Wild Card

by blueraccoon

Summary

She reminds him of his sisters, and he is so tired of being alone. (Or: What would have happened in STID had Khan met one person, just one, who was willing to listen to him? Who wanted to offer him her help? As I found out...it changed everything.)

Notes

So, this started because I have this other story in progress here, in which I have a lot of OCs, some of whom demand more attention than others. If you're keeping up with that story, thank you, and you should recognize the OC in this story and hopefully you'll enjoy her. If you're not keeping up with that story, all you really need to know was that I started it for a wingfic prompt over at the Star Trek Into Darkness kink meme, and it exploded into an epic Kirk/Khan fic in which they both have wings.

Based on a couple throwaway lines in Flying Free, I got the idea to write an AU in which said OC met Khan before the events of STID. This is a het-centric story, and while I don't know if there will or will not be slash yet, it is not going to have a Kirk/Khan pairing. If that's what you want, by all means head over to FF and hopefully you'll enjoy it. But for those of you who are interested in het, or who are interested in Jill, I do hope you enjoy this. She is near and dear to my heart for so many reasons, and I think I've made her a well-rounded character with flaws and assets and issues, but as always, I would love to know what you think of her.

With many, many thanks to Orithain, foxtales, and heartattackinab0wtie for reading this and assuring me it didn't suck.
Chapter 1

He doesn’t see her before he almost trips over her; whether she ran into him or him into her he doesn’t know, he was not paying close enough attention. For a moment he thinks she’s a child escaping her guardians, until he takes in the Starfleet uniform and the bands on her sleeves. No child, then, but a Starfleet commander, and when she looks up at him he sees both maturity and laughter on her face. “Sorry about that,” she says, extending a hand. “I don’t know if I didn’t see you or you didn’t see me, but either way, I do apologize. Jill Calastinova, I belong to Starfleet, and you are?”

He hesitates only a moment before shaking her hand, mildly surprised at her firm grip. “John Harrison,” he says. “I suppose I do too.” True in more ways than he wants to admit, even if the name feels false on his lips.

“Are you in London on shore leave, stationed here, business trip?” Jill asks. “You sound like a local, but that never means anything these days.”

“I work here,” Khan says, mildly wondering why he’s engaging in conversation like this with someone he doesn’t know, but to be rude might awaken suspicion and anyway, he doubts anyone is watching him at the moment. “And you?”

“Shore leave,” Jill says. “Kind of. I’m the XO on the Marshall, we just got back and I’ve got a couple weeks of downtime owed me, but I also had some meetings to attend at HQ in London, so I decided to combine two birds and spend a few days here after I’m done with business.” She grins, bright and quick, and Khan almost smiles back before he thinks better of it. “Care to show a girl around?”

“That’s rather impulsive,” Khan says rather than answer her.

“So am I,” Jill says. “But there’s method to my madness. You’re Starfleet, which means you’ve got a basic level of decent intelligence and other qualities I appreciate, and it’s unlikely—not impossible, of course, but unlikely that you’ll turn out to be a psychotic serial killer and want to dispose of my body somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean or the Channel. You’re physically attractive, and I can totally be shallow like that. I’ve only been to London a couple times before and I wouldn’t mind exploring more of it, and as I said this means nothing these days but you do sound like a local so it’s possible you know more about the city than I do. Also, I like to think I’m a decent judge of people and you look like you could use a friend. So. Care to show me around? I’ll throw in dinner and a pint or two if it’ll sweeten the deal.”

If he were actually John Harrison, Khan thinks, her reasoning would be fairly impeccable. The serial killer comment amuses him more than it possibly should, and he has to admit that she is attractive. And she hasn’t mentioned something on her list of reasons that most people would have, if they were being honest. “Tell me something, then,” he says, considering it. “You didn’t mention these.” He shifts his wings, just a little, just enough to indicate what he’s talking about.

“They’re beautiful,” Jill says simply. “But they’re not on the list of reasons I find you interesting. Well, no, that’s not entirely true. They are, but they’re not a deciding factor. Beauty comes in all forms in this galaxy. I will admit I’ve never met a winged humanoid before, though.”

“Neither have I,” Khan says. “For the record, I am human, not just humanoid.”

Jill’s eyebrows go up briefly. “Interesting,” she says. “Tell me about it over dinner?”
He shouldn’t. She might end up under observation by Marcus or his people, which she probably doesn’t deserve. He can’t be honest with her about almost anything, and Khan has never enjoyed lying. But the idea of going back to his empty flat for another empty evening suddenly seems almost unbearable. “All right,” he says. “What kind of cuisine do you want?”

“I’ll eat anything,” Jill says, easily falling into step with him as they head down the sidewalk. “Although the spicier the better, especially if it comes with a cold beer or two.”

Khan does smile at that; they might not be so incompatible after all, and he does know a fair number of restaurants in the area. He has to eat, after all, and cooking for one can only be so interesting before he gets bored with it. “There is a place I know a couple Tube stops from here,” he says. “Do you like curry?”

“Love it,” Jill says without hesitation.

Over dinner, which involves spicy curry, plenty of naan, and a couple beers for them both--Khan learns more about Jill, and what he learns intrigues him. She was a gymnast, which doesn’t surprise him; she moves with the grace of someone who’s had years of training. Since the Academy, though, she says she’s turned her tumbling skills into unarmed combat skills, and rarely does pure gymnastics these days. She wouldn’t stand a chance against him, of course, but he remembers her handshake, and he can see defined muscles in her arms and legs where the uniform reveals them. Petite, but not fragile.

She speaks Russian, which makes him think of Ekaterina, and Spanish, which makes him think of Anandi; he thinks both of them would like her, if they ever met. Certainly the fact that she’s half-Russian would go over well with Cat. Khan hides the flash of melancholy behind a sip of beer and promises himself he will get them to safety, no matter the cost.

“What are your plans the rest of the week?” he asks her, distracting himself from thoughts of his family.

“I don’t have any, really,” Jill says. “I mean, there’s the standard tourist things and all, but mostly what I figured I’d do was wander the city and see what looked interesting. London’s relatively civilized, I don’t think I need to worry about human traffickers scooping me up.” She grins and tucks a stray curl back behind her ear. “Care to join me?”

“I have to work,” Khan says. “This has been...” He stops, because he has enjoyed himself with her, even with her not knowing anything about him. But it shouldn’t happen again, and he finds himself caught between the truth and a polite lie to keep her from seeking out his company further.

“I know Starfleet,” Jill says. “They work you hard but they do allow you to have some free time. And I’m pretty sure you’ve enjoyed talking to me, if all your questions mean anything. I’m not asking you to call in sick and play hooky with me--yet--but we could do dinner tomorrow, or I could meet you for a lunch break, or something.”

Khan looks down briefly. “That is probably not a good idea, Jill,” he says. “There...” He stops, because he wants to warn her off without giving anything away. “I am not a safe person for you to know.”

“I like danger,” she says, smiling. “Fuck safe--which is true in multiple senses, really, because I’m not completely crazy. Are you going to kill me, John?”

“No,” Khan says honestly. “Not right now.”
“Would you kill me in future?” Jill asks, seeming surprisingly unbothered by it.

“And if I said yes?” Khan asks.

“I’d want to know why,” Jill says. “I’d want to know what I could do that would make you kill me, what danger you think I might pose to you. Because telling me you’re not safe, that’s warning me off, that’s not protecting yourself from me.”

“It is still true,” Khan says.

“And I don’t care,” Jill says simply. “Dinner tomorrow? I’ll find a place, you pay?”

“You really won’t leave me alone until I agree, will you,” Khan says and for one sharp moment he misses Rani so much it physically hurts.

Jill laughs. “I really won’t.”

This might, potentially, work to his advantage, Khan thinks. He is supposed to be acclimating, and he knows enough about Starfleet and its unspoken biases to know that Jill probably gets overlooked or dismissed a lot. If Marcus were to find out he’d started spending time with her, he might just think Khan was taking advantage of some pretty young thing and even welcome it. It’s dangerous, and it might backfire, but Khan has never been afraid of rolling the dice. “All right,” he says. “I will call you to find out where we are meeting. 1900 hours?”

“Beautiful,” Jill says, smiling.

She insists on paying for dinner and although Khan’s background would normally make him protest, he decides to pick his battles and lets her sign the credit slip. Then they head back out into the city and he smiles involuntarily when she yanks the band out of her hair and lets it tumble down, curling wildly over her shoulders and down her back. Before Khan can stop himself or really even realizes what he’s doing, he brushes a lock back from her cheek, her hair soft under his fingers.

“Most women I know these days keep their hair shorter, or straighter,” he comments.

“Keeping it straight is a pain, and I have reasons I keep it long,” Jill says, and her voice goes just a little flat and a little off, somehow. It sends off warning bells in Khan’s head and he finds himself wanting to know what happened to her, but it isn’t a night to ask. “Walk with me? It’s too early to go back to the hotel, and it’s a warm night out.”

“Where are we walking?” Khan asks, finding himself amused at how quickly she moves, even when she doesn’t seem to have a destination in mind.

“Haven’t a clue, what do you know around here that’s interesting?” Jill asks, giving him a quick grin.

“Not much,” Khan admits. “I do not have much spare time to go exploring.”

“You have to have a couple places you go to unwind,” Jill says. “Everyone does.”

He ends up taking her to one of the parks he visits sometimes, to the hill he uses on the rare occasions he goes flying. As they walk up the hill his wings shift and stretch as if in anticipation, but he folds them back. Not tonight.

To his surprise, Jill just sits down in the grass, folding her legs and looking up at the sky. “I could
never decide if it was more magical to know what was out there and point and say ‘I went there’ or to just imagine all of it,” she says. “I wanted to get into space, so badly, just to find out what was out there, just to see.”

Khan folds himself down next to her. “What have you seen?” he asks.

“A lot of things I never expected to, a lot of things I thought maybe I’d find,” Jill says. “I’m not meant to be tied down to one place, I like to be on the go, see what’s out there, visit new places and go back to see older friends.”

“It can get dangerous out there,” Khan comments, tone carefully neutral, wondering how she’ll react.

“Yeah.” Jill pushes her hair back behind her shoulders. “Yeah, it can.” She’s quiet for a moment, then she grins. “But I like danger, so mostly it works out for me.”

“Mostly?” Khan asks.

“You show me yours, I’ll show you mine,” she says. “Are we going to trade war stories?”

“No tonight,” Khan says and Jill smiles a little.

“That’s about what I figured.”

They sit quietly, looking up at the sky, and Khan finds himself mildly surprised by how comfortable it feels to just sit with her, stargazing. When she finally sighs and pushes to her feet, he does the same. “I need to get back to my hotel,” she says reluctantly. “And you probably should get back to your flat.”

“Let me see you back to your hotel,” Khan says without thinking about it. He honestly doesn’t know what dating customs are in this day and age, but if she thinks him old-fashioned it’s only the truth.

“I can protect myself,” Jill says, but she smiles. “But if you insist. You can hail us a cab, they never see me.”

“I do insist,” Khan says, touching her shoulder briefly. They walk back down to the street and he hails them a cab easily enough. Jill gives the driver the address of her hotel, and they head back. To his surprise, Jill reaches over and takes his hand, her fingers warm against his.

“I had a good time tonight,” she says. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure,” Khan says, meaning it more than he should. Jill smiles and squeezes his hand, but doesn’t let go, and Khan doesn’t make her until they get to the hotel. He pays over Jill’s protest and they get out, facing each other on the sidewalk.

“Tomorrow,” she says, stepping a little closer to him.

“Apparently, yes,” Khan says.

Jill smiles and stretches up on tiptoe, reaching up for him and tugging his head down to meet hers. Her lips are warm on his, soft, and before he knows it he moves to hold her, lifting her easily to make the height difference less awkward. She laughs against his mouth and bites his lower lip, and one kiss bleeds into the next, becoming more heated than Khan intended until she finally pulls back, lips swollen, face flushed. “Unless you’re coming upstairs with me right now we need to
“Stop,” she says, a little husky. “And I don’t think you are.”

“I think that would not be a good idea,” Khan says, carefully--and a bit reluctantly--setting her down.

“For tonight, anyway,” Jill says, taking a deep breath. “I’ll see you tomorrow, John.”

“Yes,” he says. “Good night, Jill.”

“Night.” She blows him a kiss and turns, hurrying into the hotel. Khan watches her get inside safely before heading down the sidewalk; it isn’t so far back to his flat that he minds the walk, and he could use the chance to settle his mind.

He’s not settled by the time he gets back to his flat, and ends up making himself a cup of tea--how British he’s become--and standing in his small kitchen, thinking about her. He has no idea if he can trust her, knows it would be dangerous for her to trust him, and yet something in him thinks maybe she’s not a plant of Marcus, maybe she really is who she says she is.

He probably shouldn’t be seeing her again but he doesn’t really care; he is so, so tired of being alone, exhausted from it. He’s never been alone before like this, not without his family, even just one or two of them. He misses his sisters, his brothers, more than he can express, more than he ever thought possible.

Khan sets the tea cup down and breathes out slowly. He doesn’t have to tell her the truth. She’s only in town for a few days, after which she might get shipped out to who knows where, and he might never see her again. The thought sparks a pang of disappointment within him and he closes his eyes, trying to figure out why he’s responded to her so quickly and so strongly. Is it just because he doesn’t want to be alone? Is it just because she’s the first person he’s met since being awakened in this time that hasn’t wanted anything from him other than his company?

He has to admit that’s part of it, certainly a big part, but it’s also not all of it. She reminds him of his sisters, but more, she reminds him of Rani. He’d known from the instant he’d laid eyes on Rani that she would be his. He doesn’t have that same sense of inevitability where Jill is concerned, but there is a connection between them that shouldn’t exist and yet Khan wants it to.

Tomorrow, he promises himself, he’ll look up her record, find out what she’s done, where she’s been. He’ll continue to build Marcus his torpedoes and he’ll be John Harrison and after he’s done with work for the day he’ll meet Jill for dinner, and from there he doesn’t know. Not knowing intrigues him more than it bothers him, which might not be the right order, but he can live with that.

Although he isn’t that tired he undresses for bed and washes up in the bathroom, settling into bed with a physical book, a mystery novel set in the 1920s. He has a shelf of books in his flat, one of the few indulgences he’s permitted himself since becoming revived. Starfleet pays him, of course, but they also pay the rent on his flat--Khan’s fairly certain that’s in exchange for them bugging it. Not that it matters, no one else has ever been to it, not even Marcus, and Khan intends to keep it that way.

He doesn’t want Jill here. This isn’t his space; it’s where he currently lives, but it is not his home, it isn’t a space in which he feels particularly comfortable. Hopefully she will understand that, if things progress to that point--which they shouldn’t, but Khan has a feeling ‘shouldn’t’ has never mattered much to Jill.

To be fair, it has never mattered much to him, either.
He eventually falls asleep, finding solace in unconsciousness, and his dreams involve smooth skin and curly hair and laughter. For the first time in months, he wakes smiling.

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At work, he takes advantage of people going to lunch to do a bit of hacking. Not that looking up personnel files is anything suspicious; everyone does it. But Khan would rather not be observed looking up this file, and he has developed the skills to erase his trail once he is done.

He wends his way through Starfleet files and pulls up the personnel file of Jill Drendara Calastinova, current rank commander, current assignment USS Marshall. The basic stats don’t matter much to him; he knows her height, can guess her weight well enough, and she’s both well past the age of consent and still decades younger than he is. He does find out she actually went to the Olympics at sixteen and took home three medals, which he finds impressive but also not surprising, and she started Starfleet Academy at eighteen. Graduated with full honors, top two percent of her class, which again he finds unsurprising but pleasing. He knew she was intelligent, but he likes seeing that she knows it, too.

Her record has a few commendations and a couple reprimands; curious about the latter, he reads more there, seeing one occasion where she went back for a crew member expressly against orders--while both she and the crew member survived, it wasn’t without injury, and she was reprimanded for it. The other occasion...this one gets interesting, because officially it’s a reprimand but there are statements from her captain and another admiral arguing on her behalf. Khan frowns, reading the details, and comes to the conclusion that she either values her life very little or she values everyone else’s lives much more highly than her own. Possibly both.

He does remember her complete lack of worry over whether he was going to kill her or not, though, and frowns again. If she cares nothing for her own life, she might be more dangerous than he is; lack of self-regard could lead her to do almost anything. He has a hard time believing that’s actually the situation, though, and wonders exactly what is.

She missed the battle of Vulcan--probably a good thing, since she might not have survived otherwise--and became a commander and the Marshall’s XO three years ago. Two of the commendations on her file date after that promotion, with a note he sees on one that it was almost posthumously given and relief that she survived. Khan’s eyebrows go up when he sees that and he decides he really does need to find out how much Jill values her own life, and what she might or might not do because of it.

He erases all tracks of his computer search and goes back to designing torpedoes just big enough to hold a cryotube, but his concentration is scattered for the rest of the day and he gets very little done. This earns him a couple curious looks from the other officers, but he ignores them, as he usually does, and they don’t ask questions.

As he’s leaving the archive, he calls Jill. “Where are we meeting?” he asks when she answers.

“Do you like Andorian cuisine?” she asks. “Have you ever had it before? They tend to mix sweet and spicy, but you don’t always know what you’re getting.”

“I have not, but that sounds interesting,” Khan says.

“Beautiful.” She gives him a Tube stop and a direction and tells him she’ll meet him outside the Tube station when he gets there. They hang up and Khan heads for the nearest Tube station, not quite smiling.

It takes him a moment to spot Jill when he gets off the stairs, but then he sees her and realizes
she’s pulled her hair into a neat bun at the nape of her neck. She smiles when she sees him, though, and waves for him to come over. “You’re much easier to spot than I am,” she says, brushing a hand over the edge of his wing.

“What did you do to your hair?” Khan asks rather than say hello, because even on a second date, or whatever this is, that just looks wrong.

Jill sighs. “I had meetings all day long and had to look professional.” She yanks out the band, sending pins scattering around them, and shakes her head until her hair bounces. “And it was beginning to give me a headache. Now I look twelve but at least I feel more like me.”

“You look more like you,” Khan says, brushing a lock back behind her ear. “And you do not look twelve.”

“I will wager you whatever you like that at some point tonight someone asks you if you’re out with your daughter, niece, or other young family member,” Jill says, taking his hand without asking and heading down the sidewalk. “Even in my uniform.”

“You look more like you,” Khan says, brushing a lock back behind her ear. “And you do not look twelve.”

“So how did your day go? I don’t want to talk about mine.”

“Why not?” Khan asks.

“What was so terrible about it?” Jill says, giving him a mock-glare.

Jill sighs and leans back in her chair. “I hate meetings. I really hate eight hours of meetings where I’m playing politics on my captain’s behalf because I’m better at it than he is but half the people in the room think I’m just brainless because I’m female and short. Moving on, please?”

Khan reaches over, touching her hand. “I apologize,” he says. “My day was...fairly ordinary, I suppose.”

“Can you talk about what you do or is it classified?” Jill asks.

“Classified,” Khan says, almost apologetically. “How did you know?”

“I don’t even know your actual rank,” Jill says. “You know mine, I’m guessing, but I don’t know your rank, and you didn’t tell me anything about your current assignment when you told me you worked for Starfleet, other than you’re based in London. Most people will at least say their department or their ship or whatever, unless they work for intelligence or other classified projects
and just can’t talk about it.”

“Your uniform gives your rank away,” Khan points out.

“Yours doesn’t,” Jill says.

“Technically I am an agent, not an officer,” Khan says. “It is different.”

They get interrupted by the waiter coming over to take their drink orders. Since Khan has no idea what their options are, he gestures to Jill to order for them both. She does, and looks completely unsurprised when she gets carded, handing over her ID without protest. Khan remembers her getting carded the night before, too, and shakes his head inwardly. Are people really so unobservant that they can’t see past her height?

“I have a confession to make,” Khan says, not sure why he’s admitting this but he wants to be honest about something. “I looked up your file earlier today.”

“Did you?” Jill seems unsurprised. “What did it say?”

“How little do you value your own life?” Khan asks. “Some of what I read, you seem to place no value at all upon your own survival.”

“That’s not it at all,” Jill says immediately. “Absolutely not. I like life, I don’t want to die, but I’m not afraid of it either. Most people are scared of death, so they’ll do anything to prevent it from happening as long as possible. I figure everyone dies eventually and either there’s just nothing else after it, in which case I might as well make the most of what time I’ve got in this universe, or there’s something after it I don’t know about in which case I might as well look good getting there. If I can protect the people around me, I’ll do it, and if that puts me in danger, I can live with it. Adrenalin junkie here, in case that wasn’t obvious. I get off on the thrill, on the fear. I go skydiving on my birthday every year, I’ve done free solo rock climbing, all sorts of things.”

“How much do you ‘get off’ on it?” Khan asks curiously.

Jill smiles, lazy and wicked. “Danger turns me on,” she says. “It makes everything sharper, makes everything brighter, and oh, it’s such a rush.” She shifts a little in her seat, tossing her hair back. “Why? Are you thinking about killing me?”

“No,” Khan says. “I’m wondering what you are scared of.”

“Failing my people,” Jill says. “Losing them. I’ve lost a few and...that’s hard. Letting down the people I respect, the people I trust. That’s what scares me.”

“It is hard,” Khan says quietly. “You never get over it.”

“No, you don’t,” Jill says. Their drinks arrive then, and again Khan lets Jill order dinner for them. She orders a few dishes, and it seems like too much food but Khan doesn’t argue, only gives her a questioning look when the waiter leaves. “They’re all smaller plates,” she explains. “Andorian cuisine is based around tapas-style dining.”

“I see,” Khan says.

Jill takes a sip of her drink, and Khan does the same, finding it surprisingly good, similar to a malbec wine but not quite the same. “So,” Jill says, leaning forward a little. “Tell me something interesting about you, John.”
“I am not very interesting, Jill,” Khan says, wondering what he can tell her that isn’t a lie and won’t make her question things.

“I don’t believe that,” Jill says. “All right, then. Do you enjoy reading?”

“I do,” Khan says. “I have a fondness for historical mysteries, early twentieth-century literature.”

“Why that time period?” Jill asks.

“It was interesting,” Khan says. “More...rather, less civilized than today. More openly violent, racist, classist, sexist, and yet full of life, full of passion.”

“Does passion matter to you?” Jill asks.

“Without it why bother doing anything?” Khan counters.

Jill smiles and takes another sip of her drink. “Something I’ve wondered myself,” she says. “Why did you join Starfleet?”

“At the time, I had no other options,” Khan says.

“That’s not an answer I’ve heard before,” Jill says, frowning.

“No?” Khan shrugs. “Does it bother you?”

“It makes me want to know what put you in that kind of situation,” Jill says. “Because that sounds like Starfleet taking advantage of a desperate man, and while I know it isn’t perfect...” She frowns again and takes a drink. “Why did you have no other options?”

Khan almost regrets giving her the answer he did. “It isn’t something I wish to discuss right now,” he says, wondering if she’ll accept that.

She doesn’t look happy, but she nods, sitting back. “Okay,” she says. “Let’s try for something a little more innocuous. Tell me a favorite memory from when you were a child?”

Most of his memories of childhood--such as it was--are not among his favorites, and he reflects that he is remarkably ill-suited for this type of outing, this questioning from Jill. He could deflect, he could turn the questions back on her, but he doubts that will hold her for long, and refusing to answer completely would probably only make her dig harder. “The first time I flew,” he says slowly. “I had no idea what I was doing, but I was determined to learn, to figure out how to be in the air. I have these for a reason, or so I figured, and it seemed unlikely that I would have wings and not be able to use them to keep me aloft. It was...thrilling, freeing in a way I can’t describe.” He smiles a little ruefully, remembering that night. “Of course, then I landed badly and broke three bones in my wings and my left leg, but bones heal.”

“Didn’t stop you from going again, though, did it?” Jill asks, smiling back.

“No, that it did not,” Khan says. “These days I am capable of staying in the air as I want and landing without damaging myself.”

She doesn’t ask what he almost expects her to ask, whether he is capable of taking someone else up with him. Then again, even someone her size might be a challenge for a normal human, and as far as she knows, that’s all he is. “Your turn,” Khan says, distracting himself from that train of thought. “Tell me a favorite memory.”
“It’s incredibly cliched,” Jill says, a little sheepishly. “But when I finished my floor routine at the Olympics, I knew I’d done the best performance I could have, that I’d nailed it, and when I saw the scores and saw I’d taken gold—I’d been working toward that goal for years, and to achieve it...” She smiles. “That was worth it.”

Their food arrives then, and for a bit they keep quiet, more interested in trading comments about the spice or sweetness level of different dishes and trying them than actual conversation. Whatever drink Jill ordered for them pairs well with both kinds of food, and they end up getting a second round about halfway through the meal.

When all that’s left on the various plates is crumbs and a bite here or there, Jill leans forward, setting her fork down. “Tell me two true things and a lie about you,” she says. “I’m curious if I can still do this.”

“Do what?” Khan asks.

“You’ll see if I get it right,” Jill says, taking a sip of her drink. “And I think I can, so tell me about you, John. Tell me two truths and one lie, and don’t tell me which is which.”

Khan considers this, leaning back in his chair as much as the wings allow. “All right,” he says slowly. “My name is John Harrison. I’m not from London—I grew up in India. I am the oldest of my siblings, but none of us have the same parents.”

Jill drums her fingers on the table, clearly thinking about this. “How many siblings do you have?” she asks finally. “Were you all adopted?”

“That was truth?” Khan asks her.

She nods. “Yes.”

“How are you sure?” he asks.

“Because your voice softened when you mentioned them,” Jill says. “And your wings relaxed, just a little.”

“I have--had--several,” Khan says. “We grew up together, considered ourselves brothers and sisters even though we were not biologically related.”

“And you grew up in India,” Jill says. “So tell me, then, what is your name? Why lie to me when I met you?”

“How do you know that was the truth and that was the lie?” Khan counters.

“Your face tightened when you told me your name,” Jill says. “You don’t like it. You don’t like lying, and you don’t like that you have to lie to me.”

“Remind me not to play poker with you,” Khan says, more interested than he wants to be. He does *not* want to put her in danger, does not want to subject her other crew to Marcus’ suspicions. But she’s sharp, this one, and she reminds him of his sisters, and he is so tired of being alone...

She grins. “So here’s what I think,” she says, not responding to the poker comment or the fact he hasn’t told her his name. “I think you need a friend, not-John. I think you don’t know me, you don’t have a reason in the world to trust me but you also don’t have a reason *not* to. I also think I have a secure hotel room for the next nine days that I can guarantee isn’t bugged, because I take my privacy seriously, and I think maybe you should come back there with me and we can talk a
“Why do you think I need a friend?” Khan asks.

“That one’s less clear, but...you carry yourself like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders,” Jill says carefully. “I tripped into you on purpose yesterday, because you were obviously not paying attention to anything around you, lost in thought, and you looked remarkably unhappy about it. People kept glancing at you, either because of your wings or because you were just another oblivious passerby, and you didn’t notice. And you’re too sharp to do that—I get the impression you’re normally very aware of everything around you, where everyone is, who they are, what they’re doing. You move like a trained martial artist and you deliberately took the chair with your back to the wall, and you’ve been glancing around the restaurant every so often. Every time someone walks in or out you look up to see who it is. So tell me what was bothering you so much, and what’s going on, and maybe I can help.”

“You can’t,” Khan says, stating a fact.

“You don’t know that until you ask,” Jill states in return. “I mean, if you’ve got a problem that involves needing a two and a half meter-tall man who weighs a ton and can solve any issue with brute physical force then no, I can’t help really but I might be able to point you to someone who can. If you need someone who knows the ins and outs of Starfleet and Starfleet politics, on the other hand, I can be useful.”

“Why?” Khan asks. “Why offer to help someone you don’t know, someone you know is lying to you? I really could be a serial killer for all you know. I could be anyone, and my problems could be things you really should not get involved in for your own safety, or that of your crew. You have known me, talked to me, for a total of a few hours and while I admit you are remarkably good at observing people, you still don’t know anything about me.”

“But I want to,” Jill says. “You interest me, not-John. Maybe you shouldn’t, but I’ve never been afraid of danger. I like the thrill, I like a little danger in my life.” She grins. “Including my sex life, but we can talk about that later. Anyway, the point is, I tripped into you on purpose, I still think I can help you, and I want to. I do things on impulse and sometimes it goes badly but sometimes it doesn’t. You could still kill me, I’m fairly certain you could take me in a fair fight and I’m also fairly certain you wouldn’t fight fair if it came to that, and I’m hoping you don’t because I like life and I’m not done with it yet.”

She’s so much like his sisters, Khan thinks, Cat, Anandi, even Alona. He wonders if Jill fights with knives or other weapons, wonders how long it would take him to call a kill on her if they did spar. Then he wonders, just for a moment, what it would be like to take her flying, and realizes he’s already made up his mind even though he shouldn’t have. “I can’t tell you everything,” he says finally.

“Whatever you can, then,” Jill says simply. She holds up a hand and signals for the check without taking her eyes off Khan. She pays when it arrives and they leave, deciding to grab a taxi back to Jill’s hotel.
Inside, Khan looks at a fairly standard suite with a king bed and small kitchenette area, living room with a low couch that screams uncomfortable and desk with a chair just a little too low for proper ergonomics. Jill pulls off her boots immediately and goes to the coffeemaker to brew a pot, pulling down mugs from one of the kitchen cabinets. “Give me three minutes,” she says, setting up the coffee and crossing to the desk, where she picks up a small gadget and turns a knob. She methodically crosses the suite back and forth, studying the gadget, until she returns it to the desk and flips a different switch. “Okay, no bugs, and whatever I missed is getting jammed,” she says. “No, I didn’t build it, but I did a favor for an electronics genius and he made this for me, and I trust him. So, coffee?”

“Why do you have a jammer?” Khan asks, watching her take out a box of sugar and a small container of milk from the fridge.

“I take my privacy seriously and I’ve made some enemies,” Jill says, adding sugar and milk to one mug. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Black,” Khan says.

“Yeah, not surprised,” Jill says, flashing a grin. “Should be ready in just a couple minutes, this coffeemaker is slow.”

“What enemies have you made?” Khan asks.

“Some higher-ups in Starfleet don’t like me,” she says absently. “I don’t always play by their rules. A lot of them think I’m nothing but a pretty little girl without a brain even though I’ve worked my way up through the ranks, I’m a qualified commander and the first officer of a starship, and I’m good at what I do.”

“If they think that, then why stay with Starfleet?” Khan asks. “Surely there could be other opportunities for a woman with your skills.”

“There could, and there are, and I’ve had offers,” Jill says. “But part of me’s still an idealist, and I believe in Starfleet, I believe in its goals. And I’m loyal to my captain, and my crew, and I don’t want to just abandon them.”

“Tell me about your captain,” Khan says.
“His name’s Mikael Knight,” Jill says, turning to look at him. “He’s a good man, I’ve served under him for five years, three as XO. He doesn’t like politics, so he lets me play the game on his behalf sometimes—he’ll never get higher than captain, never make it to flag rank, but he doesn’t want to. Has a tendency to think a little too inside the box at times, but so far we’ve made it out okay.”

“Would you go to him with a delicate issue?” Khan asks. “Something that might require politics?”

Jill shakes her head. “I trust him with my life but he doesn’t play the game and as I said, he thinks a little too inside the box. I know a couple other captains I could go to, maybe an admiral or two if I had to.” She pours the coffee, stirring hers and handing Khan a mug. “Let’s talk.”

Mildly to Khan’s surprise, she sprawls out on one side of the bed, shoving pillows behind her back and gesturing for him to take the other side. “The couch is hideously uncomfortable and would stifle your wings, and I don’t like the chair,” she says, taking a sip of her coffee.

Khan elects not to sprawl but does sit on the other side of the bed, twisting to look at her. She’s so young, he thinks, even though she isn’t that young. But compared to him... He takes a sip of coffee, finding it surprisingly good, and stays quiet, not knowing where to start.

“What is your name?” Jill asks softly.

He takes another sip of coffee, suddenly uncertain this is a good idea at all, but figures in for a penny, in for a pound and promises himself if this does go badly he’ll kill Jill himself, a quick, painless death. “Khan,” he says, equally quietly. “My name is Khan.”

“As in Genghis?” Jill raises her eyebrows. “That’s not a name with a weight of historic significance behind it, no, not at all.” She shifts to sit cross-legged, holding her mug in her lap. “I’m missing something big, something about why your real name is more of a title, why you’re hiding behind the utterly anonymous John Harrison, why you talk about siblings but you’re alone. Tell me what I don’t know.”

Khan looks down at his coffee. “Are you familiar with the Eugenics Wars?”

“Somewhat,” Jill says. “Three hundred years ago and change, back when scientists thought genetically engineering—” She stops, and Khan admits to surprise when it’s obvious she put the pieces together. “Your family,” she says. “They’re the others, the...oh, what was the name?”

“We were called the augments,” Khan says. “Augmented humans, engineered to be superior. We...a very long story short, we did as we had been made to do, and we were condemned for it. We left on a ship, in cryosleep, and for centuries, we slept. We hoped, when we left, things would be different someday, that we would find a better place, a world in which we belonged.” He breathes, takes a sip of coffee. “After the destruction of Vulcan, the Federation began aggressively searching unexplored space and found our ship adrift. I was the only one revived. My crew, my...my family, is still in their tubes, still asleep, those that survived the ship. Some of us--after three hundred years, equipment fails, machinery breaks down. Twelve of my family died.”

“What were you the only one revived?” Jill asks.

“How much do you know about Admiral Marcus?” Khan asks in return.

To his pleasure, her mouth twists in a grimace. “Not much and what I do know I don’t like,” she says. “He’s one of the Starfleet admirals who thinks I’m just a pretty little girl in a short skirt. Kind of scarily focused on the Klingons, these past few years.”

“He wants a war,” Khan says. “He will do everything in his power to bring about that war. He
revived me because he wanted me to create weapons for him, warships, to bring about his vision for a militarized Starfleet. I was an engineer once upon a time, I am good at innovation, and I am ruthless. I will kill without thinking twice. The officers Starfleet has now, you are not...you are not savages, not as I and my people are. You want to preserve life, not spill its blood.”

“And he’s keeping your family to control you,” Jill says softly. “Because it’s the only hold he has over you.”

“You are intelligent,” Khan says. “Why do you believe me?”

“Because you’re telling me the truth,” Jill says. “Why are you stationed in London?”

“There is a supposed archive,” Khan says. “In reality it is classified ops projects. I work there, with a few other officers who don’t know who I am.”

“So,” Jill says after a moment. “I assume you have a plan to rescue your family. How can I help?”

The offer still stuns him, and he looks at her, for once completely at a loss for words. Even after what he’s told her, even after what she’s told him, he did not expect this.

Jill sets her coffee down on the nightstand and shifts to her knees. “You love your family,” she says steadily. “You’d do anything for them, which is why you’re working for Marcus, which is why you haven’t killed him and fled yet. Right now, they’re helpless hostages, and we need to find a way to change that. Do you know how to revive them?”

“I do,” Khan says. “But I am not...they guard me, and I am rarely allowed to visit the facility holding my family, never without guards, and killing them would not improve my odds. I have been biding my time, waiting for them to grow complacent and drop the guards, and it has started to happen, but not very swiftly.”

“Marcus is an ass but he’s not stupid,” Jill says, setting Khan’s coffee aside and taking his hands. Her own are small against his, slightly darker in skin tone, a scar on her right index finger and a few nicks on her knuckles. Khan looks at them, thinking he could pin her wrists with one hand and refusing to let himself follow that train of thought. “Is there anyone you can go to? Anyone you can trust?” she asks, distracting him.

“You are the first person I have even told,” Khan says. “I have been kept guarded, alone, since being revived.” He doesn’t tell her what happened to him in those first few weeks. “I know very few people in Starfleet and of the ones I do they would believe Marcus more readily than I.”

“Fortunately for you, I know a lot of people,” Jill says, smiling a little. “I’ve got nine more days in London. You’re probably a genius and I’m relatively intelligent. I think we can come up with something.”

