pakat reminded them.

“Oh, I forgot. Just a minute!” Ooouli dashed off, and returned a moment later with a folded-up piece of paper. She handed it to Tiki, who thrust it at Ben, shyly.

“Gift,” said the younger girl, simply.

Ooouli added; “This is from Tiki and me. I know grown-ups do not get gifts but Tiki says you are lonely sometimes, without your memories. So we painted a memory for you.”

Ben unfolded the paper, expecting to see a self-portrait of simple figures or perhaps a depiction of the
house by the moor. It was indeed a painting, but there his expectations were shown to be feeble
beyond words. Like Chana’s art that graced the walls of the house at Thet, the painting he held was
fiercely abstract; untamed swirls of orange burst out from the centre, tendrils of energy that splashed
their way across a tranquil sea of deep cerulean blue. To one side of the paper was a darker shape,
the only part of the entire piece that may be representational; a small figure perhaps, being both
consumed and lifted up upon an ocean of texture and colour and light.

He stared for a long time, unable to lift his eyes away.

“Papa bought us some paints,” Ooouli was saying, “as we left ours at home. We painted it while you
were sleeping.”

Ben finally managed to tear his gaze away from the painting he held, away from the conflict of
passionate oranges, sometimes dark as earth and sometimes bright as fire, dissolving away into a
balm of peaceful blue, as quiet and deep as dreamless sleep.

“Thank you,” he said, unable to say more. All of his words had deserted him. “I...thank you.”

He refolded the painting and tucked it safely into his inner pocket. The he inclined his head and
shoulders into a deep bow. Both children stood, and then stretched out their front legs, dropping their
heads in return. Ben smiled, and then the girls threw themselves at him like excited puppies, laughing
and hugging for all they were worth.

The rest of the day proceeded quietly, or as quietly as any household in which young Falayan was
known to make sudden appearances could be. There was another history performance that afternoon
in the common room. Ben watched quietly from the corner as Ysella led the singers in their
interwoven song, the Dhosi words tumbling from the air around them. The Kheelians nodded or
hummed along politely to the forbidden language. Ben knew that the tale spoke of a time very long
ago, of boats upon a long forgotten ocean, of a great migration from danger into the unknown. He
gave no sign of his comprehension, however. Ysella had been upset enough the first time he had
indicated that he was starting to understand their tongue.

Long before the song was at an end he slipped out, unseen, and returned to the garden room. It was
by far his favourite place in the house, but Ben did not let himself fall into meditation again. Instead
he had decided to make use of the quietude to make good on the promise he had made to himself the
previous day. He would record everything he could remember of the strange half memories and
dreams that had plagued his sleep, and he would find a way to made sense of them. There must be
clues there to his former life that he could use. Clues as to why these Jedi pursued him. Clues as to
why he could remember nothing.

It did not amount to so very much when he had written it all down, and Ben sighed a little in
frustration. He had been rescued, that he knew, by a man with blue eyes who took him away to a
large ship. And yet he also remembered escaping, alone, in an out-of-control pod. He had been held
captive. He had been tortured. He had been told to speak, and to be silent. He was with others. He
was alone. He remembered. He forgot.

Defeated, for now, Ben folded away the sheet of flimsi, tucking it into his pocket beside the
children’s painting. The fragments of memory refused, for now, to coalesce into anything useful and
besides he couldn’t concentrate any more. The Force was starting to chime again, uncertainly, and it
was like an itch behind his sternum. It wasn’t quite a ‘bad feeling’, not yet, but it wasn’t good. He
needed to know what was going on. He couldn’t check on Grandmother and Chana, but he could go
and make sure that Nenka was all right.

Mind made up, he went to find Pakat. The Kheelian was back in the hydroponics lab, still working
on the humidifier. He was initially hesitant, reminding Ben that Shaarm had only said *perhaps* in answer to his request to visit and wasn’t Ben supposed to be laying low and avoiding the medcentre? It didn’t take long, however, to secure the Kheelian’s complicity – a few well-chosen phrases indicating how careful Ben would be, a reminder that the Jedi hadn’t been seen for days, and the added bonus that this would mean them both escaping from the enclave for a short while, and Pakat was very quickly on board. When they went to let the Dhosana and the children know that they were going down to the town for a few hours, Ooouli insisted on coming with them, and Tiki would follow her sister anywhere. And because the girls were leaving, Falayan, of course, wanted to come too. He was sporting his own Kel-Marr gift of a brightly coloured scarf in orange and green stripes which he wanted to show it off as widely as possible.

It was eventually decided, over a hasty evening meal, that all three children would go with Pakat and Ben and that they should therefore take the speeder. Ysella, Yalani and the other Dhosana would be heading down in to the town anyway before too long for the last night of the festival. They would not be far behind.

As the children scampered out of the building and over to the speeder, Ben finally got the opportunity to catch Pakat out of earshot of the others.

“Pakat,” he asked, low. “My lightsaber...do you have it?”

The Kheelian glanced about, quickly, before he said, “Do not worry. I took it from your belt and gave it to Shaarm to look after.” He paused then for a second, and then his eyes widened. “You do not think...”

“No, no,” Ben reassured him quickly. “I sense no immediate danger. I would just feel more ...reassured if I had it to hand.”

They all piled into the speeder and, with Ooouli’s help, Pakat piloted their craft out through the enclave and into the busy streets of the town. When he wasn’t grasping the back of Falayan’s jacket to prevent him leaping out of the side of the speeder in his excitement, Ben looked around. The pervasive fog had lifted slightly to a heavy mist and all around, the cleaning-up efforts from the previous night’s festivities were well underway. Ben saw a family of two adults, both with infants strapped in slings to their backs, sweeping up discarded wrappers and fallen streamers. In the next street they passed an old Kheelian woman, hunched with age and seated on a doorstep, playing a flute-like instrument while children danced in the street. Everything seemed at peace.

As they passed the grand-looking station building, Ben could see a train standing at the platform; a gleaming blue locomotive rested at the head of clunky, tattered carriages coated from roof to rails in dull black solar panels in that odd mix of old technology and new that was starting to be so familiar. Through the fog it resembled little more than a lumpy, black-scaled snake. The platform was full of Kheelians disembarking, jumping down from raised doors or lifting down packages and excited children. There had been thousands of Kheelians in the town the previous night, and Ben wasn’t sure he could imagine more. The town of Tszaaf was obviously more of a focal point for the surrounding area than he had supposed, and the Third Night of Kel-Marr was looking to be even more of an event than the Second.

Just in case of any onlookers, Ben ducked down low as they passed in front of the medcentre, hiding his face, but there was no-one in sight. As was becoming customary, Pakat drove them around to the back entrance in the narrow alley and parked up. Ben was climbing down from the speeder before the sound of the engine had died away, the children quick on his heels.

“Why are we here?” Falayan said, leaping eagerly out of the speeder. “Is this the medcentre? Are you sick? Are you getting more of your teeth replaced?”
“No,” said Ben, looking around, carefully.

“You’ve got a sling on,” the boy pointed out, staring at Ben’s sling with fascination. “Are you getting your arm amputated?”

“No,” said Ben.

Falayan pointed to Tiki’s cast arm. “Is Tiki getting her arm amputated?”

“No!” said Ben and Pakat at the same time. Ooouli frowned and held Tiki’s hand tighter. Tiki just laughed.

“I just want to see Shaarm briefly,” Ben explained, “and check on Nenka. We are not going to be long.”

“Who is Nenka?” said Falayan, as they made their way to the door, and Ben tapped in the staff access code.

“My nephew,” Pakat answered.

“And before you ask, no, he is not getting anything amputated either,” said Ben.

Falayan sighed.

The medcentre itself seemed quiet and they passed no-one on their way to the waiting room. The single receptionist did not even glance up. Ooouli wanted to go with Ben to see her cousin and Pakat seemed to have no objections. They left Pakat staring rather perturbed at Falayan who was entertaining Tiki by parading about the room on his hind legs in what appeared to be an unflattering imitation of Ben’s bipedal gait.

Ooouli seemed to know the way through the building better than Ben after his previous short explorations and led them up several ramps towards the recovery area. That was when the first sign of trouble appeared.

“Careful!”

Ooouli had dashed through the door into the surgery unit and almost bowled over a figure on the other side. Ben recognised the tiny nurse who had been watching the post-op ward when he had made his escape not three days ago; although he now noted that she was, in fact, a Dhosan and not a petite Kheelian as he had first thought.

She glanced over Ooouli, and then her eyes fell on Ben and widened. He remembered the clumsy Force suggestion he had laid on her before and cringed internally. Surely she wouldn’t recall that?

“Oh!” The nurse said, with a tone of awe and delight. “You are back!”

“So it seems,” Ben said, pasting on a smile but silently cursing. He had hoped to get in and out of the medcentre without being seen. No such luck.

“And did you find your missing friend, Master Jedi?”

Ben’s blood turned cold, but his mild, neutral expression never flickered.

“My...? I’m sorry; I think you must have me confused with someone else.”

“Of course I do not, you are the Jedi that was here, looking for the shipwrecked Pechnar.”
“I was here three days ago, but it was to receive surgery and I assure you, Madam, I am not searching for anyone.”

“He lives with us,” Ooouli vouched for him, earnestly. “He is not a Jedi.”

“Oh,” the nurse looked even more confused. “Yes, I suppose perhaps your fur is perhaps a slightly different colour to the other Pechnar that was here. I apologise. Pechnar do all look so alike; I do not know how you tell each other apart.”

She hurried off, casting a confused backwards glance as she disappeared.

“That was weird,” Ooouli said. “Why did she think you were the bad Pechnar?”

Ben beckoned her on and they continued.

“I suppose it is like she said,” Ben said as they walked, distracted. “Pechnar are so different to Kheelians that she struggles to see the differences between us.”

“Can you tell us apart?” Ooouli asked, curious. “Different Kheelians, I mean.”

“Of course,” Ben said. “Well, I can now. I will admit; at first I did find it rather difficult. But now, Tiki, I find it quite easy.”

Ooouli laughed, which was nice as it distracted Ben from his realisation that the nurse had not precisely specified when the Jedi had actually last been there.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go find your mother.”

As it turned out, they found Nenka first. He was in the post-op recovery ward two doors down from where Ben had awoken after his own surgery. There was no-one at the nurses’ station, so Ben led the way into the room and slid the door closed behind them.

Nenka looked... there was no good way to describe it. He was curled up on his side on a sleeping mat, bedecked with tubes and wires and bandaged from chin to chest. The patches of his shaved skin were pale, and he looked far younger than the adult years Ben knew he possessed. He seemed so small, somehow; thin too, as if he had been burned out from the inside, fur stretched over wasted tissue like he had been starved. The havoc that the accelerated healing had wrought upon the young Kheelian’s body was clear to see.

Ooouli was uncharacteristically silent. She sat down at her cousin’s side and took his hand, gently.

Ben knelt opposite her and also reached out, laying his small palm against Nenka’s broad forehead. This was why he was here after all. He closed his eyes, and sank into the Force. It felt as if a long time had passed as he drifted, but then he felt it. A tiny flicker of light; far off and almost extinguished, but glowing steadily. There was Nenka, deeply unconscious, as Shaarm said. Damaged but dormant, for now. It would take him a long time to wake, but all the while his body was healing. He was hurt, badly, but in time he would be all right.

Ben pushed a ball of warm energy towards that light, not to heal; he certainly didn’t have the strength for that, but to proffer strength, comfort and serenity. The reassurances wove around the flicker of Nenka’s life-force and then Ben slowly withdrew. It felt as if an age had passed as he picked his way carefully out of the torrent of the Force, but when he opened his eyes, winching against the pounding headache, Ooouli was still at his side and nothing seemed to have changed.

Except that the door was sliding open. And Shaarm was stepping into the room.
“Mama!” Ooouli greeted her, delighted.

Shaarm hurriedly darted in, slamming the door shut behind her.

“Ben!” Shaarm hissed. “What are you doing here?” She sounded angry, but that could mean anything.

“We just came to visit Nenka, as we agreed last night,” Ben reminded her, standing up.

“I only said ‘perhaps’,” Shaarm snapped, but she accepted her daughter’s proffered hug, gratefully. She was worried then, not truly angry.

“He needs visitors, Mama,” Ooouli said. “It is good for sick people.”

“We have only been here a moment,” Ben agreed, quietly. “We haven’t tired him out.”

“You did not try any further healing?” Shaarm asked.

“No,” Ben answered, puzzled. “Like you said, he will be all right. There is nothing more to be done until his strength improves.”

“Very well,” Shaarm said and Ben was surprised to hear she sounded relieved. But before he could push her to explain just what exactly was going on, she glanced quickly out of the window and then turned back to them.

“It is not Nenka we need to worry about now,” Shaarm continued. “I just heard word from Chana. The Jedi left Thet. They are on their way here, right now.”

Ben wished he could have said that he felt surprised, but truthfully he wasn’t. He knew that Chana and Grandmother would not be able to delay his pursuers forever. Sooner or later they were going to realise they were being stalled and then they would leave. Had he really thought that the Jedi would just depart the planet without first returning to Tszaaf? Even if they had their own ship, there wasn’t a spaceport for miles around. They might have a shuttle, perhaps, but then someone would have seen it. Tszaaf could be their only possible destination.

All this passed through his head in a second, and calmly he said; “Well. In that case, I rather think I am going to need my lightsaber.”

Shaarm nodded. “Come with me,” she said.

Both Ben and Ooouli each glanced back at Nenka, and then Shaarm was hurrying them out of the room. As she led them on, Ben plied her with quick questions about the new message.

“No, Chana is not here,” she answered. “Thalla came; she is one of the older girls in the village who couriers messages for Grandmother every so often. She has a speeder bike, you see. She arrived about fifteen minutes before you did, with a note that Yanto had brought down to the village. The Pechnar are leaving and are heading back to Thet. Thalla said they had grown impatient; she had seem them around the village last night, searching.”

“They were not going to be fooled forever,” Ben said, hurrying to keep up with the taller creatures. “I am surprised that Chana and Grandmother managed to distract them so long. Nearly 30 turns.”

Ooouli gave a little laugh. “Grandmother and Dada will have put them to sleep by talking! Maybe they only just woke up!”
“Maybe,” said Shaarm. “Come, this way. I stored your lightsaber in Yalani’s work room.”

“Even if Thalla came directly here,” Ben considered out loud as they walked, “the note said the Jedi were leaving. I assume they have their own speeder? They cannot realistically be much more than one turn behind.” Even as his voice laid out the timescale they were dealing with, Ben’s mind began to spin, offering up one strategy after the next, each considered and abandoned in turn. They could remain here, hole up at the medcentre – but there were too many indefensible entrances, too many civilians. That meant too many casualties if things went badly. Or they could abandon the medcentre and return to the Dhosana enclave – Ben might hide for a few days in its maze-like structure, but the Jedi would eventually track him down. Too many civilians: too many casualties. They could try hiding Ben in the speeder like before, and returning to Thet – but the Jedi must have figured out they’d been duped by now and they’d be on the lookout for that same trick. If they were caught all the Kheelians would be implicated. Too many casualties.

Shaarm didn’t answer Ben’s statement. She led them through the centre down to Yalani’s workshop and ducked inside. From the doorway, Ben saw her rummage about in the desk before reappearing with the sabre clutched in her hand. She handed it to him, and suddenly, weirdly, it was as if he could breathe easily again. Ben gripped the smooth chrome tightly for a second before he tucked the weapon away into his coat.

“What now?” Ooouli asked.

“We need to get out of here, for starters,” Ben said. “We know they’ll probably come here first. Ooouli, that window over there...Can you see if there are any Pechnar out in the street?”

The girl dashed off to fulfil her task, and Ben turned to Shaarm. Voice low, he said:

“Shaarm, is there anyone in the medcentre that you know well, and trust? Two people, if possible.”

“I do not know,” Shaarm frowning. “Yes, I suppose...yes. Why?”

“I need you to go and fetch them, and have them sit with Nenka for the next few turns.”

“You do not think the Jedi would try and...?” Her eyes were wide.

“Right now, I don’t know what to think,” Ben said. “But they know Nenka was there, injured, when we left the house. They know where you were planning on bringing him. I don’t want them to find him alone here if they come here looking for me.”

“Perhaps we should stay...?”

“As soon as they are close enough I fear they will sense me. I at least need to leave, to draw them away.”

Ooouli came dashing back over at that moment, and they stopped their conversation.

“There are no Pechnars there that I can see,” the girl reported. “I could see twenty-four Kheelians and three Dhosana walking up and down the road, but there weren’t any speeders or anything.”

“Good,” Ben praised. “Very good. Time for us to go then, I think.”

They split up, briefly, as Shaarm went to find two Kheelians she thought reliable to sit with Nenka while Ben and Ooouli made their way down to rejoin Pakat. They found him rather helplessly
watching Falayan who, having abandoned his attempts to walk on his back legs, had instead found his next entertainment in seeing just how far he could slide along the waiting room floor after a good run up.

Shaarm arrived a few moments after Ben had begun to explain the situation and held out a sheet of flimsi: Chana’s letter. Pakat held it low so that Ben could see and read it aloud.

Dear ones,

I hope this note finds you well. We think on Nenka often as we wait for news. The narms have not left the moor again – Grandmother is sure they will honour their word. In other news, our guests did not find what they were looking for. They intend to return to Tszaaf within the hour – perhaps you will see them there. Grandmother and I will arrive later to visit Nenka. When we all go back to Thet perhaps we can bring Ooooli’s little bird back home, if he is well enough to leave the veterinarian’s.

My heart,

Chana

“Dada is coming!” Tiki said, with delight.

“Yes, Tiki, soon,” Shaarm agreed. “As soon as he can find Porra or someone else who can fly him and Grandmother here.”

She sighed. “It is well the Jedi did not get hold of this note, as Chana clearly feared they might. He has never been adept at subtlety. But ‘little bird’? That must be Ben, but...”

“Yes, that’s me,” Ben confirmed.

“Grandmother must have told him it is the name the narms called him,” Pakat added. “I do not know why.”

“It is because of Ben’s ship, of course,” said Ooooli, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “He came out of an egg!”

One small mystery solved.

“So I did,” Ben said, with a smile. “Clever girl.”

Ooooli beamed.

“Come,” said Shaarm. “We cannot stay here. Like you said, Ben, the Jedi cannot be far behind. We’ll take the speeder back up to Yalani’s house and figure out what to do.”

The group headed towards the rear door they had entered by. Pakat and Shaarm, at the front, talked in low anxious tones, while Ben hurried the children along behind. Ooooli and Falayan both looked at ease, but Tiki was pressing up against Ben’s side in a way that suggested she was starting to feel anxious.

They never reached the door to the alleyway where the speeder was parked. Pakat halted abruptly at the edge of the last corner and everyone froze, hearing voices ahead of them. One was the familiar cadence of a Kheelian and the other was quieter, higher pitched, as if from someone smaller.

“...usually ask visitors to use the front entrance, but I suppose it will not hurt,” the Kheelian was saying. “This way, follow me, please...”
Pakat dashed back, drawing Shaarm with him, and the group hurriedly retraced their footsteps.

“We will go out of the front door,” Shaarm said, taking the lead. “Quickly now, Ooouli, Tiki. Come on!”

They hastily crossed the waiting room, and out into the grander entrance hall of the medcentre. There was no time to worry now about being spotted by watchers in the street outside and the group hurried out onto the pillared steps that formed the medcentre’s portico. The remnants of the heavy fog still clung about them, but the earlier quiet had long passed as evening drew on. The street was crowded with Kheelians, wandering up and down or standing in small groups, drinking or eating. The sounds of laughter and talking and music filled the air; the scents of peat-smoke and cooking food. It would soon be fully dark.

On instinct Ben glanced over to the spot where he had first seen the Jedi, all those days ago after his surgery. Two Dhosana were unloading crates of vok out of a small antigrav cart, but there was no sign of the tall Jedi.

Shaarm pulled Ben up to her side and they hurried down the steps and out into the street. The others crowded around as they walked and Ben stayed close, keeping his head down and his mental shields up, trying to stay as hidden and unobtrusive as he could. Kheelians pressed in on all sides, but Shaarm didn’t pause, quickly leading them out into the crowd. The medcentre was soon out of sight behind them, as they made a series of quick turns left into another street and then right, and right again. Ben soon stumbled, trying to keep up with the fast pace. Pakat, who had Tiki on his shoulders, murmured a word to Shaarm. Glancing quickly about, she led them into a narrow space behind a row of stalls. Ben sank down to the floor amongst a stack of crates, curling around his aching chest and trying to breathe. His limbs were shaking already and he cursed this lingering weakness and the chill he couldn’t shake. He was getting better, yes, but he was not yet well enough for this fight.

The Jedi were here. The Force, such as it was, thrummed with danger.

“Why are we hiding?” Falayan was asking, loudly. “Is this like a game?”

“Yes,” Shaarm said, distractedly. “Like a game.” She ducked down at Ben’s side, anxious.

“I’m all right,” Ben said. “Where are we?”

“In a side street, looking onto the market place,” Pakat answered, peering around the stalls.

“The other Pechnar are bad,” Ooouli was telling the boy. “They hurt Ben.”

“What other Pechnar?” Falayan said. “I do not see any.”

“They were at the medcentre,” said Ooouli. “Are we going back up to Ysella’s house?”

“This is a rubbish hiding place,” said Falayan.

“Is Dada coming?” asked Tiki.

“Children,” Shaarm said, a touch sternly. “A little hush please, if you don’t mind? Ben?”

Ben didn’t answer her unspoken question but nodded. The bad feeling, like a cold pressure, was back. Not as strong as before, but there was danger here, growing every second. He turned and peered out through the gaps between two stalls. Through the darkening mist he could make out the market place they had been in the previous night. At least fifty Kheelians were sitting or wandering
around the area, talking or laughing, some playing with children, or eating, or clutching small cups of vok. Many held long streamers, like flags, in shimmering colours. There must be several groups of musicians somewhere out there too; the sounds of their instruments creating a woven mesh of melody. As Ben watched, two or three more families of Kheelians wandered out of houses or appeared down the road, approaching the stalls. The streets would only get more crowded as the night drew on.

Too many casualties. He closed his eyes.

“This is not much fun,” Falayan complained. “When is it their turn to hide?”

Just at that moment there were whoops and cheers around them and Tiki tapped on Ben’s arm. He opened his eyes to see her pointing out of their hiding place across the square. It seemed the evening’s events had finally officially begun. The area about them was suddenly flooded with light. The mist glowed around strings of tiny bulbs laid along the edges of the square and dangling like streaming water from the rafters of the buildings. Clusters of lights and lanterns lit up the stall fronts and doorsteps.

A Kheelian woman wandering past with a tray of drinks stopped to stare at the group of them all clustered in the narrow space. Her eyes fell on Ben and widened.

“Ben is just resting,” Ooouli told her, firmly.

“Aww,” she cooed to Ooouli, looking down at Ben. “Poor dear. Is your little pet sick?”

Falayan was right. This hiding place was terrible.

“Happy Kel-Marr,” Shaarm said, a little icily, and stepped neatly between the woman and Ben. The woman shrugged, returned the greeting and wandered away.

“Come on, Ooouli, Falayan,” Pakat said, aware the group were drawing attention and seeing the boy was beginning to fidget again. “Let us go for a look around the festival, and see what we can see.”

“Be careful,” Shaarm warned, as they set off back up the street, towards the medcentre. The streets were so busy by now that they were soon lost in the crowd and Ben did not think they would be seen. Shaarm disappeared briefly and returned with a packet of kirtone buns and several of the brightly coloured festival streamers. She gave Tiki a bun to eat and tied streamers into both of their manes. It was a simple but effective disguise; blending them into the crowd as just two more festival attendees. Shaarm offered a bun to Ben, but he shook his head, too keyed up to eat.

“Do you truly think there is threat to Nenka?” Shaarm asked.

Ben was quick to reassure her. “No, and if I did I should not have left his side. It was Chana and Grandmother I most feared for – I was concerned that when the Jedi found out that you had lied about my being there they might react badly. I was most relieved to see Chana’s letter. Perhaps the presence of Kerra and Diega and the others was enough to see the humans off, but I hope it means they truly have no interest in anything but me and he will safer the further away I am. I am sorry.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Chana and Grandmother bought us a whole day and a half distracting the Jedi, and I am afraid that I rather squandered it. We are stuck out here in the open with no speeder and no plan. I am afraid I am no closer to coming up with a way of defeating the Jedi than I was days ago.”

“I would not stay squandered. You might still be weak, but you can walk, move and keep your eyes
open,” Shaarm reminded him, “which is more than you could do yesterday morning. Your recovery rate is quite astonishing; do not fail to appreciate that. You’re probably even healthy enough to start being stubborn again.”

Ben smiled, briefly.

“We just have to come up with a plan,” she said, but at that moment, Pakat returned, accompanied by both the two older children and by Yalani and Ysella.

“We just arrived from the enclave with some of the other Dhosana,” Yalani explained, “and we heard Falayan’s voice from across the square. You all look very solemn...what’s going on? It’s not Nenka, is it?”

“No,” Shaarm reassured them. “Nenka is still fine. But there the good news ends, I am afraid. The Pechnar that are pursing Ben...They are here.”

“We just checked and the Jedi did go to the medcentre,” Pakat clarified, “but they left again straight away and now there is no sign of them. No-one knows where they were going.”

“Perhaps they are heading for the train station,” Ooouli suggested. “Maybe they want to go home.”

Yalani interrupted, suddenly, as if he had only just processed what Shaarm had been saying. “Jedi?” He asked. “Jedi!? As in... mythical space wizards? Why the sky would there be Jedi here?”

“I will tell you later,” Ysella said.

“How do you know about it?” Yalani asked, even more astonished.

“Ben told me,” she answered. “Now hush. What is your plan, Shaarm?”

“We were heading back up to the enclave,” the Kheelian woman answered, checking her chrono to work out when Chana and Grandmother might arrive. “But we had to abandon the speeder and now I fear the streets are too crowded to drive now anyway.”

“These Jedi are the Pechnar you say are pursuing you?” Yalani asked. “What will they do if they find you?”

No-one wanted to answer that. Falayan made everyone jump by suddenly leaping up and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“There they are! Found them!”

Every head spun around. Across the market place, a family watching a troop of Kheelian acrobats had moved aside and through the haze they saw three small figures in brown. Ben froze, not wanting to draw attention by a sudden movement, but Pakat quickly stepped between him and the distant threat. Ben dropped to a crouched, moving into the shadows.

There was a tense few moments of silence, before Shaarm spoke up again.

“I cannot see them. Can anyone see them?”

“I think they have gone,” Ysella said.

“I can’t stay here,” Ben said.

“He is right,” Pakat said. “We have to hide him somewhere. Where can we go?”
“Back to the medcentre?” Shaarm said, doubtfully. “They will think they have checked it and may not go back.”

“Even if they mean him harm,” Yalani argued, “surely they would not do anything to him in a crowded public place such as this? There are far too many witnesses.”

“Perhaps not,” Pakat answered, “But they are Jedi. Who would dare to intervene?”

“If we take the back streets by the old river,” Ysella suggested, “we could hide out in the tailor’s district until dawn and...”

“It is too far,” Shaarm said, shaking her head. “Besides, we know they have asked townsfolk to look out for Ben. They may give him away without meaning to.”

“We just have to hide him long enough for Chana to arrive,” Pakat reminded them. “Then we can take him safely back to Thet. The Jedi will not go back if they have already...”

“Ben?”

While the adults had been arguing, Ooouli had been watching Ben. She was too smart not to have noticed what was showing in his expression, because, in that moment, Ben had come to another realisation.

There was no hiding. They weren’t going to give up, these Jedi. If he returned to Thet, so would they. Today, tomorrow, or the day after, they would find him. They were never going to give up. Wherever he was, the Jedi would always come for him. There was only one way to make sure they never went near the Kheelians again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, meeting Ooouli’s eyes. “I’m so sorry. I have to leave.”

The adults fell silent, one by one.


Shaarm understood, though she tried to argue. “Chana will be here soon, with the speeder. We just have to wait, we...”

Ben shook his head, and she fell silent.

“They are going to find me. You’ll never be safe, as long as I am here.”

“We don’t want to be safe!” said Ooouli, fiercely. “You were supposed to stay with us, forever. You were supposed to teach me Basic and how to fly a spaceship!”

“You don’t need me for that, Ooouli,” Ben said, kindly. “You are clever and determined. You will learn everything you ever want to without my help.”

The Kheelians were still silent. Ben thought they were desperately trying to think of some other way out and failing.

“Why do you want to leave us?” said Ooouli. She was crying now, distraught. Ben hated it.

“I don’t want to leave, Ooouli. Of course I don’t. I want to stay here, forever, like you said. But I can’t, not while the Jedi are still searching for me. I have to see this through.”

“I don’t care about them,” said Ooouli, but quietly. She clung to Tiki, the younger girl silent, not
“Where will you go?” said Shaarm, just as quietly.

“The city,” Ben answered, not even knowing that was the answer until he said it, but it was, after all, the only other place he had heard of. He stood up. “I would always have gone, at some point, to see if I could learn anything about my past. This is just a little sooner than I intended.”

“There they are again!” squeaked Falayan and Ben cursed, dropping back down to the floor. Through the forest of Kheelian legs, he could see a swirl of brown fabric. They were close and getting closer.

Ben started as Ysella suddenly burst into song. It was a lively, upbeat tune and after a moment, Falayan and Yalani both joined in with gusto. Faces turned to look at them and Ben wondered what the blazes they were doing. More voices joined in from the crowd and suddenly all the Dhosana he could see were singing and dancing, wildly. The Kheelians broke into cheers and clapping, moving back to give space to the dancers and the Pechnar were forced back out of the way.

“Go now!” Ysella said, dropping the song for a second and Ben took her at her word. He scrambled up and set off, ushering the children ahead of him back up the street, feeling Shaarm, Pakat and Yalani at his back. They sprinted back up the side street and out of sight of the market. Ben let Ooouli take the lead, dragging his arm, and she didn’t slow until they reached a broad open space planted with hundreds of tall grasses in different colours and textures, crossed by paths of laid gravel. It was a park, as busy as the market had been and the hazy halos of a million tiny lights illuminated food stalls and jugglers, the swirling motion of dancers and the children running to and fro.

Ben slowed and stopped, leaning against a wall and breathing shallowly, trying not to cough.

The adults looked at him with concern and then drew away into a small huddle, talking quietly and urgently. Tiki, as if sensing a dark turn to Ben’s thoughts, folded her long arm around his back and hugged him close, rubbing her face into his shoulder. Ooouli just looked at the adults as if silently questioning why no-one was doing anything to stop this.

After a moment or two the group broke apart and turned back to Ben.

“Ben,” Pakat asked. “Are you sure about this?”

Ben nodded, breathless but firm. “If I could think of anything else, you know I would do it.”

Shaarm looked at him, hard, but Ben closed his eyes. His chest burned and his hands shook. It was becoming increasingly apparent that he wasn’t going to be able to fight his way out of this, even if he had wanted to. Almost dying twice in five days had done little for his slow recovery. The Jedi were here, and he couldn’t hide and he couldn’t fight. Flight was his last option.

That, or surrender. But he wasn’t quite ready to give up, not yet.

“I am going to carry you,” Shaarm told Ben. “I do not think you will even make it to the station otherwise.”

They set off again, Pakat led them at a quick trot across the misty, crowded park, as they wove and dipped through the crowd. Yalani, bringing up the rear, kept glancing anxiously backwards. Ben curled up as low and unobtrusive as he could on Shaarm shoulders. He glanced anxiously back up the road; from his new vantage point he was far more exposed but he could at least see over the Kheelian’s tall heads. There was no sign of his pursuers yet. Perhaps they had not seen him in the market place after all. But if they had not sensed him yet they soon would. He reinforced his mental
walls once more and found his hand straying to the hilt of the ‘saber where it was hidden in his coat.

“How soon can we expect the next train?” Ben asked.

“There are two trains a day,” Yalani answered, as they ducked around a line of cheering partygoers. “Even on festival days. They usually arrive about 5 or 6 turns in the morning and afternoon as we are at the end of the line and they spend some time repairing or refuelling. They depart at noon and at midnight.”

Shaarm checked her chrono. “It is 70 past 11 turns,” she said, grimly. “We do not have long.”

Suddenly, they rounded a corner and the station lay before them. It was a wide, squat building, only two storeys high but several hundred metres long, shaped like a long oval with a curving roof, rather like an upturned boat. The surface gleamed and glittered with overlapping plates of white and grey stone and bronzed metal, like the scales of a lizard. Beyond the station must lie the platform and the train, his one chance at salvation. At the front of the building, the roof flicked up and curled back, giving a broad opening which faced onto a wide plaza. The plaza was not as busy as the market place had been, but there was still a sizeable crowd arrayed in a circle around some kind of theatrical show comprising larger-than-life puppets of brightly coloured paper and painted fabric on long poles.

Ben took in all this colour and motion at a single glance and then dropped flat against Shaarm’s back. Because he had also seen immediately the single still point through the crowd – yet another human figure outlined black against the pale stone. Someone had anticipated his flight from the town and they were trying to cut off his escape routes, one by one.

This was getting extremely tiresome.

He felt Shaarm’s back tense as she spotted the figure too and then she carefully stood up on her back legs as if reaching to touch a cluster of lights above their heads. Ben took advantage of the movement to slide down to the floor and then duck back behind Pakat out of sight. The Kheelians and Dhosan crowded around like they had at the market, hiding him from view.

“Stay here and I’ll get the tickets,” Yalani offered, glancing at the figure across the square. There was no sign they had been spotted but this wasn’t a good hiding place. “Stay out of sight.” The Dhosan took Falayan and headed across the plaza towards the station. Ben couldn’t help but tense as the cloaked human turned his head towards them as they passed, but he didn’t seem to show any interest and the Dhosana disappeared unhindered into the building.

Then it was just the five of them. Ben looked around at the little family slowly, trying to fix each of them in his mind’s eye. Knowing these could be the last few minutes they would spend together, despite all the days that he had hoped for, all the plans that they had made. They should have had years together. For all that he had lost he should have been allowed this, a lifetime of working, teaching, farming and peace, of living and loving and laughing. But, just like his past, that future had been stolen from him by the Jedi.

So he drank in the sight of the Kheelians, making the moment last. Gentle Pakat, who was so afraid; tense and anxious, glancing from Shaarm to the children and away across the park into the distance. Always looking for Chana to complete them. Dependable, spirited Chana, to whom Ben had never had the chance to say goodbye. Clever, perceptive Grandmother, subtle but adamant. And to his right was Shaarm, still and steadfast. She understood the decision that Ben had made and she would help him see it through with her fire and her ice-calm. He had no fears for her.

At last he looked to the children. Tiki was wide-eyed, quiet as always, but unhappy. She knew
something bad was happening but probably nothing more. She was young still, and it would pass. He wondered, if he never came back, if she would remember him when she was older. Ooouli was crying again, quietly. Perhaps she hadn’t stopped.

It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

Ooouli threw her arms around Ben, Tiki quickly joining her, and he held on to them both as best as he could, silent. Eventually Ooouli loosened her hold and sat back.

“Say you’ll come back,” she said, fiercely, brushing the tears from her face. Her strength humbled him.

“Ooouli,” Shaarm said, but the girl paid no attention.

“Promise me. You have to promise me you’ll come back.”

“I’ll come back,” Ben said. “One day, I will come back.

He hugged them both again. “Go and be spectacular,” he said, kissing the top of their heads.

Ben stood up, and turned to the adults. “Thank you,” he said. What else was there to say?

Yalani reappeared with Falayan, holding out a small metal chip to Shaarm. “It is 11.90,” he warned. “The train is about to leave. You have to go, now.”

The watcher was still standing by the door to the station. The moment they moved he would see.

Ben straightened his shoulders. One reason for leaving was to draw the Jedi away from the Kheelians. Perhaps it was time that they saw him at last.

But before he could move, Ooouli was turning to Falayan.

“Falayan,” she said, politely. “May I please borrow your scarf?”

The garrulous boy handed it over for once without a word. Ooouli threw it around her own shoulders, the bright orange and green stripes instantly altering her look.

“The Pechnar cannot tell us apart,” Ooouli said to Shaarm. “Ben said so.” Then, to the other children she said. “Want to go and tell some lies?”

Falayan gave a wicked grin. “That is what I do best!” he announced.

Ooouli grabbed hold of Tiki’s hand in one of hers and Falayan’s in the other. Then she looked at Ben.

“Love you, Ben,” she said, and then ran out and across the Plaza with the other two children at her heels.

“Ooouli!” Ben realised her intention too late. He ran forwards to stop her, but Shaarm caught his arm, holding him back.

Ooouli, fearless and unstoppable, darted through the crowd and dashed up to the human.

“Hello,” she said, her clear voice and the alien-sounding Basic tongue carrying to them across the noise of the festival. “Hello. Are you a Jedi?”

Ben couldn’t see the other’s expression but he heard the response.
“Yes, kid. That’s right.”

“He is a Jedi? That is awesome!” said Falayan, recognising the word.

“We met a Pechnar, just like you,” Ooouli announced. “He gave us five credits. I am supposed to tell you that he got on the train.”

“Are you, now?” said the Jedi. “And where did he really go?”

“He ran this way,” said Ooouli, pointing away towards the east road. Tiki copied her, pointing and nodding seriously. “We will show you. Come on!”

And the children set off at a sprint.

“Kid! Wait!” shouted the Jedi, and then, just like that, he abandoned his post and ran after them. The entrance to the station was clear.

“I’ll look after them,” called Yalani, already moving after the disappearing children. “Take Ben and go, now!”

“No!” Ben said, but Shaarm picked him and they ran, weaving through the crowd, across the plaza, and into the cool dark of the station. Ben caught a fleeting glimpse of the entrance hall; grand but dimly lit, low orangey light glinting off the copper ceiling high above and shimmering across the pale grey stone floor. The vast space was mostly empty; a dozen Kheelians were milling around, carrying packages or pushing antigrav carts out through the wide opening on the other side of the building. There he could see a long, gleaming black shape; the train waiting on the distant platform. His salvation.

Then they were through the low archway and out into the dark station, and up to the wide open door of the train, spilling its light out across the platform. Shaarm lifted Ben up through the high doorway, some two metres off the ground. He stumbled as his feet hit the metal floor and he gripped onto the door frame, tightly.

“Move over,” Shaarm said and then she was nimbly leaping up at his side, wiftly followed by Pakat.

“What are you doing?” said Ben.

“You don’t know this land,” Shaarm said. “You’ll be lost in a strange city you don’t understand, with nowhere to hide. If they catch you the Jedi will never let you go. They’re going to hurt you again”

“We already agreed we couldn’t let you face that alone,” Pakat explained.

“But the children...” Ben said, desperate and grateful, guilty, and sad, and afraid. He stared out of the open door at the station, the Kheelians on the platform and beyond, across the moonlit roofs of the distant Tszaaf houses.

“You said they would be safer if you were not with them,” Shaarm said. “Yalani and Ysella will look after them until Chana arrives. The Dhosana are formidable. They will be safe.”

“The Jedi...” Ben said, but was cut off by a shrill bell and the deep echoing thrum of engines humming into life. A blue light burst out from under the train, spilling across the platform. There was a sudden, loud whir of electronics close by and Ben pulled his hand back just in time as the door slid shut with a slam.

“Look!” said Pakat, pointing out through a narrow transparisteel window. Shaarm lifted Ben up and
he grabbed for a rail above his head, pulling himself up to the window with his good hand and looked out into the night.

He saw the dark platform and the glinting station building and, in the archway, the light glimmering off golden fur. Chana was there, Yalani behind him, and he had Tiki on his shoulders and at his side was Ooouli and they were all crying and smiling and waving. Then the train gave a shudder and there was a rush of sound and the whole carriage lifted as the maglev rails burst into life. Then the train began to move, quickly picking up speed, and then they turned a corner and everything behind them faded away into the gentle night.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was hard and I've struggled with it for ages. I love you all so I bequeath unto you its shittiness.
Your comments are my oxygen. Onwards, to glory.

RE the playlist; thanks everyone who responded. Its still under construction for now but I should clarify it will be more like a read-a-long soundtrack, kind of thing, and it keeps changing as the story changes. Will post links when I have figured it out. Big love x
Skywalker

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If the City had ever been known by another name, no-one could remember it.