“Why are you doing this?” Khan asks, not letting go of her hands.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” Jill says, and kisses him before he can respond.

“Jill, this is not a good idea,” he says when she pulls back, already missing the warmth of her mouth, the feel of her lips against his. But he doesn’t let go of her and she tightens her grip on his hands, as if expecting he would.

“Do you know how many things I’ve done in my life that were bad ideas?” she asks.

“I could get you killed,” Khan says simply. “Marcus would not hesitate, if he thought you were in
“Marcus would have to think I had a brain first,” Jill says sharply. “And yes, you could get me killed. You could kill me myself. I like to think you’re relatively safe with me, that knowing me wouldn’t be enough to get you killed or injured, but I don’t know. Are you willing to take that risk?”

“Apparently I already have,” Khan says.

Jill smiles. “Will you kill me?”

“Only to spare you a longer death,” Khan says honestly.

“I can live with that,” Jill says. “Not a huge fan of being tortured, I’ve done it before. Almost died once from it.”

Khan’s eyebrows go up. “Will you tell me about it sometime?”

“Maybe,” Jill says. “If you get me drunk enough, or if we have enough of a bonding experience and I’m high on endorphins.”

“Does sex count?” Khan asks without really intending to.

She smiles again. “Let’s find out.”

“This is a phenomenally bad idea,” Khan says reflectively.

“Is that going to stop you?” Jill asks.

“No,” he says.

“Brilliant.” Jill kisses him again, deeper this time, licking her way into his mouth, and Khan pulls her into his lap, his hands sliding up her back to hold her close. She’s warm, he thinks absently, almost as warm as he is, and her own hands tangle in his hair.

He shifts on the bed to kneel, finding it more comfortable, and Jill moves with him, straddling his lap, her skirt hiked up around her thighs. Without his thinking about it, his wings move to wrap around Jill, holding her against him; she shivers, pulling away from his mouth to brush a gentle hand over the feathers. “So beautiful,” she murmurs.

Khan takes advantage of the moment to bite her throat, shy of leaving a mark but enough that Jill moans and grinds down against him, her head falling back. “I have a medkit,” she says, a little breathless. “Did I mention I like it rough?”

“You make me want to be gentle with you,” Khan says, finding the zipper on her uniform and drawing it down slowly. “Take my time.”

“Save it for round two,” she says, kissing his jaw, nipping at his own throat. “If you make me wait this time I might explode.”

Khan laughs, which surprises him, and kisses her again, drawing his wings back just enough that he can peel Jill out of her uniform, pulling it off over her head because it’s easier. She has a scar over her left breast, a thin pale line, and he feels more marks when he slides his hands up her back. “You need to get naked,” she says.

“In time,” he says, kissing her collarbone, drawing his tongue along the scar on her breast.
“You have to be in control, don’t you,” she says with a groan. “Just my luck.”

“You might enjoy giving it up,” Khan says. He has to focus a little more to unhook her bra, as one of the clasps appears to be caught, but he gets it done without fumbling and slides it off her arms, tossing it aside. She has fuller breasts than the uniform would have indicated, he notices, although his palm still covers one.

“I probably will but that doesn’t mean I’ll just roll over and show my belly,” Jill says, grinning.

Without saying a word, Khan presses her down on her back, one hand flat on her stomach. “You were saying?” he asks.

“I was saying you need to be naked,” Jill says, reaching for him. Khan evades her grasp and pins her wrists over her head with one hand, stroking her skin with the other. “Oh, you bastard,” she says, but she laughs, arching into his touch. She pulls against his hold on her wrists and he tightens his grip, just to see her reaction; he smiles when her eyes half-close and she shudders.

“If you move,” he says, not quite letting go of her, “I’ll stop.”

“Son of a bitch,” she mutters, but she goes limp against the bed and tips her head back.

“Entirely possible,” Khan says, releasing her wrists and kissing the valley between her breasts. “I have no idea who my mother was.”

Jill’s hands fist in the covers as he moves lower, mouth tracing patterns over her skin, fingers following his lips and tongue. She has more scars than he would have expected--a pattern of crossed marks above her right hip; a circle below her navel; a jagged line running up her left thigh.

“Where did all these come from?” he asks, touching the marks above her right hip.

“I didn’t tell them what they wanted to know,” Jill says.

Her voice goes flat, just a little, and Khan decides not to ask further questions. He kisses the scars, though, and Jill shivers.

When he settles between her legs, he doesn’t immediately take off her panties, running his hands up her thighs instead, brushing against the damp fabric. Her breath catches and she arches up, just a little, before she forces herself to fall back against the bed. “It’s all right,” Khan says, slipping two fingers under the edge and stroking her gently. “Move if you need to, but keep your hands where they are.”

“In me,” she whispers, rolling her hips against his hand even though he’s barely touching her. “Khan.”

“I told you,” Khan murmurs, easing her panties down and tossing them after her bra. “You make me want to take my time with you. You deserve more than a frantic coupling on top of the covers.”

“But what if that’s what I want?” she asks, ragged.

He strokes her again with two fingers, parting her easily and brushing against the liquid heat inside. She’s silk on his fingers, wet and hot, and he has to struggle to control his own breathing, to keep his hand steady. “This isn’t about what you want,” he says, more evenly than he thought he was capable of. “It’s about what I want and what you need.”

“What I need is you inside me,” Jill says, breath catching in the middle. “I have no idea what you want other than to drive me crazy.”
“That is essentially my goal,” Khan says, shifting his hand and pressing those two fingers deep inside her. Jill cries out, clenching around his fingers and hips pushing into his touch. “Also to see how often I can make you come in a night.”

“The record’s six,” Jill says around a moan.

“Only six?” Khan asks, mildly surprised.

“We fell asleep,” Jill says, managing a laugh. “And I haven’t had that many lovers.”

“Tell me about them sometime,” Khan says without really thinking about the implications of his words, more interested in twisting his hand and rubbing his thumb against Jill’s clit.

“Harder,” she whispers, thighs tensing. “God--oh, fuck, like that--”

He crooks his fingers inside her, looking for the right spot, and it takes a couple shifts of his hand before she almost screams and bucks up. “Please,” she gets out, drawing up her knees. “God, please, don’t stop, just--oh--”

She cries out again when she comes, spasming around his fingers and hips jerking enough his hand almost protests the strain. Khan doesn’t stop what he’s doing and Jill barely catches a breath before she comes again, shaking with it. He considers going for three but she reaches down to touch his hand, hissing in a breath. “I can’t.” she says, breathless. “Not--too sensitized right now.”

When he moves to pull his hand back, she hisses again, but doesn’t stop him and in fact struggles to sit up, watching him lick his fingers clean. “Okay, that’s hotter than it should be,” she says, her cheeks still flushed.

“I like the way you taste,” he says when he’s done.

Jill flushes a little deeper at that and crawls over to him, kissing him. “Now will you get naked?”

“Yes,” Khan says, and in fact he lets her do most of it, his breath occasionally hitching when her nails scratch just right or she finds a sensitive spot. She nudges him onto his back when she’s gotten his clothes off, kneeling next to him.

“You are possibly the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen,” she says, running a hand down his chest.

“You clearly haven’t seen that many,” Khan says, watching her.

“Hush, you,” Jill says. She leans down to kiss him, more gently than he was expecting, but he lets her control it, lets her sink her teeth into his lower lip and shift to lie on top of him, so much skin to skin contact he almost feels dizzy with it. He hasn’t done this since...a long time ago. After Rani, because there were times he just didn’t want to be alone, but nothing ever lasted, and he shouldn’t be thinking of that now.

Ten days in London isn’t very long, and Khan has no right to expect more from her, but he hopes, more than he wants to admit. To distract himself, he runs his hands down her back, touching the scars he can feel--there’s a pattern to them, one he can’t quite figure out--and squeezing her ass, pulling her down more firmly on top of him.

Jill laughs and bites his throat, stretching up a little to do it. “We are going to have so much fun together,” she says.
“Are we?” Khan asks and she bites him again, hard enough his breath catches and he makes a sound he can’t control.

“Oh, you like that,” she murmurs. “Do I have to worry about marking you?”

“It won’t last,” he says, having just enough time to catch his breath before she bites his collarbone and makes him moan.

“It’s a shame,” she says; he barely hears her over his heart pounding in his ears. “I’d love to leave my marks all over you, have you feel them tomorrow.”

“Possessive, are you?” he asks, smiling a little.

Jill laughs and shakes her hair back; it trails over his chest, making his skin prickle. “Oh, you have no idea, but that’s a little much for a first night together.”

Rani had been possessive, too, he thinks, and he’d never minded. Had enjoyed it, point of fact, and she’d had absolutely no qualms about ordering him around when it was just the two of them. Whether or not he’d listened to her had varied, but it had never stopped her from trying.

Perhaps he does have a type, although physically they’re not that similar. Both petite, although Rani had been taller than Jill, but that’s about as far as resemblance goes.

“What are you thinking?” Jill asks, propping herself up on her hands to look at him better. “You went away for a moment.”

“It’s not important,” Khan says.

She frowns at him. “Do I remind you of someone?”

Again, eerily sharp. “Yes,” he says, not bothering to dissemble.

“Who?” she asks.

He has to swallow before he can answer. “My wife.”

Jill blows out a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Khan says. “She died centuries ago, before we even left Earth.”

“I didn’t think she was still alive,” Jill says, moving up his body to kiss him lightly. “Tell me about her sometime? I’ll tell you about my past, you tell me about yours?”

“Sometime,” Khan says, kissing her back. “Assuming we have time. You will only be here for nine more days.”

“Supposedly,” Jill says. “We’ll figure it out. There are shuttles and transporters and things, and we’re totally getting away from the mood.” She grins and kisses him, taking her time with it, teasing his tongue with hers, shifting enough against him his hands tighten on her hips to keep her still. “I was going to suck you,” she says against his mouth. “But I really want you inside me. Can I get both? Does genetic engineering allow for that?”

“It does,” Khan says and she laughs, pleased.

“What’s your record for one night?” she asks, pushing herself up and sliding down his body; he can feel heat and wetness where her sex presses against his skin, and he shifts one hand to just hold
“Five,” he says. “But that was centuries ago.”

Jill presses down against his hand a little and he bites back a groan at the feel of her. “Sounds like a challenge to me,” she says, a little breathless. “Hold that thought for a moment.” She moves, pulling away from him and wrapping one hand around the base of his cock; he doesn’t get to ask what she’s doing before she sinks down on him, gasping. “Oh, God, you feel good,” she whispers, her hands flat on his chest.

“Move,” Khan says, voice tight.

“Yeah,” she whispers again, beginning to roll her hips, nails digging marks into his skin where she uses him for leverage. “Oh, fuck, you just...”

“Tell me,” Khan says, his own hands on her hips, helping her find the rhythm. “Tell me how it feels.”

“Perfect,” Jill breathes. “God, you feel so big inside me, no one’s ever...” She swallows, shuddering when he presses up into her.

“So tight,” he murmurs, slowly beginning to move with her, increase the intensity and the speed. “It’s like being in a volcano, so hot around me.”

“You make...make a habit of screwing volcanoes?” Jill manages, crying out when he pulls her down as he pushes up.

“Only you,” Khan says, and then neither of them have the voice to talk for more than gasps and moans, until Jill wails when she comes, until Khan pinches her clit and she comes again, nearly screaming. She collapses against him, panting, and he wraps his arms around her and rolls them over, pushing her back against the pillows and thrusting into her.

“Do it,” she murmurs, wrapping her legs around his waist. “Just fuck me, I won’t break, I want it...”

She might not break but she’ll be sore later, Khan thinks but doesn’t really care. She’s asking for it and he only has so much self control and she feels too good around him, under him. He has just enough control left to keep from actually hurting her, but no more than that.

Jill comes again, right before he does, sounding surprised and if Khan had the breath to laugh he would. Instead, he buries his head in the crook of Jill’s neck and bites her when he comes, tasting the salt of her sweat and something else he can’t identify.

He moves to pull back, but she tightens her arms and legs around him, holding him where he is. “Stay like this,” she says softly. “Just for a bit.”

“Did I hurt you?” Khan asks, because he has to know.

“Mm-mm,” Jill says, running her fingers through his hair. “Might be a bit sore but I have a medkit, I can fix it. It’s the good kind of sore, though. God, I haven’t had sex in ten months, and you are so, so much better than he was.”

“Of course I am,” Khan says and she laughs.

“And modest, too,” she says, finally letting go of him. He eases out of her and lies down next to her.
her, tugging her in against him, one of his wings draped over her. She fits against him like she was made for it, her head on his shoulder and her hair tickling his nose.

For a while they lie there quietly, and Jill’s breathing evens and slows until he thinks she might be asleep or almost there. “Tell me your plan to save your family,” she says, though, a little sleepy but still awake.

“I am designing weapons,” Khan says softly. “I thought, if I could gain access, I could hide my family within the torpedoes, smuggle them to safety and find them later to revive them.”

“That would be safer than reviving them?” Jill asks.

“Potentially,” Khan says. He kisses her hair, holding her a little closer. “We can discuss it more tomorrow. For now, you should rest. You will need it.”

Jill laughs. “I’ll sleep when I’m dead. And I’m sure you have to go to work tomorrow, and I’m done with my meetings, I can sleep all day if I have to.”

“I still don’t wish to hurt you,” Khan says.

“You won’t,” she says.

“I could,” Khan says honestly. His fingers brush over the scars on her back and he frowns, trying to figure out the pattern or cause.

She sighs and without saying a word, rolls over, holding her hair out of the way so he can see. She has a series of pale lines down her back, not quite parallel to each other, a couple crossing others. “I’m a weird case where regen only works partially,” she says. “Bone regen, dermal regen, none of it works a hundred percent. In this case, the marks got infected due to length of time between when I got them and when medical got hold of me, and they couldn’t heal them without leaving scars. Most of the sensation’s still there, but a couple spots are numb and a couple are more sensitive.”

“What caused them?” Khan asks, tracing the lines gently.

“A whip,” Jill says. “Old school, effective, and almost broke me.”

“Almost?” Khan asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’ve come close, but I’ve never actually broken. Once it was just because my crew found me in time--I would have if they hadn’t gotten me out of there.”

“How many times have you gone through something like this?” Khan asks, still touching the scars.

“Four,” Jill says. “I only almost died once, though. Once I got away before anything major happened, once my crew got me out with nothing more than a pounding headache, once was my back.”

“You didn’t almost die from this?” Khan asks.

“Nah, just laid me up for a few days,” she says. “It looks worse than it was.”

“Somehow I don’t believe that,” Khan says, moving to brush a kiss over the nape of her neck, tracing a path down her spine. She shivers and relaxes against the bed, pliant for once, and Khan takes advantage of it to touch her, kiss her, be gentle.

“You’re going to melt me,” she murmurs, pillowing her head on her arms.
“Hard to melt fire,” Khan says, sliding his hands up her back, thumbs pressing into her shoulders just enough to relax the muscles.

“Am I fire?” Jill asks, sounding pleased. “I like that idea.”

“It suits you,” he says. “Mericulial and bright, and you burn.”

“Careful or you’ll end up with scorch marks,” Jill says, and he can hear her smile.

“I will heal,” Khan says. He kisses the small of her back, traces the bumps of her spine with his tongue. “But you might burn yourself out if you are not careful.”

“Hasn’t happened yet,” Jill says. “Besides, you’ll make sure I don’t.”

“That’s a bit forward,” Khan says even though she might be right.

“I didn’t necessarily mean forever,” Jill says, laughing. “Just for now, or until you either don’t need me anymore or kill me, whichever happens first.”

“You are remarkably unconcerned with your own safety,” Khan observes.

“If you’re going to kill me there’s nothing I can do about it,” Jill says simply, rolling over to look at him. She stretches, arching her back, and he slides his hands up her torso, able to span her ribcage with both hands. “You’re a lot taller than me, a lot bigger, probably exponentially stronger and faster, and if you wanted me dead I’d be dead before I knew it was coming. I don’t waste time worrying about things I can’t change.”

“You could be safer if I left,” Khan says. “It isn’t just me you need to worry about.”

“I know,” Jill says. “And I don’t want you to leave. I told you, I’m an adrenalin junkie. Life without a little danger is boring. It’s why my last relationship didn’t work out, he couldn’t deal with the fact that I was constantly doing things that might get me killed, both on and off the job, and I couldn’t deal with someone who wanted to put me in bubble wrap.”

“How many have you had?” Khan asks.

“Relationships? Two that might have been serious and some non-serious lovers,” Jill says. “I work hard, I play hard, but I don’t always find people who are willing to play the way I want.”

“And you think I am?” Khan asks.

“I know you are,” Jill says. “It’s dangerous for you to ally with anyone else, but you haven’t left, you’ve trusted me enough to tell me the truth about you and your family. You’ve been inside me, and I don’t think you take sex that lightly. You like danger, too, Khan, and you like that I’ll challenge you, that despite being practically half your size I’m not afraid of you, or what you could do to me.”

“What if I want you to be afraid?” Khan asks, one hand skimming up her chest to press down lightly over her throat. She shudders and tips her head back, pulse beating hard under his fingers. “You like that,” he says, pleased.

“I do,” Jill murmurs, breath coming shallow in her throat. Khan presses down a little harder and she gives a choked moan, shifting against the bed and legs spreading just a little wider.

“The things I could do to you,” Khan murmurs back, keeping his hand on her throat and shifting so
he can slide two fingers of his other hand into her, slowly. Jill gasps and clenches around his fingers, and she’s so wet her thighs are sticky with it.

“Tell me,” Jill whispers, swallowing against his hand on her throat. “Tell me what you’d do to me.”

“Anything I wanted,” Khan says softly, twisting his fingers inside her and making her shiver. “I could hurt you and make you beg for more. I could mark you, leave you with bruises, bites. Perhaps I would cut you, make you bleed for me. Would you let me do that?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“I could bind you, tie you down, leave you helpless and at my mercy,” Khan says, slowly stroking those two fingers in and out of her, just enough that Jill whimpers and tries to push against his hand. When she does that he presses down more against her throat, cutting off more of her air; she gets the point and falls back against the bed. “Rather like you are now, I think.”

“Please,” Jill whispers. “Khan, please.”

“Please what?” Khan asks, almost crooning. He has to admit he has missed this, more than he expected to, more than he wants to acknowledge. This time is civilized; people don’t do such things as cut and bleed their partners. But Jill may not be as civilized as she appears, and Khan has never claimed to be anything but a savage.

“Make me come,” she says, her voice breathless and a little hoarse against the pressure he’s keeping on her throat. “Please. However--whatever you want, just...”

What he wants is to taste her, lick her until his cheeks and chin are sticky and wet, until he’s had enough and she’s pushed past the edge of her limits. He’ll have to take his hand off her throat for this, which is a minor disappointment, but he does, running that hand down her chest, over her breasts and stomach, shifting and pushing her back against the bed, two fingers still inside her and his hand soaked from her.

He pulls his hand out of her and she whimpers, squirming against the bed. “Impatient, aren’t you,” he says almost to himself, licking his hand clean of her and moving to lie on his stomach, spreading her open with gentle fingers.

“Always,” Jill murmurs.

Khan licks her, just enough to tease, and she whimpers again, her thighs tensing. She tastes of musk and salt, familiar and different, and he settles in to enjoy himself, teasing her with his tongue and the barest scrapes of teeth, shifting his hands to hold her down when she squirms too much. She begs him, pleads with him, curses him, and he ignores it all until he hears the sob in her breath and the tears in her voice. Only then, when she’s broken, does he give her what she needs, sucking hard on her clit and plunging three fingers deep inside her. Jill screams, soaking him and the bed, hips bucking against his hold on them, and he doesn’t stop what he’s doing and she doesn’t stop coming.

Eventually, finally, she collapses against the bed, crying and utterly spent. Khan wipes his face and his hand with a corner of the covers that’s still dry and moves up the bed to hold her, lying so he can cradle her in his arms and wrap his wings around her, murmuring to her in Hindi because she won’t register what he’s saying, only the tone. He praises her, tells her he’s proud of her, that she did so well, and if an endearment or two slips out it’s not like she can understand.
Slowly she stops shivering, stops crying, and clumsily raises a hand to wipe her eyes. “That wasn’t fair,” she says, husky and voice still thick with pleasure.

“I never said I played fair,” Khan says, kissing her forehead.

“And I never expected you to,” Jill says, pressing a little closer to him. “I just didn’t...expect that. I’ve never...” She fumbles for words and can’t find them. “I think you broke me.”

“I will put you back together,” Khan says.

“Stay with me tonight,” she says. “Please.”

“I am not going anywhere,” Khan promises her, and how he means that might be up for debate, but he feels a tug of possessiveness in his gut, enough to make his arms tighten around her. It eases somewhat when she sighs and nestles into his arms, fitting like she belongs.

“Just give me a bit,” she murmurs.

“As long as you need,” he says.

He can tell she’s fighting sleep but knows it will win, and sure enough, in a few moments she’s gone completely lax in his arms. He lets her sleep for a few minutes before shifting them under the covers; her skin’s too cool for his liking, even with him holding her. Jill doesn’t stir when he moves her, but she does cuddle up to him again once she can, frowning until his arms wrap around her and one of his wings drapes over her.

Khan watches her sleep, face peaceful, and wonders exactly what he’s done.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

I never claimed to be civilized.

Chapter Notes

If you're reading FF, you will probably recognize a few of the names in this chapter, and the eventual goal is for the people to show up. Once I can figure out how.

He hasn’t come up with an answer an hour later, nor has he been able to make himself let go of Jill. But her face twists in sleep and she cries out in anguish. “No--stay with me, please, come on--” She cries out again, and Khan squeezes her wrist.

“Jill, you’re safe, wake up,” he says in her ear. “Wake up, you’re having a nightmare.”

Jill gasps and her eyes open, unfocused for a moment and blurry with grief and terror. “I couldn’t save them,” she whispers, beginning to cry. “I couldn’t save them.”

Khan holds her close, rubbing her back and letting her grieve. She doesn’t cry long, a few minutes at most, before she tries to pull away, rubbing at her eyes. Khan doesn’t let go of her, though, and she sighs and leans her head against his shoulder. “A year ago, I had a mission,” she says huskily. “I almost died, apparently, and two of my crew did die. They killed them in front of me, and all I could do was hold them while they bled out. I got a fucking commendation out of it and I wanted to quit, because I’d lost people I trusted, people I liked, people who had trusted me to bring them back safely and instead I got them killed.”

“It was not your fault,” Khan says softly.

“You don’t know that,” Jill says.

“Yes, I do,” Khan says. “I’ve lost people of my own, so many sometimes I think the tally will never end, and I know it is easier to blame one’s self than it is to accept that sometimes things happen, and there’s nothing you can do to change the outcome.”

“Do you believe it wasn’t your fault?” Jill asks.

“About as much as you do,” Khan says and she huffs out a laugh.

“Yeah, that figures.” She pushes a curl back from her face. “I’m sorry I fell apart on you. Talk about embarrassing.”

“There is nothing to be embarrassed about,” Khan says, holding her a little closer. “I promise.”

“You must think I’m so weak, though,” she says, and Khan actually laughs before he can stop it.
“You? Not at all. If you were weak, you would not have made me talk to you, tell you things I have never told anyone. You would have run at the first sign I am not John Harrison. You stayed, you persisted. What weakness is there in that? Jill, everyone has nightmares, including me.”

“What are yours about?” Jill asks, relaxing a little.

“Sometimes these days I find it hard to distinguish nightmare from reality,” Khan says after a moment. “In my original time, I dreamed of men, women I’d lost in battle. Losing my family, watching them die. Losing my wife.”

“What was her name?” Jill asks.

“Rani,” Khan says softly.

“It’s a beautiful name,” Jill says.

Khan smiles a little. “So was she.”

Jill shifts to look up at him and kisses him softly. “I’m sorry you lost her, but part of me’s glad because it means you’re here with me,” she admits.

“I understand,” Khan says, returning her kiss. He knows she probably can’t be up for much more tonight; he’s demanded a lot of her, and she isn’t engineered for stamina the way he is. But she kisses him back with more interest than he expects, and when she pulls away it’s to slide down his body, scratching him with her nails as she goes, her hair trailing over his skin.

“I told you I wanted this,” she murmurs, nudging him onto his back and settling between his legs. “Let me.”

“You don’t have--” Khan cuts off on a groan when she sinks her teeth into his inner thigh, hard enough to bruise.

“Shut up and let me suck you,” she says, brushing a kiss over the mark she’s left.

He’s only half-hard, but that changes swiftly when she slides her mouth down around him, wrapping her hand around the base of his cock. He hears her hum with pleasure, feels the vibrations, and hisses in a breath, eyes closing without his meaning them to. She scratches her nails over his thighs as she takes him deeper into her mouth, hard enough it stings and makes him shiver.

She teases him with nails, fingertips, lips and tongue and the barest hint of teeth, and when he groans and one hand tangles in her hair she makes a pleased sound and lets him guide her. Khan tries to avoid pulling her hair, isn’t quite sure he manages it, but Jill doesn’t seem to mind either way, responding to him like she’s done it for years. She does pinch him when he pushes a little too deep, though, and he smiles even as his breath catches and he can’t swallow the moan.

He tries to give her a warning before he comes but either she doesn’t get it or doesn’t care, and Khan doesn’t have a chance to find out which it is. Sparks flash behind his closed eyelids and his heart pounds in his ears and Jill doesn’t move, doesn’t raise her head or pull away when he comes. Belatedly, Khan wonders if he was holding her too tightly for her to do so and releases her hair, but she still takes her time, licking him clean until he sucks in a breath and moves away, the contact too much.

Jill laughs, clears her throat, and crawls up his body to lie on top of him. “You taste like a normal human,” she says, brushing a kiss over his collarbone. “I wonder what your blood would taste like.”
“Are you a vampire?” Khan asks, trailing his fingers up and down her back.

“No, I like the sun too much for that,” she says, arching into his touch. “I’m just curious, and no, blood doesn’t bother me in sex. I’m female, I bleed once a month as it is, if a bit more gets into my sex life I don’t mind. Besides, I highly doubt you can give me any diseases.”

“It is unlikely,” Khan says. “But you could scar.”

Jill gives him an incredulous look. “Like I don’t know what that’s like?” she asks. “I don’t mind if you mark me, so long as it won’t show outside my uniform or regular clothes. Bite me, scratch me, bleed me if you want, I don’t mind. I like marks, Khan, and I’d like yours.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“I like the reminder,” Jill says. “I like knowing there’s something hidden under my clothes that I know is there other people don’t. And in today’s society, everyone’s always so unblemished, so unmarked, and I like being different.”

“You get into bar brawls just to prove you can win, don’t you,” Khan says.

Jill laughs. “I’m reformed now. I gave up stealing, too.”

“You were a thief?” Khan asks in mild surprise.

“I was,” Jill says. “Briefly, and I usually put it all back a day or so later, but I was good at it. I had to do something between the Olympics and the Academy, and regular school was boring as hell.”

“What kind of things did you steal?” Khan asks.

Jill shrugs. “Jewelry, small artworks, things like that. I wasn’t a good enough hacker to steal information or people’s identities, and hardly anyone has cash these days, although I did steal credit chips sometimes.”

“What other surprises are you hiding in your past?” Khan asks. “A fighter, a thief, a gymnast, what else have you been?”


“An all-around rogue,” Khan comments, mapping the scars on her back.

“Something like that, yeah,” Jill agrees. “And right now I’m an all-around rogue who really, really wants a bath, but that involves getting up and moving and effort.” She makes a face and puts her head down on Khan’s chest. “Easier to stay here.”

“Does your hotel room have a bathtub?” Khan asks.

“It does,” Jill says. “Wouldn’t be big enough for you but it’ll fit me. But again, movement, effort, so not worth it right now.”

Khan simply shifts to hold her and gets to his feet, carrying her easily against his chest. Jill squeaks in surprise and smacks his shoulder. “I can walk!” she protests. “Put me down.”

“Walking would involve effort,” Khan says, not letting go of her.

“Caveman,” Jill decides, although she sounds more affectionate than annoyed. “Barbarian, really.
What are you going to do next, club me over the head and drag me off to your cave?"

“I never claimed to be civilized,” Khan points out.

He has to laugh when Jill bites him, sinking sharp teeth into his shoulder. It stings, and it will leave a mark, and it amuses him far more than it should. “Sometimes I’m not either,” she says sweetly.

“How did such an uncivilized rogue end up a Starfleet commander?” Khan asks, setting her down gently on the closed toilet lid and moving to run the bath.

“She pretended to be civilized until she could get into space,” Jill says, watching him. “Then she discovered she was damn good at what she did and part of her was enough of an idealist that she could play mostly within Starfleet’s rules, and she found a captain who let her occasionally bend or break the ones she didn’t agree with so long as she didn’t get into trouble too much or get him into trouble.”

“And did she?” Khan asks, glancing back at her.

Jill laughs. “No, not really,” she says. “I mean, I have a couple reprimands on file but nothing too serious, nothing that’s gotten me demoted or threatened with court-martial. I’m the first officer of a starship, that’s pretty impressive, and my captain likes me, so I figure I’ve come out okay.”

“You do realize that by offering to help me you are essentially committing treason against Starfleet,” Khan says.

“Not necessarily,” Jill says. “Only if you believe Starfleet and Marcus are on the same side.”

“And you do not?” Khan asks.

“After what you’ve told me, no,” Jill says. “I don’t.”

“A distinction I doubt many of your fellow officers would make,” Khan says.

“You really don’t have a high opinion of them, do you,” Jill says.

“I have not had much reason to,” Khan says. The bath finishes filling and he shuts off the water.

“This part I’m pretty sure I can do myself,” Jill says, trying not to laugh as she stands up. She looks a bit wobbly, but walks over to him and leans down for a kiss before she slips into the water. She’s small enough she can stretch out in the tub, submerged almost to her chin, and closes her eyes, sighing in contentment. “Oh, that’s lovely,” she murmurs. “Thank you.”

Khan kneels on the floor next to the tub, brushing a curl back from her face. She smiles and turns her face into his touch, brushing a kiss over his palm. “My apartment only has sonics,” she says. “So I make a point of staying only at places that have water facilities when I’m traveling. It’s expensive, but oh, so worth it. I just wish you could join me.”

“I have never been an enthusiast of baths,” Khan admits. “The wings make it difficult. I prefer showers.”

“Well, then, you can share one of those with me later,” Jill says. “Or tomorrow morning, or whenever you leave me which had better not be until tomorrow morning.”

He smiles a little. “It won’t be.” Which is possibly risky for them both, but right now Khan doesn’t much care if anyone reports back to Marcus that he didn’t spend the night in his flat. For all
Marcus or his watchers know, Khan might just have spent the night walking, or flying. He has done it before, although not in a while.

“Good,” Jill says, closing her eyes and tipping her head back against the edge of the tub. “I think I’m just going to stay here for a bit. Don’t let me drown?”

“I will not,” Khan says. He stays where he is for a moment longer, just looking at her in the water, smooth skin and scars and dark hair. He can see a few fingertip bruises starting to appear on her skin, and she has a faint mark on her throat from where he bit her. It should be gone by morning, he thinks, and finds himself wanting to leave more that won’t be.

Instead, he picks up the bottle of her shower gel and the mesh pouf, lathering up the pouf. Whatever she uses smells of sandalwood, the scent so familiar it makes his chest ache for a moment. It doesn’t, thankfully, remind him of Rani--she’d preferred jasmine--but it reminds him of a home that no longer exists and a time far gone, and he finds himself glad Jill’s eyes are closed.

She blinks them open when he begins bathing her, and looks about to protest for a moment before she smiles and closes her eyes again. “This is ridiculously hedonistic,” she says, arching under his touch. “But I like being spoiled now and again. Much nicer than a club to the head.”

“Many things are,” Khan observes.

“Catch more flies with honey, but why would you want flies in the first place unless you were a frog?” Jill asks.

“A good question,” Khan says. He notices that she winces, ever so slightly, when he moves the pouf between her legs, and doesn’t linger even though the idea is tempting.

Jill ducks completely under the water when he’s done, soaking her hair and rinsing off the last of the shower gel. “Can you hand me my shampoo?” she asks, sitting up in the tub. “It’s the green bottle over there.”

“Let me,” Khan says, picking it up.

He thinks she will argue, but she studies him for a moment instead. “When was the last time you got to take care of anyone?” she asks.

“A long time ago,” Khan says quietly.

She sighs. “I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Khan says, beginning to wash her hair.

“No, but I can still think it sucks and feel badly about it,” she says, closing her eyes.

“True,” Khan concedes. He doesn’t recognize the scent of her shampoo, but it blends well with the sandalwood. Jill tips backward when he touches her shoulder and rinses her hair, coming up and running her fingers through it. Straight from the water, it hits her waist.

“I need to condition it or it’ll turn into a rat’s nest,” Jill says, reaching for a different bottle. “And then I will cry when I have to unsnarl it and it won’t be pretty. Let me do this part, please?”

“As you like,” Khan says, watching her work the product into her hair. She’s efficient about it, but has enough hair that it takes a little while. When she finishes, she shifts to drain the tub.
“I need a shower to rinse this out,” she explains, getting to her feet as the water disappears. “Join me?”

He does, and they spend a while under the water, lazily trading kisses and caresses that don’t need to be anything more than they are. Eventually Khan shuts off the water and they dry off with thick towels, Jill wrapping one around her hair turban-style. “It takes forever to dry,” she says with a sigh. “If I felt ambitious I’d use the sonic dryer but I’m lazy.”

“Will it dry overnight?” Khan asks as they walk back into the bedroom.

“Hopefully,” Jill says, detouring to her bag and kneeling down next to it. She rummages through the suitcase for a moment and pulls out a gray case, opening it and taking out a small tube. “Haven’t needed this in a while,” she says, and Khan is amused to see a bit of color in her cheeks.

“Anesthetic cream?” he asks.

Jill nods and tosses him the tube. “Will you help me with it?”

“Of course,” he says, keeping his tone matter-of-fact.

“Thank you,” Jill says, still blushing a little. She crawls onto the bed and stretches out on her back. Khan moves to kneel between her legs, leaning down to kiss her lightly before he opens the tube. He keeps his touch gentle, not wanting to cause her further discomfort. She still winces a bit, but doesn’t ask him to stop and he doesn’t, and as he works the cream into her, she relaxes. “That’s better,” she murmurs when he finishes and wipes his hand on the covers. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Khan says, closing the tube and leaning over her to set it on the nightstand.

Jill unwinds the towel from around her hair and tosses it on the floor, running her fingers through the drying curls. “Every so often I think about cutting it,” she says. “But I never do more than a trim.”

“It hides the scars,” Khan says quietly, moving to lie next to her, wings tucked in and covers pulled over them. He reaches for her and Jill crawls into his arms, and when she settles against him he can still smell sandalwood.

“It does,” she agrees, head tucked against his shoulder. “And I do things where people will see my back sometimes. I go swimming, or diving, or even just wearing something with a low back. It’s...I’m not ashamed of the scars, but I don’t want to be stared at all the time either.”

“This I understand,” Khan says.

“Yes, I’m sure you do,” Jill says. She yawns, covering her mouth with a hand. “I don’t want to sleep. You’re going to have to leave in a few hours, I can sleep then.”

“I don’t mind,” Khan says, stroking her hair.

“But I do,” Jill says stubbornly. “Talk to me. Tell me about your family? Who were you closest to? Who would you revive first, given the opportunity?”

“Cat,” Khan says, still stroking her hair and her back. “Ekaterina. She and I were, are, extremely close. She would like you, I think. She is also Russian, and fiercely proud of it. But if I were to revive her first, I would also need to revive Konstantin, her mate. He is as much my brother as she is my sister, and the two of them are inseparable. Also, Cat has...a temper, and Konstantin can
sometimes rein her in when the rest of us fail.”

“What do they look like?” Jill asks sleepily.