It lay on the northern tip of the east continent and had been the economic and spiritual home of the Kheelians of that land for over two thousand years. It had a population of around two million, comprising primarily Kheelians with a small district of Dhosana and a few thousand immigrant Pechnar and other species. The metropolis housed all the major institutions of the state, including the university, the parliament buildings, administrative centre, state bank, museum, gallery of arts and national archives, as well as numerous markets, manufactories and the only spaceport on the planet. The vast hinterland of the east continent provided the City with produce and labour via the solitary train line which passed along thousands of kilometres of weaving, circuitous track through the major holdings and settlements of the province all the way to the furthest southern point of the continent - the town of Tszaaf, hemmed in by the impassable moors of Kender.

The ticket chit Yalani had bought provided Ben and his friends with three bunk spaces for the duration of their expedition to the north, a journey that was expected to take them at least three days and nights. More if they were delayed by weather in the mountains or by geomagnetic storms which commonly swept across the vastness of the plains that followed. Pakat’s explanation of the distances involved hadn’t been entirely clear to Ben, not having any frame of reference for a ‘length’, the Kheelian standard measurement of distance. But from the speed that the distant landscape blurred past the thick transparisteel windows he estimated that they must be travelling at least 400kph. Even allowing for the serpentine route of the train tracks and the several hours they would were expected to halt at each town they passed through, they must be journeying something like ten thousand kilometres from home. The planet was immense.

Ben learned all of this as they talked, and they talked much as they travelled. But that all came later on in their journey, for at first they were too weary to do anything but sleep. Ben could feel his own exhaustion clawing at him like some wild creature, thudding like a heavy drumbeat in his skull. The other two looked little better.

As Shaarm led them on through the rumbling train towards the residential area where their bunk spaces were to be found, Ben couldn’t help but notice, even through his crippling fatigue, that the train itself was vast, far larger than he had appreciated in his distant glimpses of its exterior. Pakat carried him through endless long carriages, each connected to the next by sliding doors through a vestibule. They traversed narrow walkways through cars stacked wall to wall and high above them with shipping crates and containers of goods and produce. The containers twinkled in the low light like fireflies with hundreds of digital tags listing ownership and destination. After the goods cars they walked through compartments of livestock in a waft of hot animal smells; black beady eyes from a herd of caprius peered out at them from between the metal railings that separated the walkway from the gloomy, reeking pens of sleeping beasts on either side.

Finally, when Ben thought they must be nearing the end of the train, they arrived at the living quarters. The carriages here were divided up into smaller compartments about 12m long, each with a narrow corridor along the centre and stacked either side with personal luggage, goods and smaller shipping crates piled high up the walls of the carriage. The bunk spaces were suspended side-on above the luggage on long shelves that jutted out from both walls, running the length of the carriage. The native Kheelians easily ascended and descended the four-metre climb up to the bunks by means...
of niches in the walls between each bed forming a sort of ladder. Ben closed his eyes, suddenly dizzy, as Pakat passed him carefully up to Shaarm at the top of the ladder.

Then, at last, he was able to lie down on his thin sleep mat, drag the blankets over him, and with his back pressed firmly to the wall as far from the vertical drop at the edge of his bunk as he could, Ben slept.

It was a sudden sense of stillness that woke him, hours later. Ben sat up slowly, disconcerted. A low powered electric light had gleamed a constant blue at all hours in their compartment and, with no windows to the outside, it was difficult to distinguish day from night. The bunk he lay in was up against the end wall of the compartment. The bed that joined onto his at the foot-end was empty. On the next bunk, Pakat was stretched out reading a data pad. Three more bunks lay beyond; one contained a sleeping shape. The others were empty. Looking across the carriage he saw a similar line of berths on the opposite wall, two of which were occupied by Kheelians, reading or chatting quietly.

“What time is it?” Ben asked, quietly. Pakat looked up, startled, putting down his reading material and stylus.

“Ben! How are you feeling?”

“Much improved,” Ben confirmed and it was true. He wasn’t cold for the first time in several days, and the strange tingling seemed finally have dissipated from his limbs. The older pains in his leg, hip, chest and shoulder were still there but he felt stronger.

“You look it,” Pakat agreed, appraisingly. “In answer to your question, it is about 10 turns. Did you sleep well?”

“I dreamed of sand,” Ben answered, “but I don’t recall any more than that. Why isn’t the train moving, do you know?”

“We have just made our first major stop, at a town called Chandreta,” Pakat answered. “It’s the main market for the agricultural lands to the east, so we will be here several hours while they load all the produce on board. Shaarm has just headed out into the town to see if she can get some basic supplies for us, as we left in such a hurry. Do not worry; she will be back well before the train is due to depart.”

Ben peered over the edge of the bunk. Far below, on the floor of the carriage, the door to their compartment had slid open and a group of Kheelians entered. He looked down on two females who were trotting along the narrow walkway between the stacked crates, chatting casually. Behind them skipped along a white-furred child, who was humming and tapping on the crates as they went. The little group made their way through the carriage and out of the next door without glancing up. Ben watched them go, pushing down the pang of misery that the sight of the child brought. Tiki and Ooouli would be safe. That was the only thing that mattered.

“What else is through there?” He asked Pakat, pointing at the far end of the carriage where the group had disappeared. “More sleeping carriages?” It would be good to get his bearings a little and find out a little more about how the train was laid out.

The next few compartments, Pakat informed him, contained more berths, as well as lounge areas, a canteen and a number of refreshers. The answer surprised Ben; he had considered from carriages he had so far seen that the transport was primarily designed for cargo and not passengers, but it seemed that some level of comfort for the Kheelian travellers had been considered. After all, it only seemed
to be Ben who was uncomfortable with the vertiginous height of their beds, though the Kheelians must be significantly more cramped in their berths than he.

“I’m just going for a look around,” Ben said, pulling on his boots. Pakat was clearly in the middle of some task. “I won’t be long.”

“I’ll come with you,” Pakat said, immediately. He tucked the datapad away into his russet-orange jacket and swung down out of the bunk before Ben could object. He didn’t actually require company or a bodyguard at the moment but it was clear Pakat himself was feeling the need to be useful, even if that was limited to accompanying Ben to the ‘fresher and back.

Ben declined Pakat’s offer of help down from the berth. Instead, using a touch of the Force to steady and cushion him, he dropped from the edge of the bunk onto the top of the stacked crates and then lightly hopped down the piled containers to the floor. His hip twinged and the damaged leg cramped a little with disuse, but he made it, and the pain was a good, healing hurt. Pakat smiled at the sign of Ben’s growing health and independence. A few curious faces peered down at them from the other bunks above but no-one spoke to them.

The pair made their way through two more sleeping compartments, Ben all the while marvelling at the sheer scale of the train. The compartment next to theirs was almost empty, with only a single purple-furred traveller stretched out on one of the high bunks, while the one after that was stuffed full with three harassed looking Dhosana adults and nine noisy children, all of whom were excitedly climbing on the bunks and tossing a ball between themselves across the carriage above Ben and Pakat’s heads.

After passing through a vestibule which connected the two carriages and also had an external door, they entered a car which contained neither bunks nor shipping containers. Instead the narrow corridor was lined on both sides with white panelled cubicles, each an individual washroom. Pakat beckoned Ben down to the far end of the corridor where there were two much smaller rooms with doors so low even Ben had to duck his head to step through. Inside he found a tiny, perfectly proportioned refresher, sized exactly for an adult Pechnar. The provision for travellers of his stature shouldn’t have been a surprise – he knew that other humans like himself were known in Tszaaf, though he hadn’t seen any, and there would be more in the city. It was just strange and oddly disconcerting to find he could reach the taps and controls on the sonics easily, when he had become used to the constant struggle of existing in a world that wasn’t designed for him.

Ben had emptied his pockets of their meagre contents - lightsaber, the children’s painting, his list of memories, ID card and the hated inhibitor bracelet – and stuffed his clothes into the laundry spinner for chemical cleaning while he washed. The cleaner pinged to announce the end of its cycle, and he pulled the garments out, eying the fabric critically. The clothes - dull orange shirt, grey sleeveless over-jacket, blue scarf and black trousers – were the ones Shaarm had bought for him all those days ago when he had first been in the Tszaaf hospital after the narm attack. They were frayed and torn, and there was still a stain on the jacket that looked a lot like blood. Add to that look his thin, scarred face with its patchy beard, second-hand over-sized boots and the ragged handmade green wool coat he had worn every day since his arrival, and he was starting to look distinctly tatty. He needed a haircut, a shave and a good meal. With a slight frown and a sigh of acknowledgement that he wasn’t likely to get any of those things in the near future, Ben ran his fingers through his wet hair to straighten it, and redressed in the only clothes he owned. At least they were now clean.

Ablutions complete and feeling distinctly re-energized despite his misgivings, Ben left the cubicle and continued on down the corridor towards the lounge where he had arranged to meet Pakat. He entered a wide bright space and at first all he took in was the window; a long strip of light stretched continuously along both walls of the carriage. The space was perhaps 30 metres long, filled with
small tables and spread about with seating mats. The large carriage could have seated perhaps fifty Kheelians, although at the moment it was mostly empty. Ben guessed the train would only grow more crowded as they moved towards the city. One corner of the space contained a canteen unit manned by two droids who were dispensing scoops of food and beverages to waiting travellers.

Ben joined Pakat, who was sitting at a small table in the corner. The Kheelian hadn’t been idle while Ben had been busy, and had acquired two trays of food. The meal of rehydrated protein cubes and crackers came in two flavours; one intended for the native population and one for anyone else, which in this instance included Ben. Significantly better than the food were the two cups of hot spiced tea that accompanied it. With little else to do, the pair of them spent the next few hours picking at the bland, processed food and studying the town of Chandreta through the windows.

As at Tsaaf, only the first few carriages of the train opened onto the raised platform outside what must be the station building. The rear of the train sat far back up the line, meaning they had an oblique view across the town. It seemed smaller than Tsaaf from what little Ben could see, with the low domes of its houses gleaming in the sun like wet river stones. The land undulated gently, shimmering under fields of solar panels and with low hilltops scattered with turbines which turned lazily in the breeze. From the other side of the train, they could see a dark line where the train tracks made a wide turn and passed across the foothills towards the distant purple shadow of far-off mountains, like a bruise along the horizon. Pakat pointed out a scatter of dark shapes about half a kilometre away. A flock of creatures known as an ostampagus – huge flightless birds each a little taller than a standing Kheelian and with a vicious hooked beak – were grazing on newly planted tubers out in the fields. They usually kept to the mountains, but a wandering flock would destroy an entire crop in less than a week, or kill a whole herd of caprius in one go if they weren’t scared off. Ben could see why the narms were considered a rather minor threat in comparison to creatures the size of the ostampagi.

Several new travellers entered the lounge over the next few hours on their way to their allotted sleeping compartments. For the main part these were over-tired families returning home from Kel-Marr festival celebrations with relatives in outer towns, but some were gruff Kheelians dressed in working clothes who oversaw the stacking of their goods on board with tired scowls and then went straight to the canteen droid to buy cups of vok.

Two dusty Kheelians, discussing the state of mining wages, brushed past their corner table on their way to join the small queue by the canteen. They gave Ben little more than a cursory glance, something he was rather relishing. Pechnar must be least common enough out here that he wasn’t an exceptional oddity. As if confirming his thoughts, the compartment door swished open and a group of humans stepped into the carriage. The memory of pursuit had him freezing at the sight, but his logical brain quickly analysed what he was seeing was unlikely to pose a threat. The first figure was a woman with rich glossy skin the colour of uncreamed caff and a long spool of black hair twisted up in knotted ropes around her head. Her companion was male, several years older and several centimetres shorter, grey headed and with the ruddy, tanned complexion of a manual worker. He was carrying a sleeping toddler in his arms. A teenager trailed behind, all gangly limbs and sticky-out ears. All of them were dressed in layers of rough green cloth, sleeveless jackets and headscarves, like labourers or farmers. The teenager caught sight of Ben’s staring and muttered something to the woman. The group picked up their food trays and quickly disappeared to the far end of the carriage. The boy gave Ben a fearless glare as they left.

Pakat saw the direction of Ben’s gaze. “Someone familiar?” he asked, with forced lightness.

“No,” Ben said. “Just the first humans I can remember ever seeing who weren’t trying to kill me.”

The Kheelian blinked. “That is depressing.”
“It certainly is. Why do Pechnar live out here?”

Pakat shrugged. “They come because there is work here, I suppose. Jobs that Pechnar stature is much more suited for than Kheelians and Dhosana – fruit picking, wind turbine repairs, droid maintenance. Even data entry is more suited for Pechar – all those fingers for typing. But I think many, like you, come here to start a new life, because they became unwelcome where they were or because they have something to hide. It would be difficult to be more thoroughly hidden than it is out here.”

Shaarm returned from the town of Chandreta some hours later, with news.

“There was a telewire unit at the station,” she told them as soon as the customary head pats and greetings were over. “I got through to Chana.”

Pakat sat up, sharply. “You did? What happened?”

“Everyone is well,” she assured them. “Grandmother has use of a house in the town for her political work, and Chana and the children are staying there with her for now, out of sight. Everyone sends their love.”

“And the Jedi?” Ben asked. “What happened after we left?”

“As soon as the train was gone, Falayan apparently dragged Chana and the girls through some back alleys he somehow knows to a hidden route into the Dhosana enclave. They stayed the rest of the night with Yalani and Ysella and by morning there was no sign of the Jedi anywhere. They’ve asked around and someone thought he saw Pechnar leaving the town on speeder bikes, heading west. They’ve gone.”

Ben nodded, relieved.

Shaarm’s errands hadn’t just been to acquire news, as welcome as it was to hear that everyone was all right. She had purchased backpacks for herself and Pakat and a shapeless cloth bag with a long strap for Ben, as well as spare sets of Kheelian clothes and the only Pechnar garments she could find – leggings and a knee-length sage green tunic. It seemed Pechnar were even less populous in Chandreta than Tszaaf. She had also acquired a selection of other travel essentials, including washing materials, maps and food. She showed Ben sachets of dried fruit and beans as well as bottled water and packaged phuff bread, all edible for his species, to supplement the processed canteen food. Ben took the new tunic, food and particularly the bag gratefully. His pockets had been starting to get a little full.

After a while Ben left the others and returned to the berths. The man slept again for several turns, still recovering from the exhaustion and weakness that had plagued him since the moor. By the time he awoke evening had drawn on and the train was winding its way through dark foothills, scattered with scrubby bushes and stunted trees. The train slowed significantly as they climbed and the track became steeper and more treacherous. One of the other Kheelians in their sleep compartment, an older female known as Maga, told Ben how heavy snow or storms in the mountain passes had been known to delay trains for days. The tunnel which had at one time passed under the mountain range had been destroyed in the war, and now they relied on good weather, good luck and an army of Kheelian volunteers who lived in waystations in the mountains for months on end to keep the tracks clear of snow, debris and wandering ostampagi.

The skies stayed clear, however, and by nightfall they had reached the mountains. Ben watched through the window in the lounge as the black silhouettes of the mountains drew in and swallowed
up the deepening blue of the night sky. He shivered, and went to bed.

Time on the train passed strangely. The enforced inaction was lulled by the constant hum of engines and by the rolling, gentle motion of the train into a stupor of hibernation. The only clear moments of definition came when the train came to a slow, grinding halt at the numerous settlements along its route, stopping anywhere between 20 minutes to four full turns.

Ben spent some of the next morning sitting up in the berths, meditating on the events of the past few days, but the chatter of the other travellers in their compartment was difficult to tune out. He missed the peace and solitude of home. Eventually Ben rose, restless, climbed down from the bunks and set out to walk off some of the excess energy. He didn’t get further than the lounge before he saw Shaarm and Pakat at their previous table, heads bent low in conversation. The golden light streaming through the window behind them made their manes glow like haloes.

They ate a late breakfast together although Ben was quiet, lost in thought. While Pakat disposed of the trays, Shaarm gestured to Ben’s shoulder.

“I notice you are not wearing your sling,” she pointed out. “How are your arm and chest feeling now? Your surgery was only five days ago, and it has been some time since I was able to check your healing...”

Ben agreed that a check-up was probably due, and so the group retired back to the sleeping compartment. Ben sat quietly on his bunk while Shaarm performed a quick examination; her long clever fingers rotating his shoulder and testing the give of his collar bone and ribs. She clicked her tongue at the sight of the ‘saber burn on his neck, but made no further comment, replacing the dressings and his scarf. Ben shook his head when she asked about pain, fever, or shortness of breath.

Finally, when she seemed to be satisfied, Ben pulled his shirt and overclothes back on. He sat back against the wall and looked over at his friends, considering.

“Is this a good time for us to speak?” he asked, low. “There are some things we need to talk about.”

Shaarm was tucking away the datapad she had been using to update Ben’s MedIdent card. “What sort of things?” she asked, handing the card back.

“Nenka.”

Pakat looked up, sharply.

“You believe hold me responsible for what happened to him,” Ben concluded, simply.

Pakat was clearly horrified. He spluttered out; “Ben! Of course we do not, that is madness...”

“Shaarm does,” Ben said, simply. “And she is correct. I am responsible.”

Shaarm looked stricken, but she didn’t deny it. Pakat was still making his protestations.

“Please, Pakat,” Ben shook his head. “I’m not saying other factors weren’t involved, but it was my wrecked ship which tainted the water so badly the narms had to abandon their homes. It was I who pushed for negotiations in the first place and took Nenka and the others up onto that moor with no idea of the complexity of the danger we were walking into. And ultimately, it was my ignorance and misuse of my powers which forced Nenka into an accelerated and unnatural healing. That damage is all of my own doing.”
Pakat became increasingly upset as Ben spoke, seemingly horrified by the idea that Ben might blame himself for Nenka’s misfortune, or worse, that Shaarm might as well. Ben regretted having raised the subject at all, but eventually Shaarm calmed her spouse down and the Kheelian left the compartment on the pretence of enquiring with the train guard about the next stopover they would make.

“Pakat is not fond of conflict, particularly amongst those he cares about. He will be back soon enough,” Shaarm reassured Ben, after Pakat was gone. “You should know he would never blame you. He does not have an accusatory breath in him.”

“I know that,” Ben agreed. They were silent for a moment.

“You didn’t...” Shaarm began and then paused. “When you healed Nenka. Did you know what you were doing?”

Ben shook his head. “I hadn’t the slightest idea. I don’t know if what I did should even have been possible. I saw him fall and then the blood...do you know he saved my life? The narms attacked him and all I remember is that I was utterly determined that no-one else should die. The Force saved him, not I.”

“The Force?” she asked.

Ben nodded, but didn’t clarify. After a moment, Shaarm said:

“You are correct in that I was hiding something from you.”

“About Nenka? He will live?”

Yes,” Shaarm said, firmly. “I was not being untruthful about that. He has a long road ahead of him, but he will recover. But as for what I was concealing from you...it is not blame, Ben. It is fear. The powers you possess... They terrify me. The things you can do and all without even knowing how? You can survive incredible injury. You can move things without touching them, speak to animals, control people’s minds... You regrew Nenka’s cells, at a thousand times their normal rate! Do you know how much energy that should take? Yes, it could be argued that advances in medicine are starting to do the same, but I understand the science behind those advances, behind bacta and surgical interventions. I believe in testable, provable facts. The things you can do, this force. That I do not understand and so yes, I do find it frightening. We all do.”

She paused for a second, and then added. “Well, all except Chana, I think. But then he never has been quite sane.”

Ben smiled at the attempted levity but it was a hollow thing that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Then it is just as well we left the girls behind,” he said, heavily. “You must be relieved, I imagine, if that is how you felt all along...afraid of me, of what I might do. Ysella was right, then, after all. Tiki and Ooouli should be kept as far from me as possible.”

“Do not be an idiot, Ben!” Shaarm snapped, losing her patience in the face of Ben’s self-recriminations. Across the compartment, two Kheelians on their bunks turned around to stare at them. Shaarm lowered her voice.

“Do you really think we would have continued to let you live in our home, let you teach and befriend our children if we thought for one second you would endanger them? I said I was afraid of your power. I am not afraid of you. You came close to dying while protecting Ooouli and Tiki. And then what you did to heal Nenka...it almost destroyed you. You were willing to place yourself back into the hands of men who tortured you to keep my family from harm. You are good. I do not fear
you. I do not blame you, either,” Shaarm concluded. “And if for a moment I did, then I am sorry.”

Ben nodded, relief flowing through him like oxygen.

Pakat returned after an hour or so. He didn’t ask about their conversation, merely seeming relieved that the conflict between them had apparently been resolved. The three relocated from the sleeping compartment back to the lounge just for a change of scenery, where the rest of the day passed slowly and monotonously. They alternated between looking out of the window, listening to music, meditating or reading. Ben showed Shaarm and Pakat the flimsi he carried with his list of things he had remembered, but they could make no more sense of the scattered fragments of memory than he.

Despite the old Kheelian Maga’s fears, the weather stayed clear, and the train did not stop as they wove their way down from the highest point of the mountains that they had passed in the night. As the afternoon drew on they arrived into their next major station; Berghet Crosspoint. Ben, who was starting to find lack of purpose and constant proximity to the other travellers highly wearing, proposed his intention to alight from the train and see the town while they were stopped. Shaarm frowned but didn’t try to dissuade him, and soon the little group were dressed in their outdoor gear and ready to disembark. Once the first hurdle was passed; a two-metre drop from the train door to the scorched grass at the edge of the rails, they set off into the town.

Unlike Chandreta and Tszaaf, there had been no settlement at Berghet before the railway was built, but it was here that the major infrastructure route passed over a broad river which flowed off to the east as well as an old drover’s track used by the caprius herders of the foothills and plains to the west. The place became quickly established as a trading outpost between the three routeways and, where commerce is taking place, a town will quickly follow. Unlike the previous large settlements, the town they walked through was dominated by blocks of warehouses and storage sheds rather than winding streets of domestic residences. Still, there were plenty of signs of habitation; taverns and shops, residential units and even a small schoolhouse. Caprius were everywhere, cropping the thick green turf which formed the surface of all the roads and walkways of the town. There were still two hours before the train was due to depart once they had finished with the town’s highlights, so they found a small eatery for a midday meal. The Kheelians tucked into the fare with evidence enjoyment, appreciating the break from the monotony of the processed train food, though Ben settled for a piece of caprius cheese, a handful of crackers and dried fruit out of his bag rather than risk anything more unfamiliar.

After eating they returned to the station and loitered at the edge of the grass, watching the final herd being corralled onto the train and taking in the last few minutes of fresh air before re-embarking. They leaned on a low fence at the edge of the track, looking back the way they had come across the grey, craggy mountains. The air was crisp and cold and it smelled of snow. Pakat had seen a news outlet in one of the bars they passed; the national weather department had issued a timetable showing a major coronal mass ejection over the previous few hours. The probability of geomagnetic storms was high over the upcoming days. They were due to arrive in the City in less than 24 hours and the other passengers were concerned that a major solar storm could significantly delay their journey. But there was nothing to be done about it, and Ben was in no particular hurry to encounter what awaited him at the end of this journey.

“How does it feel?” Shaarm asked suddenly, out of the blue. “Your magic? This...force?”

“Well...” Ben hesitated. “For one thing I would not truly call it ‘mine’. If anything, I belong to it; the Force is with me, as I believe it is to be found in everything. Sometimes it feels like music and I can see every life and object in the universe are its notes, woven together in harmony or discord. Or perhaps it is more like a river or a fire. It gives life, but I know I could be swept away by it or consumed utterly.”
“Are you afraid of it?”

“No,” Ben answered simply, without hesitation. “No, it is not something that I fear. I don’t think I understand it, yet, but it is part of who I am. Fear leads to anger, and to suffering, and I don’t think there can be any suffering in the Force.”

“You said you can sense it in everything,” said Pakat, clearly ill at ease with the entire concept, but curious nonetheless. “Can you see it in us?”

Ben nodded, cautiously. “I did some damage to myself, I think, when I healed Nenka, and I am only starting to feel the Force again. Before that though, yes, I could sense you all in the Force. You all looked like stars in a constellation.”

“And the Jedi? Were they the same?”

Ben smiled. “More like a supernova.”

Shaarm sighed, looking out towards the distant plains. “I suppose that explains how they were able to find you, then. You must have shone like a beacon to them, as soon as you took the suppression bracelet off.”

“I don’t...” Ben said, frowning. The wind whistled cold around them. “I’m sorry, what do you mean?”

“Because of you also being a Jedi,” Shaarm explained. “You must look the same to them, in the Force.”

Ben stilled, his heart giving a sudden painful jolt. He glanced at Pakat and back again. “No. That’s not right....”

Shaarm had turned to look at him fully now, and her expression was concerned.

“Ben, we talked about this.”

He shook his head, but she persisted. “The night before you went up on to the moor, to negotiate peace with the narms. I told you that you must be a Jedi. We talked about it for some time. You...you do not remember, do you?”

“I am no Jedi!” Ben objected. “They tried to kill me!”

“That is what you said before.” The two Kheelians exchanged an anxious look.

Ben paused, refocusing on this new problem. “How?” he asked. “How can I not remember that?”

“Ben,” Shaarm said, holding onto his shoulder and looking at him with a sudden intensity. “Your memory... Since the crash, have you noticed any blank periods? Blackouts? Other conversations, things you could not recall afterwards?”

Ben was feeling a slow, creeping chill, like fog of fear. “No,” he shook his head. “No, nothing like that. But I would not necessarily know if I had forgotten something, would I? Unless someone else pointed it out. Shaarm...what does this mean?”

“It is probably nothing,” Shaarm said, though she was clearly still anxious. “You are clearly capable of both forming and retaining new memories, we have seen that. It probably means that you were just preoccupied when we talked before.”
“People often do not recall minor conversations.” Pakat added, trying in vain to comfort him.

“Or it means that I am starting to forget again,” Ben concluded, “and that I didn’t even notice it happening.”

That was not a comforting thought.

They returned to the train a short while later, thoughtful and quiet. Ben turned in early, though he lay awake for a long time, thinking through every day he had experienced, every face he had seen and every conversation he had had. Searching for blank moments or expanses of lost time. He couldn’t still be forgetting. Not when he had fought so hard for what he had. He couldn’t lose it all again.

Shaarm thought he was a Jedi.

It some ways, it made sense. He could do incredible things that he didn’t understand, things that tallied into what little the Kheelians knew about the Jedi. But he needed more information that was not coloured by speculation and folk tale. If he was a Jedi who had gone rogue in some way, or was some sort of traitor then that may explain why they pursued him so diligently.

If he was a Jedi...Back in Tzaaf the first time, back when his Force powers had not been crippled, he had sensed the Jedi outside the medcentre like a burning searchlight. It stood to reason that, as his Force use recovered and strengthened, they would also be able to sense him again too. Shaarm herself had concluded as much. Ben had been shoring up the mental shields he had discovered in his mind, but he did not know if they would hide him well enough from his pursuers. He needed to adopt a more direct course of action by the time they reached the city if he was to stay hidden.

Ben rolled over quietly, careful not to disturb the sleeping Kheelians around him, and reached for his canvas bag. He extracted the inhibitor bracelet. The shiny little cuff gleamed bright and innocent in the blue overhead lights. Without allowing himself any doubts or second thoughts, Ben took a deep breath and pushed the thing onto his wrist.

The sensation was like being punched in the gut followed by falling backwards into an ice-cold frozen river. Ben gasped, trying not to wake the others and slumped back, reeling and dizzy. He hadn’t even snapped the cuff properly closed, concerned that if he sealed it shut the loss of the Force in its entirety might just plunge him back into seizures. Yet even with it slightly open, the sick, numb, crushing sensation rolled over him in waves. Ben clumsily grasped the cuff and managed to prise it open a little more. The sensation of being cut off, of being smothered, began to slowly recede. Ben adjusted the bracelet carefully, searching for a balance between his goal of blocking his Force presence, and the side effects of debilitating nausea and crippling numb ice-coldness. When he found what he guessed might be the right adjustment, he jammed a twist of cloth between the terminals of the bracelet’s arms to hold it in place and prevent it snapping entirely closed.

Time for a quick test. Ben reached out with the Force for Pakat’s stylus which rested on the side. The stylus didn’t even twitch but Ben’s nose was suddenly gushing in hot blood; he cupped his hand and a wodge of tissues under his nose and leaned forwards until the bleeding stopped. Hopefully that result meant success, but he might never know for certain if his appearance in the Force was as smothered as it felt. He didn’t have any other choice but to hope. Ben shuffled his sleeve down over the cuff until it could not be seen, quite resolved not to mention this to Shaarm. Inside his head the Force buffeted against the numbing blanket of nothingness emerging from the inhibitor. How long had he lived like this before? Days? Months? If he was going to successfully hide in the city, he would have to be able to function, despite the awful sensation of the bracelet. This was necessary training.

There was certainly no possibility of sleep now, and so he quietly fled the compartment. After a
quick trip to the washrooms to clean off any remaining blood, Ben found himself back in the lounge, all but deserted at this hour apart from a few vok drinkers and two Kheelians eating a late meal. He dropped into a seating mat by the window. Outside, the night rolled by, unbroken.

After some time, Ben felt steady enough to risk standing again, though his stomach still churned. Perhaps a glass of tea would help. He crossed carefully over to the canteen and lined up to queue behind a figure waiting at the counter. His level of distraction and unease meant it took Ben several moments to properly observe the being standing in front of him, and then he stared, fascinated.

He could not have imagined such a creature, though he remembered that once the Kheelians had looked equally as outlandish and frightening when he had first seen them. This being was at least bipedal, though it probably had a good 10cm in height over Ben. Its appearance was made even stranger by rich teal-coloured skin and by two long tail-like protrusions which grew out its skull and down his back. The pointed ends were wrapped in some decorative fashion with long crossing straps. As Ben watched, the head-tails gave a sharp twitch in towards the creature’s back and then suddenly it was rounding on Ben in a fury.

“Something wrong with your eyes?” The creature snapped, flashing pointed teeth at him. Ben jerked back. “Take a hike, pal, before you find yourself walking home.”

“I apologise,” Ben said, trying desperately to break his gaze away. The creature had the same teal-coloured skin over its face and neck, with a high, solid brow, a narrow nose and brown, human-looking eyes. Currently the face was wearing a firm scowl. Ben spotted the rather large blaster strapped to one hip.

“I did not mean to stare,” Ben continued, hoping to allay his previous rudeness. “It has just been a long time since I saw a...” he paused, panicking, but for once his brain did not desert him, and the word was suddenly on his tongue. “...a Twi’lek.”

The creature – the Twi’lek – snorted.

“Yeah, you and me both, friend. Now do you mind? I’m trying to eat.”

“I’m sorry,” Ben said again and made to step away, glancing at the tray to which the Twi’lek had gestured. Ben observed he was eating the yellow food cubes engineered for Pechnar rather than the standard white. That must be a taste preference; his memory informed him that there was no reason why Twi’leks shouldn’t be able to digest Kheelian food too.

“Twi’leks have two stomachs?” Ben said, before he could stop himself.

The Twi’lek answered “Sure,” before turning away again, muttering something under his breath that sounded distinctly like: “Why do the weird ones always turn up on my shift?”

Ben laughed, despite himself, and apologised again. “I’m sorry. Forgive me; I am not at my best today.”

“Sweet goddess...you actually speak Ryl?” the Twi’lek exclaimed with clear delight, hostility vanishing faster than coin in a spice den. “I don’t believe it.”

“I hardly believe it myself,” Ben muttered, no less astonished to realise he had just spoken in what must have been the Twi’lek’s own tongue. How many languages did he speak? This was happening far too often. Time to make himself scarce before he drew too much attention. “Pardon the intrusion. Enjoy your meal.”

Ben made to turn away, but suddenly found a hand was holding his arm.
“Oh no, you don’t,” said the Twi’lek, switching entirely from Basic to the new alien language. “You’re not going anywhere. You come over here, acting all weird like some planet-bound xenophobe, and then you come out with the most fluent sounding Twi’leki I’ve heard from anyone without lekku? Now I am very curious. Are you waiting for food? No? Then grab a drink and come on. You can give me an explanation while I eat.”

Ben floundered a little, not knowing how to answer.

“I am not good company right now,” he said at last.

“You seem a bit funny in the head?” The Twi’lek asked. “Are you?”

Ben considered. “Probably,” he concluded.

The Twi’lek clapped him on the shoulder. “Then talk about stomachs again for all I care. It’s just been a really long time since I spoke Ryl to anyone and my Kheeli is terrible.”

“Very well,” Ben agreed, a little reluctantly. He was still feeling weak and unsteady as he readjusted to the loss of the Force and in no mood to be sociable. But perhaps a distraction was what he needed.

The Twi’lek stuck out hand.

“I’m Arendet’ti,” he said. “People call me Ditto.”

“Ben,” said Ben, shaking the Twi’lek’s hand. “Ben Waken.”

Arendet’ti, it turned out was surprisingly good company, not least because he was exceedingly garrulous which made Ben’s part of the conversation rather easy. The Twi’lek, Ben learned, had studied xenosociology on his home planet of Ryloth, choosing the Kheelian/Dhosana wars as the subject for his dissertation which had been met with some confusion by his professors. He had quickly decided that field study was significantly more interesting than sitting in a library all day, and had made his way out to the planet he knew as Ata on the cheapest ship he could find. The first two years at the university had been great, but then his savings had run out and now he was stranded.

“And now?” Ben gestured at the Twi’lek’s outfit. He was wearing a bottle green jacket and trousers that clashed a little with his skin tone. The jacket had long black stripes down the arms and a logo on the front left side; clearly a uniform. A shiny, new-looking blaster was neatly clipped into a holster at his hip.

“Technically I’m a train guard,” Ditto explained. “But really all I do is translate from Basic, find lost luggage and deal with the biped passengers’ ticket chits. Not many of the quadie guards (slang, Ben figured, for the quadrupedal Kheelians and Dhosana) speak any Basic at all and Kheeli is a right mouthful. I’m meant to be security for the humies and bipeds too, but there’s seldom any trouble. Few drunken miners get in fights every now and again, and sometimes we have to chase an ostampagus or two off the line. It’s easy enough work, I get to travel while I earn some credit and it beats waiting tables. Which reminds me, I haven’t seen you about before in the biped compartments. You’re not a stowaway, are you?”

Ben smiled at that, though his attention was piqued by the last comments. He produced his ticket chit for Ditto’s inspection. “There is a separate section of the train for Pechnar? I suppose that explains why I haven’t seen that many others around. I’m travelling with two Kheelians. Colleagues of mine,” he explained. “So our berths are in the Kheelian section.”

“The bipeds on board are mostly humans, yes. Though we do get the occasional Twi’lek or Pantoran. Even had a Togruta out here last week. So you work in the City too, if you have Kheelian
colleagues?” Ditto asked, and Ben realised he was being prompted for his own story, which he told in what he hoped was the right balance of vagueness and random specificity to be believable. He settled for the familiar lie he had been using in Tszaaf, not dissimilar to the Twi’leks’s own story; he was a researcher at the university who had left the city to study the narms of Kender.

That initiated another long conversation, as Ditto was fascinated by Ben’s account of the creatures and their society. It certainly distracted the Twi’lek from Ben’s fake back-story, as the man recounted the attack, the negotiation and the fight on the moor. Ditto’s eagerness made Ben smile, reminded of Pakat’s own passion for the moor dwelling creatures.

An hour or so must have passed before the Twi’lek suddenly glanced at his chrono and swore. “Kriff. I have to go,” he said. “Was meant to be at my station ages ago.” He gestured back down the train towards the canteen and the Pechnar carriages beyond. “Thanks for the company, Ben. See you around?”

“Yes,” Ben nodded. “Goodbye.”

The Twi’lek disappeared and Ben cleared away his teacup back to the counter. He finally felt as if he might be able, at last, to sleep. Listening to another person’s interests and fears and little problems had been a good distraction, a way to remind him that his own problems were not the only ones that mattered. He returned to the sleeping compartment, quietly, though Shaarm lifted her head as he climbed a little awkwardly up into his bunk.

“Everything all right?” she whispered.

“I think I made a friend,” Ben said,

“That’s nice,” said Shaarm, and fell back to sleep.

He is aware of a sharp stinging on his face. It is but a small sensation amidst the sea of pain in which he currently adrift, but it catches his attention with its suddenness and draws him from sleep.

A voice says “Yes, he’s coming round.”

Ben turns his head muzzily, but there’s nothing to see. Something is covering his eyes. His arms are still bound. The voice continues to speak, but he ignores it for the moment. It will make its demands known in time. Instead he catalogues his own pains, radiating out from the shrapnel in his leg, his chest where they had kicked him and his neck where the deep ‘saber burn oozes and weeps. At least these are all familiar pains; nothing serious has happened since he was last conscious. He focuses back on the voice.

It is saying, “Are we ready to begin?”

A second voice, off to Ben’s right, says; “Yes, we’re ready. I just need to establish a baseline for the subject. Start off by asking him some questions you already know the answers to, so I can calibrate.”

“Yes, very well. No, Jedi, don’t fall asleep again. We have work to do.

There is another sharp slap and Ben’s head jerks back. He grits his teeth.

“Oh, don’t pull that face.” The voice continues. “Believe it or not but I have noticed your continued refusal to co-operate. So now we’re doing this in a way where your co-operation is not longer required.”
“Ready?” says the second voice.

“Yes. Okay. Let’s start... Where are you?”

Ask whatever pointless questions you like, Ben thinks; I am done talking to you. But even as his thoughts are casually stating their silent defiance, there is a strange sensation in his head. It’s like a humming, pulsing feeling on the side of his skull, under the left ear. The sensation increases to a soft buzzing, not painful but intensely irritating, and he wants to scratch the skin clear. His arms just jerk helplessly against their bindings. Then the pressure and the buzzing die away, falling back to just a faint, but constant, background hum.

“Okay, I am getting some alignment,” says the second voice. “Try again.”

“Where are you?” The man repeats, more firmly.

Ben isn’t sure he knows that information, even if he had wanted to give it. He remembers the trap, the one he had walked right into like some crèche-fresh initiate. How embarrassing. He remembers being stunned from the explosion, searched, disarmed, cuffed. Held in a small room for what must have been several days. Then, he remembers the man. Ben had said to him, “Just out of interest, where exactly am I?” and the man had replied, “You’re on my ship, of course.” And Ben had answered, “Ah, yes. Information which is both factually accurate and completely useless at the same time. Thank you so much.” The man had said, “Really, all that you need to worry about right now is that you are mine. You know, I have never actually needed a torture chamber before. Got this one made up ‘specially for you. Would you believe that this used to be just an old smugglers’ compartment off the hold? It’s turned out pretty great I think.” “It’s a marvel,” Ben had said, dryly, as he eyed the durasteel walls, stiff new manacles, cold metal drain. “Your decorator is to be commended.”

He remembers all that, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Excellent!” says the man. He sounds pleased. “That was exactly how it happened. This is going extremely well.”

“That was a very clear reading,” The second voice agrees. “Better even than the other trials, I think. But don’t get too confident just yet. That result may have just been beginner’s luck.”

Ben is confused, suddenly uneasy. What are they talking about? He cracks open his dry lips and his voice is raspy.

“What are you doing?” He asks.

“Quiet.” The man snaps, instantly. “You had your chance to talk. Concentrate.”

“On what?” Ben asks, but the man cuts him off.

“How old are you?”

Why would anyone want to ask that? His basic records are in the public domain. But even as he thinks this, the thing on his head pulses and memories are swirling up in his mind, and he suddenly remembers when he had been in the Medullia System investigating reports of a dangerous and highly illegal biological weapons laboratory. They had needed to get access to a secure area of the space station, so he had applied as much charm as he could muster along with a generous pinch of Force suggestion and two minutes later the lead research chemist had handed her key card over with a flutter of lashes. He had thanked her and walked back into the corridor where Ahsoka was waiting. She was pulling a face. “Something to say, Ahsoka?” he’d asked her, mildly. “Don’t you
think you were laying that on a bit thick?” she said. “It worked, didn’t it?” he responded, looking for the exit. “I’m not saying it wasn’t effective, Master,” Ahsoka said, falling in step behind. “But no-one wants to watch old people flirting. It’s gross.” He had sputtered, indignantly. “I was not flirting! I was getting us a way in to the lab. And less of the ‘old,’ if you don’t mind. I’m 36, I’m not dead.”

Ben gasps and is suddenly back in the present, in the cold hard chair with his wrists trapped and his eyes bound. But the memory is not over; he can hear the echoes of his own voice off the metal walls fading away to whispers.

“I’m not dead...I’m not dead....”

There was another strange sound and it takes some time for him to recognise it as laughter. The man with the blue eyes is laughing.

“Oh, I like her!” The voice says. “This ‘Ahsoka’. She’s...hmm, what’s that word? Feisty.”

Ben despises the sound of that voice speaking her name. It is abhorrent. But there are bigger things to worry about right now. They can read his thoughts. Somehow, his own memories are being dragged up and displayed for these men to witness and he is powerless to stop it. If they ask the right questions, he’ll unwillingly tell them anything. Everything.