“Cat is shorter than I am, similar coloring to you,” Khan says. He doesn’t need to close his eyes to picture her face; it’s almost more familiar to him than his own. “I always thought her beautiful in an elegant way. Konstantin is bigger than I am and always has a smile ready, especially for Cat.”

“Taller, bigger around, or what?” Jill asks.

“Both,” Khan says. “He is a remarkably big man.”

“Who else would you revive?” Jill asks. “If you could.”

“Katsuro and Bishop,” Khan says. “They are also mates, or were when they could be together, in our original time. Katsuro is shorter than Ekaterina, and Bishop is about as tall as Konstantin but built more like me. If I could get one more, it would likely be Anandi, or Alona. Alona isn’t much taller than you are, but one of the best fighters among us.”

“Is she better than you?” Jill asks.

“We are about even,” Khan says. “The best fighters we have are Katsuro and Ekaterina. No one can best Katsuro on a good day, and on a bad day Ekaterina stands a chance, but anyone else is unlikely. Cat is also difficult to defeat, and she is very skilled with knife fighting and knife throwing.”

“Nice,” Jill murmurs. Khan can tell she’s fighting sleep again, struggling to stay awake even though she must be exhausted. He massages the back of her neck gently, slipping a hand under her hair to touch warm skin. “No, you’ll put me to sleep,” she mumbles.

“Rest, Jill,” he says, not stopping what he’s doing. “I will wake you before I need to leave.”

“Not fair,” she complains around a yawn. “I can stay awake.”

Khan kisses her hair. “Let me do this,” he says softly, and Jill grumbles but in a moment or two she’s asleep again, breathing softly against his shoulder.

He hasn’t held anyone like this since Rani; the few people he was with after she died never spent the night by mutual agreement. He thinks Rani would have liked Jill, and he thinks she would approve of what has happened. She’d told him he wasn’t meant to be alone, before she died, and he’d told her no one could ever replace her. They were both right.

Jill isn’t Rani and Khan doesn’t love her, but she awakens feelings inside him he thought so far buried they were as good as gone. He has absolutely no idea if she will be able to help him or if she will just put herself in danger trying to do so, and he does not want her in danger, no matter if she enjoys it. The thought of her being hurt, being killed because of him, is intolerable, and his arms tighten around her.

But if she can help him, if there’s a chance of saving his family, of exposing Marcus...Khan is honest with himself enough to admit that she’s given him the first bit of hope he’s had since being revived, since Marcus came to him and explained just what “John” was going to do for him, and why, and what would happen to seventy-two cryotubes if he didn’t.

Khan closes his own eyes. He shouldn’t trust her, shouldn’t take that risk, but he is desperate to save his family, and desperate men will do anything they have to. And to be honest, it’s already too
late. It’s been too late since she told him to tell her three things and caught the lie.

He has no idea what will happen after she leaves London, if she’s already thought about it or if they will discuss it during the time she does have. For now, she sleeps peacefully in his arms, and it’s more than Khan ever thought he would have in this time, and it has to be enough even though it isn’t.

She doesn’t have any more nightmares, and Khan lets himself drift for a bit, his internal clock waking him an hour and a half before he needs to leave. Jill’s still asleep, and Khan takes advantage of it to touch her, stroke his hands over smooth warm skin and scars, gently nudging her onto her back when she sighs in pleasure. He lowers his head to her breast, teasing her nipple with his tongue until it becomes firm and puckered, drawing it into his mouth. Jill murmurs and arches into his mouth, still mostly asleep.

He continues to touch her, kiss her skin, being gentle and slow so as not to disturb her, and she doesn’t wake but her legs part and he feels how slick she is when he brushes his fingers between her legs. He slides two fingers into her slowly, more to feel her than anything else. She’s so hot around him, tight and soft; he wants to be inside her suddenly, his own cock twitching with interest.

Jill sighs again when he pulls his hand back carefully. She stretches and rolls onto her stomach, drawing up a knee in clear invitation. Khan moves to fit himself against her back, brushing her hair out of the way to kiss her neck and her shoulders as he positions himself. When he enters her, she groans, pushing back to draw him deeper into her, clenching around him.

He has every intention of taking this slowly, making it last, and for a time that is exactly what he does, moving slow and steady and deep inside her. He can tell when Jill wakes fully; she shudders and squeezes tight and her breath catches in her throat. “Hell of a way to wake up,” she says, breathless. “Fuck, you feel so good...”

“So do you,” Khan murmurs against her shoulder.

“More,” she demands. “I’m not--I won’t break.”

“I know you won’t, and no,” Khan says, catching her hand and pinning her wrist to the bed before she can reach down to touch herself. “We have time, and this is how I want you.”

“Oh, you bastard,” she complains, pulling against his hold and gasping when he tightens it. “Oh, fuck, that’s--”

“You like that,” Khan comments, not loosening his hand.

“Yeah,” Jill whispers. She shudders all over when he moves just enough to pin her other wrist. “Oh...”

“You like being at my mercy,” Khan says, biting her throat. “On your belly under me, pinned down, me deep inside you. You’re so wet, so desperate for me, and you’d do anything I told you, would you not? Anything I wanted.”

“Oh...” Jill breathes, pulling at his hold and whimpering when all he does is hold her tighter. “Please--God, please, anything, just--I can’t--”

“You can,” Khan tells her. “Just like this.”

“Bastard,” she curses him, but he has her well and truly caught. “I--oh--” She sobs for breath, squirming under him as best she can. “Khan, please.”
“No,” he whispers, biting her earlobe, tightening his hold on her wrists enough that he knows she’ll bruise. “Not yet.”

He doesn’t know if she can come like this, and doesn’t much care either, not yet. It’s far too enjoyable to have her under him like this, begging and cursing him and moving with him as best she can, struggling against his hold even though both of them know she can’t possibly break it. Her breath comes fast in her throat, each inhalation a broken, high-pitched whimper.

Khan licks a line up her jugular, nuzzles the spot behind her jaw. Jill cries out when he begins moving harder, faster, clenching around him and trembling. “Please,” she says, ragged and desperate. “Please.”

He releases one of her wrists and slides his hand down under her, pressing two fingers firmly against her clit and rubbing. “Now,” he says in her ear and she keens, spasming around him, hips bucking. He gives her a bare second to gulp in a breath before he presses again and Jill comes apart under him, shaking and sobbing. It’s enough to bring on his own orgasm and he bites her shoulder as he comes, muffling his groan.

They lie there, catching their breath, and Khan thinks vaguely he should probably move and let Jill breathe without his weight pressing her down, but she hasn’t complained yet and he doesn’t want to lose the feel of her under him. Eventually, though, she reaches back and nudges him and he slips out of her, moving to lie next to her instead. Jill doesn’t move right away, staying flat against the bed, arms still stretched over her head where he’d pinned her. Khan can see bruises beginning to appear on her skin and wonders what she’ll say about them. He also notes the mark he left on her shoulder; that will bruise, although he didn’t quite break the skin.

“Wow,” she says finally and laughs. “That...damn. I’m going to move any minute now, once my bones re-form. Really.”

“I believe you,” Khan says, running a hand up and down her back. Jill purrs in pleasure and arches a little into his touch, and he smiles a little at how responsive she is, even now. If he could spend the day with her...but he can’t. There are appearances to maintain and work to do, especially if he is to keep her from falling under suspicion.

“When do you need to leave?” Jill asks, managing to turn her head to look at him.

“In perhaps forty-five minutes,” he says.

She makes a face. “Too soon. Promise you’ll come back tonight?”

“I will,” Khan says even though he knows the more time he spends with her, the more dangerous it will be for both of them.

“I might be up for another round by then,” she says, laughing. “Not that I want to feed your ego, but God, you’re amazing. Quite possibly the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“What would it take to go from possibly to definitely?” Khan asks, reaching for her. Jill groans but moves, settling against him with a contented sigh.

“More data,” she says, nipping at his collarbone. “One night isn’t enough, it could have been a fluke or something.”

“So you are a scientist,” Khan says, amused.

“In some things,” Jill says between gentle bites and kisses to his skin. “But if anything is worth
doing, it’s generally worth doing again.”

“Generally,” Khan says, tipping her chin up to kiss her, taking his time with it. She sighs against his mouth and tangles her fingers in his hair, shifting against him. “I thought you were too tired for more,” he murmurs, kissing her jaw.

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” Jill says. “But we probably don’t have time.”

“We might,” Khan says, shifting to hold her close with one arm and a wing, his other hand slipping between her legs. Jill groans and laughs and gasps when he parts her with his fingers, stroking her. “Let me take care of you,” he says softly.

“You’ve done nothing but,” she protests, but she shivers when his fingers slide into her and rolls her hips down against his hand.

“And I enjoy it,” Khan says, kissing her jaw, her throat. “You gave me hope when I thought there was none. Let me give you this, as small as it is.”

“Oh,” she whispers, swallowing. “That’s not--I didn’t do anything, I just--”

Khan swallows her protests with his mouth, drinks in her moans and sighs, the shivers she can’t repress. He presses another finger into her, working her clit with his thumb, twisting and crooking his fingers. Jill whimpers and clutches at his shoulders, hips moving restlessly, and when she comes she gasps out his name. “No more,” she manages, reaching down to touch his wrist. “Please. I can’t.”

“Easy,” Khan murmurs, stilling his hand but leaving it where it is until she relaxes a bit and he can pull back.

Jill breathes out shakily, slumping against him. “I haven’t done anything,” she says after a moment. “Not yet.”

“You offered to help me,” Khan says.

“Because it was the right thing to do,” Jill says. “Is the right thing to do. We’ll just have to figure out how I can. I have some ideas, but I need to think about them more when you’re not here and distracting the hell out of me.”

“You should sleep,” Khan says, kissing her forehead. “We can talk later, after I am done for the day.”

“I’ll sleep eventually,” Jill says. “I have chronic insomnia, I rarely sleep through the night until I get utterly exhausted and crash for like ten to twelve hours. I don’t like sleep.”

“I did get that impression,” Khan says. “Because of the nightmares?”

“Partially, but some of it’s just it feels like such a waste of time,” Jill says. “There are so many things to do, to see, and sleep is just this block of time where you can’t do anything, and it blows.”

“I see,” Khan says. “Still, you should.”

She sighs. “I know, and I probably will crash for a few hours once you leave. Do you want to share a quick shower before you head out?”

“Yes,” Khan says. They have just enough time to linger a little, but not much more than that. Khan
dries off and pulls on yesterday’s uniform, watching Jill pull on a tank top and panties from her suitcase. “I will call you when I am done for the day,” he says, standing by the door.

“You do that,” she says, walking over to him. She reaches up for him and he lifts her up for a kiss goodbye. “Okay, we’re going to talk about this caveman thing sometime,” she teases, tugging on his hair. “I realize I’m small, but you cannot just pick me up whenever you feel like it.”

“Can I not?” Khan asks, smiling.

“Well, you probably can physically, but you shouldn’t,” she says, frowning at him. “I am not a toy.”

“No, you are not,” Khan agrees, setting her down. “I will see you later, Jill.” He brushes a thumb over her cheekbone and leaves before he decides to stay.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

I can't ignore what I learned today.

Chapter Notes

I'm attempting to get to plot and not have this be the all-porn all-the-time story, but they're proving resistant to the idea. I do promise Jim and some of the other Enterprise folks will show up at some point, though, along with some OCs you haven't met before and if I'm really lucky some you have (if you're reading FF).

As always, comments really appreciated - this story makes me more neurotic than anything else I may possibly have ever posted, so I'd love to hear what you think I'm doing right and what I'm not.

To Khan’s mild surprise, he gets quite a bit done during the day, even if occasionally his thoughts wander and he wonders what Jill is doing, whether she’s asleep or out in the city or something completely different. He thinks they should be ready to start physically building the torpedoes in about ten days, which is sooner than he wants but he’ll figure out a way to make it work.

He finishes up and leaves the building, waiting until he has crossed the street and turned a corner before he calls Jill. She answers right away and tells him to come to her hotel room, so he does, taking the Tube rather than a taxi because in London traffic it’s probably faster anyway. It doesn’t take him long and shortly after getting off the Tube he knocks on her door.

Jill opens it, dressed in jeans and the same tank top as she’d had on in the morning. She’s barefoot, and her hair curls wildly behind a purple headband. “Hey, you,” she says, smiling. “C’mon in.” She steps aside to let Khan in, and he closes the door behind him before leaning down to kiss her. He doesn’t mean it to be anything more than a greeting, but before he knows it he’s lifted her and she’s wrapped her legs around his waist, her fingers tangled in his hair.

“I like your way of saying hello,” she says, smiling against his mouth. “Missed you today, but I was kind of glad you weren’t here because you’re hellishly distracting and I had things I wanted to get done.” She kisses the corner of his mouth, nips at his lower lip. “Which I will gladly tell you about if you put me down.”

“If I must,” Khan says. Jill laughs, but lets her legs drop, and Khan sets her down gently.

“So, I think I’ve mentioned before that I’m not the world’s best hacker,” she says, turning and heading for her computer on the desk. “However, I have some skills, and more importantly, I have a friend who’s out of this world skilled and who also has no love for Starfleet. I did not tell this friend anything about you, for the record. I just asked this person to do some digging into classified projects in London and let me know what they found.”
“And clearly you will not be telling me anything about this person either,” Khan comments. “Even their gender.”

“Also correct,” Jill says. “It’s safer for you both that way.”

“If this person has no love for Starfleet, how did you become friends?” Khan asks.

“We stole things together,” Jill says. “They handled the information aspects, I handled the physical breaking and entering. This person has never quite forgiven me for signing on with Starfleet, but we’ve made our peace with it, and I’ve done them a few favors over the years, so I called one in.” Her fingers dance over the screen of the computer, and Khan moves to see what she’s looking at. “So, first we found blueprints for the Kelvin Memorial Archive, also known as Section 31,” she says, flicking through screens. “Then we found a whole list of programs currently ongoing at Section 31, including advanced weaponry, ship design, interrogation techniques—which makes my stomach turn—and biochemical weaponry, which I found horrifying. Supposedly Starfleet’s only studying how to counter those in this program but I don’t know as I trust it. There’s a whole side of the archive that’s science and medical labs and I get the distinct impression I don’t want to know what happens in there.” She tips her head back, looking at Khan. “But I also get the distinct impression you know all too well.”

“I do,” Khan says after a pause. “Let us leave it at that.”

Jill blows out a breath. “Right,” she says. “We’ll talk about that at some point but that point is not now. Moving on, it looks like the weapons you’ll be working on will be constructed in this facility, not within the archive itself but not that far away, either. Interestingly, and I’d love to know how you pulled this off, the facility which I think will be used to physically build torpedoes is also holding six dozen things my friend couldn’t identify but which look an awful lot like cryotubes to me.”

“You do realize I could have told you much of this,” Khan says, resting his hands on her shoulders and rubbing them gently.

“I do realize, but that way it’s just your word,” Jill says. “This way I have hard evidence that Starfleet’s up to things it should not be up to. I plan on doing more digging into the interrogation and biochemical weapons programs, because that’s incredibly horrifying, but it’s going to have to wait until I can do it and throw up in peace. I am also digging trying to find out how deep this runs in the chain of command, whether it’s all stuff only Marcus knows about or whether half of Starfleet brass is compromised.” She sighs and drops her head forward. “God, that feels good. I’ve spent far too much time today hunched over the computer in this annoying chair. The other thing I started looking into, and we’re working on, is figuring out the exact security for the facility holding your family and how to bypass it. You can’t go there without guards, and they probably watch you when you’re not at work or in your flat, although I’m guessing that’s bugged too. But I am not under the same constriction, and I am very good at sneaking into places I shouldn’t be.”

“What would you do, once you got in?” Khan asks, continuing the massage.

“Revive them, if I could,” Jill says. “At least some of them. Get them to safety.”

“You are leaving London in eight days,” Khan says. “I do not think we will have time.”

Jill grins and tips her head back to look at him. “I am, but I’ll be back,” she says. “To make a very long story short, I spent half my day putting together a proposal for my captain for me to take six months’ leave from the ship and work on a research project on Starfleet Intelligence and its current mission. It’s not as out of the blue as it sounds, I’ve had this proposal mostly written for about a
year but could never decide whether I wanted to do it or not. Intelligence has tried to recruit me twice--I’m pretty sure they found out about my history as a thief and some other stuff in my record that makes them think I’d be a good agent for them, and I decided I wanted to know more about them before saying yes, so I wrote the proposal but then life happened and I never got around to it and decided I was okay with what I was doing. But the important thing about the project now is that the Kelvin archive is still technically an archive, and also parts of it are open to all Starfleet officers, so my plan is to base my research out of London and work at the archive. Since I’m fairly certain Intelligence--or parts of it--knows about what’s going on there, it’s logical from their perspective and also gives me a bit of cover if I go digging, because everyone will expect it from me. My captain has to review the proposal and sign off on it, and then I have to get someone from Intelligence to sign off on it, and then someone at the archive to sign off on allowing me to research there, so there’s some red tape to cut through and some hoops to jump through, but I don’t see any reason why it won’t work. And if I get rejected, I’ll take an unpaid sabbatical. Honestly, I could kind of use a bit of a break after the last few years anyway.”

Khan stays quiet for a moment, processing her words. To be honest, he’s almost not sure he heard her correctly. “You have known me for three days,” he says finally. “Why would you do all this? Put your own career at risk, put your friend at risk if anyone finds out what he or she has done? You know almost nothing about me, about my people, and we are not...safe people, Jill. We kill without remorse, we are ruthless, we will do whatever we have to in order to achieve our goals. It might be easier all around to put me back into cryosleep.”

“I don’t go for the easy option,” Jill says. “Nor do I go for the safer option. I go for the right option, and holding six dozen people hostage because one mad admiral wants a war and is using you to achieve it is about as wrong as it gets. I want to help you, Khan, whether you want me to or not. My friend doesn’t much care if Starfleet gets pissed at her--oops, whatever--and if I end up wrecking my career because I’m trying to expose things they shouldn’t be doing, then it clearly wasn’t worth that much in the first place.” She turns the chair around and takes his hands, looking up at him. “You need a friend. Let me be one.”

Khan kneels in front of her, folding his wings back. “You should have been one of my people,” he says softly.

“Maybe, but then I’d be in a cryotube and you’d be stuck,” Jill says, smiling. “Anyway, I’m probably too impulsive for your people. I make up my mind based on what feels right and I hardly ever change it even if evidence tells me I was flat out wrong. Helping you feels right and it could be the worst thing I’ve ever done, but I don’t think it is.”

She leans forward and kisses him, and Khan lets go of her to slide his hands into her hair, pulling her out of the chair and down into his lap. “Also, I’m being at least partially selfish here,” she says, smiling against his mouth. “If I stick around, I have opportunities for more mind-blowing sex, and believe me, I’m not about to turn that down. Did I mention I can be shallow?”

“You did but I think your motives are more altruistic than you want to acknowledge,” Khan murmurs, kissing her jaw.

“I think you’re fascinating,” Jill says. “And I don’t want to let you get away that easily.” She rests her hands on his shoulders and kisses him again. “However, before I let you drag me into bed, I really do need to eat something. I had a bagel for breakfast but forgot about lunch, and I’m starving.”

“You will be of no help to me or anyone else if you do not take care of yourself,” Khan says, frowning a bit.
"I missed one meal, Khan, I’m not starving myself to death," Jill says, rolling her eyes. "And just for the record, I got a few hours’ sleep after you left today, so I’m fine there, too. Well, two hours, anyway, and I got another hour or so this afternoon."

Khan shakes his head and Jill makes a face at him, pushing to her feet. "For that you can buy me dinner," she says, going to find her shoes. "How do you feel about fish and chips?"

"Very British," Khan comments, rising to his feet.

"That is somewhat of the idea," Jill says, sitting down on the bed to pull on socks and boots. Khan notes absently that the boots come up to her knees, with thick platform soles. It takes her less time to lace them than he expects, though, and she hops off the bed after a moment and grabs a loose black shirt to pull over her tank top. "Purse, I have one around here somewhere," she says, looking around. "Ah, there it is." She picks up the small bag and rummages through it. "Comm link, wallet, access card for hotel, breath mints, I’m good. Fish and chips or would you rather something else? I’m making you pay so you can pick."

"Fish and chips is fine," Khan says. He’s amused that even in the clunky boots, Jill barely comes up to his shoulder. She also moves more quietly in them than he expected, but that could be the hotel carpeting.

"Awesome," she says, slipping the strap of her purse over her shoulder. "Let’s go eat."

At Jill’s suggestion, they find the chip shop closest to the park they went to the first night, and take their food and drinks up to the hill, sitting down in the grass to have an impromptu picnic. "Why do you come here?" Jill asks, gesturing with a chip. "Why this place?"

"It is a good launching point to fly from," Khan says. "Also, it is usually quiet."

"God, that must be amazing," Jill says wistfully. "I envy you that. Would you let me watch you fly sometime?"

Not what he expected her to ask. "I would," Khan says, taking a sip of his water. "Answer me something, however. Why have you not asked if I can carry you?"

"Because I didn’t know if you could, and I didn’t know if you’d be willing to," Jill says, absently wiping her hands on a napkin. "I mean, that’s got to be pretty intimate, taking someone else up in the air with you, and I didn’t...I didn’t want to presume."

"It is hardly more intimate than sex," Khan points out.

"Different kind of intimate," Jill says and he nods in acknowledgment. "I mean, I wouldn’t say no if you offered, but...it’s up to you."

Before Khan can respond, Jill’s purse chirps. She frowns and digs out her comm-link. "Calastinova," she says, answering it and setting it to privacy mode automatically. "Hi, captain."

She listens for a moment, then laughs. "No, I haven’t. Well, that’s assuming I had any left to begin with, which is debatable. No, it’s not like that. I just...I want a change of pace, and I found some interesting things in London, and I want to stick around for a bit. I’ll come back, I promise, I just...right now this is where I think I need to be."

Khan listens, curious as to how she will explain him to her captain. "No," she says and makes a face. "No, I didn’t. Not exactly. Captain, it’s my business. I’m small, I’m not a child, and this isn’t the point." Her voice cools, becoming more formal, and she gets up, beginning to pace, running a hand through her hair and pulling out the headband. "Either you can approve my proposal or I can
take six months’ unpaid leave, captain, it’s your call, but either way, I am taking this time.” She listens, frowning, and sighs. “Do you honestly think I would, captain? Really? How long have we worked together? Mikael, please. Do this for me. It’s important. I can’t tell you how important, and I can’t tell you why, just...I need you to do this for me.”

Jill pulls at her hair, grimacing. “Thank you,” she says, releasing her hair and sighing in relief. “I know it still has to get vetted by Intelligence, and someone at the archive, and I’ll follow up on that tomorrow. Red tape, all that, this may take a bit, but...yeah, okay. Thank you.” She smiles a little. “I will. Okay. Take care. Bye.” She hangs up and shuts her link with a firm snap, tossing it down on her purse before she pulls at her hair and lets out a short scream.

“I take it your captain was not pleased with your proposal?” Khan asks mildly.

“No, but he’ll approve it,” Jill says, clearly forcing herself to breathe slowly and deeply. “He thinks I’ve lost my mind, what little remained of it, and also that I’ve apparently met someone who might be taking advantage of me for nefarious purposes.” She curses eloquently in Russian and kicks a nearby tree hard enough the tree vibrates. “Because God forbid–oh, fuck this, I am not dealing with his neuroses over my having sex tonight.”

“Has he been overprotective before?” Khan asks. Frustration rolls off Jill in waves, and he keeps himself still and quiet, not wanting to do anything that might cause her to lash out at him.

“Always,” Jill says with a groan. “He has no problem seeing me as competent and adult and all that when I’m acting as his XO, but the moment I mention something about having a romantic life he turns into the overprotective father with a daughter barely old enough to date. It’s fucking embarrassing, is what it is, and I am so, so sick of it. Because of course the only reason I’d want to do this would be because I met a man and I’m all...” She gestures, apparently unable to find words.

“To be fair to your captain, the only reason you are doing this is because you met a man,” Khan says carefully.

“But not like he thinks,” Jill says, kicking the tree again. “God. At least he agreed to sign off on it. Now I just have to harass Intelligence and the supposed archive, but at least no one there knows me personally and will think I’ve lost my pretty little head over a man.” She growls and kicks the tree one more time before dropping down to the grass. “So, so frustrating. I’ve been having sex since I was fifteen, it’s not exactly like I’m a blushing virgin, and yet.”

“Your captain did just find out you want to take six months away from him and his ship,” Khan says. “He is probably searching for some kind of reason why this came up so suddenly.”

“Which I get, yeah, but still, he could have left the ‘Did you meet someone?’ out of it,” Jill says grumpily. She blows out a breath and falls backward into the grass, staring up at the darkening sky. “I need to go for a run, or something. I’m too aggravated right now to calm down without some form of physical exertion.”

“Are you dressed for a run?” Khan asks.

“Unfortunately not,” she says. “Do you mind if we go back to the hotel so I can change and then head out for a bit? I probably wouldn’t give you much of a challenge, but you’re welcome to join me if you like.”

“I will,” Khan says, pushing to his feet as Jill does the same. They gather up the detritus from their dinner and toss it in a trash can on the way back down to the street. He hails them a taxi easily enough and Jill pays when they get to the hotel, not giving Khan a chance to argue.
Inside her room, she changes swiftly, pulling on a support tank under a fitted T-shirt and shedding her boots and jeans for running pants and sneakers. She bundles her hair into a ponytail, slips in earbuds, and ties a hoodie around her waist. “Okay, let’s go,” she says, tucking her access card into a thigh pocket. “No idea how far I want to go, but at least until I run off this mad.”

“Do not exhaust yourself,” Khan says, holding the door for her. “I have...plans for you.”

Jill grins at that. “I like the sound of that.”

She’s correct in that she doesn’t run fast enough to give him a true challenge, but she still moves quickly enough that he doesn’t feel frustrated by her pace, and she runs longer than he expects her to. By his estimation they cover almost ten kilometers before arriving back at the hotel, having slowed to a walk to cool down. Jill grins and flips into a handstand just before they get to the door, walking on her hands for a few steps before she flips over and stands up. “Occasionally I miss gymnastics,” she says, brushing off her hands.

“Why did you give it up?” Khan asks, opening the door.

“There’s not a whole lot left to accomplish after the Olympics,” Jill says. “I proved I was the best in the world at one thing and second best at something else, and my team proved we were the best collectively. I mean, what else was I going to do? I could have stayed in and competed more, but I figured I’d done what I wanted and it was time to move on, and I wanted to get into space.”

“So instead you took up stealing for two years,” Khan says.

“Well,” Jill says and laughs. “Yeah, something like that. I was bored.”

“Most people when bored develop a hobby,” Khan says.

“I did develop a hobby,” Jill protests. “It just wasn’t exactly legal.” She punches the button for her floor and the lift doors slide closed. “But those days are...mostly behind me now.”

“Mostly?” Khan asks, raising his eyebrows.

“I did say I’m remarkably good at sneaking into places I shouldn’t be, didn’t I?” Jill grins. “Comes in handy more than you’d think. And damn, I need a shower. Join me?”

“Yes,” Khan says, although he likes the way she looks at the moment, warm and skin damp from sweat, a few curls escaping from her ponytail to frame her face. He brushes one back, more to touch her than anything else, and she smiles and turns her face to kiss his palm.

She lets them into her room and tosses her access card and earbuds on the nightstand before stripping out of her clothes efficiently. Khan watches her for a moment before she looks at him and gestures. “This sharing a shower thing only works if you get naked too,” she points out.

He smiles and begins undressing, aware of her watching him. When they’re both nude, she walks over to him and stretches up for a brief kiss. “Shower,” she says firmly and walks toward the bathroom.

Under the water, she sighs and stretches, rolling her head around on her neck and raising her arms to the ceiling, fingers linked and palms facing up. “I needed that run,” she says. “I am not made to sit at a desk all day. I’d go mad.”

“And yet you are attempting to convince people of your wish to do an academic research project,” Khan says, picking up her shower gel and pouf.
“Needs must,” Jill says, shrugging. “Besides, I highly doubt I’ll actually get much of it done before things come to a head and either I get kicked out of Starfleet or it has a lot more important things to worry about than me. Possibly both.”

Despite her casual words, her shoulders tense when she says them. “I do not want you to lose your career because of me,” Khan says, beginning to wash her back.

“I don’t particularly want to lose it either, but we’ll see what happens,” Jill says, bowing her head. “I can’t—even if it wasn’t for you, I can’t ignore what I learned today. That’s not the Starfleet I signed on to serve.”

She’s such an odd match for him, Khan thinks. He has never been an idealist, in any sense of the word. But she still believes, and strangely, he does not want to disabuse her of that. Instead, he pulls her close, her back against his chest, as he continues to wash her. Jill sighs and closes her eyes, tipping her head back and relaxing against him. “You are going to spoil me, and then I’m going to go back to my apartment in San Francisco with just sonics and no one to wash my back and be very depressed,” she says.

“How long will you be there before you come back to London?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Jill says. “It depends on how long the red tape takes to get through with Intelligence and the archive. Plus I’ll need to find a place to stay in London, and pack for six months, and arrange to have someone apartment-sit for me in San Francisco and...lots of things. I need to make lists except I hate making lists. At least I don’t have any pets or plants to worry about.” She turns when he nudges her and reaches up to pull him down for a kiss. “Let me return the favor,” she says, picking up the soap.

“As you like,” Khan says.

“I do like,” Jill says with a quick grin. She takes her time with him, and he can’t tell whether she’s deliberately trying to arouse him or not but it has an effect. When she sees that, she grins, sinking to her knees and running her hands up his thighs. “Let me do this,” she says. “I want to.”

“I doubt I could stop you,” Khan murmurs, and she laughs before she takes him into her mouth. His breath catches in his throat and he rests a hand on the back of her head, eyes closing. Heat surrounds him: the water pouring down over him, Jill’s mouth around him, the warmth of her hands on his thighs. It’s almost too much and he savors it, resisting the urge to push into her mouth, to just take. She would let him, and he knows it, and that alone makes him hold back, breath coming harsher in his throat.

He pushes her back before either of them want her to stop and she makes a disappointed sound, trying to lean forward again. “Come on,” she says, voice hoarser than normal. “Let me.”

“I want something else,” Khan says, pulling her to her feet effortlessly and slipping his hands to her waist to lift her, press her against the wall. She licks her lips and swallows, wrapping her legs around his waist for balance, and both of them gasp when he enters her.

She’s so hot around him, so wet for him he has to catch his breath. She wraps her arms around his neck and tangles her fingers in his hair and he kisses her as he begins to move, hard and steady and deep. This won’t last long for either of them, Khan knows, not with the way Jill’s already shivering against him, whimpering into his mouth. “Tell me how it feels,” he says against her lips, biting one gently. “Tell me.”

“God,” she says, a groan more than a word. “Perfect. Fucking perfect. It’s--you’re almost too big
and it feels so damn good...” Her voice cracks on the last word and she arches against him, panting.

Khan kisses her again, swallowing the sounds she makes. He smiles to himself when her fingers tighten in his hair, enough to pull, and she drags her nails down the back of his neck and over his shoulders, clawing at his skin. The marks won’t last but for now he enjoys the sting.

He tightens his grip on her hips, wondering if he’ll leave more bruises as he drives into her.”God, please,” she pleads against his mouth.

“Come for me,” he tells her and in seconds she’s spasming around him, head falling back against the tile of the shower and shuddering. He growls low in his throat, closer than he wants to be but he knew this was going to be fast. When he comes, he bites her shoulder, right where it meets her neck; Jill cries out and comes again, shaking. She clings to him, and he holds her, supports her, until finally she sighs and indicates he can put her down.

They wash up again quickly and get out of the shower to dry off. Jill sprawls over the bed, wrapped in one towel around her body and another around her hair, and Khan sits next to her, running a hand over what exposed skin he can touch. She hums in contentment. “Can you spend the night?” she asks, turning her head to look at him.

“I probably should not,” Khan says. “But I will.”

Her smile lights up her face. “I’m glad.”

“I think you trust me more than you should,” Khan says.

“It’s not necessarily about trust,” Jill says. “I enjoy your company. Also I miss having sex, and did I mention it’s better with you than it’s ever been with anyone?”

“You said you needed more data to confirm that,” Khan says, stroking his fingers over her throat.

“I really do, but so far I have a working hypothesis,” Jill says, tipping her head back. “And--hold that thought,” she says as her comm-link chirps. She scrambles to her feet and runs for it. “Yeah,” she says, activating privacy mode. “Oh, hey. What’ve you got?” She listens, unwinding the towel from around her hair and running her fingers through the damp strands. “Okay. Yeah, okay. So...well, we knew it wasn’t going to be easy.”

Khan watches as her eyes go wide and she curses in Russian. “Are you fucking insane? I know, I know you don’t--but--Magpie, you’re going to get yourself arrested and I absolutely cannot help you if you do.” Jill chews her lower lip, looking agitated. “Yes, I know, but--be careful. More than usual. I can’t--I can’t help you if you get caught on this, and he’s dangerous. More than you know, more than I can tell you over an unsecured lin--okay, fine, it’s secured, I should know you better than that but this isn’t something I want to go into over a link.”

Clearly Magpie is her hacker friend, Khan thinks, and also clearly Magpie has been doing something even Jill finds reckless, which concerns him. Jill had said she hadn’t told Magpie anything about him, but if Magpie gets herself into trouble, her connection to Jill could be found out and Jill could also find herself in trouble. He frowns, thinking about it.

“No,” Jill says. “No, I know we need to know. Okay. Yeah, I’ve got about a week left in London, and then I’m not sure what I’ll be doing. Can you come here? I can--okay, yeah. Day after tomorrow should be fine. Yeah, okay.” She smiles a little. “You too, crazy girl.” She hangs up and tosses her link onto the desk. “So, now you know my hacker friend’s name,” she says. “And she’ll be here in two days.”
“What did she do that was so concerning?” Khan asks.

“She’s working on hacking Marcus’ email,” Jill says, coming back over to the bed and sitting down next to Khan before she flops backward.

Khan’s eyes widen much the way Jill’s did. “That could be extremely dangerous for her.”

“I know,” Jill says, passing a hand over her face. “I know. Magpie’s out of this world skilled, but I don’t know how many layers of security or anything Marcus has on his email. And if she gets caught...”

“If she gets caught, will they find you?” Khan asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Jill says. “We’ve been very careful about that.”

Khan nods, brushing his knuckles down Jill’s cheek. “How did you meet her?” he asks.

“She found me,” Jill says. “I’d stolen something and she had hacked the owner’s security system while I was in his house for a totally different reason, and she was curious enough to follow me once I left. Well, follow me electronically. Then she basically studied me for a week before she contacted me and suggested we team up. I didn’t actually meet her in person until six months after she contacted me for the first time.”

“I see,” Khan says. “Where did she learn her skills? Why does she hold no love for Starfleet?”

“That’s her story to tell,” Jill says.

Fair enough. Khan nods, tracing the line of Jill’s collarbone, the slight swell of her breasts above the towel. She has a mark on her shoulder from the morning, and another one on her throat from the shower. When he looks down at her hands, he can see bruises around her wrists--faint enough most people probably wouldn’t notice, but he can see them clearly.

He probably should not be as pleased by that as he is, but she has a way of bringing out his darker impulses, wakening a side of him he has kept locked away since before he went into cryosleep. The list of things he could do to her, wants to do to her, keeps growing even though he knows he has neither the time nor many of the things he would want.

He wonders what toys she has in her apartment; he’s certain she has a collection, but wonders if it includes things like cuffs or rope or knives. He wonders what she uses on herself when she’s alone, how she pleasures herself.

“What?” Jill asks, looking up at him. She catches his hand where he’s tugging at the fold holding her towel together. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Do you really wish to know?” Khan asks, taking his hand back and unwrapping her towel.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t,” Jill says, making a face at him when her towel falls open.

“You make me want to do so many things to you,” Khan says, stroking a line down her chest, between her breasts, circling her nipple with one finger slowly. “But I am in part limited by lack of equipment. I am curious what you have in your apartment, what you use on yourself.”

“My toy collection,” Jill says, breath catching when he brushes his finger over her nipple. “I have a lot of things. I, um. I have a couple with me, I always travel with something because you never know when you’ll meet someone.”
“Really,” Khan says, almost a purr. “What did you bring to London?”

“Stop touching me and I’ll show you,” Jill says. Khan smiles and takes his hand off her skin, but it takes Jill a moment and a couple deep breaths before she gets up and crosses to her suitcase. She returns with a black box and a purple bag and sits down, opening the bag. “Some basic supplies,” she says, taking out two kinds of lubricant and tossing them onto the bed. “My absolute favorite vibrator, and a backup in case this one dies.” Her favorite is purple, made of a material Khan doesn’t immediately recognize, and the other one is black and shaped slightly differently. “The only other stuff in here is some stuff for clean up, wipes and toy cleaner, nothing all that exciting.”

“And the box?” Khan asks.

Jill grins and opens it. “These are possibly the best thing I ever got sex toy wise, but unfortunately I need a partner to use them. I know they don’t look like anything all that exciting, but...here, put one on me.” She holds out her hand and Khan picks up one of the leather cuffs, fastening it around her small wrist. Jill presses a small spot on the cuff, just below the buckle, and Khan hears a faint hum. “It locks,” she says, pulling against the cuff, which doesn’t move at all. “Any position, anywhere, it’ll support a ton of weight, and it will not move until you press the release.” She touches it again and lowers her arm.

“When did you buy those?” Khan asks, watching her put away the toys and unfasten the cuff around her wrist.

“They were a birthday gift from a then-boyfriend,” she says, closing the box. “The relationship didn’t last, obviously, but I kept the cuffs. They’re good to travel with because you don’t need anything else, really. We can play with them later.”

“I look forward to it,” Khan says and Jill grins.

“I thought you might.” She gets up to put the toys back in her suitcase and pull on an oversized t-shirt; the sleeves come down to her elbows and the collar slips off one shoulder. “I’d say we could play with them now but Magpie’s supposed to be sending me some data shortly and I want us to both look at it before we get distracted.”

“What data is she sending?” Khan asks.

“She didn’t specify,” Jill says, crossing back to the bed and sitting down on it cross-legged. “My guess is either more about the security on the facility holding your family or she found out more about something at section 31. Maybe both.”

“Where did Magpie learn her skills?” Khan asks. “How good is she, really?”

“I have not met anyone better than her in or out of Starfleet,” Jill says. “She’s mostly self-taught, she’s just got an instinctive genius for computers. Sometimes I think she can create a psychic link with them, she’s that good.” She tilts her head, looking at Khan. “Are you and your people psychic at all? Was that engineered into you?”

“Not as far as I am aware,” Khan says. “And I should think by now we would have realized if that were the case.”

“Probably,” Jill agrees. “I was just curious. How different are you than me? I mean, what advantages do you have, and are there any drawbacks?”

“Many, and yes,” Khan says. “We are much stronger, faster. Our reflexes are keener. Our senses are enhanced. We can survive without oxygen for fifteen minutes without brain damage. Injuries
heal extremely rapidly—broken bones, for example, take no more than a few hours depending on severity of break. We can’t scar physically. Superior intelligence, of course—none among us is less than a genius. We require minimal sleep and can go days without it if necessary. We are essentially immune to disease, and we age much more slowly than regular humans because our cells constantly regenerate.”

Jill whistles. “That’s a hell of a lot,” she says. “What’s the downside?”

“We are extremely aggressive and quick-tempered,” Khan says. “We will kill without thinking twice and not regret it. None of us have what you might call a conscience. And most of us are sterile, although I am not sure if it can be reversed with today’s medical advances.”

“What was the rationale behind that?” Jill asks.

“To control us, I believe,” Khan says. “A few of my sisters are capable of bearing children, and perhaps two or three of the men, but as far as I know I am not one of them.”

“Okay,” Jill says. “Well, I’m on birth control, I have the five-year implant and I’m on year two, so even if you could father a child we wouldn’t have to worry about it. I think I might want kids someday, but not for a while. I don’t want to be tied down like that yet. I’m also not sure I ever want to be pregnant, but I’ll jump off that bridge when I get to it.”

Her computer chirps and she slides out of bed, going to check it. “Email from Magpie,” she says, motioning for Khan to come join her. “It looks like...oh, this is interesting. List of personnel assigned to the different projects at section 31, and...hm, I don’t know what this is, can you tell me?”

Khan scans the report. “Status update on the Vengeance,” he says.

“And what is the Vengeance?” Jill asks.

“A dreadnaught-class ship,” Khan says. “Built solely for combat, currently being constructed behind Jupiter.”

Jill grimaces. “Charming,” she says. “I’m going to do some digging into the names Magpie gave me, see what I can learn and if anyone has weak spots.”

“Must you do it right this moment?” Khan asks, resting his hands on her shoulders and sliding them down over her breasts.

“Was sexual insatiability something they engineered into you as well?” Jill asks, laughing even as she shivers and her nipples harden under Khan’s touch.

“Perhaps,” Khan says, brushing his thumbs over her nipples. “Are you complaining?”

“No,” she says, tipping her head back to look at him. “Not at all. This can wait a bit.”

“Good,” Khan says, lifting her out of the chair and carrying her back to the bed. She punches him in the shoulder before he sets her down.

“Not a toy,” Jill says, giving him a mock-glare. “You cannot just do that whenever you want.”

“Oh, I think I can,” Khan says, slipping his hands under the hem of her t-shirt and pushing it up. She scowls at him. “You can’t keep carrying me around. I’m not a princess and I’m not a toy and
I’m not a child.”

“You are not,” Khan says. “But that has little to do with my ability to lift you.”

Jill sighs. “You’re not going to stop it, are you?”

“Possibly not,” Khan says, rolling her nipples between thumb and forefinger. Jill groans softly and arches into his touch. “But I will refrain from it in public.”

“If that’s the best I can get, I’ll take it,” she says, dragging the t-shirt off over her head. “But I might still punch you or bite you.”

“I will survive,” Khan says solemnly. Jill laughs and reaches up for him, pulling him down into a kiss.

“Research later, sex now,” she says against his mouth.

“Indeed,” Khan murmurs.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

If he's Intelligence and a friend of Jill's, he might be worth using.

Chapter Notes

More OCs! Possible plot! And yes, the porn. I'm still horribly neurotic about this story but I like it, so I'm continuing to post it. Hope y'all like it too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Halfway through his workday Jill emails him with a one-line message that she has a meeting at 1600 hours to discuss red tape and she’ll see him when he gets out. Khan’s mildly surprised; either Intelligence really wants her or someone’s caught on to her sneaking around, because even in this century bureaucracy moves slowly.

He puts it out of his mind as best he can and returns to his work, and by the time he gets done with what he wants to accomplish, it’s after 1800 and he’s the last one there, as usual. He leaves, somehow not surprised to see Jill sitting on a bench outside, face tipped up to the sky. Her hair’s braided back tightly and her uniform looks crisp and neat; Khan thinks he much prefers her out of it with her hair down.

“Hello, stranger,” she says when she sees him, pushing to her feet. “Dinner?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“You pick where,” Jill says, not reaching for him as they leave the grounds. “I’m in the mood for anything so long as I can have a glass of wine or a pint with it.”

“All right,” Khan says. “Did your meeting not go well?”

“I’ll tell you about it over dinner,” she says. “Too public here.”

Khan raises his eyebrows but doesn’t ask, deciding to take her to an Italian place he frequents semi-regularly, about a kilometer away. Jill seems tense, but as they leave Starfleet behind she relaxes more, and a few blocks in she tugs the band out of her braid and runs her fingers through her hair.

When he hears someone call “Half-Pint!” he doesn’t think anything of it, but Jill stops dead and turns, looking for the voice. “Someone you know?” Khan asks her.

“Yeah, and not someone I expect--Jake! Son of a bitch! what are you doing here?” Jill asks, grinning.

The tall man jogging over to them doesn’t have on a uniform, but Khan marks him as Starfleet anyway, although he’s surprisingly scruffy for an officer. Dark hair, dark eyes, about Khan’s height, and he grins back, leaning down to hug Jill. “Pick me up and I will kick you,” she warns
him when it looks like he’s about to do just that.

“I’ll take my chances,” Jake says and lifts her off the ground. Jill does in fact kick him in the shins, as well as punch him in the shoulder, and he puts her down, laughing. “What the hell are you doing here, shorty?” he asks.

“Long story,” she says. “What the hell are you doing here? Also, let me introduce you since you’re interrupting my date. John Harrison, Aaron Jacobs, but call him Jake. Jake, this is John.”

“Any friend of Jill’s,” Jake says, smiling and extending a hand. Khan shakes it, mildly pleased by the firm grip and calluses he can feel. “So I’m guessing this isn’t a good time to catch up, but Jill, we need to talk. Am I hearing rumors right that we might finally get our hands on you? That you’re coming over to the dark side?”

“Not exactly.” Jill says. She looks up at Khan. “Jake’s in Intelligence,” she explains. “We went through the Academy together, but they snapped him up almost before he graduated.”

“They tried to get her, too, but she didn’t go for it,” Jake says. “We’ve been trying to convince her since then.”

If he’s in Intelligence and a friend of Jill’s, he might be worth using, Khan thinks, and from the look on Jill’s face she’s thinking something similar. “Okay, change in plans,” Jill says. “The three of us are going back to my hotel room to order dinner and talk, because I need to pick your brain and I know my room’s secure.”

Jake whistles through his teeth. “Jill, what have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“I’ll explain when we get to the hotel,” Jill says. “For now, one of you overly tall people needs to hail us a taxi.”

Both Khan and Jake move to do that at the same time; Jake grins and steps back, gesturing for Khan to hail a cab. One pulls up almost immediately and they get in, Jill taking the middle because she’s the only one that will fit in it. Even so, Khan’s wings feel stifled and he takes a moment to stretch them when they get out of the cab, He notices Jake’s eyes on him, but Jake doesn’t say anything and Khan doesn’t offer an explanation.

Once in Jill’s room, she activates the jammer and does a sweep of the room--and of Jake, which surprises Khan but Jake doesn’t seem bothered by. “You’re clean,” she says, setting the jammer back on the desk and making sure it’s on. “Had to check, you know that.”

“I know, and you should know I’d never come near you with bugs on me,” Jake says patiently. “So what the hell have you gotten yourself into, and why do I think I’ve seen your face before?” he asks Jill and Khan respectively.

Jill takes off her boots and moves to sit on the bed, gesturing for the men to sit wherever. Jake sprawls on the couch, and Khan chooses to remain standing for the moment, just in case. “What do you know about something called section 31?” Jill asks finally.

Jake whistles soundlessly. “Shit, shorty, is that what this is about? You do not want to get mixed up in that. It’s above my clearance level--”

“Which means jack shit from you, so tell me what you know,” Jill interrupts.

“What I officially know or what I actually know?” Jill glares at him, and Jake grins sheepishly. “Okay, okay. So officially it doesn’t exist. Like it’s all need-to-know, and unless you’re working
on it, you don’t need to know. I have learned through sources that I can’t reveal that a lot of things hidden under the section 31 umbrella deal with things that Starfleet’s not supposed to be into at all. Advanced weaponry, ships, that’s less gray than some of the other programs. I do not know how high up in Starfleet brass this goes, but I do know Marcus’s fingerprints are all over it. Whether or not anyone else knows about it I don’t know, haven’t looked, I’m kind of busy with other stuff at the moment. I was considering trying to get myself assigned to one of the programs to learn more, but I’m better suited to doing what I’m doing and I wasn’t sure what I’d accomplish.” He looks at Khan. “You work there, don’t you?”

“Well, and ship design,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I thought you sounded vaguely familiar,” Jake says. “I scanned bios at one point when I was curious and digging around. Question is, why are you dragging my sister into this?”

“He didn’t drag me,” Jill says, scowling at Jake. “If you think anything happened that wasn’t my idea you clearly don’t know me that well, Aaron.”

Jake winces. “Okay, okay, but how did you get mixed up in this? What am I missing?”

Jill looks at Khan, clearly not about to say anything without his lead. Khan considers his response for a few moments. “Marcus blackmailed me into working for him,” he says finally. “If I do not give him what he wants, he has threatened my family’s safety.”

“Cold, but not that surprising,” Jake says. “Wait. Hold on a second.” He tips his head back, clearly thinking. “I swear I’ve seen your face before, not from the...but...no, that’s impossible.”

“What’s impossible?” Jill asks.

Jake scrubs his hands over his face and through his hair, rumpling it more. “There was a ship,” he says. “An old one, like centuries old. It got brought back to Earth a few months ago, I don’t remember the exact date, but then it just...disappeared, like it never existed. Supposedly there were no survivors, but rumor had it that was wrong, that the crew had been in hibernation and one had been revived, but then brass shut the whole thing down and anyone asking got reassigned to like Siberia, or the space equivalent of Siberia. Since I have no real desire to go to Siberia, I didn’t ask, but I did poke around a bit, and I swear I saw your face.” He looks at Khan. “Harrison’s not your name, and you were on that ship, weren’t you?”

“Jake,” Jill says quietly. “You don’t want to ask questions like that.”

“I’ll swear on whatever you want me to that I don’t mean either of you any harm and I’m not going to tell anyone what I hear,” Jake says. “Jill, c’mon, you brought me back here, you had to know I’d put pieces together even if I can’t tell what shape they make.”

She sighs, tugging on a curl. “Okay, point.”

“I was on the ship, yes,” Khan says after a moment. “Marcus revived me to use me, and he keeps my crew, my family in stasis to control me.”

“Right,” Jake says. “Okay. So how can I help?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Jill says, getting up from the bed. “Also, I am getting out of this uniform, avert your eyes.”

“Must you?” Jake complains but closes his eyes.
“I really must,” Jill says, unzipping her uniform and pulling it off. Khan watches, because she didn’t tell him not to, and earns himself a grin before Jill pulls on a tank top and jeans. “Also I need coffee, and you can open your eyes now.”

“If you work for us, you don’t have to wear short skirts,” Jake says, watching Jill go to the coffeemaker.

“Tempting,” Jill says. “Also, how are you in London? What are you doing here and how did you hear about my project?”

“Um,” Jake says. “I may or may not have set up a search to alert me if you and Intelligence crossed paths in the hopes of talking you into joining us, and I may or may not have gotten a ping yesterday when your proposal got approved by your captain and sent to Intelligence for review. I may or may not have beamed into London to do some fast talking with the people reviewing your proposal to tell them that they really, really wanted to approve it and fast, before you changed your mind, and then I may or may not have looked for you to find out what made you want to do this now.”

“That may or may not sound an awful lot like stalking,” Jill says, rummaging in a drawer and taking out a folded pamphlet. “Room service menu, order whatever you two want and get me something with red meat and vegetables.” She hands the menu to Khan and gets down three mugs for coffee. “But it would explain the last-minute call I got to meet with them today and discuss details of my proposal, and why they sounded so eager to have me sign on to start in three weeks.”

“It’s not stalking,” Jake protests. “It’s--Jill, come on, you are made for intel work and you know it, and if this is the way I can get you on my team, I’m pushing for it. But I’m guessing your sudden change of heart has less to do with you recognizing your true calling as an Intelligence operative and more to do with a need to be based in London to help your friend here?”

“You would be correct,” Jill says, pouring three mugs of coffee. “Have we ordered dinner yet?” She hands Khan a mug of coffee and takes the menu and another mug to Jake. “John, what do you want?”

“I do not care,” Khan says.

“Fine. Jake, order for the three of us,” Jill says, shoving the menu at him and going back to add sugar and milk to her coffee. “Get a bottle of wine with whatever you order, though, maybe a Shiraz or a pinot?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jake says, picking up the room phone to put in an order. Khan moves closer to Jill, resting his free hand on her back.

“Just so you know,” she murmurs, leaning into him, “Jake speaks multiple languages including Russian and Spanish, so it’s very difficult to have a conversation around him without him being aware of what’s being said in it. Also, so you know, we’re even on the saving lives scale—he saved mine once, I saved his once. His mother thinks of me as the daughter she never had, I think of Jake as the brother I never had, and I trust him implicitly even if he doesn’t tell me what he actually does for a living.”

“Does he speak Hindi?” Khan murmurs back.

“I have no idea but I don’t,” Jill says, smiling. “You could teach me, though. I’d like that.”


“Because it’s important to you, and it’s a beautiful language,” Jill says, turning to face him. “Most
languages are beautiful, I’ve just never had a chance to learn more.” She sets her coffee down on the kitchenette counter and rests her hands on his chest, stretching up to kiss him. Khan leans down and she slides her hands into his hair, licking her way into his mouth. His free arm tightens around her but before he picks her up Jake clears his throat pointedly.

“Oh, sod off,” Jill grumbles but pulls back and picks up her mug. “What did you order?”

“Three steaks and salads and baked potatoes,” Jake says. “And wine, as requested. Should be here in about twenty minutes.”

“Brilliant.” Jill stays close to Khan, though, and he folds a wing around her without even thinking about it, holding her against him. She laughs softly and brushes a hand over the feathers.

“So how did you two actually meet?” Jake asks.

“I tripped into him,” Jill says. “He looked unhappy and I wanted to know why, so I tripped into him.”

“And then wouldn’t leave you alone, right?” Jake asks. “Funny, she did a similar thing to me when we met.”

“I did not,” Jill protests indignantly. She looks at Khan. “We were assigned as partners in unarmed combat class, our second semester at the Academy. Jake couldn’t believe he’d gotten partnered with this tiny girl who probably didn’t know anything, and I couldn’t believe I’d gotten partnered with such an arrogant asshole. He tried to pick me up, I flipped him over my shoulder, and we got along fine after that.”

“I see,” Khan says, amused and reminded of Alona. “Both of you studied advanced combat, am I correct?”

“You are,” Jill says. “Jake’s scores were better than mine by about four points, mostly because he has physical advantages I don’t.”

“I’m also a better pilot,” Jake claims.

“You are not,” Jill says, rolling her eyes. “You are, however, possibly a better marksman. Possibly. I’ve been practicing.”

“Do you have time this week to spar with me?” Jake asks hopefully.

“Probably,” Jill says. “If you know somewhere around here we can go. I am not destroying this hotel room.”

“I’ll find a place,” Jake says. “You’d be welcome to come,” he says to Khan. “I don’t know if you’d want to spar, though.”

“That might not be a good idea,” Khan says. “But I will watch, if you do not mind.”

“I don’t mind,” Jill says. “Although it’s even odds whether you’ll watch me kicking his ass or getting mine kicked instead.”

“Best two out of three?” Jake offers.

“We’ll see,” Jill says. She takes a sip of her coffee and leans against Khan, sighing a little. “It’s been a long day. A very long day.”
“What was so long about it?” Khan asks, slipping a hand under her hair to rub the back of her neck.

“Research,” Jill says, bowing her head and setting her mug down. “Many things to research. Many pieces of red tape to cut through. Many conversations with people I didn’t want to talk to about things I didn’t want to talk about.” She sighs. “Okay, so there was only one of the last, but it still sucked.”

“What happened?” Khan asks softly.

“The last man I had a serious thing for called,” Jill says, resting her forehead against Khan’s chest. “We never dated--I asked him out, but he turned me down and I didn’t try again, and...I don’t know if Mikael put him up to it or if he found out I was taking six months away from the ship, but he called and asked me if it was something he’d done, if he could convince me to come back, and...” She sighs and groans. “I really, really had a thing for him, and it fucking hurt when he turned me down, and if he’d called last week--but everything’s different, and I had a hard time explaining to him that no, it wasn’t him and no, I wasn’t coming back. But if he’d said yes when I asked him out, if I’d tried again, maybe. But I didn’t and he didn’t and now here I am and this is where I need to be, but it still hurts.”

Khan sets his mug down next to Jill’s and uses both hands to hold her close, folding her in his arms and his wings, still rubbing the back of her neck. She takes a deep, shuddery breath, then another, and he thinks for a moment she’s about to cry but she gets herself under control before the tears can start. “I’m okay,” she says after a moment. “I’m okay. I’m just...I thought I loved him.”

“Do you still?” Khan asks softly.

“No,” she says. “I don’t...if I’d really loved him, I wouldn’t have let him turn me down, I’d have asked again, or something. And I’m here now, and here is where I need to be, here is where I want to be. But...” Jill sighs and scrubs a hand over her face. “Why do you always see me when I’m falling apart? This sucks.”

“Why does your society put such a stigma on sharing emotion?” Khan counters. “Why do so many of your fellow citizens feel like they must confine all their feelings?”

“Vulcan influence,” Jill says with a shaky laugh. “Humans are so messy and emotional and a lot of us like to think we could be more like Vulcans if we only tried hard enough.”

“But you are not Vulcan,” Khan says.

“No, I’m definitely not,” Jill says. “I don’t think they’d have me even if I tried. I just...I already get seen as inferior because I’m female and I’m small, to keep having these messy jags of emotion getting in the way is a third strike I don’t need.”

“I do not see you as inferior,” Khan says, running his fingers through her hair. “And I think any who did would be making a mistake.”

“Not to interrupt the mood, but I agree with him,” Jake says.

“Okay, okay, point made,” Jill says, rubbing her hands over her face. “I’m okay. I promise.” She tips her head back to look at Khan. “How do you say that in Hindi?”

He tells her, and she repeats the words carefully, her inflection quite good for a first try. “I think I can remember that,” she says. “Maybe.”

Jake repeats it, and Khan looks over at him, surprised. “I like languages,” Jake says, shrugging.
“I’m passably fluent in a bunch, I can get by if I have to in a bunch more. I grew up learning a few and I’ve always kept my hand in. Helps with Intelligence work. Hindi’s not one of mine, though.”

“What do you speak?” Khan asks.

“I can think in English, Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish, Italian, and mostly Japanese,” Jake says. “I’m working on my Mandarin, but it’s slow going, and I’m also working on my Klingon which is harder because there are sounds human throats are not meant to make, but I’m getting by. I have about half a dozen more languages, Earth and not, that I can fumble through in a pinch.”

“Impressive, in today’s society of the universal translator,” Khan says.

Jake shrugs. “Translation doesn’t always give you the actual context or meaning you want, and in my line of work it’s sometimes better to pretend you don’t have one.”

“What exactly do you do for Intelligence?” Khan asks.

“Um,” Jake says. “I find things out? Covert ops, mostly, fieldwork. I go a lot of places Starfleet can’t officially have a presence. Sometimes I do things Starfleet shouldn’t be doing, either.”

“Assassination,” Khan says, not asking.

Jake sighs. “Yeah, I’ve done that when I’ve had to. I’m not--it’s not my primary role, but yeah, I’ve killed.”

Jill takes a sip of her coffee. “Which is one of the reasons I don’t know if I want to work for Intelligence,” she says. “I kind of--I don’t want to let myself like killing people, and I already probably enjoy it more than I should.”

“I don’t want to like it,” Jake says, not asking.

“A few people don’t deserve to be alive,” Jake says and Khan has to agree.

“Yeah, but is it my place to make that decision for them?” Jill asks. “Whatever, anyway, bigger philosophical question we’re not getting into. The point is, I’ve killed before and I liked it and I don’t really want to like it, so I don’t really want to put myself in a situation where I could get used to it.”

“And there’s nothing saying you would have to, if you came over to Intelligence,” Jake says and it has the sound of an old argument. “But this is not the point right now. Right now the point is that dinner is going to be here shortly so I am going to duck into your bathroom and wash up.”

Jill gestures to it and Jake pushes up from his seat, disappearing into the bathroom and closing the door. Khan looks down at Jill, brushing his knuckles over her cheekbone. “Three weeks?” he asks quietly.

“Assuming I can get all the details sorted by then, yes,” she says tiredly. “I need to find a flat, and an apartment-sitter for San Francisco, and pack, and a million other things I’m forgetting. Makes me tired just thinking about it. I wish I could ask you for help, but that probably isn’t an option. I can probably shanghai Jake into doing some of it, though, and he has friends who he can drag along.” She smiles a little and stretches up to kiss his cheek. “I’ll have to figure out what of my toy collection to bring along.”

“You will,” Khan says, resting his hands on her shoulders and rubbing them gently. He can feel the tension in her, even now, and increases the pressure until she groans and slumps against him. “Did your captain call you?”
“No,” Jill says with a sigh. “No, and I doubt I’ll hear from him for a while. It’s okay. We’ll be okay.”

“Are you certain?” Khan asks.

Jill says nothing, but presses her head harder against Khan’s chest. “Easy,” he murmurs, holding her. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yeah, I do,” she says. “I do. You need me, and I’ve already set things in motion and I want to do this. It’s...life is messy and complicated, is all. But. Anyway. I think dinner’s here.” She pulls away from Khan to let in the room service person and set up their meals on the coffee table. While she’s doing that, Jake emerges from the bathroom.

“She okay?” he asks Khan.

“I believe so,” Khan says, keeping his voice quiet.

Jake nods. “She--I’m probably not telling you anything you don’t know, but she tends to rush headlong into things without really thinking about how complicated it could get, and then she gets surprised when complications happen and life catches up to her.”

“I had noticed,” Khan says mildly.

“Yeah, I thought you might have,” Jake says. “But she’s also steadfastly loyal and she’ll do anything for someone she cares about, and she seems to have decided you’re one of hers.”

“Do you think she should not have?” Khan asks.

Jake shrugs. “Not my place to say,” he says. “I don’t know you from Adam, really, but Jill thinks you’re good people, and I won’t say she’s never wrong, but she’s got a good sense for people most of the time. So if she thinks you’re worth helping, I’ll do what I can to help until or unless you prove her wrong.”

“Why do you want her for Intelligence?” Khan asks.

“Because she’s made for it,” Jake says. “She doesn’t like to play by the rules, she’s sneaky, I can trust her with my life, she’s good at being underestimated just by who and what she is, the list goes on. She’s wasted in her current assignment. Any idiot in gold can run a starship, but not everyone can do what I do, what Jill could do if she’d just sign on with us.”

“Many of my fellow idiots in gold would disagree with you,” Jill says, closing the door behind the room service person. “Including me, thanks. I like what I do.”

“But you hate how rule-bound your captain is, how much you have to play inside the lines,” Jake says with a sigh.

“Okay, point, but I still...we’ll see, for now dinner’s here, let’s eat,” Jill says, gesturing to the coffee table.

No one talks much as they eat; Jill and Jake spend some of the meal catching up with Jake’s family news and Jill’s recent missions. They finish the wine and Jill clears away the dishes, setting them outside the room door for housekeeping to deal with later. “So,” Jake says. “Is this the point where we start talking strategy or do you two need to do some more research first?”

“We need more data,” Jill says. “At least, I do. Right now I don’t have enough information.”
“Information for what?” Jake asks.

Jill scrubs her hands through her hair, disheveling it and making some of the curls fluff out. “How to revive six dozen people without getting caught but also without them becoming automatic criminals and wanted by Starfleet,” she says. “How to shut down the programs under section 31 that shouldn’t exist and hold Marcus accountable for his actions. There’s probably more but that’s a good start, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’d say that’s a hell of a lot,” Jake says. He drums his fingers against his thigh, thinking. “Let me do some poking around and see what I can learn. I’m on downtime until they need me again, so I’ve got some flexibility and some free time. I don’t know if I’ll be able to learn anything useful, but I’ll see what I can find out. You’re here for another week, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jill says. “Then I have to go home and pack and settle things to come back for six months. Which means I need to find a place to live this week. You know anyone who might be able to help?”

“Maybe,” Jake says. “Let me check with a couple people. I take it I’m going to help you move?”

“Yes,” Jill says, smiling sweetly. “Don’t get sent to Siberia.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jake says. He pushes to his feet. “For now I need to bother a friend and get beamed back to my place. Don’t get arrested.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jill says, also getting up. She walks Jake to the door and gives him a tight hug, holding on for a moment.

“You okay?” he murmurs, probably thinking it’s too quiet for Khan to hear.

“Yeah,” she says but she doesn’t sound certain. “Yeah, I’m fine. Go on, get out of here.”

“If you need me to stay—”

“I really don’t,” Jill says, nudging him in the ribs. “Go on, go home. I’m okay, I promise.”

Jake kisses her forehead and tugs a curl before raising a hand to Khan and leaving. Jill locks the door after him and slumps against it, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “I have a headache,” she admits. “Maybe the wine, maybe the day.” She pushes away from the door and goes to find her medkit, taking out a pill bottle and dry-swallowing one. “That should kick in soon.”

“Do you get headaches often?” Khan asks, walking over to her.

“Once in a while,” she says. “You know any tricks for dealing with them?”

He takes her hand and pinches the webbing between thumb and forefinger, pressing down hard enough she hisses in a breath. “Acupressure point,” he says, not letting go. “Tell me if that helps.”

“Yeah, somewhat,” she says after a moment. “That’s handy.”

“If you undress and lie down, I may be able to help the rest of it,” Khan says.

Jill laughs. “Are you sure you don’t just want me naked?”

“That would be a side benefit,” Khan says, smiling a bit. Jill laughs again and pulls off her tank top and her jeans, crawling onto the bed as she unhooks her bra and tosses it toward her suitcase. She sweeps her hair over her her shoulder and stretches out, resting her forehead on her crossed arms.
“I have lotion in my toiletry bag, if you want it,” she says. “It’s on the bathroom counter.”

Khan goes to find it, locating the bottle easily enough. He’s somehow not surprised to smell the sandalwood when he opens the cap, and brings it back to the bedroom, moving to kneel between Jill’s legs. He runs a hand down her back and up again, gauging the tension, pressing in a few places over her shoulders and the back of her neck to feel the muscles. “You are remarkably tense,” he says, pouring a bit of the lotion onto his hands. “Tell me what went wrong today, what you did not want to say in front of Jake.”

Jill sighs. “Just...so much stuff to deal with. Marcus, your family, this project, moving for six months, Magpie, everything. I don’t--” She pauses, clearly choosing her words. “I don’t regret anything I said or offered you and I stand by the decisions I made, am making. But at the moment I feel a bit overwhelmed, and uncertain where to start. It’s like walking into the ocean surf and suddenly the bottom drops out from under you and oh, there are sharks in the water and you’re still wearing clothes.”

“How often do you get overwhelmed from doing things like this?” Khan asks, pressing into her shoulders, soothing the knots he can feel.

“Not that often,” she says. “I mean, I’ve had missions go sideways where there’s always a moment of oh shit, what now? But this is different. I just...honestly, I don’t know where to start. Do we start with trying to get your family to safety? I mean, what would we do with them once we revived them? Seventy-two people isn’t—that’s not like hiding one or two people in a hotel room. But I’m afraid if we go into this and try to take down Marcus—which I don’t know if it’s even possible, for the record, but if it is, what happens if the admiral who replaces him decides your family needs to stay in cryosleep? That’s not fair either.”

“Life isn’t always fair,” Khan says.

“No, but there’s unfair and then there’s wrong,” Jill says. “Ow, that hurts.” She winces, and Khan eases the pressure. “Better. Thank you. So...where do we start?”

“You realize I do not care much if Marcus is held to account for his crimes,” Khan says after a moment. “I just want my family safe.”

“I realize you don’t care, yes,” Jill says. “But I do, and I think there’s a way to accomplish both.” She’s quiet for a moment, but Khan doesn’t think she’s finished her thought. “You want him dead, don’t you?” she asks.

“I do,” Khan says, not bothering to dissemble. “Were you in my position I think you would feel similarly.”

“Probably,” Jill says. “So if you kill him before Starfleet can put him on trial, that’s one way of solving our problems, although then you’d probably go to jail and I’d rather avoid that eventuality.”

“Only if I were to get caught,” Khan says. Arranging an accident for Marcus would not be nearly as satisfying as squeezing the man’s skull to pieces, but the end result would be the same.

“Well, yeah,” Jill says. “But how likely is it that you wouldn’t?”

“That would depend on how he died,” Khan says.

“Point taken,” she says. “Well, we can consider it.”
“You don’t object to killing a Starfleet admiral? The one in charge of Starfleet, to be exact?” Khan asks in surprise.

“I’m a vindictive bitch,” Jill says. “And I don’t know all of what he did to you, had done to you, but at this point I think death would be kinder than he deserves. You don’t trap a tiger and expect it to play nicely when it gets free.”

“Am I a tiger?” Khan asks, amused despite the subject.

“Raptor’s probably more accurate, given the wings,” she says, laughing. “But I think tiger’s fairly accurate. Maybe a wolf. Some big predator, anyway.”

“I see,” Khan murmurs, sliding his hands up Jill’s back, thumbs pressing along her spine. “What does that make you?”

“A rogue,” Jill says matter-of-factly.

“Of course.” He kisses the back of her neck, breathing in the scent of sandalwood and the spicy-sweet scent of her hair. “How is your headache?”

“All gone,” she says. “Thank you. You really are going to spoil me.”

“If you are to help me, I need you in optimal condition,” Khan says but they both know that isn’t all of it, and Jill laughs, turning over under him.

“I’m sure you do,” she says, reaching up to twine her arms around his neck. “Did I mention I require regular sexual satiation in order to be at my best?”

“Most humans do,” Khan says, letting her pull him down into a kiss.

“Most humans say they do,” she says, nipping his lower lip. “Although there have been studies showing the benefits of celibacy, but man, I am not made for that.”

“You really are not,” Khan agrees, kissing her jaw, running a hand down her side. “You are far too sensual.”

“I think hedonistic is the word you want,” Jill says, laughing. “Tell me how you want me.”

“I want to know how much of me you can take,” Khan says softly, pleased when her breath catches and she shivers under him.

“Let’s find out,” she murmurs.

He kisses her again, tasting wine, the barest hint of coffee. She runs her fingers through his hair and down the back of his neck, scratching gently. “Let me,” he says, pulling away from her mouth to slide down her body, kissing her neck, her collarbone, the scar on her left breast.

“That’s what you always say,” she says, mock-complaining.

“This is what I want,” Khan says, running gentle fingers down her stomach, under the band of her panties, moving so he can slide them down her legs and toss them aside. He can already smell her, and when he cups her in his hand he can feel her heat.

“I want you to get naked,” Jill says, propping herself up on her elbows. “Can I have that?”

“Yes,” Khan says, reluctantly letting go of her to undress. Jill doesn’t take her eyes off him as he
does and reaches for him when he moves back to the bed, pulling him down on top of her.

“You are so beautiful,” she says, framing his face in her hands.

“You flatter me,” Khan says, kissing her lightly. “Lie back.”

“One of these days I’m going to turn the tables on you,” she says, but she lies back, stretching her arms over her head.

“Will you?” Khan asks, kneeling between her legs.

“You’ll see,” Jill says, closing her eyes when he touches her, stroking her with a finger.

“I suppose I will,” Khan says, brushing one finger against her clit to feel her shiver. “Are you sore?”

“No,” Jill murmurs, drawing up her knees. “I want you.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive,” Khan points out, pressing two fingers into her slowly.

“Oh, don’t be logical when we’re naked,” she says, scowling at him. “Oh, fuck, that feels good.”

“Tell me,” Khan says, crooking his fingers, twisting his hand to find the right spot. “Tell me how it feels.”

Jill’s breath hitches and she clenches around his fingers, gasping when he gets it right. “Oh, fuck, that’s—it’s good, it’s—I need more, please, Khan.”

“Patience,” he says, almost to himself, even as he enters her with a third finger and hears her moan. “How many times can you come for me, milaya moya?” He twists his hand to rub her clit with his thumb, hard and fast, enough to make her shudder.

“I don’t--oh--” She cries out when she comes, hips bucking up. Khan doesn’t let up and she comes again, arching off the bed. “I can’t,” she gasps when he shifts his hand. “I can’t, please--”

“You can,” he murmurs, not stopping.

“Please,” she begs. “Please, I--oh--” Her head tosses on the pillow and her fingers fist in the covers. “I can’t, I--” She keens when she comes, clenching so hard around his fingers it almost hurts.