“One more easy one,” says the second voice, across the room. “Just to make certain the pattern is fully locked in. Then we can begin properly.”

“All right,” says the blue-eyed man. “Now, I want you to tell me ...who is the Grand Master of the Jedi Order?”

But Ben has not been idle in those few seconds since the memory faded, and he is prepared. As the blue-eyed man states his question and the device on the back of his head begins to hum against his skull, he slams up the solid walls of his defences around his mind. The rising memories are trapped inside a stone casing and he fills the space with white noise, lets his thoughts go long and empty, thinks of nothing, remembers nothing. It’s kind of like meditation and it would be easier if he had any access to the Force greater than the thin, secret trickle getting through the inhibitor that he has been keeping held close in his chest like a fluttering bird or a palmful of water. But it is still working. It’s enough. They’ll see nothing but static. He can do this.

Then there is a sharp crack, and pain lances through his hand. The blue-eyed man has leaned over, grasped a finger on Ben’s left hand and casually snapped the bone. Ben’s concentration shatters and, with a gasp, the memory rises up and consumes him.

He is standing in Chancellor Palpatine’s office, between Mace and Yoda. The chancellor is smiling his politician’s smile under his hawk-like eyes. “Grand Master Yoda,” he says, standing. “I’m delighted to see you. Thank you for coming at such short notice”. “Come to serve, we did,” says Yoda. “Just tell us how we can help.” Ben says.

He opens his eyes, and hears again the echo of his own voice on metal.

“Help...help...”

“See?” the man says. “If you co-operate, this will go quite smoothly.” He suddenly moves and Ben hears his voice by his ear, feels a gentle pressure squeezing around the snapped finger joint. “Don’t do that again. Defy me and I will break every bone in your body. Understood? Now, show me what you know about all the Jedi commanding active campaigns in the outer rim.”
He woke with a gasp, breath frozen in his throat, heart hammering against his ribs.

“Ben?” Shaarm’s voice was a whisper in the dark. “What’s wrong?”

“I—” Ben said, and didn’t know where to start. “I remember...”

His voice caught, dry and tight. He had the sudden need to move, to shake off the clinging horror of the dream. He had to write it all down before the memory drifted away again. There had been names.

Ben tumbled out of the bunk, almost forgetting in his haste about the steep drop, and clambered inelegantly down the crates to the floor.

“Ben!” someone hissed down from above but he didn’t pause, stumbling out of the compartment and back up the train. He wasn’t sure where he was going, other than that he had the urgent need to move. His legs suddenly gave out while he was in the corridor between the caprius pens. He dropped where he stopped and ducked his head down to his knees, listening to the snuffling of the caprius in the pens around. The animals within were sleeping, their simple thoughts untouched by sense of distress or fear, dreaming only of fresh grass and clear skies.

Shaarm and Pakat found him not five minutes later as he sat with his back up against a metal strut, trying to force his shaking hands to write. Pakat leaned forward and easily plucked the flimsi and pencil out of fingers that trembled with phantom pain now long gone. The Kheelian lay down on his front with the flimsi under his hands, holding the pencil ready. “I will write,” he said, simply. Shaarm settled down on the floor across the corridor from Ben and said;

“Tell us.”

Ben breathed out slowly. The swirl of images and emotions threatened to drown him but the whirlpool was merely the rush of water down a drain and, if he didn’t work to save them, the memories would swiftly be washed away forever. One single memory rose to the surface, and he grasped it like it would save him from drowning.

“I am 36 years old,” he said.

Pakat wrote and Shaarm nodded, but neither spoke. They knew how significant that statement was. It was only one tiny fact, but it was, perhaps, the first thing Ben had remembered about himself as an individual that was not derived from guesswork and supposition. He knew his age.

Ben continued, haltingly. “There was a...device. I was blindfolded, I think. There were two different men in a room. I wouldn’t answer the questions they asked me, but that didn’t matter. Any thought that I had they could watch. Like a damned holovid. I tried to resist but...”

Ben flexed his fingers, feeling the grate of bone beneath the skin. *Defy me, and I will break every bone in your body.* He shivered and closed his eyes. What had he remembered? What had he seen? It was already starting to slip away.

“There was a girl. Older than Ooouli. She mattered to me, a great deal.”

“Your daughter?” Shaarm asked.

He shook his head. “No, she was not human. Not as different as a Kheelian; she ...her head was... I can’t remember clearly. Not a Twi’lek.”
“Take your time,” Shaarm said. “What did she look like?”

“I can’t recall. Her name was...” Ben paused. “Her name...” But it was gone. The more he had tried to grasp it, the more the knowledge had dissipated from his head, like clutching at a vapour. It was as if his mind was rejecting the memories, draining them from his brain like pus from an abscess.

“I don’t remember who we are speaking about,” he confessed.

“You were telling us about a girl,” Shaarm prompted but Ben shook his head. He couldn’t recall any more.

“I went,” he said and halted. “Somewhere. There were two people with me. Powerful. We...”

“Jedi?” Shaarm asked.

Ben shrugged, helplessly. He remembered remembering their names. But now the dream, and the memories within it, were gone.

No-one slept much for the rest of the night and dawn wasn’t far off. Ben himself gave up on sleep again after a few restless hours and tried to meditate once more. Despite the attempt, he recalled nothing further from his nightmare. Wearily, he got up. Shaarm and Pakat were still asleep although some of the other Kheelians in their compartment had gone, perhaps to find food. Two of the berths were cleared out and the luggage stacked below was missing so some of their travelling companions were probably leaving the train.

Ben headed through the sleeping compartments to the ‘freshers, noting that the gentle motion of the train had ceased once more. They must have arrived at the next major stopping point; a town, he remembered from Shaarm’s map, known as Zabora. This was the last settlement on this side of the uninhabitable plains which stretched for over 400 lengths ahead between them and the City. If the effects of the predicted geomagnetic storm didn’t reach them, they would arrive at the City that same day.

The human found himself in need of some fresh air, so he made his way to the vestibule at the end of the carriage and leaned against the open train door, cup of tea clutched in one hand, watching the quiet hum of activity taking place around train. Zabora was barely visible in the early dawn light, though Ben could see, under low sodium lights, a set of additional sidings parallel to the main line. The line here was slightly curved, and if he looked towards the rear of the train he could see flickering lights and figures around the far end where another carriage was being connected up to the train. He looked in the other direction, but even if he leaned out of the door, the train was so long he could only see the nearest five carriages; the rest of the cars and the engine beyond were lost to distance and darkness.

After another half turn, the doors along the carriages slid closed and the train grumbled into motion. Ben returned to his usual place in the lounge; though the datapad with its treatise on narms that Pakat had loaned him remained switched off on the table. It was time to start coming up with a plan. If they were going to reach the city today he needed a stratagem. He wanted to find out about his past and he didn’t know how long that was going to take. A long time, probably, with the few clues he had to go on. Even longer if he was trying to stay hidden while he looked – he didn’t believe his pursuers wouldn’t catch up with him eventually. He just hoped he would have time to find out who he was first. In the meantime he was going to need a job, somewhere to live. He couldn’t expect Shaarm to support him forever, and sooner or later the Kheelians would need to return to their family.

As he thought and planned, the dawn came and went. As the turns passed, more Kheelians
wandered into the lounge for breakfast and to look at the passing landscape out of the windows. Ben had been compiling a list of his skills – if he was going to find work, he needed to know what he was capable of. It was a depressingly short list.

He wasn’t sure afterwards what made him look up. The sound of the door opening, perhaps. Maybe he was looking for Shaarm and Pakat arriving from the sleeping compartment. But it wasn’t them.

A Jedi stood at the end of the carriage.

Long brown robes, the colour of wet peat, and face hidden within a deep shadowed hood.

Ben had been found.

Ben took the sight in at a glance. Calmly, he slid he datapad into his satchel and picked up his empty tea cup. He stood, just as a group of Kheelians wandered through the carriage, heading to the canteen. He stepped in front, walking slowly, unhurriedly, as if he was heading to dispose of his cup into the waste chute, all the while keeping the quadrupeds between him and the Jedi.

With the suppression bracelet half closed on his wrist, the Force was like cold mud in his mind, dull and muted. The Jedi could not sense him. He could still get away. Just another slow, sleepy figure moving through the train. He kept his head down, and kept moving, heading for the door to the rear of the compartment towards the Pechnar area, walk slow, act natural-

“Ben. Ben Waken.”

Ben froze. Every single muscle went taught as bow string. He couldn’t run, he couldn’t hide, he couldn’t even breathe. That voice. That voice. The Kheelians flowed around his stationary form and off to the canteen, but he couldn’t move. His hand was centimetres from the door. The limb dropped of its own accord. Slowly, dazedly, he straightened, every muscle fighting. Slowly, slowly, he turned around.

The Jedi stood in the centre of the carriage. Even as he watched, a second stepped through the far door behind him, then a third. Then a fourth. Four figures, shrouded in brown cloaks and deep hoods. Watching. Waiting.

He was in rather a lot of trouble.

The Jedi at the front stepped forward, hands a little raised. “That’s what you’ve been calling yourself, right? Ben?”

Ben stayed silent for a moment, just calming his racing heart. One of the couple of Kheelians sitting at a table by the window looked over at them with interest.

Ben swallowed and kept the fear from his face. “Might I know who is asking?”

“It’s all right,” the man at the front of the group replied. “You’re all right, you’re safe now.” The man pushed back his hood and Ben saw his face properly for the first time. He was a human certainly, and tall, taller than Ben. Light brown hair and blue, blue eyes. He was...familiar.

Ben took an unconscious step back, trying to keep all four of the Jedi in sight, trying to keep the door at his back, but trying not to make it look like he was trying. There were eight Kheelians in the train compartment. One was reading, and the others were now watching the show curiously. These Jedi wouldn’t attack him while there were so many onlookers, surely. But even as Ben watched, the female at the back of the group slid open the compartment door behind her and stepped aside. She held out a small translation module.
“Everyone leave,” the device intoned in loud, accented Kheeli. “Jedi business.”

It took a moment for the orders to sink in, but the Kheelians, with their faces a mix between curiosity and awe at the word Jedi, slowly rose and shuffled out of the lounge back towards the sleeping compartments. They threw more than one puzzled glance at Ben too, but no-one spoke. The door closed with a smooth whir, and he was alone. Alone with the Jedi.

There was a moment’s silence before Ben said. “Who are you?”

“We’re Jedi Knights,” the man at the front of the group answered, slowing moving forwards. “I’m your friend, so there’s no need to be afraid. You can stop running.”

“I am fairly sure I don’t know you,” Ben said, although that was a lie. That voice was burned into his soul. “Perhaps you have the wrong person.”

“My name is Anakin Skywalker. I know you don’t remember right now, but we’re friends. We are here to take you home.”

“Home?” said Ben, both playing for time, and because he couldn’t help himself; he yearned for this, these scraps of truth, of connection to his old life like water in a desert.


Ben glanced about him. “I...no. I don’t remember. What happened to me?”

“There was an accident.” Skywalker said. “You got hurt...a head injury. But we can fix it, as soon as you come with us. You’ll get your memories back.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” Ben asked, but even as he said the words he already knew that this man was no stranger. He felt as if those compelling blue eyes were looking straight through him, as if they knew every single thing about Ben; as if every confidence, every secret had been stretched out and flayed open before that crystal gaze.

“Well, we have been searching for you for almost a month,” the Jedi said, and his face twisted into a wide smile.

“So, you are persistent.” Ben acknowledged. “But that proves nothing.”

It was only because Ben was watching so carefully that he saw it. The moment Skywalker’s eyes darted to Ben’s wrist, catching sight of the suppression bracelet just showing beneath Ben’s sleeve.

Ben hesitated a second, and then asked; “Was that you I saw? In Tszaaf, outside the surgery?”

Skywalker nodded. “We almost got to you several times, but your new friends are extremely loyal. Here,” Skywalker continued. “Will this do for proof? Would anyone other than a Jedi have this?”

He opened his hand. Lying across the palm was a metal cylinder. Chrome alloy, stripped-back bronze and a black ridged handgrip.

A lightsaber.

Ben stared, astonished and curious and afraid. But of course these Jedi would have lightsabers too. What he hadn’t been expecting, though, was how different each ‘saber was. The weapon Skywalker held out was a longer in the handle than the one currently hidden in Ben’s satchel. He could see it
was narrower in the grip and would be lighter too, as if made to fit a slightly smaller hand and stature. And despite the stark, almost skeletal, appearance of that exposed emitter matrix, it was sturdier, well-balanced. Less sleek, less showy than the one from the wreck. He knew that it had a blue blade and a single Adegan crystal. That would make it less powerful than the multicrystal structure of the ‘saber Ben was carrying, but that was a price worth paying for an integrity and reliability and strength that would never overheat, never fracture, never fail. He knew all this. And there was something else he knew.

“No.” Ben said.

Skywalker looked, for a second, taken aback. “I’m sorry? ‘No’ what?”

“No,” Ben repeated. “You are not Jedi.”

The man closed his hand over the ‘saber. Then he straightened his back, tilted his head. And, as he looked at Ben, he smiled.

It was not pleasant.

“Now, why would you go and say a thing like that?” Skywalker said.

Ben grasped the suppression band on his right wrist and, in one smooth motion, he tore it free. The Force thundered into him, and with it, certainty. He felt nothing from the four people in the carriage; no rising maelstrom, no rushing storm of Force presence. Just the low hum of a living creature. This Skywalker was not the Jedi he had encountered in Tszaaf. In fact, he was not a force-user at all.

Without wasting a moment more, Ben grabbed for the Force, gathered it in close, and then pushed as hard as he dared, slamming a wave of Force energy into the group. They went flying back but he didn’t wait to see the result of his actions. He turned and sprinted through the door at his back, slamming it shut behind him.

Ben ran for his life.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much, friends, to anyone who read last chapter and especially everyone who commented or left kudos. I appreciate it more than I can say and honestly would have abandoned this long ago without you all to keep me going. I suck at replying though, but I'll try answer any questions you have that aren't plot centric or soon-to-be-revealed.

Chapter unbetaed, so please let me know if you spot any typos, spelling mess-ups or formatting horrors.

Big love, and stay safe out there.
Deceptions

Chapter Notes

I'M NOT DEAD.
Surprise!

For this and other feeble excuses see author's note below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Seventeen seconds.

That was all the advantage Ben could hope for.

Five seconds for the false Jedi to scramble back up to their feet. Ten seconds for them to follow his mad dash down the length of the carriage. Two seconds to throw aside the compartment door.

No matter how Ben calculated it, it was an undeniable truth that the pursuit was right on his heels.

He took in the carriage he had just sprinted into at a glance. Rows of seats, curious faces turning to look at him and, at the far end of the carriage, the door onwards. If he had sixty seconds, he would have strolled casually through the car, moving slowly and drawing no attention to himself. If he had thirty seconds, he could have hidden – slipped unseen into one of the rows of seats, and turned his face away. Engaged someone in conversation, perhaps, like an old friend. Dropped onto the floor and rolled beneath a table and they might pass right by, oblivious.

But in seventeen seconds? He could only run.

Fifteen, fourteen...

So run he did, sprinting down the carriage, feeling his boots slide on the polished floor, the satchel smacking against his hip, knowing that curious eyes were turning on him with every frantic stride as his urgent flight drew the attention of the innocent passengers.

Eleven, ten, nine...

There wasn’t enough time. He had to increase his lead or he was going to be caught.

Five, four, three...

How had the false Jedi found him? He had thought he was safe. He should have been safe.

One...

He was mere metres from the end of the carriage when he heard the far-off whoosh of the door behind him sliding open. A voice shouted “Stop that man!” A voice that was chilling and familiar. A voice woven with authority and madness.
Ben saw a passenger to his right stand up and reach out as he ran past, but the Rhodian hesitated and by then it was too late: Ben threw his hand out and swept the door ahead of him aside with the Force, and a second later he was through into the next compartment. He slammed the door closed behind him and slapped his hand onto the control panel. A quick burst of the Force and something sparked in the mechanism. That should buy him a few moments.

Running was not going to be a solution for much longer. Skywalker and his men were between Ben and the Kheelian section of the train, where Shaarm and Pakat sat oblivious, and they were corralling him onwards. Soon, he would reach the last few carriages and his enemy were right on his heels. He was trapped like a clawmouse in a snare.

Ben glanced about at the gloomy, windowless space. His unfamiliarity with this part of the train put him at a disadvantage, but as luck would have it, this might be one of the best hiding places he could hope for. The compartment was clearly one of the designated biped sleeping areas he had been told about. Ben could sense around two dozen creatures and saw some sleeping figures bundled up in blankets far above. The bunks came in two tiers up the walls instead of singly like the Kheelian berths, though there were still stacks of crates, boxes and produce towering either side of the walkway. Above his head, between the upper two rows of bunks, netting was slung the width of the car and almost to each end, like a vast hammock. Lumps and bulges in the cloth revealed it was similarly packed with luggage and goods – there may even be more bed spaces too.

Unlike the last compartment, no-one had noticed Ben enter. He perhaps had one more minute while Skywalker’s men handled the sealed door, during which time there were a dozen places in which to hide. It would take his pursuers time to check every bunk and even longer to go through every crate and box stacked below that was large enough for a small man to conceal himself. All in all the compartment was as good a place to hide as one could hope for on a crowded train, but no doubt the false Jedi would think so too. And doing exactly what your enemy expected you to do was the best way to get caught.

Ben ignored the myriad hiding places to the left and right and instead ran on through the carriage towards the exit. He slid open the door into the vestibule, just as a distant hammering sound started up behind him. His enemies had apparently discovered the ‘faulty’ door control. It wouldn’t be long before they forced it open. Ben darted in, closing the door behind him and subjecting the panel to the same treatment as the last, jamming the mechanism and sealing the door shut. Good. He had gained a small lead and was completely out of sight of his pursuers. Now to think.

Ben glanced around the vestibule. It contained no people or furniture, just two doors at each end leading respectively back and onwards through the train, and, on his right, a large external door. Through the thick transparisteel window, the world outside flickered and flashed past in a blur. Even as the thought came into his head – throw open the door, climb out onto the train roof, pass unseen above his pursuers - Ben dismissed it as pure nonsense. This was real life, not some cheap holonovella. They were travelling at 400kph; if he even managed to force the door open against the safety mechanisms and the external pressure, trying to hold onto the side of the train in those wind speeds would rip his arms off. No use trying to get under the floor or into the roof space of the train either. Both the ceiling and the floor of the vestibule seemed to be made of solid durasteel plates.

There was nothing for it but to go on. Frustrated, Ben hurried to the next compartment door. No need to guess what was upcoming this time; a panel on the door read LOUNGE in Basic aurebesh characters. By his calculation, that meant after the lounge there was only one further biped sleeping compartment and the new goods car which had been connected up at Zabora station. He was running out of train. He needed a new strategy.

The appearance of Skywalker and his false Jedi henchmen on the train had been a horrible surprise,
just when Ben had finally thought himself safe. There was no way that they could have overtaken the train by any means other than some form of low altitude all terrain vehicle, or perhaps even a starship. They must have boarded at Zabora, when the train had last stopped. For all his efforts, all his hiding and subterfuge, Ben had still not evaded them, and there was no possibility that his pursuers would quit now, not after twenty days of pursuit.

That at the least told him all he needed to know about the man who called himself Skywalker. It was clear he was highly intelligent: dedicated, bold and ruthless. He had independent transportation, funds, resources, a disguise, and he had access to something else Ben did not currently have: back-up. Skywalker and his three friends could afford to split their party to both search the sleeping compartment and still continue on in pursuit after Ben.

Skywalker was not going to stop.

Ben touched the lounge door release and then hesitated. Up until today the rumours had only spoken of three Jedi, but there had definitely been four just now when they had confronted him. This Skywalker’s resources seemed to be limitless, and there was nothing to say there weren’t more accomplices elsewhere on the train. The lounges would be the ideal places to set a trap.

Nothing for it; he had to go on. He was out of options, and the durasteel jaws of the trap were closing fast. Ben took a moment to drag his scarf free and wrap it loosely around his head and shoulders, like the headscarves he had seen the other human labourers wear. It wasn’t much of a disguise but it might fool a casual glance. He breathed deeply, forcing his muscles to relax, and felt the Force wrap around him. *Hide me*, he thought. *Let me pass unnoticed.*

A muffled thud in the compartment behind him spurred him into action. Ben slid open the door to the lounge compartment and, adopting a slow but purposeful gait, stepped in. He took in the scene ahead with a subtle, lightning-sharp glance. There was no clear sense of danger or threat emanating from any of the twenty-three beings in the compartment; fourteen adults and nine children, all bipeds. No-one looked up as he entered, and he saw no sign of movement as of someone drawing a concealed weapon.