Khan stills his hand when she falls back against the bed, panting and cheeks damp. He moves his thumb away and draws his hand back, pressing in again with four fingers. She’s so tight, but she whimpers and pushes down against his hand. “I don’t know if I can take your hand,” she says uncertainly.

“I will not hurt you,” Khan promises her. “Just let me.”

“I know you won’t.” Jill says. “Just...oh.” She covers her eyes with an arm, biting her lip. “Oh, that’s...you have amazing hands.”

“You feel so good,” Khan murmurs, watching the color rise in her cheeks and spread down her neck, to her collarbone. “Have you done this before?”

“Yeah, but not for a while,” she says, shifting against his hand when he presses the right spot inside her. “And he wasn’t as big as you in any sense of the word.”
“Easy,” Khan says, resting his free hand on her belly. “There is no rush.”

He takes his time, moving from four fingers to three and back again to four, teasing her, coaxing her to relax for him. She gasps softly and shivers and pushes against his hand, and when he finally folds his thumb against his palm and works his hand into her she moans, arching up. “Please,” she whispers. “Please.”

“Just a little more,” he tells her. “Can you take it?”

“Yeah,” she breathes. “Yeah, I--oh--” Jill cries out when his hand pushes into her, shuddering with it. “Oh, God, that’s--oh, my God.”

He twists his hand, knuckles rubbing against the spot inside her that makes her shudder and cry out. “So beautiful,” he whispers, moving his other hand to rub her clit. “I want to see you come apart for me.”

Jill almost screams, shaking with the force of her climax, one triggering another and then another. She’s trembling by the time her body gives up the ghost and collapses against the bed, and Khan can see tears on her cheeks.

He eases his hand out of her as gently as he can; she still winces but says nothing, and Khan wipes his drenched hand off on the covers and moves up the bed to hold her. “I have you,” he murmurs, tucking her into his arms. “You did very well.”

“Mmf,” she mumbles, and he smiles. “Thirty seconds,” Jill decides and Khan thinks she’s being optimistic but says nothing.

Forty-seven seconds later, she takes a deep breath, scrubs at her cheeks with a hand, and kisses him briefly before shifting and wrapping her hand around him. He groans, unable to muffle it, barely able to keep from pushing into her touch.

“Show me how to touch you,” she murmurs, and he moves one hand down to guide her, showing her what he likes. She hums in pleasure when his breath comes faster in his throat, when he groans again and pushes into their joined hands. “Let me see you,” Jill says softly, pinching his nipple with her other hand, nipping at his collarbone. “Let me have it.”

He comes when she bites him, the sharp pain enough to make him gasp and spill over their hands. “Beautiful,” Jill whispers, and Khan gets his eyes open just in time to see her licking her hand clean. He wipes his own on the covers, thinking he probably needs to do a proper wash-up but that can wait for now.

She moves to snuggle into him, sighing in contentment. “I have to find a flat tomorrow,” she says. “Where do you live?”

“I would not recommend choosing your location based on mine,” Khan says.

“What else do I have to base it on?” Jill asks and Khan admits she has a point. He tells her his address and she repeats it to make sure she has it correctly. “Tomorrow,” she says. “Oh, shit, Magpie’s coming in tomorrow. Well, we’ll figure that out when we get there.”

“Does Jake know Magpie?” Khan asks.

“Nope,” Jill says. “And hopefully never will. They really either would get along horribly or end up in bed together, and that’s something I don’t need either way.”
“I see,” Khan says.

“You don’t,” Jill says, not unkindly. “But you will once you meet Magpie.”

“As you like,” Khan says. “Did she send any more data today?”

“She did,” Jill says. “We can go over it in a bit if you want, but right now I don’t want to move.”

“It can wait a little while,” Khan says, stroking Jill’s hair.

“So what do you think of Jake?” she asks after a moment.

“I think he is very loyal to you,” Khan says, considering it. “And he will do anything he can to help you because you have asked.”

“He’s also very good at what he does,” Jill says. “If he says he can find things out, he can.”

“He worries about you,” Khan says. “I think he thinks you may have gotten in over your head.”

“I’m sure I have, but that’s not going to stop me,” Jill says. “Besides, I’m short, it doesn’t take much to get over my head.”

Khan smiles at that. “Do you know when Magpie will be arriving tomorrow?” he asks.

“Not a clue,” Jill says. “With my luck she’ll show up at five in the morning or something. She has the same kind of irregular sleep schedule I do, so you never know when she’ll be around or online.”

“Did you sleep at all today after I left?” Khan asks.

“I got an hour, maybe two,” Jill says. “I’m okay, though. I’ll probably make it to the end of this trip and go home and crash for a while. Don’t lecture me, this is how I normally operate.”

“How do you cope on a starship?” Khan asks out of curiosity.

“I generally can keep going until a free day, and then I sleep,” Jill says. “I don’t know. I manage. I guess my sleep schedule’s a bit more regular when I’m shipped out. Not much, but some. But I’ve never been a good sleeper. It’s such a waste of time.”

“Most people would disagree with you,” Khan says.

“Most people are boring,” Jill says and Khan has to agree. “I think I want a shower, once I can feel my legs again. You have this bad habit of melting me. And don’t even think about picking me up.”

He smiles, amused. “As you like.”

“I do like,” Jill says. She kisses him lightly. “I like you, too.”

The simple statement means more to him than it should, but Khan honestly can’t remember the last time anyone said those words to him, if indeed anyone ever has. “Thank you,” he says.

Jill smiles and tucks her head against his shoulder. “You’re welcome.”

Chapter End Notes
Jake may seem vaguely familiar, if you're reading FF, but I changed him slightly for this story (he's not a captain, he's an Intel operative). I think he gets referenced in my twisted fic Watch the World Burn, too, but I don't think he's actually showed up on screen yet there.

And yes, Magpie shows up in the next chapter, for those curious about her.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

I'm telling you she'll want you to, and what are you going to do then?

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Apologies for the delay in updating - if you're not reading FF, I mentioned over there that I was in a car accident on Halloween and basically lost a week of my life due to concussion. I'm all healed now, though, and I will be buying a new car hopefully this weekend.

Warnings for this chapter: Drugged sex, and while I don't think this counts as dubious consent your mileage may vary, so please be careful if you are at all sensitive to such things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Just after 0500 hours, someone knocks on the door. Khan was mostly awake, but Jill wasn’t, and it takes her a moment to register the sound and groan. “This better be good,” she grumbles, sliding out of bed and pulling on an oversized t-shirt from her suitcase. She gives Khan a moment to get up and put on his pants before she unlocks the door and yanks it open, hiding a yawn behind her free hand. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Hello, love,” the young woman standing in the doorway says. She’s younger than Jill, Khan estimates, and medium height, with wavy brown hair twisted up in a pair of chopsticks--one red, one yellow. Multiple bracelets adorn each wrist, and a tangle of silver necklaces lies around her neck. She has several differently colored studs in each ear, and a green stud in her nose. The name ‘Magpie’ makes a bit more sense, Khan thinks, and wonders what her actual name is.

“Why are you--never mind,” Jill says, yawning again. “Come on in. Magpie, John, John, Magpie.” She waves blearily between the two of them and stumbles to the coffeemaker.

“Holy hell,” Magpie says, stepping into the room and closing the door behind her. “Jill, you didn’t-”

“No,” Jill interrupts.

“You didn’t even let me finish,” Magpie complains. “He’s very, very pretty. Would you--”

“No,” Jill says again. “Mine.”

“But--” Magpie protests.

“Mine,” Jill says again firmly, giving Magpie a sleepy glare. “No, you can’t. Stop now.”

“That’s not very friendly of you,” Magpie says with a pout.
“No. Mine.” Jill finishes setting up the coffeemaker and pushes her hair out of her face. “Why are you here at five in the morning?”

Khan does not let himself smile, but he finds the interplay amusing. Instead, he pulls on his shirt.

“It’s when the shuttle got in,” Magpie says. “I figured you’d be awake, since you never sleep.”

“Well, I wasn’t,” Jill says, shoving at her hair again. “But you’re here anyway, and John has to leave in a bit, so I might as well get up. You can crash with me after he leaves. Not before.”

“You’re really being very selfish,” Magpie observes. “And after I flew all the way from Boston.”

“Which is still closer than San Francisco, and I’m not sharing,” Jill says. “Find your own winged man, this one belongs to me.”

“Does he know that?” Magpie asks.

“Do you want coffee or do you want me to pour it on your head?” Jill asks.

“You’re remarkably cranky this morning,” Magpie says with a frown. “Is your winged man not good in bed?”

“Best sex I’ve ever had which is why I’m cranky, he wears me out and I was asleep and you know I don’t wake up well,” Jill says, yawning. “I’m sorry. I will attempt to be more cheerful. I’ll let you steal the blankets later. John, when do you need to leave?”

“In an hour or so,” Khan says.

“Can I call you Jack?” Magpie asks. “Because then you’d be Jack and Jill and it would be really cute. Except maybe too cute.”

“No,” Jill says, adding sugar and milk to one mug and sugar to a second. “You can call him John. I am not a nursery rhyme.”

“You’re short enough to be in one,” Magpie says.

“Bite me,” Jill says, pouring coffee. She doesn’t look surprised when Magpie crosses to her and bites her shoulder; instead, she hands her the mug with sugar but no milk. “John, if you want your coffee it’ll cost you a kiss.”

Khan smiles a little at that and walks over to Jill, leaning down to kiss her lightly. She smiles against his mouth and hands him the mug of black coffee. “Did you and Magpie ever?” he asks softly in Russian.

“No, we just sleep together literally,” Jill says in the same language. “Okay, we’ve made out a few times, but that’s it. I’m mostly straight and she’s really not my type, and it’s...complicated.”

“Mostly?” Khan asks.


Khan shrugs. “Pleasure is pleasure regardless of where or how one finds it,” he says.

“I like how you think,” Jill says, taking a sip of coffee and leaning into him. “But women usually just don’t turn me on.” The last she says in English, and Magpie laughs.
“Usually,” she says. “There was that barista in Seattle.”

“A dead gay man would have found her sexy,” Jill says, laughing as well. “She was...mm, that was a good weekend. Sadly she moved to some planet I never go to and the last I heard had collected a harem of lovers, but we had fun. Anyway, we are not talking about my past sexual exploits.”

“If we did that we’d have to talk about the Olympics,” Magpie teases.

“Yeah, we really don’t,” Jill says, and Khan is amused to see a flush in her cheeks. “I was sixteen, horny, and in possibly the best physical shape of my life--and surrounded by people in the same boat. A lot of sex happened. End of story.”

“How much is a lot?” Khan asks, mostly because it amuses him to see her so discomfited.

“Um,” Jill says, blushing more. “Let’s just say I didn’t get a lot of sleep, and I never had an empty bed. The swimmers and the divers and the gymnasts got along really well. Really, really well. The divers and the gymnasts were flexible as hell, the swimmers were just built, and I really--um. Moving on.”

“Must we?” Magpie asks, sipping her coffee. “All right then, do I get details about current time?”

“Not while he’s here,” Jill says, hiding behind her hair. “For the love of God, moving on, please?”

“You owe me,” Magpie says, clearly amused. “You promised me details in exchange for information. I provided. I always provide, and you owe me.”

“You promised her details about your current sexual activity in exchange for data?” Khan asks to clarify.

“It’s the only currency she’d accept,” Jill says, still blushing and ducking her head. “She won’t take my money and even though I called in a favor or two I still have to pay her something.”

“I see,” Khan says even though he’s not quite certain he does. He is, however, fairly certain he wants to know what Jill will tell Magpie about him, and how honest she will be.

“I’m a data junkie,” Magpie says by way of explanation. “I want to know everything.”

“Is that what you do for a living?” Khan asks.

Magpie grins. “I do a little bit of everything. And everyone. And you would totally be worth another hole in my ear.”

He looks at her, for once baffled by what she says even though it’s in English. “Magpie gets something pierced every time she takes a new lover,” Jill explains. “Left ear for women, right ear for men.”

“Why did you pierce your nose?” Khan asks curiously.

“That was for me,” Magpie says. “I have a few other holes for other reasons, and I have tattoos for special people--I have one for Jill on my shoulder, for example.” She slips off her jacket and pushes down the sleeve of her tank top, turning to show Khan the artwork. He smiles when he sees the small red dragon, wings outstretched and tail arched. Something in it does remind him of Jill, although he can’t say exactly what it is.

“When did you get it?” he asks.
“A few days after we met in person for the first time,” Magpie says, putting her jacket back on. “My body is a work in progress, and I like having physical reminders of people who mean things to me. Jill does it too, except mine are planned. I haven’t convinced her to get a tattoo yet.”

“I’m thinking about it,” Jill says. “But I haven’t decided on any artwork I’d like enough to want permanently on my body. I have enough scars, I’m not sure a tattoo would count as improvement. And Starfleet regs don’t allow piercings except for ears. I took out my tongue stud when I started at the Academy.”

“You had your tongue pierced?” Khan asks.

“Yeah, ages ago,” Jill says. “I keep thinking about doing it again, but regs officially would get me in trouble. But it was so, so much fun for oral sex. I bet you’d love it.” She grins, and Khan takes a sip of coffee to hide his reaction.

“Would he, now,” Magpie purrs.

“Oh, shut up,” Jill says, making a face at Magpie. “You know I love giving head, and I’m good at it.”

“Not that I’d know personally,” Magpie says with a sigh.

“Nope,” Jill agrees. “Because I’m a bitch that way. Also, what did you send me before getting on the shuttle or while on the shuttle? I haven’t checked my messages in a few hours due to sex and sleep.”

“Good priorities,” Magpie says. “I sent you some more data about the facility security. It’s definitely hackable, which is the good news. The bad news is that the security guards are...good. And many. And we need to get you some new tech if you’re going to break in.”

“What kind of new tech?” Khan asks.

“I brought a couple things with me,” Magpie says. “It’s pretty cool stuff, honestly, and some of it Jill already had but I didn’t know if she had it with her so I brought it from her apartment.”

“You broke into my apartment?” Jill asks.

“Only to bring you your own things,” Magpie says. “Besides, it’s not like you care if I do it.”

“Well, point,” Jill says, taking a drink of coffee. “What did you bring? The boots and the gloves?”

“Yes, and a cloak,” Magpie says.

“What do these items of clothing do?” Khan asks.

“They work together,” Jill explains. “They make me move a little more slowly, but almost silently, and when I activate the boots and the gloves I can climb up the walls without needing special equipment, any flat surface or inclined surface really. What does the cloak do?”

“It’s pretty cool,” Magpie says. “It’s not a true invisibility cloak, because those don’t exist, but it makes you blend in with the local surroundings, a lot harder to spot. Cost me a pretty penny to get, too, so you’d better appreciate it.”

“If I can get into the facility I might just fuck you as a thank you,” Jill says.

“Pardon me?” Khan asks.
“I said might,” Jill says, laughing. “You don’t like that idea, do you?”

“Am I supposed to?” Khan asks. He feels the tug of possessiveness in his gut again and pushes it away; Jill isn’t his, does not belong to him, and he has no claim on her nor demand for her exclusivity.

She smiles. “I don’t know,” she says. “A lot of men would. Two women together, isn’t it the typical male fantasy for a reason? Then again, you’re not exactly typical.”

“Neither are you,” Khan says.

Jill steps closer to him and stretches up to kiss him. “Relax,” she murmurs against his mouth in Russian. “I don’t share well, and I don’t sleep around. You’re the only one I want to be with right now.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” Khan says in the same language, leaning down to rest his forehead against Jill’s. She smiles and brushes a hand over the edge of his wing.

“Should I leave you two to it?” Magpie asks.

“Tempting, but he has to leave soon,” Jill says, pulling away slightly. “You are, however, not rooming with me tonight.”

“No, of course not,” Magpie says. “I have a room down the hall. Note the lack of luggage.”

“Point,” Jill says. “It’s five in the morning, you’re lucky I noticed the new hole in your ear.”

Magpie grins and touches it. “Her name is Gina,” she says. “She’s a dancer, amazingly flexible, and so, so beautifully dominant. I left her to come here, for the record, and I’m totally going back once we’re done.”

“How’d you meet her?” Jill asks.

“I went to a show she did,” Magpie says. “Wangled my way backstage after and we hit it off.”

“What kind of dancer is she?” Jill asks.

Magpie grins again. “Burlesque. She has the most amazing breasts, oh my God.”

“Picture,” Jill demands and Magpie takes her phone out of her pocket, fingers dancing over the screen for a moment. She holds it out and Khan takes in the image of a dark-skinned woman with a shaved head and brilliant smile, two earrings in each ear and a stud in her lower lip, just above her chin. “Oh, she’s gorgeous,” Jill says and Khan silently agrees.

“Isn’t she?” Magpie sighs happily and puts the phone away. “Almost as pretty as John here, but wings are new and exciting and I’ve seen my share of breasts, no matter how amazing.”

“Still not sharing,” Jill says.

“Still a bitch,” Magpie grumbles.

“Yes,” Jill says cheerfully. “And it’s time for John to get in the shower and get going unless he’s going to shower at his flat.”

“I will do that,” Khan says, moving to pull on his boots and make sure he has his communicator and wallet. He hears Magpie and Jill talking but doesn’t bother to listen in on the conversation,
although he does note that Jill’s face seems a tiny bit flushed when he walks over to her again. “I will call you when I am done for the day,” he says.

“Yes,” she says, setting her coffee down and reaching up for him. He allows her to draw him down into a kiss, refraining from lifting her even though his hands settle on her waist and it would be so easy to just pull her up against him. But he doesn’t, and when he does pull back she looks a bit dazed, lips swollen and face flushed.

He touches her lips gently, feeling the dampness from his own mouth, and tells himself he has to go to work. “See you later,” she says, kissing his fingertips.

Khan nods. “Yes.” He nods goodbye to Magpie, who waves a lazy hand, and leaves quickly.

His morning passes quickly enough, despite his distraction—which he doesn’t think anyone else notices—and he skips eating lunch in favor of doing some surreptitious searching on Magpie. He doesn’t learn much; what he does learn is that some people don’t believe she exists, some swear she does, others say she can’t be as good as has been attributed to her. He reads more about a few stunts she supposedly pulled off and notes he’ll have to ask her about them, or ask Jill about them, later.

Five minutes after he erases his last search, he gets an email from an anonymous address. Checking up on me? Cheeky. I like it. You could just ask, you know. I’m always honest. Except when I’m not. That’s all there is, and the message self-deletes thirty seconds after he reads it.

It makes him want to laugh, but he schools his face into sober neutrality instead and goes for another cup of tea. When he gets back, he has another message from a different anonymous address.

She won’t tell me anything about you that’s honest, and she won’t lie to me. Curiouser and curiouser. Meet me here at 1900 hours, I want to talk. The “here” is a link to a website about a club, with address. Khan reads a bit on the website and comes to the conclusion that it’s both illegal and dangerous, and his estimation of Magpie shifts slightly—whether in a positive or negative fashion, he can’t say.

As with the first one, this email self-deletes after thirty seconds, and Khan puts it out of his mind and gets back to work. He half-expects a third email, but one doesn’t arrive, and he leaves work in plenty of time to change into plain clothes, get to the club’s address and find Magpie. He gets there ten minutes early to find a plain steel door with no handle or visible way in, but just as he turns the corner Magpie and Jill show up, both in short coats and in Jill’s case thigh-high boots. Jill’s also wrestled her hair into a high, tight braid—she must have straightened it first—and Khan wonders why all the caretaking with appearances, what they have on under their coats. Magpie’s boots only come up to the knee, and her hair is down.

“Hey, stranger,” Jill says, walking easily despite the stiletto heels of her boots. “Magpie’s got the code to let us in.”

“Why are you here?” Khan asks, walking over to her by the door.

“Because you and Magpie are, and I can take care of myself,” she says. “I’m not unarmed, and this place will be safe enough for us, we’re with the crazy girl.” Magpie laughs and knocks in a complicated pattern on the steel door. A moment later, a window appears in it and she holds up a card.

“Three for entry, unlimited pass,” she says as a green light scans the card. There’s a beep and a
hum and the door slides open silently. “Well, come on,” Magpie says to Jill and Khan. “Let’s go
dance with the demons.”

Inside, Jill and Magpie take off their coats, and Jill’s dress makes Khan growl before he can bite it
back. It’s not that he objects to revealing clothing. It’s that Jill’s dress, which has no sleeves and a
high neck, has no back, and with her hair in the braid, the scars down her back all but shine in the
dim lighting. “I know,” she says steadily, looking at Khan. “I know. This makes me look like I
belong here.” She passes her coat to coat check—which actually exists, surprising Khan a bit—and
takes the ticket stub, slipping it into Khan’s pocket.

“Oh, you’re one of us, little thing,” the coat check girl--taller than Khan, flat black eyes--says,
smiling. “You’re definitely one of us.”

Jill smiles back, and it’s not pleasant. “I’m with the bird,” she says, and Khan notes Magpie has a
pin of a bird in her hair. “Safe passage.”

“Anything for the bird and her friends,” the coat check girl agrees, gesturing for them to pass.
“She’s got a reputation, and we appreciate having a functioning system.”

“Let’s go, then,” Magpie says, walking down the hall into the club proper. Khan feels like he’s
returned to a century before his proper time, from the decor, and the haze of sweet smoke hanging
in the air feels like it should have a narcotic feel to it, but a discreet inhalation and he confirms it’s
just for color--or it’s a drug he’s never experienced, which is also possible.

The three of them take a secluded booth off the main floor, complete with curtained entrance, and
once they’re seated Magpie twists the pin in her hair and its eyes flash. “Okay, we’re clear,” she
says after a few seconds. “Someone’s going to walk through that curtain in twenty seconds and ask
us for drinks orders. Get one, not doing so will make you stand out, anything you want. It won’t be
tampered with.”

“Are you certain?” Khan asks.

“I am,” Magpie says and Khan isn’t but his metabolism can likely handle anything the club puts in
his drink. When the short green-skinned woman steps through the curtain, he follows Jill’s lead
and asks for a vodka tonic. Magpie gets herself something Khan’s never heard of before but which
makes the server smile approvingly. She says she’ll be right back and disappears, and Khan looks
at Magpie.

“What do you want to know?” he asks.

“Everything,” Magpie says unhesitatingly. “But we’ll start in--” She tips her head. “One minute,
fifteen seconds.”

Khan presumes that will be when their drinks arrive and is mildly gratified to be proven correct. He
doesn’t touch his, although Jill takes a sip of hers and nods, and Magpie takes a sip of whatever
idly that she sees more than she lets on. “Where do you come from?”

“India,” he says. “But that is not the right question to ask.”

“What is, then?” Magpie asks.

“Ask me when I am from,” Khan tells her, knowing he’s taking a risk, mildly surprised by how
much he’s enjoying this.
“When are you from, John?” Magpie asks. “And no, I’m not going to ask your real name. Be a bit hypocritical of me.”

“As I thought,” he says. “Three hundred years ago.”

Magpie’s blue eyes positively light up and she grins, delighted. “Of course,” she whispers. “The Botany Bay. I was so damn curious about that, and it didn’t seem right that nothing ever came of it.”

“My ship,” Khan confirms. “What would you have expected to come of it, little bird?”

She laughs at his name for her and takes another sip of her drink. “Something,” she says. “Something involving revived humans from a time long past with incomplete records and missing data. Something more than complete silence.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because there was so much silence about it when it was brought in,” Magpie says, drumming her fingers against the table. Her nails, Khan notes absently, are painted green and blue. “Because no one would talk about it, and that didn’t seem right. A centuries old ship, brought back to Earth, possible crew in hibernation? The media should have been all over it, but wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t allowed to be, I presume,” Khan says. “The crew is still in hibernation, save me.”

“Why?” Magpie scowls. “Don’t answer that. That was a stupid question.” She takes a sip of her drink. “What does Marcus want with you?”

“To achieve his vision of a militarized Starfleet,” Khan says much the way he did to Jill.

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Magpie says. “Asshole. Creepy, power-hungry misogynistic asshole. I’m considering loading a few viruses onto his personal computer.”

“He isn’t stupid, little bird,” Khan says. “And he has people who are quite, quite good at what they do.”

“And none of them are me, and I don’t get caught,” Magpie says. “Ever. Hell, half the planet thinks I don’t exist.”

“Why do you create such a reputation for yourself?” Khan asks.

“Because it’s fun,” Magpie says. “Because I can. Because I’m that good and often, that bored, and I get offered better jobs by the people who can track me down, who do know I exist. A girl has to earn a living somehow.”

“She says this like she isn’t worth billions,” Jill says, rolling her eyes.

“I’m not,” Magpie protests. “I don’t think.” She shrugs. “I don’t pay much attention to money.”

Khan finally does take a sip of his drink, which turns out to be quite good and not at all spiked that he can detect. “Will you help us?” he asks Magpie.

“Already am, love,” Magpie says, smiling. “I like you, and Jill asked for my help, and I’ll drop whatever I’ve got to help her when she asks, since she never does. Fortunately I didn’t have anything ongoing at the moment.”

The bird in her hair chirps and Magpie’s eyes go wide. “Incoming in five,” she says, tensing, and
Khan doesn’t quite get a chance to stand up before a two-meter tall humanoid covered in patchy brown fur walks into their booth.

“Safe passage,” Jill says and the humanoid growls.

“Here to warn you,” it--he--Khan’s not sure--says. “Trouble on the way. Leave now.”

“How long?” Magpie asks, already getting up.

It glances back. “Now. Take your chances, you stay. Take your chances, you leave.”

“We’re leaving,” Magpie says, and it ducks back out of the booth. Khan motions her to let him leave first, and she does. He doesn’t see any threats immediately when he leaves the booth, but there are two humans by the bar, both dressed in all black, one with a shaved head and one with a truly impressive head tattoo covering most of his scalp. They look at him and shrug, and he keeps walking as Jill and Magpie exit the booth behind him.

“Mine,” the shaved head one says immediately, looking at Jill.

“Fuck off,” she says, walking quickly. Khan moves to intercept the human before he can reach for Jill.

“Don’t touch her,” he says quietly, coldly.

“Mine,” the human says, grinning at him. “Nice try, though.” He moves, and Khan moves, and the next few minutes pass in a blur. Whoever this human is, he’s definitely on something; his speed isn’t natural and neither is his strength, but he’s still not a match for Khan. The problem is that his friend gets in on the act, and then a few other people join the fray possibly just for the fun of it. Khan isn’t worried about his ability to take them all down, and sets about doing just that, but he does worry about Magpie’s ability to take care of herself, and he doesn’t see Jill when he glances around quickly.

The fight ends about the way Khan expected it to, with everyone else incapacitated or unconscious, but he doesn’t see the women when he looks around. “The bird,” he says to the bartender, who ducked under the bar when the chaos began. “And her friend. Where did they go?”

“Coat check,” the bartender says, jerking his head, and Khan moves.

He finds Magpie in the coat check closet, kneeling next to Jill, who appears to be unconscious. “While you were taking out most of them, one of them got close to her,” Magpie says, glancing up at him worriedly. “He picked her up, she kicked him in the balls and smashed her head into his nose, and he dropped her, but he dosed her with some kind of spray as he did, and she passed out. Alix here helped me get her in here, because this is safer, but I can’t carry her out of here and I don’t know what he got her with, and I don’t know if we should take her to Medical.”

“Whatever he dosed her with, I wouldn’t recommend Medical for it,” the coat check girl--Alix--says. “They either won’t know or they’ll call in the authorities and get her in trouble, and that she doesn’t need. If you need a doctor that makes house calls, I can recommend one. Name’s Parker.”

“Thanks,” Magpie says, pulling on her coat and passing Khan Jill’s. She stirs a bit as he slips it onto her and winces, pushing a fist against her lower abdomen and curling in around herself.

“Jill,” he says softly, but she appears to be out again. Khan pushes down the anger, the worry, and picks her up, cradling her against his chest. She’s so light, he thinks, and he tightens his grip on her.
Magpie’s fingers dance over one of her bracelets, a wide silver cuff, as they walk outside, and by the time they get there a black cab’s waiting for them. Khan doesn’t ask her how she pulled that off, content for the moment to get in, still holding Jill, and give the driver the hotel address. Magpie keeps quiet on the ride, but Jill stirs again, muttering something incoherent under her breath. She folds up more, though, pressing a fist against her belly as though something hurts down there.

“I can’t think,” Jill mumbles after a few minutes. “God, it hurts.”


“Everything,” she whispers, huddling into him. “I can’t...did I get him? The guy who got me?”

“You did,” Magpie says. “The last I saw of him he was unconscious on the floor.”


“Easy,” Khan murmurs, shifting his hold on her to rub the back of her neck. “Just relax, milaya moya.”

“I can’t think,” Jill says in frustration.

Khan keeps rubbing the back of her neck, troubled by how hot her skin feels, even for Jill who normally runs warm. She’s tense, and she shivers when he touches her, but when he pauses she tenses more. “It...” She licks her lips. “It doesn’t hurt as much where you touch me,” she says slowly, clearly struggling to convey how she feels.

They get to the hotel right about then and Magpie hands over a credit chip, waving away change and scrambling out of the cab to let Khan slide out with Jill. He carries her inside and Magpie gently reaches into Jill’s coat pocket for her access card, letting them into her room. Khan sets Jill down on the bed and begins taking off her coat and boots, keeping his touch gentle. Jill groans and curls up around her stomach, fist shoved against the skirt of her dress.

“Jill,” Magpie says softly. “Jill, do you remember anything about what the guy got you with? A scent, a flavor, anything?”

“I...” Jill takes a breath, then another, then swallows. “Cinnamon,” she manages finally. “It smelled like cinnamon.”

Magpie’s eyes go wide and she curses under her breath. Khan’s over to her in a second, using his height to advantage. “Tell me,” he says, soft but fierce.

“I don’t know what it’s called,” Magpie says, a little shaky. “It’s only been around a month, and mostly what I know is rumor. It’s--” She stops, breathes, and when she starts again she sounds steadier. “It’s a new rape drug,” she says. “In high enough doses it causes unconsciousness, which isn’t actually the intent, because in lesser doses it causes reduced inhibitions and acts as an aphrodisiac. Effects last from six to twelve hours depending on dosage. If I had to theorize, based on the dose Jill got and her size...” She visibly steels herself, as if delivering news she doesn’t want to. “It overloaded her, knocked her out, and now she’s so sensitized everything hurts, it’s too much, she’s overwhelmed. As it wears off, it’s...it’s going to hit her hard. There’s no treatment for it, since it’s so new, and the only real way to cope is to wait it out until it wears off. Most cops don’t even know about it yet, and it’s...it’s insidious, because it makes you think you want things. And it’s not something where you watch for someone spiking your drink, it’s an aerosol spray so
anyone freshening up perfume, cologne, breath spray, anything could be a target.”

“I won’t hurt her and I won’t force her,” Khan says, not sure which of them he means it for.

“I know that,” Magpie says, looking at him, and her eyes have too much knowledge in them. “I know you won’t. I’m telling you she’ll want you to, and what are you going to do then?”

He doesn’t have an answer for her, and on the bed Jill stirs again, shivering. Khan looks at her, but doesn’t go to her just yet. “Tell me something, little bird,” he says quietly. “How do you know so much about this? How do you know about these clubs and gain safe passage?”

“Even in today’s all-seeing, all-powerful Federation, some of us slip through the cracks,” Magpie says, mouth twisting bitterly. “Some of us were born there. I grew up on the streets, John, and I spent years selling my body until I got good enough with tech I could sell my skills instead.”

“How many officers paid you?” Khan asks.

“A few in particular,” Magpie says. “Marcus wasn’t one of them, for the record, but I know his type.”


Magpie smiles tightly. “You know more about it than Jill does, I think,” she says.

“Perhaps,” Khan says. He looks at Jill again, at her curled up around her fist, and something cold and heavy settles in his gut. “I think perhaps you should leave.”

“Yes, I think that would be best,” Magpie agrees. She takes off a ring and hands it to Khan. “If you need me, the stone flips up and it’ll call me directly. I’m just down the hall.”

“Thank you,” Khan says even though he isn’t quite sure he means it.

Magpie nods and leaves, and Khan moves to set the ring down on the nightstand before moving back to Jill, finishing taking off her boots and sitting with her head by his hip. He strokes the back of her neck and her back, and she shivers and tenses and relaxes alternately, her breath coming shallow and fast in her chest. “Relax, Jill,” Khan says, rubbing the back of her neck. “Just relax.”

“Trying,” she mumbles. “God, it all hurts, it’s like sandpaper on my skin.”

“Let me get you out of the dress,” Khan says, thinking that might help. Jill bites her lip and nods and he peels her out of the black fabric, leaving her in a pair of remarkably skimpy black lace panties and nothing else. It would normally be arousing but he can’t think about that right now, not with her fist still shoved against the lace, like she doesn’t even realize it. “Jill,” he says. “Why do you keep pushing your fist there?”

“It...” Jill shakes her head. “I feel...hollow. Empty. Something.”

“Let me touch you,” Khan says, and she grits her teeth but moves her hand away. Khan reaches down, flattening his palm against the lace, feeling her so warm, but she gasps and shoves his hand away after a moment, curling up tighter around her own hand.

“Too much,” she says, breathless. “Too much. I can’t. I can’t, Khan, I’m sorry, please...”

“Easy,” he soothes her, stroking her back. “Easy, milaya moya. I am not going to hurt you.”

“I know,” Jill whispers.
He has nothing else to say, really, so stays quiet, touching her where he can, feeling muscles relax under his touch that then tense when he touches her elsewhere. Her skin stays too warm, but slowly she begins to relax, her breath coming easier and tension easing out of her. “I...shit,” she says.

“What is it?” Khan asks.

“I wasn’t so out of it earlier that I didn’t hear some of what Magpie said about this drug,” Jill says, swallowing. “And it’s...it’s starting to wear off, and I wish it wasn’t, because you’re...I know you, Khan, even after only a few days, and I know there are lines you’ll never cross, one in particular, and if you touched me now you’d consider it crossing that and you’d never touch me again, and I...I don’t want that, God I don’t want that, but all I can think about right now is you touching me, you inside me. And I can’t seem to stop what’s coming out of my mouth, it’s like there’s no filter between what I’m thinking and what I’m saying, and I want you, I do, it’s just--I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone, you look at me and I get wet and fuck this should be so embarrassing, but--” She stops, breathes. “I don’t know how to convince you that while I may be drugged and under the influence and not quite in my right mind I want you and I’m not going to regret it when this wears off and I’m not going to accuse you of rape because there’s almost nothing you could do to me I wouldn’t want normally. So I think maybe...maybe you should just leave and let me get through this and we can pretend later everything’s fine.”

“No,” Khan says, not having to think about it. “No. I am not leaving you alone like this, Jill.”

“Please,” she says, swallowing again. “Khan, please--it burns where you’re not touching me and it burns more where you are and I can’t fucking think, I can’t, and I need you to touch me and fuck me raw and don’t stop and you won’t, I know you and you won’t and this can’t end well.”

“Jill,” Khan says and stops because he doesn’t know how to articulate what he thinks, what he feels. She’s right in that he won’t force sex, has never and will never, but she’s wrong about the rest of it. Despite his efforts to convince himself otherwise, he seems to have decided that she belongs to him, that she is his, and it’s only been a few days but he knew with Rani the first time he saw her. Jill’s not in her right mind, no, but he’s not a good enough man to care.

He realizes he can smell her, that she’s shifting against the bed restlessly, and it’s enough. He reaches for her, pulls her up and into his lap, and kisses her before she can say anything else, hard enough she whimpers and squirms against him, her mouth opening for his tongue eagerly, her hands digging into his shoulders. “Mine,” he says against her mouth.

“Am I?” Jill challenges him, even now, tossing her head back to meet his eyes.

“You belong to me,” Khan tells her, his hands tight on her hips, holding her against him. “You are mine, and there is nothing I would do to you for which you wouldn’t beg me. I know you, Jill Calastinova, and I know what you want, what you need.”

She looks at him with a poker face, despite the drug, but he can read her body; her nipples tightened when he was speaking and her hips flexed under his hands, and she swallows now, clearly trying to consider what to say even though she knows it probably won’t come out right thanks to the drug. “If I’m yours,” she says finally, licking her lips, “then give me what I need. Otherwise, what good are you?”

Despite the entire situation, Khan smiles. “You’ll beg for it,” he says again, and shifts his hand and a quick sharp tug later her panties tear, the strings at her hips snapping. He tosses the lace aside and presses a finger against her clit, unsurprised at how hot she is, how wet.

“Maybe,” Jill says, but there’s a tremor in it and she pushes down against his hand. He holds her
still with his other hand, rubbing her clit with a finger, lighter than he knows she needs to orgasm, and she literally growls at him, fingers clenching in the fabric of his shirt. “More,” she demands.

“I will have you,” Khan says, shifting to press his thumb against her clit instead, push two fingers into her. “I will have you and I will take you apart.”

“So fuck me already,” Jill says, voice higher and more breathless than he thinks she wants it to be.

“Not until you come for me,” he says, showing her a bit of mercy and touching her the way he knows gets her off the fastest, hard and fast and fluttering his fingers inside her.

“Oh, fuck, oh, God,” Jill whispers, starting to tremble under his hands. “Oh--oh, my God, just--Khan--” Her words dissolve into moans and whimpers and then her hips jerk and she shudders, panting for breath.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, stilling his hand.

“Come on,” she says, still breathless, still demanding. “Fuck me already.” She drops a hand to his groin, pressing against his erection. “I know you want it.”

“Ask me for it,” he says, moving her hand away, his own grip tight around her wrist. “Ask me and I’ll give it to you.”

She growls at him again, baring her teeth, and he finds it both endearing and arousing. “You want it as much as I do,” she says, moving her other hand to touch him, rubbing against his groin. He can’t move her hand away without taking his hand out of her, which he’s loath to do. Instead, he crooks his fingers, pushing his thumb against her clit enough she trembles.

“Ask me for it,” he says again.

“Bastard,” she swears, unbuttoning his pants one-handed. “Khan, please.”

At that, he eases his hand out of her and moves, pushing her down on her back and unfastening his pants with the other hand, moving clothes out of the way just enough he can enter her, hard and fast and enough to make her gasp and clench around him. He pushes her wrists over her head, pins them there with a hand, and she curses him and writhes under him, her legs wrapping around his waist. “Fuck me,” she says but it’s a plea, not a demand. “Please, Khan, I’m burning up, I can’t--”

She really is, Khan thinks, starting to move steady and deep and hard, the way he knows she loves. She’s so hot it’s almost painful and so drenched he finds it almost amazing, and with every thrust into her she whines and her heels dig into his back. “Please,” she says over and over, clearly unable to stop herself. “Please, don’t stop, don’t fucking stop, just give it to me, I can’t, I need it, please--”

He doesn’t quite have the leverage to touch her clit, not with his weight braced on the hand not holding her wrists, but he knows she finds it easier to come that way and this isn’t really about denying her, not when she’s so desperate, so chemically out of control. He shifts his grip on her wrists to pull her up and into his lap, sitting back on his heels, holding her close with an arm and his wings. “Ride me, milaya moya,” he says, using the hand not supporting her to touch her, rubbing her clit. “Move the way you need to.”

Jill groans and grinds down against him, her fingers clutching his shoulders. “Fuck,” she breathes. “Fuck, I can’t, it’s--oh, fuck, I can’t, it’s too much, it’s--oh, please, so close, so--I’m--” She cries out when she comes, head falling back. “Don’t stop,” she says, her words a bit slurred. “I’m still burning up, God, I can’t take it.”
He doesn’t stop, giving her what she needs over and over, his cock and his fingers and his mouth and at one point her vibrator for a change of pace because he’s curious how she responds to it. He stops counting her orgasms when he gets to nine, and although it’s not about him he comes three times, enough to make him pleasantly tired truth be told, but he ignores it and considers Jill lucky she’s with him and not a normal human.

It’s not until just after dawn that Jill finally breaks apart, sobbing on the bed, exhausted and covered in bites and scratches and bruises he left, so sensitized it just takes a brush of his fingers. “I can’t,” she says, gulping for air. “I can’t, God, make it stop, I can’t do this anymore, please, Khan, please, make it stop.”

She’s tired enough this just might work, Khan thinks, and moves his hands, pressing a few spots in her neck firmly. He’s not convinced the acupressure points will override the drugs, but her eyes fall shut a moment later and she slumps into sleep, breathing slow and even. He stays where he is, holding her, for a few minutes to make sure she will stay asleep. Then he gently sets her down and moves to get a few warm cloths to clean up the worst of it, wincing when he sees how marked he’s left her. Neither one of them were in control for a while there tonight, he thinks, and feels a bit guilty about it.

He gets a glimpse of himself when he returns to the bathroom with the cloths, giving himself a quick wash. He has his own marks, although they’ve already started to heal. A few bite marks across his collarbone and shoulders, he can feel scratches down his back, and he somehow has a bruise on his shoulder that he can’t remember how he acquired.

When he goes back to the bedroom and moves the wrecked covers aside, Jill’s still asleep, but she frowns and shivers, and he pulls her close under the sheets, holding her to surround her with his own warmth. She relaxes once he holds her, shoving her face into his throat as if to breathe in his scent.

He needs to leave if he’s to get to work, and the thought of her waking without him is intolerable. He doesn’t know what the consequences of his missing a day will be, whether Marcus will demand answers or allow him grace. Marcus walks a fine line between wanting control of him and realizing just who he is dealing with, and Khan does not always know on which side he will fall.

He shifts just enough to get his comm-link and send a quick message to his ‘team’, such as it is, that he is ill and will be out for the day. He’s never done that before, but right now he doesn’t care what their reaction will be. Starfleet does allow for sick leave, and personal leave, and technically he has the time. He’s just never dared to use it.

Jill murmurs something and moves closer, even though she’s already pressed against him. “Easy, milaya moya,” he murmurs against her hair. “You are safe. I have you.”

She sighs, nuzzling at his throat absently. He smiles a little and strokes her hair--still straight, but the braid came undone earlier in the evening and it spills over her back. He doesn’t like the lack of curls, though, and if he could get her into the bath to wash it, he would. But he’ll have to wait for her to wake up first.

Fatigue washes over him and he realizes just how tired he is, how much the night took out of him. He closes his eyes, setting part of himself on alert, to wake if anyone comes in or disturbs them, and lets himself fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, Magpie, what am I going to do with you? Why do you make my life so complicated?

We're totally not going to talk about what inspired half of this chapter because we're just not, but I will say I thought about tagging for sex pollen but didn't think it quite fit.

Also, a moment of total geekery here: Jill started in another life as a halfling rogue character I played in a D&D campaign. Along the way in the campaign, she acquired some magical items. The boots, gloves, and cloak referenced in this story started life as D&D magical items, and if you're enough of a geek I'll bet you can figure out what some of them are.
Khan wakes when the door opens and is out of bed in an instant, not caring about his nudity when there are intruders in the room. “His fault,” Magpie says, pointing at Jake, who scowls.

“Who the hell are you?” he demands. “And it’s not my fault, I knocked for five minutes and no one answered and Jill’s not answering her link and I don’t have yours and, uh, could you put some pants on?”

“Please don’t,” Magpie says, grinning.

“She is asleep,” Khan says. “You both need to leave.” Now that he knows who they are, he feels safe enough in turning his back and going to find his pants, pulling them on quickly despite Magpie’s disappointed moue.

“Jill doesn’t sleep through things like this,” Jake says, scowling more.

“Jill isn’t asleep,” Jill says from the bed. “But she’s also naked, and very tired. What do you both—oh, fuck me, why are you both here?”

“I’m checking in on you, since you ignored your link and me knocking on the door,” Jake says. “I don’t even know who she is, so I don’t know why she’s here.”

“I saw him knocking and came to find out what was going on,” Magpie says. “How are you feeling?”

“My head is killing me,” Jill says, sitting up and wrapping the sheet around herself. “And...I really, really need painkillers. Who’s got them?”

“What level do you need?” Jake asks.

“Something stronger than over the counters,” she says wearily, rubbing her face. Khan can see the bruises he left around her wrist and grimaces inwardly. “Opiates would be good, if you’ve got ‘em.”
“I’ve got them,” Jake says. “But not on me. Give me twenty?”

“Make it half an hour so I can shower,” Jill says.

“Jill, what happened to you?” Jake asks hesitantly.

She groans and rubs her face again. “It’s a long story and I need a shower before I tell it,” she says. “Please, Jake, give me half an hour.”

“I’ll be back,” Jake says, giving Magpie one last suspicious look before he ducks out.

“As for you, bird,” Jill says once he’s gone. “You can stay, but I am taking a shower and I’m making John share it with me since I’m not entirely convinced I can stand up without falling over right now.”

Magpie moves over to the couch and sits down, taking a rolled something out of her purse and unrolling it to reveal a flexible PADD. Curious, Khan looks closer; he’s never seen one like that before, and Magpie grins. “I’ll show you later,” she promises. “For now, shower.”

Khan makes things simpler by picking Jill up, and she grumbles and swats at his shoulder but doesn’t really protest. He carries her into the bathroom and sets her down on the toilet as he moves to take off his pants and turn on the water. “Can you stand?” he asks once he judges the water has warmed.

“I think so,” Jill says, pushing herself to her feet carefully. She wobbles, but walks into the tub and gets under the water, hissing as some of the scratches on her skin come in contact with the water. “I am so, so sore,” she says, closing her eyes and moving to let the water soak her hair. “Oh, my God. How many times did you fuck me last night? It all kind of started blurring together and I don’t even remember.”

Khan gets into the shower with her, picking up her shampoo and beginning to wash her hair. “I think perhaps it is better you don’t remember,” he says, working the lather into her hair. “You were...neither of us was in control. I left you with more marks than your clothes will cover, and I am--”

“Don’t,” Jill says sharply. “Don’t fucking apologize. You gave me what I needed and I don’t know if I’d have gotten through it without you and I know that much. I can live with bruises, bites, whatever. I have a medkit and what I don’t have I know Jake does, and if I need to heal some of this I can do that.” She closes her eyes, quiet for a moment. “I can handle anything except you apologizing,” she says finally. “Anything except you feeling regret.”

“I don’t regret what happened,” Khan says. “I only wish I hadn’t hurt you.”

“You didn’t,” Jill says. “You didn’t.” She tips her head back under the water, rinsing out the shampoo. “But oh, God, I feel awful. Hangover from the drug, not you, although fuck, I’m sore. I’d ask you to use the cream on me but I think I’m too sore for you to even touch me there right now. Maybe later.”

“Later,” Khan says. “After the narcotics have kicked in. Do you take them often?”

“Gymnasts live with pain,” Jill says. “At least, I did sometimes. Opiates work better for me than some of the newer pain medications, maybe for the same weird reason regen doesn’t work on me that well, I don’t know. I’m kind of a throwback in some ways. I keep a stash of medication in my flat in San Francisco but didn’t bring most of it to London because I wasn’t counting on this.” As she talks, she works conditioner into her hair.
“I can’t imagine why not,” Khan says and she laughs. “Let me wash you.”

“As you like,” Jill says, and while it’s partially an excuse to touch her he does use it to see just how sore she is in various places and how she reacts when he smooths his hands over her skin. Overall, he finds her about how he expected. The worst bruises are around her wrists, and the bite mark on the line of her shoulder broke the skin and is badly bruised. A shirt will cover that, at least.

“You may wish to heal this,” he says anyway, touching just below the mark.

“Maybe,” Jill says. “Let me wash you.”

“As you like,” he says, and she smiles, picking up the soap. His marks have all healed by now, although some of his muscles have lingering soreness from the fight and the sex, but he ignores it, knowing it’ll pass.

Jill washes her face when they’re done, rinsing the last of the conditioner out of her hair, and they step out of the shower to dry off. “Do you wish me to get you clothes?” he asks, aware of Magpie in the bedroom.

“Magpie’s seen me naked before,” Jill says, wrapping a towel around her hair. “I feel better, but God I want those drugs.” She wraps another towel around her body and ducks into the bedroom, leaving Khan to finish drying off and put his pants back on.

“Oh, honey,” Magpie says when Khan comes out of the bathroom and pulls on his shirt. “You look like you spent six months at the brothel that had me. Not you, her,” she says to Khan.

“It’s not that bad,” Jill says, pulling on soft pants and a soft t-shirt and falling down on the bed. “Oh, God, everything hurts. My muscles haven’t ached this much in years.”

“You say it’s not that bad but you’re moving like you’re ninety,” Magpie says. “Yeah, I’m not buying it. So who was the cranky cutie in here before? Jake, was it? He’s Starfleet, I’m guessing?”

“Intelligence,” Jill says, unwinding the towel from around her hair. “Never told him about you because you’d either get on horribly or fuck him.”


“Don’t look at me like that, he’s my brother,” Jill says, closing her eyes. “And there he knocks at the door.”

Khan moves to let him in, and Jake sets a small backpack down on the floor by the bed before taking out a bottle and tossing it to Jill. It lands next to her head and she picks it up, opening it and tipping out three pills. “Three? Jesus, shorty, how badly did last night go?” Jake asks.

Jill dry-swallows the pills and rolls onto her stomach. “We went to a club,” she says and names it. Jake’s eyes go wide but he keeps himself from saying anything. “There was a fight. John took out most of them—all but one—and that one grabbed me. I took him down, but he dosed me with some new drug, smelled like cinnamon.”

“Dante,” Jake says. “That’s its name, I think. It’s...shit, that’s not good.” He looks at Khan, and his face takes on a grim expression. “You got her through it.”

“I did,” Khan says, moving to sit next to Jill on the bed, touch her unmarked shoulder.

“That’s...that’s good,” Jake says slowly. “From what I know about Dante, it can occasionally be
fatal if you get too much of it, or if you can’t wear off the effects in enough time. The, um.” He colors, but keeps going. “The need for sex outweighs everything else, and if you don’t come down soon enough you keep going until your heart just gives out. How long did it take you to come down?”

“I don’t remember,” Jill says. “Ten hours, maybe? John knocked me out at the end, when I couldn’t...I remember that, but I don’t remember what he did. I just remember asking him to make it stop, because I couldn’t take anymore, and then I woke up when I heard you all arguing.”

“Acupressure points,” Khan says. “They can be unreliable, and they don’t cause unconsciousness so much as they convince your body it needs to sleep right now. I was honestly not sure they would win out over the drugs, but you were exhausted, Jill.”

“Can you teach me those?” Jake asks. “That’s a handy trick to have.”

Khan nods. “If you like,” he says.

“So I’m guessing you’re here for the same reason I’m here,” Jake says to Magpie. “Do you have a name?”

“Yeah,” she says, looking up from her PADD. “But you can just call me Bird.”

Jake frowns, like he’s putting pieces together, but doesn’t actually comment. “What do you do?” he asks.

“A little of everything,” Magpie says. “And you?”

“Same,” Jake says. “Why haven’t I come across you before?”

“We don’t move in the same circles, cutie,” Magpie says. “I stay on-planet most of the time, and I’m guessing you don’t.”

“Depends on the planet,” Jake says, smiling. “I’m just surprised Jill never mentioned you to me or vice versa.”

“I like to fly under the radar,” Magpie says.

“Also I knew you’d either try to kill each other or try to fuck each other and either way it’s drama I don’t need,” Jill says, her voice the tiniest bit slurred. She yawns and stretches and curls up with her head in Khan’s lap, wincing briefly. “Can someone order me a protein shake from room service? I’m not hungry but I need to eat something to counter the drugs or I’ll be loopy and giggly for hours.”

“Yeah, on it,” Jake says. “John, you want anything?”

Khan shakes his head, rubbing the back of Jill’s neck. A few missed meals won’t hurt him; his metabolism will simply slow down until he eats again, and in any case he isn’t hungry.

“Bird?” Jake asks.

“I ate earlier,” Magpie says. “But thanks.”

Jake nods and moves to the room phone.

“Are you feeling any better?” Khan asks Jill softly in Russian.
“A little,” she says. “My head’s not pounding quite so much. The pills take a little longer to kick in than an injection would, though. In about twenty minutes I should be fine, if stoned.” She makes a face. “I hate being stoned, but right now I’ll take it to the alternative. And don’t tense like that, this wasn’t your fault. You heard what Jake said. If you hadn’t been here...”

“I should have been more in control of myself,” Khan says simply.

Jill smiles. “I like that you weren’t. I like that I’m able to get to you the same way you get to me.”

“Even when it leaves you like this?” Khan asks.

“Even when,” Jill says firmly. “Mostly how I feel is due to the drug hangover and not you, I think.”

Khan doesn’t know if he believes this, but he keeps massaging the back of Jill’s neck and her unbruised shoulder, coaxing her body to relax a bit more. He has to stop when her protein shake arrives and she sits up to drink it, making a face when she takes the first sip. “I hate these things, but I can’t face real food right now,” she says, clearly determined to get it down as fast as possible.

“So what’s the plan for today?” Jake asks, sitting in the desk chair. “Is there one?”

“There is not,” Jill says. “At least, if there is one I’m not coming up with it. I’m stoned and sore and taking a day off.”

“Research,” Magpie says, still tapping away at her PADD.

“Wait, is that a flexible--where did you get that?” Jake asks, clearly fascinated. “How does it work?”

Magpie grins and holds it up, then rolls it up and unrolls it. “It’s a regular PADD, maybe a little underpowered but it’s really convenient,” she says. “A friend designed it, I’m testing it out. Flexible screens haven’t really worked in the past but I think this might. It can lock, when you have it flat, so it doesn’t have the curve that tends to make people queasy.”

“That’s so cool,” Jake says. “But what are you researching?”

“At the moment, things you probably don’t care about,” Magpie says. “I’ll deal with our stuff in a bit, but I have a couple other projects going on at the moment. Thanks for the name ‘Dante’, by the way, I knew about the drug but didn’t know its name.”

“Uh, sure,” Jake says.

“Research is good,” Jill says. “Research means I might not have to get dressed and leave the room or the bed. Jake, what’ve you got for us, anything?”

“Not much,” Jake says. “My usual sources are being tight-lipped, which alone tells me some things, but I’m still digging. I was going to see if you wanted to hit up a couple places with me today, but I think tomorrow might be better.”

“Ask me in a few hours,” Jill says.

“I’m not sure you’ll be conscious then,” Jake says dubiously.

“I’ll be conscious, I just might not be sober,” Jill says. “Whoa, there’s the head rush.” She sets down the empty shake glass and falls back on the bed, sprawling out. “Actually, I have an idea.
We’re going to move to the bird’s room for now because I’d really like to get housekeeping into this one to clean it and change the linens, as these are kind of destroyed.”

“The bird needs five minutes first,” Magpie says, already moving to the door.

“Yes, fine,” Jill says. “It’ll take me that long to get up and moving. Jake, call housekeeping and ask them to come up here?”

“On it,” Jake says, picking up the phone.

Jill lies where she is for another couple minutes before pushing up with a groan. “Oh, ow,” she says. “I may need some help.”

Khan gathers her into his arms and stands up. “Don’t get used to this,” Jill says, but her head comes to rest on his shoulder and she closes her eyes.

“Housekeeping’s on its way,” Jake says, getting up and scooping up his backpack. “Let’s go find the bird. What’s her room number?”

Jill tells him and they head down the hall about five rooms before Jake nudges a partially open door. “You decent, bird?” he calls.

“Never, but come in,” Magpie calls back and they enter. Her room looks identical to Jill’s, but she has a few pieces of jewelry and a couple colored scarves on the dresser, and at least two computers and a PADD on the desk. “Put the shadow girl down on the bed, I think,” she says. “I’m amazed she let you carry her.”

“I told him not to get used to it,” Jill says, clinging a little when Khan tries to set her down. He changes tactics and sits down with her in his lap instead, and she seems mollified by that, snuggling into him with her head still on his shoulder.

“Teddy bear,” Magpie teases and Jill makes a face at her.

“It’s the drugs,” she says. “You know they make me silly. Just no one make me laugh, that’d hurt too much.”

Jake drops into the desk chair again, since Magpie’s on the couch. “So, now what?” he asks. “I kind of need to get out there if I’m going to do anything. Clearly neither of you are coming with me, and I’m not sure what skills you’ve got, bird, but I don’t know as we’d mix all that well.”

“Possibly better than you think,” Magpie says. “I’m not a fighter, though, so if you want to go anywhere and get into brawls, count me out.”

“The idea is to not get into brawls, but I’ll keep that in mind,” Jake says. “Mostly I was hoping to talk to a few people today, non-Starfleet if you’re worried about that.”

“Why would I be worried?” Magpie asks curiously.

“I get the feeling you don’t like uniforms,” Jake says, shrugging.

Her eyebrows wing up. “Curious,” she says. “Also correct. Do you want to risk taking me with you?”

Jake considers. “Sure, why not,” he says. “The worst that happens is they refuse to talk to me with you around. The best that happens is we make progress.”
“This is going to end terribly,” Jill predicts cheerfully. “But we can patch you up later.”

“Ye of little faith,” Jake says with a snort.

“Me of knowing you both for years,” Jill says. “I’m not worried about your contacts hurting you. I’m worried about you killing each other.”

“We’ll be fine,” Jake promises. “I promise to return the bird in the same condition in which I found her.”

“Which is crazy and impulsive and prone to all kinds of behaviors in the pursuit of knowledge,” Magpie says.

“Good to know,” Jake says. “You want to head out or stick around here for a bit first?”

“I’d like to finish up a couple things,” Magpie says, glancing up from the PADD in her lap. “You’re welcome to use the middle computer on the desk if you want to look at anything.”

“Thanks, I will,” Jake says, spinning the chair around.

Khan can’t see what he’s working on from the bed and doesn’t much care at the moment. Jill sighs and rubs her cheek against his shoulder, her body relaxing against his. “This feels good,” she murmurs. “Don’t let go of me.”

“I won’t,” Khan murmurs back. “Clearly, the drugs kicked in.”

“Mmhmm,” Jill agrees. “I feel kinda good right now. Blissed out and floaty and I’m only sore when I move.”

“You might be more comfortable if you lie down,” Khan says, slipping into Russian even though neither Magpie nor Jake are paying attention to them and Jake speaks Russian anyway.

“No,” Jill says stubbornly. “I like this. I don’t know how much I’ll get to have it in the next few days or after I go back to San Francisco or even after I come back to London and I want to enjoy it while I can. You should have...fuck, you should have gone to work today.”

“I couldn’t leave you alone,” Khan says.

“You could have,” Jill says. “I’m stronger than I look.”

“Believe me, I know,” Khan says. “But I am not going to leave you alone until you are fully recovered.”

Jill gets an impish sparkle in her eyes. “That could take days.”

He laughs softly. “I think you underestimate your capability for healing.”

“I think you underestimate my capability for wanting you,” Jill says, smiling.

Khan kisses her softly. “I think I do not,” he says against her lips. “Remember, you are mine.”

“Yes, and we’re going to talk about what that means once we’re alone,” Jill says back, nipping his lower lip. “But not right now, because I don’t trust Jake not to eavesdrop.”

“What?” Jake asks, looking up. “I heard my name.”
“I bet you heard more than that,” Jill says, rolling her eyes. “Don’t tell me. Are you and the bird heading out of here yet?”

“Is she ready?” Jake asks.

“Do I look like I know?” Jill asks.

Jake’s turn to roll his eyes, Khan notes. “Bird, are you ready?”

“Da,” she says, rolling up her PADD and slipping it into a multi-colored tote. “Any objections to my appearance before we go?”

Jake studies her, the assortment of jewelry and multicolored clothes and clunky boots. “Nah, you’ll do fine where we’re going,” he says. “But, uh, how many electronics do you have on you?”

“A lot, and no, I’m not elaborating,” Magpie says, getting up and moving to fix the pin of the bird in her hair. At that, Jake stills, looking at her.

“I know who you are and you don’t exist,” he says slowly.

“Don’t I?” Magpie touches the bird absently and it chirps. “Am I a figment of your imagination?”

“You don’t—I looked for you, and I’m good at finding things,” Jake says, frustrated. “And you don’t exist. There’s no proof of you. How do I even know you are her?”

“Her who?” Magpie asks.


“I don’t like to be found,” Magpie says. “That way I only get offered jobs from people good enough to find me in the first place.”

“Well,” Jake says, considering. “That’s not stupid.”

“Neither am I,” Magpie says, slipping her tote onto her shoulder. “Lead on, cutie.”

Jill groans at that. “Do not fuck him,” she says. “Please, for the love of God.”

“I haven’t decided if he’s worth it yet,” Magpie says. “We’ll see how today goes. Do you have your access card to get back into your room?”

“Um,” Jill says. “Do I?”

“I have it,” Khan says.

“Lovely. Do not have sex in my bed.” Magpie crosses over to Jill and leans down to kiss her cheek. “Not that I think you really want sex for a while.”

Jill groans again. “I think I’m fucked out til next month,” she says.

“It’s three days til the end of the month,” Magpie says.

“Month after next,” Jill says.

“Could you please stop?” Jake asks, looking pained. “Things I never needed to hear about my sister, like ever.”
Jill snorts. “Surely you’re aware I’ve had sex, Jake.”

“Yes, I am, but I still don’t need to hear you talking about it especially when I saw your man there with his pants off this morning,” Jake says. “Jesus, it’s like you want to give me a complex.”

“Inferiority complex? Size complex? You’ll have to be more specific than that,” Jill says, giggling. “Oh, oh shit.” She starts laughing harder, completely dissolving into a fit of the giggles, shaking with it and wiping tears out of her eyes.

“Neither, for the record,” Jake grumbles, which sets Jill off again and makes Magpie join in the laughter. “What? He wasn’t that--”

“Oh, so wrong,” Jill says, hiccuping. “So very, very wrong, Aaron.”

“Oh, shut up,” Jake says, a bit of color staining his cheekbones.

“How wrong?” Magpie asks.

Jill looks about to answer, looks at Khan’s impassive face, and dissolves into giggles. “Later,” she promises when she can get the word out--it takes her three tries.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Magpie says. “C’mon, Aaron Jake whatever your name is, let’s go leave them to their not-sex and talk to people.”

“Jake,” he says firmly. “Call me Jake.”

“All right,” Magpie says, slipping her arm through his. “We’ll see you later, Jill-Bear.”

“Roar,” Jill says, taking a deep breath to settle herself. “Do not kill each other. Do not fuck each other. Come back in the same state you’re in now.”

“Yes, Commander,” Jake says, tossing off a lazy salute. Magpie snorts and leads him out the door, closing it firmly behind them.

“Are you sober enough to talk?” Khan asks after a minute, when Jill seems calmer.

“Yes, I think so,” she says, thinking about it. She takes a breath and stretches a little. “When housekeeping’s finished in my room I’d like to go back there and have you treat some of me.”

“Of course,” Khan says.

“But first,” Jill says. “First you’re going to tell me why you decided I belong to you, and what exactly that means for us.”

“What do you think it means?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jill says. “No, you don’t get to do that to me. You tell me what it means.”

Khan considers his words, considers what he wants to say and how. “I did not intend to claim you, truly I didn’t,” he says finally. “And then I looked and I could not let go of you. You...get under my skin, milaya moya.”

“Tell me what it means,” Jill says quietly.

“It means I will not share you,” Khan says. “It means I will protect you, always, and I will take care of you. That I have the right to do these things.”
“What if I said no?” Jill asks, and he doesn’t know if he can’t read her because her poker face is that good or because something cold coils in his belly at the thought.

Still, though. He’d offered Rani, and honesty makes him acknowledge he needs to offer Jill the same thing. She doesn’t know all of what he is, and doesn’t know how demanding, how difficult he can be. “You could say no,” he says steadily. “You could walk away, if you chose. I am...I admit I am a difficult person, Jill, not an easy lover to have. If you do not want this, tell me and walk away from me, from this whole situation, all of it. You have taken on more than I ever expected of you and I will demand more from you if you stay.”

“No,” Jill murmurs. “No, you’re not an easy lover to have.” She smiles. “But I never did like things that were all that easy. I went to the fucking Olympics, Khan, that’s not something you do if you think life’s about easy. And I medaled, which is even harder.” She tips her face up and kisses him softly. “I’m not walking away from this,” she says. “I’m not walking away from you. But I won’t be anything but your partner, Khan, I won’t be anything but your equal where I can be. I know you’re physically superior to me, I know you’re more intelligent than I am, I’m not asking you to treat me like a physical equal or even an intellectual one if it comes to that. Just...I am a human being capable of free will and independent thought and I expect you to respect that.”

“I do not think you will let me forget,” Khan says mildly and she laughs. “And I give you my word.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” Jill says. She tips her head against his shoulder. “And one more thing.”

“Tell me,” Khan says, a little wary.

“You belong to me, too,” Jill says. “I don’t share.”

He laughs. “Of course.”

They sit in silence for a time, Khan content to hold Jill and stroke her hair, and Jill seemingly content to cuddle against him. After a bit, though, a thought occurs to Khan and he raises to look at her. “Is there video of your competition in the Olympics?” he asks.

Jill blushes. “Yeah, there is, I have it,” she says. “Why? Do you want to see?”

“I do,” Khan says.

She stretches and gets to her feet, wincing slightly as she does, and walks over to the desk, scanning the equipment before choosing a computer. Her fingers fly over the screen for a few minutes before she brings the tablet back over to Khan. “I’ll watch it with you,” she says. “It’s my floor routine, the one that won me the gold.”

“Will you watch with me?” Khan asks.

Jill shakes her head. “I don’t like to see it. I’m too critical, all I’ll do is tell you what I could have done better. I’m going to stretch out on the bed and pretend to sleep.”

“All right,” Khan says. Jill moves around him to lie down, and he hits play. The first thing that catches his eye is how small she is--she’s not exactly big now, but he thinks she was even shorter at sixteen, and thinner, barely more than skin and muscle and bone. Her hair must have been shorter, too, because she has it scraped back into a small bun. And then she begins to move, and he watches, fascinated.

They studied gymnastics as children, of course, so he is familiar with some of her moves. But her
speed and grace are still remarkable, and he thinks she would get along well with Alona. He sees one or two minor things she could have corrected, but she makes no major errors, and he admires her flexibility and strength. The grin on her face when she finishes, arms thrown up in the air, makes him smile involuntarily, and he sees her run off the mat and hug her coach, a big burly man easily twice her size.

“All done?” Jill asks without opening her eyes. “The beam routine’s in the same folder if you want to watch it.”

“I do,” Khan says, finding the video file easily enough and opening it. This time she has a fierce look of concentration on her face the entire time; he finds it oddly endearing. She wobbles exactly once, and he guesses that was the mistake that cost her the gold, but he doesn’t know enough about how the Olympics scoring works to be certain. “Is your balance still this good?” he asks when she finishes.

“Possibly better, these days,” Jill says. “I’ve matured a bit--okay, a lot--and I’m more comfortable in my own body these days. Added some muscle, thankfully almost no fat. I haven’t tried the beam in a while, but I’ve had some close calls and managed to land on my feet.”

“Do not tell me you are one of those women who obsesses over appearance,” Khan says, twisting to look at her.

“I won’t tell you then,” Jill says, grinning and looking at him. “No, I’m not, but I’m built petite and I’d like to keep my figure as it is. I mean, I’ll eat anything, but I also expend a lot of calories running around. If I ever slow down, I’ll have to rethink things.”

“I am not sure you are capable of slowing down,” Khan says, smiling a bit, and Jill laughs.

“Do you think housekeeping’s finished in my room yet? I’d like to go back.”

“Perhaps another ten minutes,” Khan says. “How do you feel?”

“I’m good,” Jill says with a lazy smile. “I’m stoned out of my mind is what I am, but I’m coherent enough, and I don’t really hurt unless I move wrong or try sitting down too fast. God, sore.”

“Do you think you can stand to have me use the cream on you?” Khan asks.

“I think so,” Jill says, making a face. “I mean, it’ll hurt, but I need it. And I think I do want you to treat my shoulder, just because it’s throbbing a bit. The same cream has an antibiotic in it, so that should work for any potential badness.”

“What about the bruises on your wrists?” Khan asks.

“Nothing really to be done for them unless Jake has a dermal regenerator, which I don’t have with me,” Jill says. “I don’t mind, though. I like them.”

“Do you?” Khan asks.

Jill sits up and stretches out her hands in front of her, looking at her wrists. The bruises are shades of pale blue and purple, definitely noticeable to anyone looking closely enough and possibly those not even trying. “I do,” she says, smiling. “I told you I liked marks.”

“Would you get a tattoo for me?” Khan asks idly.

“Maybe,” Jill says. “Depends on what you’d want and where you’d want it. I don’t...” She licks her
lips. “I don’t know how long this thing between us is going to last, and I don’t know what will happen when you get your family back and we deal with Marcus and everything, whether you’ll still want me around after that or not. But I don’t think I’ll ever want to forget you, no matter what, and...yeah, I’d consider it, for you.”

“Do Starfleet regulations allow for tattoos?” Khan asks.

“They do,” Jill says. “So long as they’re within the bounds of reasonable taste, which is like the old definition of pornography—you know it when you see it, right? But no one’s ever really challenged the regulation and no one I know of has ever gotten in trouble because of it, so it’s not really a big deal.”

Khan nods, not quite willing to believe that if anyone finds out Jill got a tattoo because of him she won’t get in trouble for it, but the idea does tempt him, and surprises him at the same time. He’d never asked Rani for something like it; he’d known she was his, to his bones, and known he would be with her until she died. He’d just expected that to happen decades from when it did, not six years after he met her.

But he likes the idea of seeing his mark on Jill, something small and discreet in black most likely. Maybe it’s just because she has so many scars already, one piece of artwork wouldn’t be a big deal. Rani had been unscarred, almost untouched, when she’d become his, and he’d wanted to keep her that way. Jill is different.

He doesn’t love her, he knows that, but possessiveness curls around his bones and makes him reach for her abruptly, pulling her into his lap. She looks at him curiously but goes with it, arranging herself comfortably once he has her close. “You went away again for a moment, and now this,” she says, cupping his face in her hands. “Tell me. Rani?”

“You aren’t her,” Khan says. “I know that.”

“No, I’m not,” Jill agrees. “And you don’t love me any more than I love you.”

“I do not,” Khan agrees with her. “And yet you are under my skin, and the thought of anyone else touching you makes me...displeased.”

“How displeased?” Jill asks, smiling a little.

He gives her an even look. “Do you really want to push me, Jill?”

“Maybe,” she says, still with that slight smile. “What’ll it get me? Because from what I can remember, last night was pretty spectacular. Besides. You know I don’t sleep around, that I won’t cheat on you. But I like to go out and have a good time once in a while, and unless you’re offering to go clubbing with me, I’m not going to sit in my hotel room waiting for you.”

“I don’t go clubbing,” Khan says.

“I didn’t think you did. But I do. I brought that dress to go out in, because I was planning on going out at some point while I’m here. I’d still like to do that once I’m all healed up and things are less tense. Are you really going to try and stop me?” Jill asks.

“No,” Khan says after a pause. “But that does not mean I like the idea.”

Jill laughs. “I know you don’t. Why don’t you, though? You know you’ll be the one I’m coming back to, that if I go out and dance and get all...worked up, it’ll only be because I’m thinking about you, what you do to me, with me, and by the time I get back, I’ll be so ready for you, you won’t
believe it. What about that sounds so terrible?”

When she puts it like that, she might have a point, Khan thinks. Still. “I dislike the idea of other men or women thinking they can flirt with you, that they can have you if they ask nicely enough,” he says. “I am not worried about your ability to take care of yourself under most circumstances, but things happen, as we discovered last night.”

“They do,” Jill says. “But I’m not going to the kind of place we went last night. I’m going to perfectly legal, regulated clubs, and I’ll have the bird with me. Maybe Jake, if she talks him into it.”

“Are you talking about going out tonight?” Khan asks.