Ben did not let himself relax though. He slowly walked on, keeping his eyes low, and glanced around the rest of the compartment. It was smaller and gloomier than the lounge designed for the Kheelian passengers. It lacked the large gallery windows of the latter; instead a line of low round portholes looked out over the inhospitable plains. There was also no canteen, only a couple of automated vendors which stood in front of the grey durasteel wall at the far end. A narrow corridor led onwards into what must be the last sleeping car.

The bipeds in the compartment – humans for the most part, and two more Rodians - were clustered into family groups around tables. A few solitary figures were looking out of the windows. Three of the humans glanced up at him as he passed through the carriage but all looked away, uninterested. He felt no eyes lingering suspiciously. If there were more fake Jedi on the train, they did not seem to be here.

As he continued, Ben’s thoughts whirled. What was he going to do now? Just finding a hiding place was not going to be enough. Ben knew Skywalker would tear this train apart looking for him, and they were still hours from the city. The false Jedi had followed him at every turn, anticipated each move he made. He was going to have to do something unpredictable if he was going to escape this train with his life. Ben turned the problem on its head as he walked. He knew Skywalker was ruthless and unstoppable. So what did Skywalker know about *him*? True, his pursuers might have been familiar with the man he was before he lost his memory, but the lack of that past life and all its prior experiences no doubt made Ben a different person now. Just *how* different was yet to be seen.
So what unintended patterns had Ben’s own behaviour exhibited so far?

He was cautious, that was clear. Conflict had always been a last resort; if threatened he had chosen to run or hide rather than fight, or if he could, to talk his way out of trouble. That said, the business with the narms had shown he wouldn’t hesitate to take lives, or indeed sacrifice himself too without a thought, if it meant protecting those he cared about. That was a trait his enemies would no doubt exploit if they became aware of it. He made plans and strategies and calculated risks; he had stepped naturally into a leadership role when required but he was just as content to keep quiet and stay under the radar. He had avoided being seen as much as possible and he had gone to some lengths to avoid authority figures and official recognition.

Ben suppressed a sigh. That didn’t give him much to work with. If he hid he would be found, and he doubted he would be able to talk his way out of this one. Was his only chance to stand and fight, then?

No. There was still another option. He had a name now, and an ID. He was a registered citizen and his liberty and maybe life were under threat. What would any other innocent civilian do under such circumstances? Notify the authorities, of course. And who comprised the authorities on a train?

Ben paused. On his left a group of young humanoid males were clustered around a table, intent on their sabacc cards.

“Excuse me,” Ben asked them, quickly. “The train guard?”

The teens barely looked up. “Somewhere down there,” one of them said vaguely, waving towards the end of the car.

“Thank you,” Ben said, and walked on to the end of the lounge compartment. On his left was the corridor to the next compartment. On his right, a smooth grey metal wall with a single plain door almost out of sight behind the vending machines. A small plate in the centre of the door read:

NO ADMITTANCE.

Now that was promising.

Maintaining his purposeful walk, Ben turned right and stepped confidentially up to the door. Without a pause, he grasped the handle and shoved, as if he had every right to be entering a restricted area. Confidence was the key to invisibility in a crowd; act nervous and you stood out a mile. That said, if the door was locked he was going to look like a fool.

It was. Old fashioned mechanical lock too, with no electrical panel he could short out with the Force this time. Turning slightly to hide the movement, Ben reached into his satchel and slid out his ID card and the datapad stylus. Keeping his body between the door and the onlookers in the carriage behind him, he slid the card between the door and the frame, pushed the stylus into the lock mechanism and twisted.

Nothing.

Come on, come on…

On the third attempt, the lock gave a soft click. The hatchway slid open and Ben walked through. Without glancing back he closed the door firmly behind him and twisted the lock home.

For a moment he just stood, silent and breathless; awaiting the hue and cry would break out behind him, expecting any moment to hear fists pounding on the door. But nothing happened. Slowly, Ben
breathed out his relief; tried the let the tension and the fear release their toxic hold on his mind.

He was safe, for now.

At last, he looked around. As he had suspected, the space he had entered was a maintenance bay. One wall held an array of switches, levers and data screens, probably for controlling all the minor systems of the train, such as the door releases, heating and the like. There were large metal shelving units and cupboards too, stacked with towels, blankets, soap and other consumables, and all around was a clutter of cleaning equipment, tools and spare parts.

Beyond the maintenance area, in the far corner of the crowded room, was a curtain. Ben drew it carefully aside and revealed what could only be a tiny living space with a bed even narrower than the passenger berths, a sink, a rail holding a row of neat dark clothes, and stacks of books and datapads in teetering piles.

Curious.

Suddenly the sound he had been dreading broke the quiet of the compartment. Footsteps outside, followed by a soft click as someone tried the door handle. Ben froze.

Perhaps they would pass by. Perhaps they would-

The handle twisted and rattled but the lock held.

Ben sank back into a shadowy corner behind the shelving units and held his breath. Don’t see me, he thought hard, weaving his need to hide into the Force, filling the room with a numbing blanket of obscurity like a masking smoke. Don’t see me. Look away.

There was a scrape of metal as a key entered the lock and another click as the bolt drew back. The door slid aside.

“...deeper than the space between the stars...hmm hmm...love, the universe that could be ours...”

Wait, was that...singing?

A tall figure had ambled into the room, humming loudly. A teal-skinned hand slid the door closed, and, as the lock clicked shut, elegant lekku brushed against the back of a dark green jacket.

Ben gave a ghost of a smile. If he believed in good luck this must surely be the first example he had encountered in some considerable time.

Ditto, the train guard Ben had befriended not eight hours previously and the very creature he had been searching for, barely even looked around. The Twi’lek wandered into the room, still humming, and shrugged out of his uniform jacket with a comfortable sigh. While dumping his satchel on a nearby shelf his glance skimmed across the corner where Ben stood barely hidden, but to Ben’s surprise, Ditto’s eyes didn’t pause for a second, merely sliding away from the intruder, oblivious. The Twi’lek just crossed to one of the control panels and began making a minor adjustment to a dial, still singing softly to himself, fully at ease.

Ben had not been seen. He could stay here, still and quiet, and hope that whatever influence was keeping him hidden lasted until they reached the City. But that was hours away still and this was his only chance to act first, to take control of a situation that had been spiralling wildly out of his grasp since he had first become conscious twenty-three days ago.

Ben straightened and stepped slowly out of the shadows.
“Hello there,” he said.

Ditto jumped as if he had been electrocuted and spun around. His hands flew up in front of him as if to ward off a blow, but made no movement towards the shiny black and chrome blaster that hung at his hip. That told Ben a good deal; as he had suspected, the weapon was probably new and the Twi’lek was no warrior. Any arms training he would have received as part of the job would likely be rudimentary, his experience with the weapon non-existent. He had snapped and blustered at Ben last night but would he freeze in a fire fight? Most probably.

All in all perhaps not the best ally a hunted man could hope for.

“Ben?” The guard exclaimed. “What are you doing in here? This area is staff only!”

“I know,” Ben said. “I am sorry but I needed to speak to you rather urgently.”

“Wait, how did you even get in here?” Ditto glanced back towards the entrance in some confusion. “The door was locked...”

“Never mind that now,” Ben pressed. “I need your help.”

“Actually, my shift just ended,” Ditto said. “The geomag storm has moved faster than they predicted and in a few hours we’ll have to shut down the engines until it passes. We won’t make the city today so I’m off duty until we have to halt and I get to spend the next twenty hours up to my neck in complaining passengers. Go back up the train to Car 21, you’ll find the quadie guard’s lounge. Ask for Jebett, she’ll help.”

Ben shook his head. “I can’t,” He said. “It has to be you. Please, just listen to what I have to say. Then you can decide if you are willing to help me.”

Ditto was still looking unsure, but he eventually nodded. “All right, I guess,” he said. “Mind if I get a drink first though? It’s been a long night.”

Ben gestured towards the small curtained area he guessed was Ditto’s quarters. The Twi’lek tossed his jacket onto a rail, kicked his boots off, and picked out a couple of bottles from a tiny cooler in the corner. Ben declined the offered beverage and forced himself to wait, patiently, while Ditto made himself comfortable. At last the other sat, feet up on the control panel, and gestured to Ben.

“Okay, shoot.”

Ben paused, suddenly unsure where to start. A little honesty might be the key here. But not too much, of course.

“What I told you before,” he said. “About myself. Coming from the City, being a university researcher, studying the narms...Well I am afraid that was not entirely true.”

“Okaaay,” said Ditto, drawing the word out. “I’ll be honest; I have no idea where this is heading.”

“I am in hiding,” Ben said. “My work at the university...it’s a cover. I am not from Ata. I can’t give you all the details, but some time ago, on another planet, I came into possession of some information, information that led to the arrest and imprisonment of some extremely dangerous individuals. I was sent here and have been in hiding ever since, to avoid retribution. But I have reason to believe that my identity has been discovered.”

“What the kark... No. No way. That’s bantha druk.” Ditto was staring at him, half-smiling. “This is a wind up, right? Or a bet?”
“I’m afraid not,” said Ben. “I am quite serious. Possibly deadly serious. At least four bipeds boarded this train at Zabora, most likely bounty hunters. They are in disguise, and are armed and dangerous. They have already tried to attack me once this morning.”

Ditto was shaking his head, still not taking it in.

“You’re really telling me, truthfully, that you are some sort of protected witness? And they sent you here? What did you do, snitch on a Hutt?”

“I can’t say.”

“Is your name even Ben?”

“It is now,” said Ben, holding out his Ident card.

“Kark me,” Ditto muttered, glancing at the card and handing it back. “That’s quite a story. You say they are here? On the train?”

“Yes,” Ben repeated, patiently. If he couldn’t win the guard’s trust now, he’d be in big trouble. He could, of course, use the Force to make the Twi’lek believe him. That mind trick he had used on the nurse in Tszaaf. But somehow it didn’t seem right to use it on a friend. He wanted Ditto to believe him for his own sake, not because of some compulsion. “They’ve seen me and no doubt they’ll be heading this way trying to find where I ran off to.”

“When you say dangerous, how dangerous are we talking?” Ditto asked. He’d dropped his feet down from the console and was leaning forward now, beginning to look slightly anxious.

“I don’t think they will have any interest in anyone else,” Ben said. “But I have been their guest before and have no desire to repeat the experience.”

He twitched aside his scarf and collar to reveal the thick yellowish scab that covered the angry red burn scar forming on his throat. He heard Ditto draw in a breath, and knew he was believed.

“They did that...? Hells. Ben, I’m sorry, but...what do you want me to do? We’re just guards. I’m not trained for this. We can legally make arrests but we’re not cops. I don’t know how to fight four people...”

“Just let me hide here for now,” Ben explained. “I’m sure they’ll try and recruit your assistance sooner or later, but please, whatever tale they spin about me, you must not believe them. They aren’t what they claim to be. They are currently disguised as Jedi knights.”

“Jedi knights?” exclaimed the Twi’lek, looking even more amazed. “But...how? Why would they-”

The door handle turned.

The lightsaber was in Ben’s hand faster than he could think. His thumb hovered over the button, but he didn’t press it. Not yet.

Ditto glanced at Ben.

The handle turned again and gave a slight rattle. There was silence for a second, and then came three firm knocks.

“Shift’s ended,” the Twi’lek shouted at the door in Galactic Basic. “What do you want?”

A muffled voice from the other side called back.
“Please open up, sir. We just want to talk to you.”

Ben knew that voice. Fear poured over him like an ice rain.

“It’s them,” he whispered to Ditto, already moving. “Please. Trust me.”

Ditto swallowed, but didn’t respond. He stepped towards the door.

Ben slipped silently behind the curtain that screened the guard’s tiny living alcove, gripping the ‘saber tightly. He crouched down, pressing his back to the wall until he could see into the maintenance area through the narrow gap at the edge of the curtain.

Even as Ditto was unlocking the door, the knocking came again.

“All right, keep your shirt on,” muttered the Twi’lek and slid open the door.

Ben couldn’t see them from the angle, but he heard Skywalker’s all-too-familiar voice.

“Good morning, sir. You are the guardsman for this part of the train?”

“Yeah, but I’m off duty. You’ll have to go see the Kheelian guard. One of them speaks Basic. They can help with any trouble.”

“Oh, you have trouble alright, my friend, and you are going to want to hear this. May we come in? I don’t wish to have this conversation in the hall.”

“I guess...”

Ditto clearly had little choice in the matter as two figures were already stepping into the room, pulling the door shut behind them. Ben recognised the man who had called himself Skywalker and one of his accomplices from earlier, a near-human male with very pale, almost lemon-coloured skin and silver eyes. Both were still dressed in sweeping brown robes and hoods that shadowed their faces. The other male and female he had seen must be elsewhere, perhaps searching the other compartments.

Ditto stepped back, keeping himself between the intruders and the rest of the room.

“Well, what is it?” The Twi’ek said, with a familiar bravado. “You’re cutting into my drinking time.”

“My name,” said the man with the blue eyes, “is Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker. I am here because I need your help.”

“I told you,” said Ditto, stubbornly, folding his arms. “I’m off duty.”

Ben closed his eyes. Ditto might be trying to help but his terrible acting might just get them both killed.

“Interesting,” said Skywalker. “You did just hear me say we were Jedi? Everyone else we have met has fallen over themselves to help us. You don’t even seem surprised. I would have thought a Twi’lek would be particularly eager to lend their assistance to our mission, given the vital role we Jedi so recently played in the liberation of Ryloth...”

“I don’t live on Ryloth,” Ditto returned. “I don’t care what happens to that stinking planet. It’s been a long night, Master Jedi, can we get to the point where you tell me what you want?”

“Of course. We are here on Ata pursuing an escaped prisoner. He is armed and extremely
dangerous.”

“An...escaped prisoner.”

“Yes. He has been hiding out in some backwater near the moors. We’ve been closing in on him for some time but we finally have him trapped somewhere on this train. For the safety of everyone on board it is imperative that we apprehend him as soon as possible. Alive, of course, to stand trial for his crimes.”

“What crimes?”

“They are numerous, but in particular he recently kidnapped a Jedi master. Tortured him to death with his own weapon.”

“Stars’ end,” muttered Ditto.

“Precisely,” said Skywalker. “He is extremely cunning and is likely to tell any number of falsehoods to gain your sympathy and trust. Do not believe anything he tells you. You have no idea what he is capable of.”

Ditto was silent. Ben gripped the ‘saber tightly.

“What do you want me to do?” the Twi’lek asked, quietly.

“Keep out of our way,” Skywalker said. “We’ll catch him, but you must let us work without interference. We know he is somewhere at this end of the train, and I am going to search every inch of it ‘till he is caught. That said, if you or the other Kheelian guards spot him, do not hesitate to detain him. I authorise you to use violence if necessary to subdue him. You have blasters? Good. Stun him or injure him, and bring him to us. I will take it from there. Here, his picture.”

Skywalker handed a flimsi to the Twi’lek. Ditto glanced at it and Ben saw him twitch; an unconscious motion, no doubt, but a damning one to the watching Jedi. Both of them looked up and directly towards the curtain behind which Ben hid. The silver-eyed henchman pulled out a blaster in one smooth motion and stepped towards the alcove.

There was nowhere else to hide. With the only option Ben had left, he leapt vertically up into the air, catching hold of an overhead pipe and bracing his feet against the opposite wall. Beneath him, there was a rattle and the curtain was whipped aside. Ben locked his joints and froze. Beneath him he could see the top of the henchman’s hood, his arm, the black gleam of the blaster in his hand and all the while Ben was gripping onto the ceiling like a spider. It would take just one glance up from the man below and it would all be over. Don’t look up. Don’t see me.

“Yeah, I’ve seen that guy,” Ben heard Ditto’s voice, a little too fast and a little too loud. “Last night, in the canteen. Don’t know where he is now though.”

The man with the silver eyes directly below Ben wasn’t taken in by the distraction. He looked around the alcove with what felt like an agonising slowness. He ducked and peered under the bed, poked into every corner with his blaster and riffled through the clothes rail.

“Gurra?” called Skywalker’s voice from out in the main room.

“There’s nothing,” the man responded. The man stepped back into the maintenance bay and let the curtain fall closed. He never once looking up.

“Very well,” Ben heard Skywalker say. “Please, remember what I have said, guardsman. We want
this man alive. You will bring him straight to us if you see him?”

“Yeah,” Ditto said, quietly. “Sure.”

There were footsteps, fading away, and then the click as the door back out to the lounge slid open and then closed once more. With all his sense, Ben could just make out muffled footsteps continue along the corridor.

“Ben?” Ditto’s voice called, cautiously. Ben dropped carefully down from the ceiling, letting the Force cushion his fall. He stepped out from the curtain. At his appearance, Ditto took a few steps back, not taking his eyes off Ben. The blaster was now in his hand and wariness had displaced the easy trust in his eyes. Ben followed at a casual distance, rubbing his aching collarbone. He really wasn’t healed enough to be hanging off his arms like that.

“You heard what they said?” Ditto asked. “About you being a criminal?”

“I heard,” Ben said. “It isn’t true.”

“No offence but how do I know that?” Ditto said. “What he told me – it makes sense. Everyone knows the Jedi are peacekeepers. Why would they lie?”

“Because those aren’t Jedi,” Ben explained again. _Damn that Skywalker._ “This isn’t a Republic planet. Why would the Jedi be here?”

“They said they’d chased you here. That you killed one of their own.”

“Also not true,” Ben said. “Besides, even if it were – four Jedi? That seems like a very high number for a single criminal, no matter how dangerous.”

Ditto paused. “That’s actually a good point. On the newsfeeds they usually only come in pairs at most, except in the big battles. And there weren’t any troopers.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Clone troopers,” Ditto clarified. “Have you been living under a rock? The Jedi have a whole army these days. If they were hunting a dangerous escaped prisoner, I would have thought they’d bring a squadron or two. I would. Stop the whole train, evacuate the passengers.”

“Exactly,” said Ben, while having no idea what a ‘clone trooper’ might be, or why peacekeepers would need an army. “Please, Ditto. You are the only hope I’ve got of not dying today. I can’t prove to you that what I’m saying is true, but think about it like this. I’m not the one asking you to shoot someone, or detain a person you don’t know using violent force. The last thing I want is for this to end in anyone getting hurt. There are Kheelians here on the train that will vouch for me. I just want to be left alone. I just want to be allowed to live my life, in peace.”

Finally, Ditto nodded. “All right. All right, I’ll help you. But I just lied to that Skywalker guy, and my job is on the line here. So please, _please_, don’t turn out to be some kind of wanted outlaw.

Ben couldn’t help but smile a little. “I’ll try not to.”

“Okay,” said Ditto. “So what do we do?”

“I need a way out,” Ben said. “I’m outnumbered and they have me trapped. I have to get off this train.”
“A way off? No chance,” Ditto snorted, dashing his hopes immediately. “Sorry. Zabora was the last station before the City. There’s nowhere else to get out.”

“You said the train will have to make a stop because of the magnetic interference from the storm...”

Ditto turned and tapped a few keys on a datascreen mounted over the control panel. “Storm will be over us by 15 turns, that’s six hours from now. We’ll start slowing down at 13 turns to make sure the train is fully stationary and all the equipment is properly shut down before the worst of it hits.”

“So I have to stay hidden for four more hours. When the train stops, I’ll make a break for it.”

Ditto was shaking his head. “Come on, that’s impossible. We're in the middle of the Scarred Plains, Ben!”

“So, what’s out there?”

“What’s out there?” Absolutely nothing, that’s what, for hundreds of kilometres. There’s nowhere to go to. The train is shielded from the contamination but if you somehow got out you wouldn’t last a day. It would be suicide. You’ll just have to hide-”

Whatever Ditto was about to say was interrupted by a loud hiss of static. The Twi’lek reached for his bundled-up jacket and pulled out a small radio communicator.

“...are you there? Ditto?” The caller’s voice was distorted with static.

Ditto cursed, lightly. “Storm’s messing with the signal already.” He explained, and pressed the transmit button.

“Yeah, I’m here, Jebett, but I can barely hear you. What’s going on?”

“...someone here... looking for a pechnar,” crackled the voice. “...called Ben Waken. Do you ...?”

Ditto looked at Ben, wide eyed.

“Who’s asking?” he said into the radio. There was silence for a moment, then they heard:

“...couple of Kheelians...name...Shaarm and Pakat?”

Ben let out a breath. “Those are my Kheelian friend, the ones I’m travelling with,” he explained. “I haven’t been gone that long but I suppose they must have become concerned...I have to warn them about what is going on. They might be in danger too.”

Ditto nodded and made to press the speaker button. Ben stopped him, swiftly.

“Get them to head down towards us, but don’t say anything too specific,” he warned. “Low tech radio communications are far from secure and anyone could be listening.”

Ditto gave him an odd look, perhaps confused by his excessive paranoia, but he obeyed the instruction. “Jebett, tell the Kheelians to head towards the biped end of the train. I’ll come and meet them, help them find their friend.”

There was a little more silence, then they heard:

“...all right...tell them...out.”

“Good,” Ben said, once Ditto had tucked the radio back into his jacket and pulled the garment back
“Now just to get back up the train without being spotted. We can assume, I think, that the two false Jedi who were in here have moved on to the end of the train, but where the other two are is anyone’s guess.”

“Can you describe them?” said Ditto as he headed for the door. “The four you saw?”

“Well there was the leader, the human male with the blue eyes...”

“Skywalker?”

Ben nodded. “The other three were also humanoids; the human hybrid with the yellow skin, he seems to be called Gurra, and a human female. The fourth was- damn I can’t recall the name of the species. Tall, bipedal, with furred faces and limbs...”

“Wookiee? Bothan?”

“More feline, with fangs. Angular features.”

“Zygerrian?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

In the meantime, Ditto had slid the door open a crack and was peering out into the main lounge. Quietly, he asked:

“The female. Was she short with cropped off red hair, blue facial tattoos and a sort of brown cloak, like the others?”

“From your precise description I assume she’s waiting just outside in the lounge?”

Ditto slid the door silently closed and straightened. “Yeah, she’s hanging around by the vending machines. Kind of stands out what with the outfit and the fact everyone in there is staring at her. But she’s gonna see you too, the moment you step out of here.”

“Perfect,” Ben muttered. He was well and truly trapped.

Ditto shrugged. “Why are you trying to go anywhere though? You could just stay here. They’ve searched this room so I’m sure they won’t come back.”

“Oh, they will if they don’t find me. If they’ve left someone hanging around outside it is because they think they have a lead. Otherwise she’d be searching elsewhere. Perhaps she’s waiting for you to leave so she can follow you. Or maybe she intends to break in here and search the place as soon as you go.”

Ditto tapped on the maintenance console, uncertain.

“We need a distraction,” Ben said, firmly. “I need to draw her onwards into the next compartment so I can get back up the train to the Kheeolian section. What is in the next compartment?”

“Biped bunks,” Ditto says, “And then the Zabora freight car. It won’t take those guys long to search that though. If you want to go, I think you’ve got to go now.”

Ben nodded. “Very well. I don’t suppose you would be amenable to lending me a spare uniform?”

“Kriffing hells, you don’t ask for much do you?” Ditto looks startled. “You know I would lose my job?”
“I know,” Ben said, low. “I do know that and I am grateful beyond words. And I’m open to other suggestions if you have them. But think about it like this; you’ll very probably be saving my life.”

“Sithspit,” Ditto cursed. “Fine. Fine! You’re the most persuasive son of a Hutt I ever met, you know that? Force, I hope you aren’t a con artist.”

Ditto disappeared into the curtain alcove and came back with a folded bottle green uniform which he dumped on the console in front of Ben. Ben took off his coat, stuffing it into his bag, then pulled on the green trousers and jacket over his own clothes. The Twi’lek was thankfully narrower across the chest and shoulders than was common for his species, so the jacket didn’t look utterly absurd on Ben’s half-starved frame, though the trousers of course had to be belted and rolled up several times so that he wasn’t in danger of tripping over them and falling on his face. He pushed the rolled-up ends into his boots and laced them up to hide the excess fabric. There. That probably looked all right.

“You look ridiculous,” Ditto commented, handing Ben another belt. “Also there’s only a single biped guard on the whole train, and it’s not like you and I look similar.”

“Ah, but Skywalker probably doesn’t know that you’re the only guard,” Ben pointed out, buckling the belt up over the jacket and then straightening the garment. “Besides, this is only meant to fool a casual glance. Just enough to make no-one look twice.”

“How are we going to get the female out of the lounge though?” Ditto asked. “She won’t be looking casually at anyone. And what about the Zygerrian?”

“These panels - they give you access to the environmental controls in each carriage, right?” Ben asked, pointing to the main console. The Twi’lek nodded.

“Very good,” Ben said. “Well, when I say, cut the lights in the compartment next door, the sleeping compartment. Then, five seconds after, the lights in the lounge.”

“They’ll cycle back up,” Ditto warned. “You’ll only get about 10 seconds outage before the emergency lights cut in and the system reboots.”

“That’ll be enough,” Ben said, with a nod. It had better be. “I’ll worry about the Zygerrian if we encounter him.”

“Hang on,” Ditto said, and hurried back behind the curtain. He stooped low and pulled something out from under the bed, returning a second later with a box.

“It’s part of the standard uniform,” Ditto said, holding out a hat and discarding the box it came in. The hat was the same bottle green with a stiff black peak over the eyes, almost like the hat of a Nubian security officer.

Ditto continued. “Obviously, they let me get away with not wearing it, because…” he gestured to his lekku. “But it might help you.”

Ben accepted the hat and pulled it on, shoving as much of his ragged hair beneath it as he could. The brim shaded his eyes and might obscure his face a little.

“Thank you,” he said. “Really. I mean it.”

Ditto nodded, a little grimly, and went to the console. “Better get this done,” he said. “Before that Skywalker guy reappears.”

Ben crossed to the door and cracked it open, silently. The female was standing close by with her
back to the door, staring across the lounge. Clearly waiting for something. Ben raised his hand and then dropped it, sharply.

“Now,” he breathed.

There was a click as Ditto threw the switch. Then, faintly, from their right came a chorus of angry shouts and one or two startled screams.

“What the….?” said the woman and then she ran towards the door to the next compartment. She threw it open and went inside.

“Boss?” they heard her say and then the door closed behind her.

“Now!”

Ditto threw the switch and the lounge before them plunged into darkness, even the shafts of gloomy daylight struggling through the round porthole windows was cut off as the transparisteel went opaque and dark. Ben threw the door aside and darted out, Ditto at his back.

“What the hell?” someone on his right said.

“What's going on? Hey! Don't touch my cards, cheat!”

Ben and Ditto strode up the carriage as quickly as they could without running, while the figures around them in the dark yelled and complained. A scuffle seemed to have broken out amongst the sabaac players; Ben didn't look around.

“Hey, are those guards?” Someone shouted, spotting them through the gloom. “This is the third time in two days! Fix the damn lights!”

“Sir, what do you think we're doing right this second?” Ditto said, without stopping. “Excuse me…."

They reached the end of the compartment without anyone else stopping them and jogged into the vestibule. Ben closed the door behind them with a solid click, just as there was a distant hum of the lights powering back up. Someone behind them cheered.

“It worked!” Ditto was beaming, eyes shining. “I can't believe that worked!”

Ben was still moving, heading to the far door. “Yes, well, don't start celebrating yet. There's plenty of train still to go, at least one of them still ahead of us.”

But despite Ben’s fears they made it through the next four compartments without incident. No-one gave the uniform a second glance, and there was no sign of Skywalker’s Zygerrian friend. Ditto muttered darkly about budget cuts and cheap manufacture when they reached the two doors with the broken lock mechanisms that Ben had fried, both now forced open. Ben wisely kept quiet about that.

At last they reached the carriage with the rows of refreshers. Ditto headed up to the far end to another door Ben hadn’t noticed before, also marked NO ADMITTANCE. It was another maintenance area, about half the size of the one which contained Ditto’s berth, but similarly arrayed with shelves of cleaning products, tools and equipment.

“You’d better wait in here,” Ditto said. “I'm sure any minute we're going to run into one of the other guardsmen and then the moment they see you I'm going to get fired. Just keep out of sight for now;
I'll be back soon with your friends.”

As it turned out ‘soon’ meant almost immediately. Ben had barely sat down before the door was being opened once more, and Ditto entered again, followed by the familiar and comforting figures of Shaarm and Pakat.

“We are sorry to disrupt your morning,” Shaarm was saying in Basic, as she entered, Pakat following silently behind. “But our friend has not been seen since last night and we wanted to…”

Ben watched her gaze sweep over him without recognition before he enjoyed her almost comedic double-take of surprise as she suddenly recognised him.

“Ben! I give thanks you are safe! Where have you been?”

“And what in all the sky are you wearing?” Pakat added, as they both patted his shoulders and back.

“Both the disguise and my safety are thanks to my new friend Arendet’ti,” Ben gestured to the Twi’lek with a nod of thanks. “But I’m afraid I had to tell him about the trial, and about how I am in hiding here.”

Ben stared at Pakat hard as he spoke. He had no doubt Shaarm would pick up on the minor falsehoods he was telling, but Pakat, for all his sparkling intelligence, never lived quite as much in the moment as his mate. He might miss the subtleties of what Ben was saying entirely and say something to give the game away. But Pakat just stared between the three of them in confusion, saying nothing. Shaarm nodded to show she at least had comprehended what was going on, and that something urgent had occurred.

“What has happened?”

“They’re here,” Ben replied, in Kheeli. “On the train.”


“They boarded at Zabora,” Ben explained quickly. “At least four, perhaps more. They had me trapped at the other end of the train for a while but we slipped passed them. They won’t be deceived for long.”

“We left them far behind, in Tszaaf. How did they even catch the train? They must have a ship somewhere, or…”

Shaarm interrupted Pakat’s panicky guesses. “It’s going to be all right, Ben. You have a disguise and a safe place to hide here. They cannot know that you look different, that you changed your hair..”

“I’m not sure there is anywhere to hide. And I’m sorry - they’ve already seen me.”

Shaarm and Pakat just stared in mute, horrified silence while Ben reported his encounter.

“Their leader calls himself Skywalker.” Ben concluded, and then glanced at Ditto, not anxious to share everything yet with this new, uncertain ally. “He knows...all about what happened to me.”

Shaarm nodded, looking fierce. “Does he mean you harm?”

“Oh yes,” Ben said, quite matter-of-fact. “He is the one who gave me this before.” He tapped against the bandage on his throat. “I recognised his lightsaber. It is the one they used to burn me.”

Pakat looked horrified and Shaarm gritted her teeth.
“But the storm!” Pakat exclaimed. “We’re stuck here! What are we going to do?”

“Wait, they have lightsabers?” Ditto said, finally catching up on the conversation. “You said they weren’t Jedi.”

“They aren’t,” Ben said. “Shaarm, Pakat - they aren’t Jedi. That’s what they are pretending to be. I can’t explain how I know and I don’t expect you to believe me. But they aren’t.”

“We believe you,” Shaarm replied, instantly. “But what do we do? How are you going to escape?”

“The storm is coming,” Pakat repeated. “Soon we’re going to be parked up, maybe for days. How are we going to keep him hidden for that long? They will have as much time as they like to search everywhere.”

“Technically they can’t enter the staff areas,” Ditto pointed out. “But as they came to me with their story about an escaped convict I expect they went to the other guards too, and they’ll help that Jedi guy search every centimeter of the train. Never mind that they’ll probably have given out other copies of your picture to everyone too, so the passengers will be looking out for you.”

“I’m sorry,” Ben said, low. “I’ll just have to try and keep hiding or running. If I can’t leave the train there isn’t any other way out. But wherever I go though, it is vital that we are not seen together. Do you all understand? They must not suspect that we are associated or you will all be in as much danger as I. I would rather surrender than risk any of you.”

The others were silent, too anxious to argue.

“Listen,” said Ditto after a moment. “Like this guy said, we’re going to have to stop in a few hours and then we won’t move on again ‘till the storm’s over. It looks like a heavy storm in terms of intensity but it should be over quickly… I'm guessing worst case scenario we reach the City maybe the day after tomorrow.”

“That's nearly 40 turns from now,” Shaarm summarised.

“Do you have any radiation suits?” Pakat asked, suddenly. “For maintenance or something? Ben won’t be able to stay hidden in the train that long, but what about if he was outside?”

Shaarm looked up. “He’d never be able to cling on while the train was moving. But if he could somehow get into a suit and outside while we were stationary…”

“That's mad,” Ditto said. “Completely mad. We don't carrying any suits on board anyway. Maintenance work is all done at the stations.”

But Ben had felt the spark of something. It felt like hope. What Pakat had just said had ring a bell in his memory. Something he has seen, recently… “There are protective suits on board,” he mused, searching his patchy memory. “I remember seeing a shipping tag on a container when we first boarded. Anti-radiation protective clothing and equipment by Dormler Industries. Shipping unit crate 15/cf22...something. cf224c?. Destination: University research laboratory nine.”

Ditto just stared.

“Well?” Shaarm prompted the Twi’lek after a moment, unfazed by Ben’s eidetic and yet frustratingly sporadic memory. “Do you have a cargo manifest?”

“Um, yeah. Yeah, I do.”
Ditto grabbed a datapad off the wall and flicked through it for a moment.

“You're right. Compartment 15. Astonishing.”

“They won’t be designed for bipeds though,” said Pakat. “You wouldn't be able to move much.”

“Hang on, you can't just take stuff from private shipping containers whenever you-”, Ditto started to protest but Shaarm interrupted.

“Borrow, not take. We will put it back. Or you could explain to the owner; say the train officials needed to commandeer the suit for some other reason. Emergency repairs perhaps.”

“Look, okay, maybe I just don't want to know,” Ditto said, looking as shaken as anyone who tried to argue with Shaarm might look. “Keep all that to yourselves. Just for stars’ sake don’t damage anything and put it back when you're done.”

The Twi'lek turned away for a moment as if wrestling with something. Eventually he turned back. “All that talk of maintenance might have given me an idea…”

Ditto cast a critical eye over Ben.

“What is it?”

“I’m judging how wide your shoulders are.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Any particular reason?”

“I have an idea how you can move around the train unseen,” Ditto proposed, “and, luckily for you, it doesn’t involve theft followed by climbing onto the roof of a moving train and then dealing with wind speeds that will tear you in half.”

“Well, I’m in favour so far. Care to elaborate?”

“When you boarded the train, did you also happen to notice the solar panel cladding array on the roof? Yes? Well, those panels are maintained by human engineers – small ones, mind you – as they have to crawl through the maintenance ducts which run beneath the roof space. Those ducts run the entire length of the train but the only access points are in crew-only areas.”

Ditto pointed directly upwards. Above his head was a small hatch.

Ben grinned.

Now they had two options and that was enough to come up with a plan, of sorts. It had been perhaps a turn since the Jedi had confronted Ben. Plenty of time for them to have searched the last few carriages at the rear of the train and to realise Ben had slipped past them. They'd almost certainly start to move back up the train, trying to herd him before them like an errant caprius. If Ben could make it past them using the crawl space in the ceiling, they might continue on to search the entire rest of the train before turning back again. Of course, eventually one of the other guards would probably clue Ben's pursuers in to the existence of the maintenance ducts, so he couldn't count on being able to hide there forever. But it would hopefully give enough time for Shaarm and Pakat to ‘acquire’ a protective suit from the Dormler Industries shipping crate and for the train to slow enough that he could survive outside for a few turns.

It wasn't much of a plan. But what other choice did he have?
Ben shoved a few key items into his pockets and then handed the rest of his satchel off to Pakat for safe keeping. He was going to need as few hindrances as possible when negotiating the maintenance tunnels.

“Well, are you ready?” Ditto asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

Ditto released the hatch door and it swung aside. Pakat lifted Ben up and he scrambled into the small space, smacking his head almost immediately.

“You're heading that way.” Ditto pointed. “It's about 240 metres to the next hatch in my maintenance bay or there's another right at the end of the train another 100 metres on from there. There's no other access though apart from those hatches so for stars' sake don't get stuck. None of us can get in there to pull you out so you'd likely be trapped until they next disconnect the carriages in about four month’s time.”

“I'll be fine,” Ben says, looking down at their upturned faces. “See you on the other side.”

“Good luck!” said Shaarm, and Ditto closed the hatch, plunging him into gloom.

Like most things in life, it was easier said than done, and there were several moments when Ben wasn’t sure it could be done at all. At first it hadn’t seemed too bad. He had lain flat, carefully taking his bearings before he set off back down the train, and that’s where he noticed the gap between the curving roof above his head and the interlocking panels which formed the ceiling of the compartments below was not much more than 40cm high, and his movement was limited to flat crawling, pulling himself along using only his arms. Then, after the first few metres, the going began to grow more difficult. Wires and components from the solar panels above hung down around him, obstructing further movement, and every so often light fittings or the rails for the doors below jutted up through the floor. Added to the hot, dark, airlessness in the crawlspace and the fact he could only lift his head a few centimetres, the whole experience was a claustrophobic nightmare. The first time Ben’s boot got caught up on a tangle of loose wires somewhere above the first vestibule it was all he could do not to panic and to remember to use the Force to untangle himself, brush the wires away and free the limb.

The roaring sound of the stabilisers outside the train was deafening and the walls shook and rattled around him. The crawl space was clearly not designed to be accessed when the train compartments were hitched together, let alone when the train was in motion. But there was no use worrying about that now, and no way to turn back even if he wanted to.

Two-hundred and forty metres. He could do it. He must.

A loud whirring noise ahead announced another upcoming set of doors in a compartment below and, for Ben, another negotiation of the tricky connection between the two carriages, connected by durasteel couplings and sealed together by thick bands of flexiduct casing. He had started by counting each metre that he crawled but he had long since lost count; this must the be sixth or seventh set of doors, surely. He must be nearly back at the biped lounge. As usual, the doors were the worst part; the housing extended almost 10cm proud of the floor up into the space and Ben had to try and squeeze over the obstacle without getting trapped in the narrow gap or catching his clothing or fingers in the whirring mechanism of the door housing. Ben shoved with his feet, scrubbed with his hands and forced himself over the bar. At last he was clear. That had to be the last carriage. It had to be.

Finally. He could see the hatch right ahead and the urge to give up had never been stronger. He
could escape the crawl space in seconds, for the safety of the maintenance bay by Ditto’s quarters and hide out there. Or he could risk it on foot through the last two carriages to the end of the train.

But no. If the false Jedi hadn’t yet passed by beneath him and were still at this end of the train, watching the guard’s office, he would be seen the moment he stepped out of the maintenance bay and all this would be for nothing. Worse than nothing, because if the humans got hold of him then Shaarm and Pakat would doubtless put themselves in danger trying to free him. He had to go on, stay hidden, all the way to the end of the train.

One last push. Ben gathered his strength, peered ahead in the direction of the distant shadow that was the end of the train and forced himself on. Only another 100m or so to the end of the train. Half what he had already done. Easy.

He lost track of time, dragging himself onwards through the narrow space, with the heat and the noise and the cloying airlessness. Time passed. Too much time. Then, his knuckles cracked into a ridge of durasteel and then slid over a smooth panel. The last access hatch in the last compartment. He’d made it.

Before he did anything, Ben dropped down onto his face and just breathed for a few seconds. Cramp was squeezing its way up and down his back and his shoulders were on fire. His arms, trapped beneath his body, were trembling. That had been a thoroughly unpleasant experience.

As he was lying there recovering his breath, there was a crackling sound below, followed by a mellow chime.

“Gentle passengers,” announced a tinny voice in Kheeli, clearly through a set of speakers. The voice echoed up into the crawl space; it must have been transmitted throughout the train. “We have begun our deceleration in advance of the storm. In one hour the train will be stationary and current estimates predict progress will be halted for one full day and night. During the storm, all electrical items should remain switched off to prevent them becoming damaged. The canteen droids will remain in service. Please speak to your train guard if you have any concerns. We give thanks for your patience.”

There was a slight pause then, as if the announcer had been presented with a sudden break from the standard script.

“Gentle passengers,” the voice continued. “You may be aware that a peacekeeping operation is taking place on the train. This is unusual but please follow the directions given to you by officials and co-operate with their activities. There is no danger.”

Ben managed not to groan. That damned Jedi had thought of everything. Now everyone was going to be on the look-out for suspicious activity. Even worse for staying under the radar.