“Probably not,” Jill says. “I’m too sore to really enjoy it. Let’s go back to my room. I can walk there, I promise.” She kisses him lightly, then again, and one more time for good measure before she pulls away and gets up. Khan follows her back to the room, and when they go in there’s a distinct scent of air freshener and the room is made up. Khan’s lips twitch at the air freshener and Jill outright laughs, moving to the bathroom to inspect it.

“Let me treat you,” Khan says when she pokes her head back out. “Shoulder first, I think.”

“Probably best,” Jill says. She moves to get her medkit and tosses it onto the bed before moving to sprawl out and pull off her shirt. The bruise looks worse than it did earlier, dark purple and skin slightly red where it isn’t bruised, and Khan winces before taking the cream and smoothing a thin layer over her skin. “It’ll hide under my shirts,” Jill says. “I did tell you I liked marks.”

“You did, but that...” Khan trails off.

“Will it scar?” Jill asks.

“Unlikely,” Khan says. “But it will be badly bruised for some time.”

“I can live with that,” Jill says, pulling her shirt back on. “Now the part that’s really going to hurt.” She rolls onto her back and wriggles out of her pants. She isn’t wearing underwear under them, and for a moment Khan just cups her sex in his hand, wishing he could ease the soreness he caused. He works the cream into her carefully, forcing himself to ignore the way she tenses when he touches her, and when he gently smooths a bit of the cream over her clit she whimpers in pain, but the sound’s muffled, like she’s biting it back. “Please tell me you’re done,” she says after a moment, voice tight.

“I am,” Khan says, drawing his hand back immediately.

“Oh, thank God,” Jill says with a sigh of relief. She’s still tense, though, and she moves to pull her pants back on. “That...was not comfortable.”

“I will be right back,” Khan says, thinking she probably wants a moment to gather her composure and he needs to wash his hands. He gets up and goes to do just that, unwrapping a new bar of soap from the hotel toiletries. When he comes back, Jill is still sprawled on her back, one hand on her belly and the other arm flung over her head. “How do you feel?” he asks.

“Sore. Stoned. A little silly. Like I’d really like you to come lie down with me and hold me for a bit, if that’s not too needy and clingy and things,” Jill says, eyes closed.

“It isn’t,” Khan says, moving to do just that and gather her into his arms, folding a wing around
her. Jill smiles a little and tucks her head into the crook of his throat, nuzzling at his skin.

“You still should have gone to work, but I’m glad you’re here,” she murmurs.

“I should be right where I am,” Khan murmurs back. “Stop worrying about it, milaya moya.”

“But if you get in trouble because of me,” Jill says, frowning.

“I can handle Alexander Marcus,” Khan tells her. “And he does not trust anyone else to know who
I really am. No one else will think anything of my taking a day off.”

Jill sighs. “I’m not convinced, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“At this point, there is nothing I can do either,” Khan points out.

“Well, true, I guess,” Jill says. “Is it lunchtime? We should eat. You haven’t eaten since--when
was the last meal you had?”

“Yesterday,” Khan says. “You need to eat something more substantial than a protein shake. My
metabolism will adjust if I do not eat.”

“You still need to eat,” Jill says. “Room service or dare we go out or do you want to run out and
pick up something? I think there’s a cheap Greek place two doors down, I could go for a gyro.”

“I can go out and bring back food,” Khan says. “But I will have to let go of you.”

“Sad but true,” Jill says with a sigh. She kisses his chin and his jaw before pulling away from him.
“Get up before I change my mind and drag you back over here.”

Khan smiles and brushes a hand over her hair before getting up. He pulls on his boots and makes
sure he has wallet, communicator, and access card to Jill’s room. “Remind me to stop by the front
desk and get another card for you,” Jill says, watching him get his things. “Just in case you need
it.”

“If you like,” Khan says.

“I do like,” Jill says. “Get me a gyro and chips, if they have chips, and some kind of caffeinated
soda please? Anything non-diet with caffeine.”

He’s pleased by her appetite; she must be feeling better and the drugs wearing off. “I will be back
shortly,” he says.

“Mnhmm.” Jill stretches and rolls onto her stomach, burrowing into the pillows. “I’ll be here.”

The Greek place turns out to be right where Jill said it was, small and crowded and full of enticing
smells. Khan gets food and drinks for himself and Jill, and doesn’t react when the pierced, tattooed
cashier slips him his email address along with the receipt. He takes the bag and leaves, returning to
the hotel.

Jill appears to be asleep, but when he closes the door she stretches and sits up. “Oh, wow, that
smells amazing,” she says. “Let’s eat at the coffee table so we don’t mess up the bed.” She rolls
out of bed with only a faint wince and walks over to the couch, folding herself down on it. Khan
joins her and sets out the food, handing Jill her soda.

“Thank you,” she says, twisting open the bottle and taking a drink. “What did you get?”
“Two gyros, two orders of chips, and baklava,” Khan says, handing her a gyro.

“Oh, God, baklava,” Jill says. “My weakness. Well, I have a weakness for rich, sweet things, but baklava’s at the top of my favorite desserts list. Up there with creme brulee and cheesecake.”

“Have you ever had halva?” Khan asks, unwrapping his own gyro.

“I don’t think so, no,” Jill says. “Would I like it?”

“I think you would,” Khan says. “My sister used to make it for me, as a special treat.”

“Which sister?” Jill asks, taking a bite of her gyro.

“Cat,” Khan says. “She enjoys cooking.”

Jill nods and swallows. “I’m terrible at it, for the record. I live on takeout and restaurant meals and things where I don’t have to do more than heat it up. Fortunately I don’t have to feed myself that often, since starships have messes. Do you cook?”

“I can,” Khan says. “I enjoy it on occasion. Did you never learn or do you just not enjoy it?”

“I’ve tried to learn, but I don’t like it and I’m truly awful at it,” Jill says, making a face. “After the third attempt I decided this just wasn’t meant to be. I love food, but I do not love preparing it.”

“Not everyone can be good at everything,” Khan says, swallowing a bite of his gyro.

“Except augmented humans?” Jill grins and takes a sip of soda. “What aren’t you good at?”

“There is nothing I could not be skilled in, given time to study,” Khan says. “But I was never a good student of medicine, it did not interest me. And I am not particularly good at gymnastics due to my wings.”

“Where did you learn things like acupressure?” Jill asks. “I mean, isn’t that medicine?”

“In a way,” Khan says. “One of my sisters, Maeve, studied medicine. She wanted to be a nurse as she felt they did more to directly help people than doctors. She studied acupressure, too, and massage, and taught me some of it. She liked to use me as a practice subject for massage as I was usually tense due to the wings.”

“Why do the wings make you tense?” Jill asks.

“They tend to move and shift and want to stretch on their own, given opportunity,” Khan explains. “Since this is not always possible, I keep mine folded back, but restraining them makes my back muscles tense and occasionally cramp. I go flying when I can to stretch my wings and loosen the muscles, but these days I have few opportunities to do that.”

Jill frowns, thinking about it. “You’ll have to teach me more massage, then,” she says. “I give a good back rub, or can, but you’re a special case.”

“If you like, I can teach you some of what I learned from Maeve,” Khan says.

“I would like,” Jill says. “I would also--I don’t want to impose, but if you ever did want to take me flying, I’d...I’d really like that.”

She’s so careful about asking, even when it’s obvious she’s dying to get into the air with him, Khan thinks. “I will take you tonight, if you like,” he says.
Her face lights up. “Really? I mean--are you sure?”


“Thank you,” she says softly. “Thank you. That’s...that means a lot to me.”

“Why does it mean so much to you?” Khan asks. He takes a bite of his gyro while he waits for her to answer.

She takes a drink of soda and eats a chip before responding. “Because it’s something you can do that no one else I’ve ever met can,” she says. “Because even if I knew someone else with wings, I doubt he or she would be able to carry me. Because it’s intimate, different than sex. Because I’ve always wanted to be able to fly. I’ve gone skydiving--I go every year on my birthday, I think I told you, and I’ve gone hang-gliding, but gravity always wins in the end, and you can go up and not worry about it until you want to or get tired, but I get the feeling the former happens more often. It’s just...this is something I couldn’t do with anyone else in the galaxy, and it’s incredible.” Jill flushes a little and looks down at her almost-finished gyro. “Do any of your brothers or sisters have wings?”

“No,” Khan says. “Only me.”

“So unique among the unique,” she says. “God, that must have been so alienating, growing up.”

“My family has always loved me unconditionally,” Khan says simply.

“I’m glad you had them,” Jill says. “We need to figure out how to get them back for you.”

“Yes,” Khan says.

Silence falls between them as they finish eating, but it’s comfortable. Khan lets Jill have both pieces of baklava after seeing the face she makes when she takes her first bite, and wishes briefly she wasn’t so sore. She licks her fingers clean when she’s finished, or starts to before Khan catches her wrist and draws her fingers into his mouth to do it himself.

“Oh, that’s not fair,” she says shakily, her breath catching in her throat. “Don’t tease me when I’m too sore to do anything about it.”

“A promise for when you are not,” Khan says, kissing her palm.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Jill says, her hand flexing under his touch. “I should send Magpie a message, find out if she and Jake have killed each other yet.”

“Come here first,” Khan says, tugging her closer. She smiles and settles in his lap, straddling his thighs. Khan slides his hands into her hair and draws her in for a kiss, slow and easy, licking his way into her mouth until she sighs and her tongue tangles with his. She tastes like honey and walnuts, rich and sweet.

They spend a while on the couch, just kissing, Khan’s hands tangled in Jill’s hair and hers curled against his shoulders, nails digging into his skin through his shirt. Khan keeps it lazy and soft, slow deep kisses that still have Jill making soft sounds against his mouth, and he knows she’s still too sore for more but this is good, just as it is.
I have...many thinky thoughts about some of Khan and Jill's conversations in this chapter, and if you're curious leave me a note and I'll happily go into them. Mostly it's a comparison of things in this story to things in FF, and how things change and yet don't.

Magpie's nickname for Jill is complete and utter self-indulgence on my part. My teddy bear when I was small (okay, not so small; I slept with that bear until I was fifteen at which point she was retired and replaced with Pierre the Gay Bear) was named Jill Bear, because the girl who gave her to me was named Jill, I guess. I got the bear when I was two; I don't remember. No, that's not where Jill's name comes from, but I couldn't resist using the name in this story.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

She's so easy to read sometimes.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to those folks reading this, even if you're just lurking - if you're enjoying, I'm happy. If you're not enjoying, I'm sorry, and feel free to tell me why this didn't work for you. I realize this story is not to everyone's taste, but I like it, so we'll see how it goes from here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They separate when someone knocks on the door. “The timing here seriously sucks,” Jill grumbles, pulling away from Khan to go get it. “Oh, you’re back, and alive. Everything go okay?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Jake says, tugging one of Jill’s curls as he comes into the room, Magpie following. “Bird’s not you, but we did okay together.”

“Damned with faint praise,” Magpie says with a snort. “We did fine, Jill-Bear. Learned a few things, too. Oh, good, you had lunch.”

“Complete with baklava,” Jill says, smiling. “We just finished a little while ago. What’ve you got?”

“Your jammer on?” Jake asks. “Color us paranoid, but we’re paranoid.”

Jill goes over to it and turns it on, sweeping the room. “We’re clear,” she says, setting it down on the desk. “Unless Magpie wants to check with her own equipment.” She moves back to the couch, settling herself in Khan’s lap without a hint of self-consciousness. Jake takes the desk chair, and Magpie the other end of the couch.

“Did Andy build that?” Magpie asks.

“Of course,” Jill says.

“Then we’re fine,” Magpie says. “I don’t have anything better than anything Andy could design.”

“Who is Andy?” Jake asks.

“Andy is to computer hardware what I am to computer software,” Magpie says. “Designed the rolled PADD I was playing on earlier.”

“Nice,” Jake says. “Is Andy male or female?”

“Yes,” Magpie says. “Depends on the day and Andy’s mood.”
“Huh,” Jake says. “Okay then.”

“Could Andy be of use to us?” Khan asks.

Jill and Magpie exchange looks. “Maybe,” Jill says. “Probably. But Andy doesn’t work cheap and he’s...” She licks her lips, thinking. “I don’t want to mix her up in this if we don’t have to. She’s...Magpie, how would you describe Andy?”

“Sweet,” Magpie says. “He’s just a gentle, sweet girl. This sort of thing, this isn’t his scene. Jill’s right. If we can avoid involving her, I’d like to.”

“Then we will try to avoid that,” Khan says. “How did you meet her?”

“I’d rather not go into that,” Magpie says and a shadow passes over her face.

Khan finds himself curious, but doesn’t ask, and neither does Jake. “How’re you feeling, shorty?” Jake asks instead. “Do you need more meds?”

“In a bit, maybe, yeah,” Jill says. “I am feeling better, though.”

“You’re looking better,” Jake says.

“Agreed,” Magpie says. “You look less ready to collapse and you’re moving more easily.”

“Thanks, I think,” Jill says. “Not sure I’m up for going out today, but we’ll see. Lunch definitely helped.”

“Do you--um--” Jake hesitates. “I’ve got a dermal regenerator, if you want it, for, um, the bruising.”

“Thought you might, but no, I’m okay for now,” Jill says, absently touching her wrist. “They’re not painful.”

“Sure,” Jake says. “Just keep it in mind if you have to look respectable.”

“I will,” Jill says. “Here’s hoping I don’t have to look respectable any time soon.”

“Respectability is highly overrated,” Magpie agrees.

“Sometimes necessary in my job,” Jill says. “But I am off the clock for a bit.”

“I keep telling you you’re in the wrong line of work,” Jake says. “Come work with me, you get to be un-respectable all the time.”

“Is that even a word?” Jill asks. “And right now I have other priorities. Which you are aware of. I don’t even know if I’m going to be in Starfleet six months from now, talk to me then.”

“God, I hope not,” Magpie says. “You could do so much better.”

“We are not having this argument again,” Jill says, thunking her head against Khan’s shoulder. “We just aren’t.”

“Because you know I’m right,” Magpie says.

“Hey,” Jake protests. “What’s wrong with Starfleet?”
“Do you want it chronologically or alphabetically?” Magpie asks.

“How about not at all?” Jill says. “Jake, without going into specifics let’s just say Magpie had some bad experiences.”

Jake frowns more. “We’re not all assholes,” he says.

“I know that, but I still don’t trust the organization as a whole,” Magpie says. “Which is why this is so weird that I’m sitting here with three members of it actively working to help, although to be fair we’re talking about taking down Marcus, so that’s more like it.”

“Marcus does not represent Starfleet,” Jake says. “At least, not in my book, not with what I’ve learned lately.”

“Yes, and you’re going to tell me about that,” Jill says. “Who did you talk to today?”

“A couple people,” Jake says. “One of whom spent the entire conversation trying to hit on the bird here.”

“Totally not my style,” Magpie says, making a face. “I mean, he was cute enough, but...obvious. But he did tell us that Marcus has been growing more and more obsessed with the Klingons for a while now, and rumor has it he’s outright trying to instigate a war. Which we kind of knew, but it’s good to have confirmation. Sadly he couldn’t tell us much about the section 31 programs, but he pointed us to someone else who maybe could.”

“That someone else is not in London currently, though,” Jake says. “So we can track her down--I think she’s in San Francisco at the moment--or wait for her to come back to London, which we were told she’d be doing in about three days.”

“What we are hearing, though, is that this is all Marcus’ doing,” Magpie says. “That section 31 is totally his game, and it’s off all records except the ones he can’t completely avoid. He’s kept most of the other brass out of the loop as much as he can, is falsifying reports, all that. So if we take him down, we might be able to chop the head off the snake and kill it.”

“Just make sure it’s not a Hydra,” Jill says. “Chop one head off, two grow back to take its place.”

“With Starfleet brass that’s always a possibility,” Jake says. “But I think--I hope--most admirals out there would be pretty horrified by what Marcus is doing.”

Khan isn’t convinced, but says nothing. Magpie snorts. “Yeah, I’m not sharing in your optimism,” she says. She looks at Khan, who meets her eyes in silent agreement. “Before we take this to anyone else, I want to know who and research them. My way.”

“I want to talk to that woman,” Jake says. “What was her name? Amy Tyler?”

“Something like that, yeah,” Magpie says. “Her I’m okay with, because we’re not telling her much, we’re getting information from her.”

“Who is she?” Jill asks patiently.

“A former section 31 operative who quit or was asked to leave depending on your source,” Jake says. “She’s a biochemist, I think.”

“Describe her,” Khan says sharply.
“We didn’t get much description,” Magpie says. “Um. What did he say? About a meter and a half, slender, blonde, green eyes, big glasses, tends to wear scarves.”

Khan presses his lips together. “You know her,” Jill says softly, studying him.

“She left because of me,” Khan says. “Because even her stunted conscience caught up with what she was being asked to do, and she left. She isn’t a good person, but she has some semblance of a moral code.”

“What was she being asked to do?” Jill asks.

Khan shakes his head. “Not now.” There are some things he’s not willing to share with Jake and Magpie, and to be honest he doesn’t even want to tell Jill the story, but he knows he will have to eventually.

“Well,” Jake says. “I think maybe we should track Dr. Tyler down and talk to her. Would it be better to tell her we know you or not?”

“Hard to say,” Khan says. “See how she reacts to you first.”

“Come on, cutie,” Magpie says, pushing to her feet. “Let’s go locate one blonde scientist. Shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“On a planet of billions?” Jake snorts and gets up. “Jill, catch,” he says, taking the pill bottle out of his backpack and tossing it to her. She snags it neatly. “I don’t need them, so keep the bottle, I can always get more.”

“We know approximately where she is, her name, this shouldn’t be that hard,” Magpie says. “We’ll be in my room. Knock first.”

“Don’t have sex,” Jill says, twisting the pill bottle open and tipping two pills into her palm. She knocks them back with a sip of soda and closes both bottles, setting them down on the coffee table. “Thanks for the meds, Jake.”

“Anytime, shorty.” He crosses to her and tugs a curl. “And if you need a regenerator, or anything, I know it doesn’t always work on you but bruising should be easy enough, right?”

“Should be, yeah, but I’m okay for now,” Jill says. “Stop fussing, you’re only six months older than I am.”

“Six long months,” Jake says. He looks at Khan. “Take care of my sister.”

“I will,” Khan says simply.

“Touching as this male bonding is, I’m fairly certain Jill can take care of herself,” Magpie says. “So I’m going to reverse it and tell her to take care of you.”

“I can do that,” Jill says. “Please don’t have sex with Jake.”

“I’ll consider it,” Magpie says. She bends to kiss Jill’s forehead and Khan’s cheek. “Can I have sex with John?”

“No,” Jill says. “Mine. Stop asking. The answer’s not going to change. The answer is never going to change.”

Magpie sighs. “I had to try.” She grins, though, and Khan hides a smile. It has been a long time
since anyone wanted him so openly and brazenly, and he admits he finds Magpie’s interest in him somewhat flattering. Not enough to return it, of course, but still, he is in some ways only human.

“Go away, bird,” Jill says, but she smiles back. Magpie laughs and surprises Khan by touching his cheek before leaving.

The door closes quietly behind Jake and Magpie and Jill rubs her forehead absently before turning to Khan. “What did she do to you?” she asks.

“After I was revived,” Khan says slowly. “There are incomplete records from my time, insufficient data. Marcus knew I was engineered, but did not know the full extent.” He falls silent, unwilling to voice the rest.

Jill’s breath hitches. “They experimented on you,” she says softly.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“God,” Jill whispers. “How long did it take?”

“Six weeks,” Khan says. “Dr. Tyler was asked to experiment using my blood. She initially agreed, and made the mistake of actually speaking with me. I was able to...convince her of the unethicality of what she was being asked to do, and she quit.”

“Clever man,” Jill says, smiling. “How badly did they hurt you?”

“Were I not who I am, I would have died,” Khan says. “Multiple times.”

Jill breathes out slowly and rests her forehead against his. “One day, you’re going to tell me their names,” she says softly. “And we’re going to find them.”

“I don’t want you to kill anyone for me, milaya moya,” Khan says, his hands on her waist.

“Killing people doesn’t bother me, Khan,” Jill says. “It sometimes bothers me that it doesn’t bother me, but taking lives really doesn’t upset me.”

“You really should have been one of my people,” Khan murmurs.

“Unless there’s a way to give me some of your abilities, I’m stuck being a normal human,” Jill says, smiling.

“There...might be,” Khan says slowly. “Our blood can heal, we know that much. We never studied, but it is...it might be possible, with enough transfusions, for your body to acquire some of my abilities.”

“Huh,” Jill says. “Well, maybe. We don’t have any of the equipment we’d need, and I don’t know as I feel comfortable being that much of a vampire.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Khan says. “Would you want to try it?”

“Maybe,” Jill says, not sounding convinced. “At a minimum, what would it do to me?”

“Give you a stronger immune system, heal you of any diseases or infections,” Khan says. “It might also possibly make it harder for you to scar, I am not certain.”

“Scars don’t bother me,” Jill says. “And I’m fairly healthy already, so...let me think about it. I’m not sure it’s worth it to drain your blood when we don’t know for certain what it’d do to me. On
the other hand, if it did help, that could be a hell of an advantage.”

“It could,” Khan says. “Think about it.”

“I will,” Jill says. She kisses Khan lightly, then again. “Do you want to go for a walk or something?”

“Are you up for that?” Khan asks.

“We can always get a cab back if I’m not,” Jill says. “I could use some fresh air, though, and I think a walk might be about what I’m up for right now.” The look on her face tells him she’s thinking something, but he doesn’t ask what. Jill kisses him one last time and gets up to go pull on actual clothes, jeans and boots and a patterned t-shirt under a hoodie. She leaves her hair down and throws a few items into her small purse. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Khan says, getting to his feet. “Where are we going?”

She smiles. “Your building.”

“That isn’t safe,” Khan says.

“We’re not going to your flat,” Jill says. “We’re going to your building so you can stop into your flat for anything you might need and I can ask about vacancies in the building since I need a place to live for six months and I’m guessing you live in moderately priced already furnished housing.”

“I think you are taking a bigger risk than you should be by looking for a flat in my building,” Khan says, following her out of the room.

“I think what’s life without a little risk?” Jill pirouettes neatly despite her boots and grins up at him. “Besides, it gives us cover if anyone sees us in public together. Why yes, we know each other, I’m doing research at the archive and coincidentally happened to get a flat in your building, so we commute together sometimes and have become work acquaintances.”

“You make the most illogical things seem almost logical,” Khan says.

Jill laughs and tips backward into a handstand, walking over and coming back upright. “I’m good at that,” she says. “It’s a me thing.”

“Clearly,” Khan says. “I still think this may not be an acceptable risk.”

“I don’t really care,” Jill says, taking two skipping steps to stand in front of him and jumping up to wrap her legs around his waist, her hands on his shoulders. He balances her weight easily, holding her with his hands on her thighs, and she smiles. “It may come to nothing. There may be no vacancies in your building for what I need. But maybe I’ll be lucky. Let’s go find out.” She kisses him, and Khan knows there are logical responses he could make, arguments he could formulate to counter hers, but he finds it remarkably difficult to concentrate with her mouth on his and her body pressed against his—which, he expects, is partially her intent.

Jill pulls away from him before he wants to let her go, but he doesn’t stop her from dropping back to the ground or from taking his hand as they walk to the lift. “It’s later than I thought,” she says when they head outside. “Sundown should be in an hour, maybe hour and a half. We could, if you wanted, stop by the park on our way back.”

“I would like that,” Khan says and smiles to himself when her face brightens. She’s so easy to read sometimes, he thinks, and wonders how good an actress she can be.
He gets a bit of a chance to find out when they end up at his building, a boring block of flats exactly as Jill had guessed them. She pulls him aside about half a block before the entrance. “Let me go in first,” she says. “Follow, don’t acknowledge me. I’ll call you when I’m done, or message you, or something.”

“All right,” Khan says, somewhat amused that now she is willing to be cautious. But he lets her head down the block, moving quickly and pausing to toss a couple credits into the guitar case of a street busker. Khan wonders absently if the man’s actually a musician or if he’s covert ops, decides it doesn’t matter, and gives Jill a twenty-count before heading into his building. He sees her on his way to the lifts, talking to the manager on duty, and she glances up when he comes in but doesn’t acknowledge him in any way or break her conversation with the manager—who, Khan notes, appears to be trying to chat her up.

The lifts in his building tend to be slow, but he waits anyway, listening in to see what he can hear of Jill’s conversation. “I know, it’s very last minute, but I’ve got like four days to find a place, and then—ugh, packing and more packing and moving and it stresses me out just thinking about it, so if I could knock finding a place off my to-do list I’d be thrilled. I don’t suppose you’d have anything suitable?”

“We might, actually,” the man says. “How long did you say you needed a flat for?”

“Six months,” Jill says promptly. “Well, seven, I guess. With an option to renew, that’d be good, just in case I end up staying longer than I planned. Nothing in life ever goes the way I plan it.”

“Let me look,” the man says, smiling. “Why are you relocating to London anyway?”

“Oh, work,” Jill says easily. “You know how Starfleet can be, right?” She laughs, and then the lift arrives and Khan gets on.

He spends some time in his flat puttering around, takes a shower and changes into clothes more suitable for flying. He ends up also packing an overnight bag with what he will need for tomorrow, since he doubts he’ll be coming back to his flat again before he gets out of work tomorrow, and he really does need to go in.

Jill hasn’t called by the time he finishes putting a bag together, so he makes himself a cup of tea and settles on his couch with it and a book. He can’t focus on it, though, and ends up turning pages randomly, creating the appearance of reading without the reality. Finally, his link buzzes with a message, and he sets the book down with a sigh of relief.

**Meet me at the cafe one block east. Hopefully it’s not terrible.**

Khan smiles. *It isn’t*, he sends back and leaves, taking his bag with him. By the time he gets to the cafe, Jill’s sitting at a table outside with a tall go-cup. He drops his bag at the table and goes to get himself a cup of coffee, returning a minute later. “So?” he asks.

She grins. “Two floors up from you, lease starts this Sunday, runs for eight months but I can cancel after six with no penalties and renew at any time. One bedroom furnished flat, supposedly fantastic plumbing and guaranteed climate control, which given that we’re at the beginning of fall is not a terrible thing. How is the plumbing and heat in reality?”

“I have only been there a few months, but it is adequate,” Khan says, sipping his coffee. “I have not run out of hot water at any point, at any rate.”

“I have to say the water facilities were a big bonus,” Jill says. “They cut me a bit of a break on the
rent and let me order a mattress for myself, since the bed comes with the flat but the mattress doesn’t, which I found curious but I’m not going to argue. And Gary, the manager, tried three times to slip me his contact information even though I kept politely telling him I wasn’t interested. I finally told him I was gay.”

Khan snorts. “Did you really?”

“I did,” Jill says, laughing. “I don’t think he bought it, but he apologized. What, you don’t think I’d make a good lesbian?”

“No, I really do not,” Khan says. “There are certain things you enjoy too much.”

“Well, okay, point,” Jill says, her cheeks turning pink. “I’ve had a couple female lovers, though, and it was fun, but yeah, men are more my style.”

“Who was your first female lover?” Khan asks.

“Her name was Beth,” Jill says. “She was a synchronized swimmer at the Olympics. We wound up in bed together one night after most of the orgy had ended, and she spent the night. I was curious, she thought I was adorable, it worked as a short-term thing.”

“Orgy?” Khan asks, not quite sure he heard correctly.

“I told you,” Jill says, blushing more. “The Olympics are full of horny teenagers looking to get laid. There was usually a nightly orgy going on in someone’s room, and a couple times it was mine or I was in the room where it was happening. I didn’t always take part, but I never slept alone unless I wanted to.”

“When first we met, you said you hadn’t had that many lovers,” Khan comments.

“I haven’t,” Jill says. “The Olympics--I had sex with a bunch of people, but they weren’t my lovers, they were my sexual partners, and honestly, that’s kind of in its own category. I don’t tend to count it when thinking about my sexual history. I didn’t come down with any diseases or get pregnant, everyone had a good time, I refuse to be ashamed of it. Mostly.”

“And yet it makes you blush,” Khan says.

“Involuntary response,” Jill claims. “It’s just...it kind of makes me sound like a giant slut, and I refuse to be slut-shamed or let anyone else make me feel guilty for enjoying sex, but at the same time, I honestly can’t remember how many people I fucked then, and that’s a tad embarrassing. I do remember most of them, but a couple nights kind of blur together.”

“Who was your favorite of the Olympians?” Khan asks.

“His name was Mark,” Jill says. “He was a swimmer, he did the relay and some mid-length races, I think he ended up with a silver and a gold in the relay. He had the body of, like, Apollo, and this curly red hair that he kept almost buzzcut. He loved giving head, and oh, my God, was he good at it. I mean, not that I had a lot of experience to compare back then, but God, he was...” She smiles a little wistfully. “We kept in touch after the Olympics, but drifted apart when I started at the Academy. He did show up unexpectedly for spring break one year, and we didn’t leave his hotel room for three days. But he got married a couple years back, and he’s very happy, has a baby girl now I think.”

“What does he do now?” Khan asks.
“He’s a swim coach and commentator,” Jill says. “He couldn’t leave it behind the way I could, and it was one of the reasons we drifted apart. He wanted to stay in that world, and I wanted to find the next thing.”

“The next thing?” Khan asks.

Jill shrugs. “I go through phases,” she says. “From the time I was about three until I was sixteen, my life was about gymnastics, I mean that’s all I did. Then I decided I was mostly done with gymnastics and moved on to, um, less legal activities, and then I decided I didn’t want to do that forever and threw myself into Starfleet Academy and getting into space, and for a while that’s been my thing, but I like to try new things every vacation. And now I’ve met you, and--you’re not a phase. I don’t know what you are, but you’re not a phase.”

“But I am the next new thing, am I not?” Khan asks.

“I don’t like it when you put it that way,” Jill says. “I believe in fate. I believe I was meant to meet you, to connect with you, and I’m meant to be here, doing what I’m doing.”

“Do you also believe in free will?” Khan asks.

“Absolutely,” Jill says immediately. “But I think that sometimes things happen for a reason and we don’t always know what those reasons are, but life has to happen just that way. If I hadn’t been who I was in my past, I wouldn’t know the bird, and we need her, and I might not know Jake either, and we need him. And--and maybe Andy, but I’d still like to avoid involving him if we can help it.”

“How did you meet Andy?” Khan asks.

“Through Magpie,” Jill says, taking a sip of her drink. “Andy and Magpie go way back, to when Magpie was I think nine. After she and I started working together, and after we’d met in person, she introduced me to Andy because Andy had some tech I needed.”

“The boots and gloves?” Khan asks.

“A couple other things, too, but yeah,” Jill says. “Andy is...special, John. She’s...she’s not like Magpie, or me, or Jake. She’s—he’s—I don’t know if the word innocent is accurate, because he’s seen a lot, but at the same time it’s kind of the only thing that fits.”

“Why do you alternate pronouns for Andy?” Khan asks curiously.

“Because Andy thinks gender roles are socially defined artificial constraints and complete bullshit, and sees no need to conform,” Jill says, smiling. “Because Andy doesn’t care whether you call him a man, a woman, or anything else, and will answer to whatever pronouns you want to use for her. If you meet him, you’ll understand, I think.”

“Do you know what Andy’s biological sex is?” Khan asks.

“In fact I don’t,” Jill says. “I think Magpie does, but I’ve never asked. It’s not important, anyway. I don’t care what Andy has between her legs, I care about how he wants to be treated.”

Khan nods. “I was just curious.”

“It’s getting dark,” Jill observes, looking up at the sky. “Let’s walk?”

They take their drinks and head to the park, taking their time. Jill tosses her empty cup in a trash
can on the way and Khan does the same. “Are you sure you want to--” she starts when they climb the hill.

“I would not have offered if I didn’t,” Khan says, touching her cheek. “But you may wish to tie your hair back.”

“I can do that,” Jill says and takes a couple hairbands out of her pocket, wrestling her hair into a quick braid and tying it off. “Is that better?”

“It should suffice, yes,” Khan says.

They reach the top of the hill and Jill bites her lip, looking at him nervously. “I don’t know how this works,” she admits.

Khan holds out a hand and she takes it, and he draws her in. “Relax, to begin with,” he says, brushing an errant curl back from her face. “This will not work if you are too tense. I won’t let you fall, Jill.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Jill says, but a bit of tension eases out of her.

“Then what are you worried about?” Khan asks.

“You deciding halfway through that you didn’t want to do this after all,” she says, ducking her head. “It’s stupid, I know it’s stupid, but...”

“I am not going to decide that,” Khan says.

“Are you sure?” Jill asks hesitantly.

In response, he picks her up, settling her in his arms, cradled against his chest. She wraps her arms around his neck and tucks her head against his shoulder, and he kisses her hair. “Trust me,” he says softly.

“I do,” Jill murmurs back.

He launches them into the air easily enough; for all that he hasn’t taken anyone flying in a long time, Jill weighs almost nothing and curls into his arms like she’s always been there. He hears her gasp in delight when he gets into the air, and takes them higher and higher, circling as he does, until they can see the lights of London. “Oh, my God,” he hears Jill whisper, but she doesn’t squirm in his arms, doesn’t get in the way of his wings.

Khan keeps them in the air for a while, longer than he usually stays out alone, and only lands because it’s starting to get cold and he can feel Jill shiver a bit. He brings them down a block from her hotel, landing without anyone else around, and before he can set Jill down on the sidewalk she grabs his face and kisses him hard. “Oh, my God,” she says again, eyes wide, breath coming shallow in her chest. “Oh, my God, that was...that was...” She shakes her head, not having words for it. “I don’t even--hotel. Now.” Jill jumps to the ground and grabs his hand before she takes off at a dead sprint, pulling Khan along with her, and in the lift to her room she kisses him like she wants to devour him.

“You have absolutely no idea how much I want you right now,” she says, shoving the door open to her room and pushing him inside before slipping the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the handle and closing it. “Unfortunately I think I’m out of commission for another day or so, so we’ll have to improvise. And by improvise I mean you have to let me suck you. Like right now.”
“I do?” Khan asks, amused and surprised by her reaction.

“God, yes,” Jill says, dropping to her knees in front of him. “That was...Jesus, I think I had an orgasm in the air. How do you survive without getting into the sky on a regular basis? How do you-you know, we can talk later, sex now.”

“Take your hair down first,” Khan says. “Please.”

Jill grins and yanks the bands out of her hair, disheveling the braid and tossing her hair back over her shoulders. Khan slides his hands into the curls and draws her in, and she unfastens his pants, mouthing him through the fabric until he groans.

She really does love this, Khan thinks, watching her slide her mouth down around him, her hand wrapped around the base of his cock. He finds that immeasurably satisfying and also arousing; he’s never been interested in partners who were unwilling or uninterested themselves. But it’s obvious Jill wants this, wants to be doing exactly what she is.

He pushes into her mouth, just a little, and she lets him, humming in approval. His hands tighten in her hair without his being fully conscious of it but she doesn’t protest, doesn’t reach up to stop him or make him loosen his grip. Instead she scratches her nails down his thighs, hard enough to leave marks and make him shiver.

Khan groans softly, watching her, lashes dark against her cheeks and mouth stretched wide around him. Something about her makes his control waver, makes him want in ways he doubts he should and knows he can’t stop. He pushes into her mouth again, holding her head still, and she hums again, one hand relaxing against his thigh and the other moving down to press against her own jeans, her knees shifting a little further apart. “Don’t,” he says, watching her. “Wait for me.”

Jill makes an annoyed sound, but moves her hand back to his thigh, scratching him again. She’s clearly telling him to hurry up and get on with it, and he smiles, deliberately slowing down the pace, taking his time with her. Still, though, he’s closer than he’d like to admit, and it doesn’t take much more before he curses under his breath and comes, releasing his grip on her hair. She swallows, coughs, swipes her hand over her mouth and looks up at him. “That was really unfair,” she says, voice raw.