Now that he had caught his breath he noticed a thin sliver of light escaping around the hatch. Ben pressed his eye to the gap and saw he was looking down into another tiny maintenance bay. It was stacked with an increasingly familiar array of electrical dials and screens and piles of tools and cleaning products. But as far living beings went, the room was empty.

Ben moved his hands around until he felt a latch at the edge of the access hatch, and flipped it open. The hatch slid aside. With a degree of caution, Ben curled forward and dropped soundlessly into the room, landing in a crouch. Across from him was the only exit, leading out from the maintenance bay into the main train carriage. He paused by the door for a second, reaching out with his senses and the Force, but the room beyond was empty of any living beings. Cautious anyway, Ben opened the door and peeked out.
This was the last carriage; the goods van they had acquired at Zabora station. Unlike the other goods carriages he’d seen further up the train, the vast space around was not divided up into compartments. Instead, rows of massive shelving units ran along each wall and extended into the centre of the carriage. The near end was heaped three crates high with boxes and goods, mostly seeming to be building materials like metal girders, pallets of brick and stone, and containers of dried paint and unmixed duracrete.

His pursuers, having realised Ben had given them the slip by now, had clearly moved on back up the train, and it might take them many turns to search the other thirty or so carriages. Ben was to wait here until Pakat and Shaarm could bring him one of the experimental radiation suits. The ‘experimental’ nature was mildly concerning. Would he get enough protection from the suit to survive outside the train during the storm for the next 25 turns? Even if he did, he would be forced to re-enter the train when it started moving again and Ben had no idea how he could evade capture until they reached the City.

The shelving units obscured most of the view up the train to the door so Ben moved cautiously through the carriage, looking for a suitable place to conceal himself. He didn’t know how long the others were going to be. His own progress through the train had been painfully slow, but there was at least a turn still until the train would come to a stop. So, wait it was. He was already regretting giving the rest of his possessions over to Pakat. Some food and water would be very welcome right now, but there was no helping that. What he had on him would have to be enough.

As he stepped around a shelving unit, something moved behind him. Before he could turn there was a screeching sound followed by a low static hum, a noise bursting with raw, visceral power. A sound that was growing increasingly familiar.

A lightsaber.

Ben turned slowly, and the blade was centimeters from his chest. Behind it, Skywalker’s face was bleached with flickering shadows. Ben had been right about one thing at least. The ‘saber’s blade was blue.

The trap was sprung.

But Ben had felt nothing. He’d searched the compartment ahead with the Force before he had entered and it had been empty. He knew it. How had Skywalker hidden? How?

Skywalker was watching him through unblinking, hooded eyes. There was the slightest smile creasing his face as he watched Ben trapped at sword point, trying to figure out why his senses had failed him. As if in response to his thoughts, Skywalker raised his left arm. The glint of the suppression bracelet on his own wrist, the one Ben had so foolishly and unthinkingly cast aside in his flight that morning, was unmistakable. It had obscured the man entirely from Ben’s senses.

“It was just a hunch,” said the man who called himself Skywalker. “I’m rather surprised it worked myself.”

He pulled the cuff free with his teeth and then dropped it into his palm. Ben utilised the momentary distraction to take a step back, intending to dash behind a nearby shipping crate but Skywalker instantly twitched the blade closer. Ben felt the heat against his skin and took the hint. He stopped moving. But there had to be a way to escape. He just needed time to think.

“Put that back on, please,” Skywalker ordered, and tossed the suppression cuff lightly towards him. Ben deliberately fumbled the catch and let the thing bounce off his arm and fall to the floor. Skywalker gave him a look.
“Who are you?” Ben asked, but Skywalker wouldn’t be drawn into conversation. He merely raised his hand and spoke quickly into a communicator, eyes fixed on Ben.

“Gurra. I have him. The last carriage.”

Blast it. Now backup was coming too. Skywalker made a little gesture towards the floor with the ‘saber blade.

“Pick the cuff up and put it on. I’m not going to ask again.”

Ben didn’t move. Skywalker must know the Force was his only ally right now and there was no way Ben would give it up so easily. He repeated his question instead, this time adding a little Force suggestion to the words. “I know you and your companions are not Jedi. Why did you lie?”

Skywalker suddenly flicked the blade, searing a thin line of hot pain against the flesh of Ben’s shoulder. Superficial, no doubt, but a compelling warning nonetheless.

“Put that cuff on and maybe I’ll tell you instead of cutting off an arm. Your choice.”

Blast it. A glance at the man’s face showed he wasn’t bluffing. Ben needed more time and he needed answers. This might be the only way to achieve both. He crouched slowly and his fingers brushed the cuff where it lay on the floor. He reluctantly slid the hated thing over his hand, leaving it partially open. That feeling of being slowly suffocated under crushing ice began to squeeze in around him and he dropped forward onto his knees, gritting his teeth.

The false Jedi smiled at the sight. Leaning forward, he took hold of Ben’s wrist and snapped the bracelet fully closed. The world tilted away from Ben in a dull, nauseating swirl and it was all he could do for a moment not to pass out. If he hadn’t already been through this before in the early hours of the morning when he had been experimenting with the cuff he probably would have.

Skywalker must realise that Ben was Force-blind and defenceless. Not an ideal position to be in. But it hadn’t seemed like the false Jedi was going to let his guard down before Ben was incapacitated in some fashion, and at least being Force-blind might be marginally less debilitating than losing an arm. Now he might get some answers.

“Well?” Ben said, looking up at Skywalker from where he was kneeling, forcing down the sickness and dizziness and crushing pain. “You owe me an answer.”

The man tilted his head a little, though the blade didn’t falter. Ben could almost see the thought process flash behind his eyes: Ben was unarmed and the longer he stalled them with conversation, the sooner Skywalker’s allies would arrive. Thus there was no harm in indulging a few questions.

The man smiled that unpleasant smile once again. “When I walked into your cell and you started asking where you were, and claiming you couldn’t remember anything, I assumed we were being treated to yet another of your famous subterfuges. Clearly not. But once you escaped, well, telling everyone we were Jedi was an obvious countermeasure.”

“Really. How so?”

“Come on. What did we have to lose? It made the locals much more helpful, for one thing. And if you were actually faking the whole memory loss thing, you would hear the word Jedi and think your little friend had come to save you. Of course, if you weren’t faking and really had turned into a total basket-case, well then. It wouldn’t matter what I was wearing or calling myself when I stunned you and dragged you back to my ship to cut out your brain.”
“But you wiped my memory...” Ben argued, trying not get drawn in, though the need for answers was consuming him.

The man gave a vicious little laugh. “Oh no, we didn’t. Like I said, I didn’t even believe it at first. Amnesia? Please. We’re not living in cheap holovid. But no-one is this good of an actor.”

“But you do believe it now,” Ben said. He’d slid his arms to his side and was carefully feeling round the cuff, trying to find that weak spot. “I don’t remember anything. Don’t you see? Whatever information it is that you want, I can’t give it to you, even if I wanted to. I’m of no use to you, so you may as well leave me be.”

Skywalker shook his head. “Oh, don’t be so modest, my dear General. You are far from useless. I can think of a number of ways you will fit very nicely into my plan.”

Ben’s hands stilled and his mouth formed its own cold smile. “How kind. But I am afraid I must decline. I have plans of my own.”

He stood up, suddenly, knowing it would put Skywalker off balance. The other man stepped in and raised the blade again.

“You aren’t going anywhere. Sit down and don’t test me. I don’t want to melt the rest of the skin off your face; for one thing it will make a mess of this nice, tidy train. But I have already been delayed far too long sharing tea parties and lies with your furry little friends. Believe me, if there hadn’t been kids in that house I would have burned it to the ground. So stop messing me about. I have no intention of being drawn into a conversa-”

There was a clang behind them; the distant door to the carriage was thrown open. For a split second, Skywalker took his eyes off Ben, glancing away, and Ben moved. Leaping back, he ripped the other ‘saber out of its hiding place inside his sleeve, igniting the blade in a shrieking burst of blue. He swung his arm round and, in one smooth motion, slashed the blade down across his own wrist. The suppression cuff burst apart with a shower of sparks and molten metal, and the Force thundered back in to him.

Someone gave a shout and a second later, Skywalker’s blade came down like a burst of lightning. Still dazed and reeling from the psychic blow of the Force returning, Ben stumbled and caught the blade against his own at the last moment. The two blades collided and locked, humming and buzzing like living things, pulsing out heat and power and energy, neither of them giving any quarter. In the swordlight, Skywalker’s face flickered and glinted with madness.

Somehow Ben knew what to do to break the lock. He leaned back, letting his guard weaken for a second, and then pushed, flicking his wrist just so. His blade skittered across the other and the ‘saber was twisted from Skywalker’s grasp, falling clattering to the floor. The blade went out.

This time, Skywalker wasted not one second glancing after it; instead he snatched a blaster from under his robes and opened fire. Ben leapt to the side as bolts rained down, darting behind a container for cover. Skywalker was running back as he fired, disappearing between the shelves and yelling to the three other false Jedi who had sprinted into the carriage. Ben was outnumbered once again; he Force-jumped up three metres onto the top of the nearest shelf then dashed along the row, trying to keep Skywalker in sight.

“There he is!” The Zygerrian yelled from somewhere to his right. “Cut him off!”

Blaster bolts flashed in his peripheral vision; Ben threw himself forward and rolled, letting them spark harmlessly over his head. Came up and carried on running. Sensed another bolt come
screaming towards his back and without wasting time to think he swung the ‘saber around and cut the bolt from the air.

“Hey!” Someone yelled. “Mind your aim, Gurra! We’re taking him alive.”

“Like hell you are;” muttered Ben.

He could sense two beings on his right, one on the left, out of sight. But directly below he caught a glimpse of Skywalker through the shelves. Ben leapt down from the crates to the carriage floor, rolled and landed in a crouch, using the momentum of the roll to swing the blade up. Skywalker bore down on him, slashing with his own sword in a rough parry, it clearly hadn’t taken the man long to retrieve the weapon, though it did the false Jedi little good. Ben easily knocked the blade aside. He darted forward, ready to strike, but Skywalker still had the blaster in his left hand and once again Ben was forced back under a hail of bolts.

A shout from the left and the woman was there too, firing wide shots. Pinned down, Ben threw himself behind a pallet, just as a shot blasted against the metal floor, centimeters from his knee. These false Jedi might not want to kill him but they certainly didn't seem bothered about inflicting a crippling injury. Well, two could play at that game.

His brain calculating possibilities lightning-fast, Ben spun out from his cover and twisted his arm, catching the next incoming bolt and deflecting it right back where it had come from. The blaster sparked and clattered to the floor as Skywalker fell back with a cry of pain. But Ben paid for his moment of triumph immediately: he had stepped out from behind his cover and one of the female bounty hunter’s shots flashed under the arc of the ‘saber blade and clipped his arm. Ben gasped at the sudden, searing agony but there was no time for self-pity. He grabbed two boxes from high above his head with the Force, swept his arm forward and smashed them into the durasteel between him and his enemies. Cans went crashing across the floor; clouds of blue paint powder billowed out in every direction. Skywalker and the woman were thrown back, yelling, and Ben ran, sprinting to the next set of shelves and scrambling back up onto the top row. Two of the four false Jedi were down and fifty metres away the door of the carriage was open. He set off at a run; jumped, and landed on top of the next row of shelves; ran and jumped again to the row after.

“He’s making for the door!” The Zygerrian shouted. “Cut him off!”

“Give it up, Ben!” Skywalker’s muffled voice was somewhere below. “There’s no escape this time. If we leave this train without you, people are going to start dying!”

Ben was still running but skidded almost to a stop as Gurra, the human hybrid with the silver eyes, vaulted up onto the shelves two units ahead of him, blaster raised. Ben dived into a somersault and came up kicking out hard. Gurra took the brunt of the kick straight to the diaphragm and dropped like a stone, wheezing. The blaster fell from his hand onto the packing crate and Ben instantly slashed at it with the ‘saber blade, leaving two lumps of hot useless metal. Gurra lay at his feet, an enemy disarmed and defenceless. The best chance Ben had to even the score. To survive. Ben draw the ‘saber back, flicking the blade in, ready to strike the final blow. The killing blow.

He froze. The man was lying there, helpless, but for all the threat that he posed, for all he might have hurt Ben in the past, and whatever diabolical plans they had in store….Ben couldn’t strike the man down. Not like this. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t-

Crack.

Pain. Horrible, shocking pain all up his right leg and into his body. Something whipped around his ankle was yanked hard and he was falling, the ‘saber dropping from spasming fingers. Bolts of pain
flashed up through his muscles and joints, his nerves were like wildfire, and then he fell from the shelves and hit the ground.

The pain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Ben rolled aside, gasping, in time to see the Zygerrian’s sneering face as he coiled the long cord of the electrowhip back and cracked it in the air with a snarl of delight. Then the whip came lashing down towards Ben once more. Ben tumbled aside, throwing his hand out and calling the lightsaber to him, but too slow; the whip clipped his back in an agonising stripe. Then, the smooth metal of the lightsaber hilt smacked into his palm and the blade ignited. He got to his feet, somehow, slashed at the cord as the whip cracked in again but he couldn’t cut it, couldn’t even leave a mark; the cord must be made of some material that made it impervious the lightsaber blade. The Zygerrian cracked the whip again and again; Ben fought back, blocked each blow, threw himself into another somersault to avoid the electrified cord. But he was running out of time; he could hear shouts and running footsteps coming up the aisle between the shelves. He’d destroyed two of their blasters, he was sure, but if he had to face all four of the false Jedi he had no idea what the outcome would be. In desperation, he darted in, forcing his attacker back. The Zygerrian lashed the whip at Ben’s face; the tip cracked a handbreadth from his eye and he dropped, sliding in under the Zygerrian’s guard and bringing the lightsaber down with an inevitable smoothness.

The Zygerrian’s hand, still clutching the whip handle, fell to the floor.

The injured enemy fell back with a scream, clutching his severed forearm. Ben didn’t waste a moment in guilt but shoved past him and ran for the aisle. He could see the open carriage door ahead, only a few dozen metres away, but then someone slammed into his back. Hands grabbed his shoulders, arms like steel cords wrapped around his upper body and neck, and hauled him back. They hit the floor, Ben kicking wildly, trying to jab the lightsaber round behind him at the enemy holding him down.

“Get the ‘saber!” Someone yelled, and both the woman and Gurra were there too, grabbing Ben’s arms, twisting his wrist close to breaking. The blade was flashing between them, erratic bursts of blue fire; Ben’s arms were trapped, someone was kicking him hard in the side, the arm around his neck was tightening, and...

The ‘saber fell from his hand.

“BEN!”

He saw two figures in the distant doorway. Shaarm and Pakat with hands up at their mouths in horror. He heard an echo of Skywalker’s voice: ‘if there hadn’t been kids in that house I would have burned it to the ground’. New strength surged through him. He rammed his head back hard, smashing it into Skywalker’s face. Something went crack and the arms holding him loosened. He surged up, kicking out, punching hard and tore himself free. The ‘saber hilt had rolled about metre away; Ben scrambled over, snatched it up, and then turned towards the door. He hurled the weapon as hard as he could, using the Force to guide it towards the Kheelians, still frozen in horror in the doorway.

“Shaarm!” Ben yelled. “The couplings...”

He saw her eyes widen; she reached out towards the flying lightsaber hilt, but Ben had to look away, rolling aside once more as a blaster bolt missed him by centimeters. The female bounty hunter was firing and now Ben couldn’t deflect the shots, but he had a plan, he had to...

Skywalker was on his feet again, nose dripping blood and dark fury in his eyes.
“You—” he began, but Ben didn’t wait to hear more. He crouched, snatched up handfuls of the spilled paint powder billowing across the aisle and dived forwards, hurling the paint into the false Jedi’s eyes even as he called the Force to him, zeroing all his attention on the object in his enemy’s fist. The other lightsaber. Skywalker stumbled back, his hands coming up. Ben reached out with the Force, pulled, and the ‘saber tore itself from Skywalker’s grasp and flew straight into Ben’s own. It fit perfectly in his palm like it belonged there, comfortable and powerful and familiar and…

“This,” Ben hissed at Skywalker, “is mine.”

He turned and sprinted for the carriage door. Blaster bolts sparked around him and ahead he could see blue light burning in the doorway. Shaarm was wielding the other ‘saber, slashing at the floor of the vestibule, hot metal and sparks flashing around her, as she worked to sever the couplings holding the two compartments together. The floor beneath Ben’s feet gave a jolt, a warning siren started wailing and somewhere behind Shaarm he could hear Pakat yelling.

“She’s nearly through, Ben! Run!”

There was an awful clunking sound, a distant screeching as of metal torn lose, and the entire carriage began to shake. The force of the train’s speed had ripped all but two of the last cables in the couplings that Shaarm had started cutting and the goods car was tearing itself loose from the rest of the train.

“Ben!” Pakat yelled again as with a grumbling scream, a great rift opened up in the flexiduct seal between the two doorways and the last carriage tore away, dragged along by the last two surviving connector cables. Daylight streamed in through the gap and the carriage shook and pitched. Ben shoved the ‘saber into the front of his tunic, put on one last burst of speed, pushed away from his feet with the Force and leapt out through the door. He sailed over the void between the carriages, feeling the tearing winds drag at him, seeing blinding daylight, the nauseating rush of the blurred tracks passing far below, and then he was crashing to the floor in the safety of the vestibule. The Kheelians had backed up against the rear wall leaving an open space for his landing and Shaarm started to step forward, but then there was a yell and something slammed into Ben’s back, forcing him to the floor. Gurra, the human hybrid, had leapt after him and they were both thrown across the vestibule floor. The false Jedi flipped over, lashing out hard with the blaster in his fist, catching Ben across the side of the head. Dazed, Ben tried to push himself up, but looked back as he heard Pakat shout in alarm once more, just audible over the blaring sirens and howling winds. Gurra’s silver eyes darted up, zeroed in on the Kheelians and the blaster’s barrel started to rise. Ben dived forwards, barrelling into the man, knocking him back away from the Kheelians towards the doorway. Then he leapt up into the air and kicked the man as hard as he could with both feet.

Gurra was thrown back; his flailing hands missed the edge of the door frame as he fell, and the howling winds dragged him straight down into the searing void between the carriages. Ben saw one last glimpse of terrified wide silver eyes and the man was ripped down into the gap and beneath the train.

There was a screech of tearing metal, a last judder shook through the train, and the final cable holding the goods carriage snapped. Ben watched through the door, numb with horror, as the carriage shook itself free from the train, dropping back down the track as the bulk of the train sped away. Clustered in the doorway of the stricken carriage were the false Jedi; the woman, the Zygerrian and, between them, the man who had called himself Skywalker stared back at Ben with hatred. The goods car quickly lost its momentum, growing smaller and smaller as the train thundered unstoppably on and away, leaving the stranded carriage and its bounty hunter cargo behind.

Before Ben, the door to the vestibule rebooted and slammed shut, cutting the scene off before his
eyes. The siren fell silent.

“Ben,” Shaarm whispered, from somewhere behind him.

And then, another sound. A blaster powering up, right behind his ear.

Ben turned around. There was Ditto the train guard, his teal skin pale with shock and horror, the shiny new blaster held out in both hands, with the barrel pointed directly at Ben.


Chapter End Notes

Gentle readers. I wish I could tell you my long absence could be justly and reasonably explained by my being in a coma or on a solo mission to Mars or even in jail. But the actual truth is far more mundane - my brain fell into a deep MCU hole and I only just clawed my way out. (In completely unrelated news if anyone is also in the Captain America fandom or can put me in touch with someone who might be interested in beta-ing a 200K word post-Winter Soldier trilogy, hit me up. Asking for a friend…).

So yes. All I can say is I am deeply sorry for keeping you all (and Ben) waiting and I want to offer my sincerest thanks to everyone who has continued to read and comment on Weeds over the last few months, even though it must have looked dead beyond dead. I also want to shout out to Vorpalsward and Toastmaster9000 in particular for their stunning and beautiful art. Please check what they've accomplished here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/12772026 and in my gifts, I swear you somehow know the pictures in my brain better than I do. I love your art so much I might burst.

This chapter is dedicated to you all, readers and commenders, for not giving up on me, for dragging me out of my rut and setting me on the right path with your encouragement. It’s not an exaggeration to say this tale would not continue to exist without you.

Chapters might continue to be slow in appearing from this point on, but appear they will. The end is in sight and we will see this through together.

Peace.

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