“I promise to make it up to you,” Khan says, reaching down to pull her to her feet. “Besides, I thought you were out of commission.” He unbuttons her jeans, unzipping them and slipping his hand inside, into the skimpy lace of her panties.

“I forgot how much giving head turns me on,” Jill says, gasping when he touches her clit. “Oh, fuck, that’s...it hurts but God, it feels good. Don’t stop.”

There’s something about both of them still being fully dressed, with clothes pushed just enough out of the way, that makes this almost more arousing than being naked with each other, Khan thinks. He remembers a similar time with Rani, with her skirts rucked up anyhow and his head between her legs; it’s still one of his favorite memories of her.

He pushes it aside for now, focusing on Jill, on the way she shivers and moans and her hips buck against his hand. She comes in almost a matter of seconds, shuddering and gasping out his name. Carefully, Khan eases his hand back, licking his fingers clean, and Jill groans and stumbles back to sprawl out on the bed.

“Fuck me,” she mumbles.
“I think that might be a bit much,” Khan says, fastening his pants and moving to sit next to her.

“Rhetorical, and probably, unfortunately,” Jill says, arms flung over her head. “God, that was...how do you survive down on Earth when the sky’s just waiting there? When you can get away at any time, how do you ever land?”

“By knowing I can get away again when I need to,” Khan says. “By knowing I am not bound by gravity unless I want to be, or unless I become too tired to stay in the air. There is freedom in just having the ability to escape, milaya moya.”

“Yeah, but God, Earth must feel so confining,” Jill says.

“At times, it does,” Khan says honestly.

“That was honestly amazing. I’ve never...that was just...I haven’t even got words. Just...” She shakes her head. “Can we go again sometime?”

“Whenever you want,” Khan says. “You are remarkably easy to carry.”

“There’s not much of me,” Jill agrees. “Get down here, would you? I want a snuggle.”

Khan laughs, a sound that still surprises him vaguely when he hears it, and moves to hold her, letting her curl into him and tuck her head against his chest. “Should we find Jake and the little bird and ask how their searches have been?” he asks.

“Mmf. In a bit. By which I mean yes, we should, but I don’t want to right now.” Jill makes a face, nipping at his collarbone. “I do want you to help me treat the shoulder again, though, in a bit, and maybe the rest of me.”

“Of course,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jill says, and he doesn’t think she’s just talking about his help with the cream. “Just...thank you.”

Khan presses his lips to her hair. “You are welcome.”

Chapter End Notes

A note on Andy, for those curious: I am not attempting to write a primer to genderfluid characters. Andy feels the way she does about pronouns because of experiences he has had in his past, and really honestly enjoys confusing the hell out of people trying to figure out "Is that a boy or a girl, Mommy?" To which Andy will invariably answer "Yes." Andy should not be taken as representative of genderfluid people as a whole. It is not my intent to insult anyone with my descriptions of Andy, and if you feel that I am being disrespectful to genderfluid folks because of how I have described Andy, I am sincerely sorry and would like to know how I can fix this in future. My thoughts on language and non-gender binary pronouns don't really belong here so I will avoid that one, especially as I am not a linguistics student and would like to avoid making any terrible errors.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Today's just full of surprises.

Chapter Notes

I was really hoping to be able to post a chapter on Thanksgiving (I'm American, in case that wasn't obvious) and say thanks for all you lovely people reading along, especially those of you leaving me comments and kudos and things, but it didn't work out. So this is a belated thank you, and I hope you're all still enjoying the story.

If you're reading the Khan backstory comic, clearly this does not fit in with that, because I started this story before the comic came out and it's too late for me to change my head canon, which is fairly locked at this point (if you're reading Flying Free, you'll understand, I think). So I should probably end up tagging this as AU. Thoughts?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Khan leaves Jill mostly asleep the next morning, awake enough to kiss him goodbye and promise she’ll see him later but he thinks she’s asleep again before he leaves the room. He’s glad to see it, truth be told; she’s not one of his people, and she can only run so long on limited amounts of interrupted sleep. With luck, he thinks, she’ll sleep most of the day, but he knows better than to think she will.

He stops for coffee on his way to the archive but still arrives before anyone else gets in, and spends a bit of time catching up on whatever he missed the previous day. There doesn’t appear to be much, which doesn’t surprise him, but what does surprise him are two messages from the people on his team expressing concern as to his sudden illness and hoping he feels better. He doesn’t quite understand why they did that, but doesn’t bother trying to analyze it.

“Harrison,” one of them says, getting into the workspace. “Feeling better?”

“Yes,” Khan says briefly, glancing up from his workstation.

The stocky blond man grins briefly. “Have to admit, we were a bit surprised,” he says. “Some of us had started to think you were some kind of android or something; you’re always first in, last out, and you never take time off, hell half the time you don’t even take a lunch hour. No offense or anything, but it was kind of refreshing to know you’re human like the rest of us, even if you have wings.”

This is a side effect he’d never considered, Khan thinks, and he finds it intriguing. “I assure you, I am human enough,” he says, managing a brief smile.

“Calvin said he saw you leaving here with a woman the other night,” the man--David, Khan remembers, David Smythe--says. Smythe grins, leaning against his desk. “Were you actually sick,
or just taking some personal time?"

Khan considers his answer for two seconds. “She was ill,” he admits.

“Bummer,” Smythe says. “Calvin said she was pretty, if tiny. You been seeing her long?”

“Why are you so curious?” Khan asks mildly.

“It’s nice to know you’re human, like we are, and have interests outside this building,” Smythe says with an easy shrug as Calvin walks in. “You’re always so cold, we were beginning to wonder if anything could get under your skin.”

“Clearly something did,” Calvin says. “Hey, David, Harrison.”

“Hullo,” Smythe says. “You bring me a coffee?”

Calvin hands him a go-cup. “Everything all right, Harrison?”

“Yes,” Khan says, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“His girlfriend was sick,” Smythe says.

“So the ice man has a girlfriend,” Calvin says. “I want to meet the mysterious woman who managed to snag you.”

Khan dislikes the term ‘girlfriend’ but honestly doesn’t have a better one. “She based in London?” Smythe asks. “Is she even Starfleet?”

“She serves on the Marshall, but is relocating to London for a research project,” Khan says honestly enough. These men are not unintelligent, and London has cameras everywhere. If he refuses to tell them anything, they will only go searching on their own, and if he lies to them, they will likely see through it. Not to mention that Khan has never enjoyed lying.

“What’s her rank?” Calvin asks.

“She is a commander,” Khan says. “Currently the Marshall’s first officer.”

Smythe frowns. “I swear I’ve heard of her,” he says, turning to his computer and typing out a couple queries. “Huh, I think I have. Calasti--how the hell do you pronounce her name?”

“Jill,” Khan says and they laugh. “Calastinova, to be precise.”

“Oh, now I remember,” Smythe says. “She did an advanced combat training refresher with my brother-in-law about two years back.”

“How’d it go?” Calvin asks.

“She wiped the floor with him,” Smythe says, grinning. “Apparently he thought she’d be an easy match given her lack of size, and he never quite made up for that mistake.”

Khan doesn’t quite smile, but he can imagine it. “How big is your brother in law?” he asks.

“Two meters and a bit of change, and fairly broad,” Smythe says.

“She can’t even be a meter and a half,” Calvin says, gesturing at Smythe’s screen. “Is she?”
“According to her file, she’s one point four two meters,” Smythe says. “Little over forty kilos.”

“Christ,” Calvin says. “She literally weighs less than half of what I do.”

“You’re also a little under two meters tall,” Smythe points out. “And not exactly a string bean.”

Calvin grins and rubs a hand over his shaved head. “So how’d you meet her, Harrison? This is kind of fascinating, you’ve never made any indication of having a personal life before.”

“I bumped into her on the street,” Khan says.

“Interesting,” Smythe says, and he’s clearly thinking something but doesn’t articulate it. “Anyway, we should get to work, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Calvin says, taking his coffee and moving to his workstation. “Harrison, bring your girlfriend by sometime after we’re done with the classified bits, yeah?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says non-committally.

Smythe snorts. “Harrison for no.”

“No, if he meant no, he’d just tell you no,” Calvin says, logging into his computer. “I think ‘perhaps’ is Harrison for ‘bugger off and stop asking me questions about my girlfriend, you wanker’.”

“I’m still having trouble with the concept of Harrison with a girlfriend,” Smythe says.


“Okay, you can stop there now,” Smythe says with a sigh. “Arsehole.”

Khan somewhat agrees with him, but keeps quiet. “Pay no attention to the wanker,” Smythe tells Khan. “But seriously, bring her by sometime, if she’s around.” He says nothing else, but a moment later an instant message window pops up on Khan’s monitor. She has to be something special to have captured your attention. I’m curious. If I’m out of line, tell me and I’ll back off.

Khan considers his reply, then sends back You have never expressed interest in my life before. Why now?

Smythe types quickly and quietly, which Khan appreciates. Because you actually have one, for once. Calvin and I were starting to think you’d just materialized out of the ether or something. You never talk about your past, you never talk about your family, just suddenly you appeared and got signed onto this project. There’s more to you than we know, and it’s your right not to tell us about it, but you can’t blame us for being curious now that we’ve seen you’re not stone cold all the way through.

These men are trained in research, Khan reminds himself, and once again he reminds himself not to underestimate who he is working with. If they looked hard enough, they could probably put the pieces together, which is not something he wants—they may seem genial and amiable enough, but he knows they are both wholly loyal to Marcus.

Or are they? He wonders if he has just been assuming that, if perhaps he could gain an ally here. It will require a careful approach, but perhaps Jill can help him with that. If he can sow dissent within section 31 itself, perhaps...
I will ask her to stop by when we have finished for the day, he sends to Smythe. For now, let us get to work.

Khan sends Jill an email briefly noting that his colleagues noticed her the other day and are curious, and would she like to stop by around 1700 hours? He doesn’t expect a response from her any time soon, though, and puts it out of his mind.

Two hours later, he gets an email from Jill. Oh my. This should be interesting. See you then, John.

He smiles at it, ducking his head so neither Smythe nor Calvin notice, and returns to work.

At 17:05, he has just logged out of his computer when he gets a message from Jill that she is outside upstairs. “So we do get to meet the mysterious girlfriend,” Calvin says, lightly punching Khan’s shoulder. “Brilliant, mate.”

Khan ignores the punch and shrugs, getting on the lift with Calvin and Smythe and heading up to the unclassified sections of the archive. They walk through the security scans—idly, Khan wonders if Magpie could hack them—and head outside, and Khan sees Jill sitting on the same bench she was using last time she met him here. She’s out of uniform, in jeans and a purple fitted t-shirt under a hoodie, her hair loose behind a headband, and she has on fingerless gloves—Khan’s immediate thought is that she has those on to hide the bruises. Smart of her, he thinks.

Jill bounces to her feet as they approach her, and she grins when she meets Khan’s eyes. “Am I allowed to be here if I’m out of uniform?” she asks, laughing. “I’m off duty, I couldn’t deal with that skirt. Hello, love.” She takes Khan’s hands and stretches up to kiss him lightly.

“We won’t tell,” Calvin says, extending a hand. “Agent Calvin Cruz.”

“Commander Jill Calastinova,” she says, shaking his hand firmly.

“David Smythe. Good to meet you, commander,” Smythe says, shaking her hand next.

“Call me Jill, please,” she says. “Off duty, remember?” She tucks back a loose curl. “Were there plans past meeting the mysterious woman, or was this it? Because I’d love to chat, but not out here, it’s getting cold and I’m small, I don’t have a whole lot of body mass to keep me warm.”

Khan knows this to be an untruth; Jill runs warm normally and between her hoodie, gloves, and the boots she has on he doubts she’s actually cold. But they won’t know that, and it’s well done of her.

“There’s a pub round the corner we go after work sometimes,” Calvin says. “We’ve asked Harrison to join us more than once, but he never has. If you wanted, though, we could go there, get a pint or something?”

“Brilliant,” Jill says. “If that’s all right with you, John?”

“It is fine,” Khan says, curious what she wants to know about his colleagues, what information she will get from them over a drink or two.

“Today’s just full of surprises,” Smythe says. “Have you known him long, Jill?”

“No, not very,” Jill says. “A few days? Most of a week? Something like that.” She takes Khan’s hand as they walk, threading their fingers together; he’s not surprised to feel hers warm against his. “And I have to get back to San Francisco in a few days, but I’ll be back.”

“Right, Harrison mentioned you were doing a research project?” Smythe asks.
“Mm, I am,” Jill says. “The plan is for a six-month project, that’s what’s been approved and what I’m hoping for, and at the end of that time I guess I’ll re-evaluate and figure out where my interests lie. I kind of want a break from what I’m doing now—don’t get me wrong, I love it, but it gets tiring, and I’ve had a long few years.”

“How long have you been on the Marshall?” Calvin asks.

She gives him an impish look. “You say that like you didn’t read my file,” she says.

Caught out, Calvin stammers and stumbles and flushes darker than a man with his skin color should be able to do. “Uh huh,” Jill says, still smiling. “So then you know I’ve been assigned there for five years, three as XO.”

“I’m starting to see why you like her,” Smythe says to Khan.

Khan smiles a little. “Yes.”

They get to the pub and get a table rather than a booth in deference to Khan’s wings, but they’re in a back corner and it’s fairly quiet. “I’ll stand the first round,” Calvin says, getting up from the table. “What do you all want?”

“I know we’re at a pub and I should get a pint, but honestly, I’d really love a vodka, neat,” Jill says. “Something that won’t poison me later, I’m not particular about brand. And a glass of water.”

“Russian, right?” Calvin grins. “Yeah, I can handle that. Harrison? Dave?”

“Guinness, sure,” Smythe says.

Khan asks for the same, thinking Alona would be pleased, and Calvin heads to the bar. “Just don’t get so pissed we have to pour you into a taxi later,” Smythe tells Jill.

She looks indignant. “Please. I’m half Russian, I can handle my liquor. Clearly you didn’t know me in my drinking days.”

“You had drinking days?” Smythe asks.

“About eight of them,” Jill says, grinning. “After finals ended at the Academy each semester there was a group of us who went out and got thoroughly trashed. It was either that or an orgy and those never worked out well.”

Smythe clearly has no idea what to say to that. “You’re taking the piss,” he says finally.

“Scout’s honor,” Jill says immediately. “Seriously, we tried for an orgy my second year. It wasn’t the most amazing sex I’d ever had then but it was fun, but the damned logistics were so much work to arrange we said never again. After that we just got drunk once a semester, once finals were over.”

Smythe shakes his head. “Academy’s changed from my day, clearly,” he says finally.

“I could tell you stories that would turn your hair white,” Jill says cheerfully. “Or maybe his hair.” She reaches up, running her fingers through Khan’s hair playfully. “Then again, he knows me better than you do, so I don’t think it’d shock him quite as much.”

“What did you do?” Khan asks, gently moving her hand away.

“Do when?” Calvin asks, returning with their drinks. “For the lady, a double vodka and a water.
“Guinness for everyone else.”

“Spasiba,” Jill says, taking her glasses. “We were talking about Academy fun.”

“Oh, lord,” Calvin says, taking his seat. “In my day it was all about getting trashed after finals.”

“We were just talking about that,” Jill says. “Poor David was a bit shocked by the orgy my second year, though. I suppose I shouldn’t mention the pre-finals play parties.”

“The what?” Calvin and Smythe say in unison.

“Exactly what they sounded like,” Jill says, taking a sip of her water. “A chance for folks to blow off steam before the madness started.”

“Good Christ,” Calvin says. “How did you wind up in that mess?”

“I helped organize them,” Jill says, as if surprised he has to ask. “My past is many and varied.”

“Clearly,” Smythe says, shaking his head. “No wonder you snared Harrison.”

Jill grins. “I’m a woman of hidden talents.”

“What, can you tie cherry stems in knots with your tongue?” Calvin asks.

“Yes, actually, but that wasn’t quite what I meant,” Jill says. She glances at Khan, smiling, and he shakes his head, but he can’t quite hide the faint smile.

“An actual smile, would you look at that,” Smythe says, thwapping Calvin on the shoulder. “Maybe he is human after all.”

“I’m telling you, he’s an anatomically correct android,” Calvin insists, taking a sip of his pint.

“Mm, pretty sure you’re wrong on that,” Jill says.

“I’m going to regret asking this but how are you so sure?” Calvin says, eyes sparkling.

“Because you can’t scratch an android and leave welts behind,” Jill says sweetly. “And that’s the most innocent of the answers I could have given you, so you might want to be careful about what else you ask me, love.” She picks up her vodka and knocks back a third of it in one swallow.

Smythe snickers into his pint. “She got you on that one, Calvin,” he says.

“Not asking anything else, thanks,” Calvin says, taking a long drink of his Guinness.

“Wise choice,” Jill says. Under the table, she drags her nails up the inside of Khan’s thigh, quick and subtle and hidden from Smythe and Calvin, and enough that he almost loses his poker face before he reaches down to circle his fingers around her wrist. She shivers a little, just enough that he notices, and pulls her hand away, but he tightens his grip to keep her there, knowing he has to be pressing against the bruises, that it has to hurt. Jill makes no indication one way or the other and picks up her glass again, taking a sip.

Khan smiles a little again and lets go of her, and slowly she moves her hand back into her own lap. “So,” she says, and if her cheeks are a little pink Khan figures the others will assume it’s because of the alcohol. “Now what?”

“Apparently David’s brother-in-law had a run-in with you a couple years ago,” Calvin says. 
“Did he? What’s his name?” Jill asks.


Jill tips her head back, thinking. “Big guy,” she says slowly. “Redhead, going bald prematurely, has a tattoo on his right forearm. Thought he could throw me across the room.”

“That’s Will,” Smythe says, laughing. “How the hell did you get the drop on him?”

“I used his own mass against him,” Jill says. “It’s not hard. He’s also slower than I am, because he’s bigger, and he’s used to relying on his size and strength to win fights. I’m not, because I haven’t got either. That makes me faster, more agile, sneakier, and determined. Also, I think I’ve had more training than he has.”

“I still don’t understand how someone your size can pin someone his,” Calvin admits.

“Would you like me to demonstrate?” Jill asks. “We can grab a room and spar, I can move in these clothes.”

“You’re going to regret this,” Smythe tells Calvin.

“Maybe, but I’m still game,” Calvin says. “I’ve had advanced combat training, I think I can at least hold my own against you.”

Jill grins and knocks back most of the rest of her drink. “Then drink up and let’s get out of here,” she says.

They do, and in short order they’re heading to the Starfleet gyms located within the archive, on the “public” floors. As Khan expected, Calvin keeps a locker there, and he ducks into the locker room to change into workout clothes. Smythe signs them into a gym, and Jill moves into it to take off her hoodie and her boots and socks.

“Are you certain of this?” Khan murmurs to her in Russian, waiting for Calvin to join them.

She grins. “The worst that happens, I get my ass handed to me,” she says, braiding her hair back. “Care to go for a bout when I’m done with Calvin?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “Not with the others around.”

“No, of course not,” Jill says. She moves through a few basic stretches before moving to one side of the gym and bouncing on her toes for a moment. Then she takes off into a tumbling run, not one Khan remembers from watching her floor routine but clearly something she’s comfortable with. She lands solidly facing him, arms thrown up, and Smythe whistles.

“Where the hell did you learn that?”

“I was a competitive gymnast for over ten years,” Jill says, turning a cartwheel. “I like to keep my hand in. And here’s Calvin. Shoes off, love, no unfair advantages.”

Calvin grins and takes his shoes and socks off. “Best two out of three?” he asks.

“If you want,” Jill says, moving into the center of the room. “Unarmed only, no weapons, so if you’ve got ‘em, toss ‘em.”

“I don’t,” Calvin says. “Do you?”
“Nope,” Jill says and Khan thinks she’s lying but isn’t about to call her on it. “Someone call start?”

“I will,” Smythe says, looking at the clock on the wall. “Three, two, one, go!”

Calvin is slower than Jill, although not by much, and she spends most of the first few minutes nimbly evading him when he tries to grab her, at one point doing a back handspring to get out of his way. Khan sees the moment when she decides to stop playing around and flatten him, and smiles to himself as she twists in midair and lands a kick to his solar plexus. He hasn’t caught his breath yet when she grabs his arm, twists, pulls, and sends him flying into the mats, and she’s got him pinned in an armlock with her knee in the small of his back a second later.

“Try again?” Jill offers after a moment, getting up and offering him a hand, which he takes. She pulls him easily to his feet.

“Now I see how you did it,” Smythe says.

“Something like that, yeah,” Jill says, grinning. “You want to go a bout?”

“No, thanks,” Smythe says quickly. “For one, I don’t have advanced combat training. For another...no. Have you fought Harrison yet, though?”

“Nope,” Jill says. “Maybe another time.” She smiles at him, though, and Khan feels unaccountably warm from it. “John, call time on this one, let’s try for five minutes and see where we are?”

Calvin nods, Khan calls out when to start, and they start circling each other, neither one willing to make the first move. Jill finally does, and Calvin grabs her fist before the punch can connect and twists. She folds at the knees, twists and rolls and pulls away from him, and sweeps his legs out from under him before jumping to her feet.

He gets the drop on her once, and Khan thinks Calvin might actually pin her but she escapes at the last moment. However, Jill doesn’t quite manage to pin him before the five minutes are up. “Keep going?” she asks him, slightly out of breath and grinning.

“Absolutely,” he says.

“Brilliant,” she says, ducking out of the way of a punch. “Gonna have to be faster than that, love.”

In the end, she gets him after a wrestling match that has them both rolling all over the mats. Khan doesn’t quite know how she avoids getting pinned during that, but every time he thinks Calvin’s about to get her she wriggles out of it, and she finally ends up sitting on his head, knees on either side of his face, with him face down on the mat.

“You know, he probably can’t breathe all that well,” Khan comments after a moment.

“I don’t weigh that much,” Jill says but she moves off Calvin, who still takes a minute or two to get up.

“Clearly I need more practice,” Calvin says finally, pushing to his feet. “And clearly you are kind of terrifying, Calastinova.”

“Me? Never,” Jill says innocently. “You’re not bad, though. But remember, I do this for a living, not research or whatever you’re up to that I can’t know about. I’ve had to fight for my life on more than one occasion. And my brother and I routinely spar when we’re in the same location, and he’s better than I am, so if it makes you feel better I’ll arrange for us to reserve this gym tomorrow and you can come watch him kick my butt.”
“You know, I think I’d like that,” Calvin says. “1800 hours? This gym? I’ll go block it off now. What’s his name?”

“Aaron Jacobs,” Jill says easily.

Calvin looks at Smythe, who whistles. “I’ve heard of him,” he says. “Didn’t know he had a sister, though.”

“We’re not genetically or legally related, but you know how family is,” Jill says, tucking back a loose curl. “You go block off the gym. I think I’m going to stay a bit longer, maybe stretch out a bit if that’s cool?”

“Sure, no problems,” Smythe says. “Nice meeting you, Jill.”

“Likewise,” she says, skipping over to shake hands with both him and Calvin before they leave. She closes and locks the door behind them and turns to Khan. “Spar with me, love,” she says.

Khan takes off his boots and socks and moves out onto the mat. “Don’t bother holding back,” he says.

Jill grins. “I won’t.”

She doesn’t, and he ends up with a few bruises and narrowly avoids a black eye before getting an arm around her throat and pulling her up against him, not-quite choking her. Her feet don’t touch the floor and without his other arm around her waist to support her he really would be choking her. She shudders against him, and he can feel her pulse beating in the hollow of her throat. “Tease,” she whispers after a moment.

“Is there something you want, milaya moya?” Khan whispers in her ear, shifting his hold so his hand is around her throat, not his arm, and his thigh presses between her legs. She shivers again and pushes down against his thigh. “You did like this, before,” he murmurs, nipping her earlobe.

“God, yes,” she breathes, licking dry lips. “But we can’t, not in here, they...don’t they monitor the gyms?”

“Do you really care?” he asks, tightening his grip on her throat, enough that her breath hitches and she can’t draw a full inhalation.

In response, she makes a broken whimper, her body beautifully pliant against his, and he can feel her heat even through her jeans and his clothing. “Please,” she manages, breathless, the word a gasp. “Please.”

“Please what?” he asks, loosening his grip enough for her to talk. “Tell me what you want, milaya moya.”

She swallows hard. “You,” she says finally.

“Yes,” he murmurs, kissing the spot behind her ear. They can’t, though, not here, and he knows it. Still, though, he tightens his hold on her throat again, pushing his thigh more firmly between her legs, and she whimpers again, fingers scrabbling at the arm he has locked around her waist. “Can you come just from this?” he asks, shifting her a little so she has better leverage to rub against him. “Just like this.”

Jill gasps and shudders and grinds down against him. He tightens his hold on her throat, enough to cut off most of her air, and her body jerks, nails digging into his skin. She doesn’t have the breath
to make a sound when she comes, hips bucking and body trembling.

Carefully, Khan gentles his hold on her throat, allowing her to breathe, letting her gulp in air and shiver in his arms. “Beautiful,” he murmurs, kissing her temple.

“Let’s take this somewhere else,” Jill says hoarsely, but it still takes a moment before she indicates he can put her down, and she wobbles when she lands on her feet.

“Tell me something,” Khan says, watching her move to pull on her hoodie and socks and boots. “Why does this arouse you so much?” He slips into Russian out of habit.

“Promise you won’t laugh at me?” Jill asks in return, lacing up her boots.

“Of course I will not,” he says.

“it’s...” Jill sighs and pulls the band out of her braid, running her fingers through it to fluff out the curls. “It’s the feeling of--that--that there’s nothing I can do to stop you, that you’re literally controlling everything you can about me, down to whether or not I can breathe. I don’t...I don’t normally get off on that, for the record. I don’t like being helpless, I never have. But God, everything’s different with you, and this...” She sighs and runs her hands through her hair again. “I guess that’s where the difference lies.”

Khan walks over to her and takes her hands, lifting her to her feet. “I am not certain you should trust me,” he admits, his hands on her waist.

“You got me through Dante,” Jill says softly. “After that, why shouldn’t I?”

He smiles a little. “You might have a point.”

“I often do,” she says, running her hands up his arms. “It may not always be a good point, but I usually have one. Anyway. We should go get dinner, and then we should go back to my hotel so you can fuck me.”

“Should we?” Khan asks, smiling.

“Unless you’d rather do that in reverse order and get room service,” Jill says.

Khan brushes a curl back from her face. “No, I think I would like to go out tonight,” he says. “I can wait, and there are some things I would like to discuss with you.”

“All right,” Jill says. “Let’s go eat and talk.”

This time he does take her to the Italian place, and they get served a basket of warm bread and glasses of Chianti without even asking; no one even asks Jill for her ID, which clearly surprises her but she doesn’t question it. “I come here semi-regularly,” Khan says, taking a sip of his wine. “I recommend just asking for whatever the chef thinks is best. I have not been disappointed yet.”

“I can do that,” Jill says, tearing off a piece of bread. She pours a little olive oil onto the dipping plate, adds a swirl of vinegar, and slides the bread through before taking a bite. “Oh, that’s wonderful,” she says after swallowing. “That’s really quite good.”

“Our chef will be pleased to hear it,” the waiter says, appearing in a swirl of white linen and brandishing a very large menu. “The wine list, if what you have is not to your liking?”
“No, this is perfect,” Jill says, smiling at him. “Just what I was in the mood for.”

“Excellent,” he says, smiling back. “For you tonight, I think perhaps something with seafood, yes? The chef is doing amazing things with shrimp and scallops, I think it will be just what you did not know you wanted.”

“But I already want it, so how can I not know I wanted it?” Jill counters.

“But you do not know precisely what the chef will make specifically for you,” the waiter points out.

Jill laughs. “Whatever he makes will be fine with me,” she says. “Grazie.”

“Prego,” he says and turns to Khan. “Ah, a familiar face we have not seen in far too long, and yes, I know exactly what to tell the chef for you, if you are willing to trust to my simple judgment?”


“I will be right back,” the waiter promises and disappears.

“That’s not just dinner, it’s dinner and a show,” Jill murmurs, eyes bright with laughter. “I see why you come here. How did you find it?”

“I was walking through the city, happened to be hungry, and was here,” Khan says. “I did not think I had to worry much about being observed or followed, and the food turned out to be far better than I had even hoped.”

Jill nods, taking a sip of her wine. “So what do you want to talk about?”

“Smythe and Cruz,” Khan says, tearing off a piece of bread for himself. “What do you think of them?”

“More intelligent than they want to let on,” Jill says, considering. “Decent enough, but I think they’d both kill without blinking. Not really sure how loyal they are to Marcus or section 31 or whatever, though, I’d need to do more research into that and their weak spots and get to know them a bit better. Calvin’s a bit obvious in some ways but I think some of that’s a front.”

Khan nods. “Would the bird be willing to research them for us?”

“Oh, sure,” Jill says. “We’ll ask her tonight, if she’s still around. When I talked to her earlier today she was making noises about having to leave for Boston for a few days on a job, and I think she misses Gina.”

“Where is her permanent home?” Khan asks.

“I’m not sure she has one,” Jill says. “She’s always on the go for jobs or just for fun, although she generally stays on Earth. I know she has an apartment in Boston, and one in San Francisco, and I think one somewhere in Spain, maybe. But she’s kind of a born gypsy, loves to travel.”

“Does she speak anything other than English?” Khan asks.

“Spanish,” Jill says. “And she says she can mostly follow conversations in a couple other languages but she can comprehend more than she can speak. Russian’s not one of hers, as far as I know, though.”

The waiter returns then with two salad plates, setting one in front of each of them. “Enjoy,” he says.
and disappears before either of them can thank him.

Jill laughs and picks up her fork. “So,” she says. “I have to head back to San Francisco in about three days, which is going to suck, but I’ll be back and forth most likely until I’m settled in London. I found a friend willing to apartment-sit my place in San Francisco, which isn’t a big deal as half the time I’m shipped out and not there anyway. The same friend has offered to start packing up things where I don’t need to decide on stuff, like my uniforms and a couple other things. I’ll deal with my civvies and toiletries and personal items when I get back. Wish I could take you with me, though.”

“What else do you have to do in San Francisco?” Khan asks.

Jill swallows a bite of salad before answering. “There are a couple people I want to talk to,” she says. “I promise not to reveal anything about you without running it by you first, but...I want to hit up a couple of my contacts and see what I can do.”

Clearly she doesn’t want to reveal more than that right now. Khan considers asking more questions and decides against it; it may be better that he not know. “Are there items you need to buy for the London flat?” he asks.

“So many,” Jill says. “I placed a giant order for all kinds of things earlier today, should get delivered on Sunday when my lease starts, which is not-so-coincidentally the day before I leave. So I won’t have time to organize anything, which is kind of a joke anyway, I’m a horrible organizer and can never find anything when I need it. But it’ll be there when I get here again.”

“If you like, I could attempt to find order among your belongings,” Khan says, not quite sure why he’s making the offer but on the other hand, she’s doing all this because of him anyway.

“Sure,” Jill says, smiling. “I’ll get a spare access card for you before I leave, or just give you mine and you can give it back later. You totally don’t have to, though.”

“I know,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jill says, taking a sip of her wine. “How long have you been working with those two?”

“About three months so far,” Khan says. “They are intelligent enough, I suppose.”

“That’s damned with faint praise,” Jill says with a laugh. “But I see what you mean about them. How the hell have you survived working with them for three months?”

Khan shrugs. “When there is no alternative, one adapts. And they usually leave me alone.”

“So it’s my fault?” Jill asks mock-indignantly.

“I did not say that,” Khan points out.

“Implied,” Jill says, giving him a look.

He smiles and takes a bite of salad. Jill laughs and shakes her head, brushing a curl back behind her ear. “You’re impossible,” she says.

“I have been told that before,” Khan says.

“By who?” Jill asks.
“More than a few people,” Khan says. “Some who didn’t believe a winged human could exist. Some who didn’t believe I could do everything I said I would. Rani, when she felt I was being particularly obstinate.”

“I would have liked her,” Jill says.

“I think so,” Khan agrees.

“How did you meet her?” Jill asks.

“She became a hostage,” Khan says. “I took over her city, and she became my hostage in exchange for my releasing her father and her brothers and a few other people. In time, she became one of my chief negotiators.”

“I see,” Jill says. “What happened to her?”

Khan takes a sip of his wine to give himself a moment. “She died,” he says, the simple words burning his throat. “She became ill, cancer, and she did not tell me until it was too late. I could have saved her, if she had come to me earlier, but she did not know, and she did not want me to worry, and she died.”

Something passes over Jill’s face and she looks down at her salad plate. “Tell me,” Khan says.

“It’s not my place, and I don’t want to upset you,” Jill says softly.

“Tell me,” Khan says again, a little more firmly, and Jill sighs.

“You loved her more than she loved you,” she says. “If she had loved you enough, she would have told you sooner, soon enough to do something about it. But she didn’t, or she didn’t trust you enough, and because of that, she died.”

“I have thought that before,” Khan admits. “She did love me, Jill, I know that.”

“But not enough,” Jill says quietly.

“She was afraid,” Khan says. “And...perhaps it wasn’t enough.”

“I’m sorry,” Jill murmurs.

“It doesn’t matter,” Khan says. “She died centuries ago, years before even we left Earth. I have had time to grow used to not having her.”


“Thank you,” Khan says, the words feeling foreign to him for some reason.

Jill tears off another chunk of bread and breaks it in half, handing him a piece. “Magpie says she contacted Andy to ask about getting some new equipment,” she says, changing the subject entirely. “I don’t know exactly what she asked for, but maybe she’ll pick it up when she’s back in America. Andy bases out of San Francisco and New York mostly.”

“Does Andy speak any languages other than English?” Khan asks.

“Why do you always ask that?” Jill counters.

“Because I find the growing rise of monolingualism in this world puzzling,” Khan says. “In my
original time, there were so many languages, and my brothers and sisters and I learned many. To not do so would have been like crippling ourselves. I find it amazing that in today’s day and age, even with the universal translator, so many people confine themselves to a single, often inadequate language.”

“Okay, point,” Jill says. “I’ve never understood it either, to be honest. And Andy speaks Mandarin, English, I think Japanese, and something else I’m blanking on at the moment. Italian, maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Mandarin isn’t easy to learn,” Khan comments.

“No, it’s not, but I think she grew up with it,” Jill says. “I don’t know much about Andy’s background.”

“Did he grow up on the streets with Magpie?” Khan asks in Russian.

Jill’s eyes widen briefly. “The bird told you that? That surprises me. She doesn’t tell most people where she comes from.” She, too, uses Russian.

“She did,” Khan says.

“That...okay,” Jill says. “But you were asking about Andy. The answer is I don’t know. I don’t think Andy grew up on the streets the same way Magpie did, but I know Andy spent a few years out there. From things he’s said, I think but am not sure she got kicked out of her house, and ended up on the streets and met Magpie. Andy’s older than I am, for the record, and I’m older than Magpie.”

“And you said Andy met Magpie when Magpie was nine,” Khan says.

“I did,” Jill says. “Which would have made Andy around fifteen or sixteen.”

Their waiter arrives again with a flourish to clear away their salad plates and serve the entrees. He seems to see they’re distracted, though, and keeps quiet. Khan looks at his plate and has to admit it does look appealing, although he does not specifically know what is involved in the meal.

“Interesting, then, that you describe Andy as innocent despite his time on the streets,” he says when the waiter has left them.

“Innocent isn’t quite the right word,” Jill says, making a face. “It’s more...Magpie’s in some ways very cynical, very jaded. And I’m not saying she shouldn’t be. But Andy’s still...Andy still believes people are fundamentally good at heart, despite everything she’s been through. Andy’s an idealist and a dreamer and I don’t understand how he’s still like that, how he isn’t...hard. But that’s Andy for you.”

“Interesting,” Khan says.

“I don’t want Andy mixed up in this,” Jill says. “I may not have a choice on that--Andy’s about as stubborn as I am when she gets it in her head that someone needs her--but I’m hoping to keep him out of it for a while. But if you want to meet him, I can probably arrange that.”


Jill shrugs. “Little of one, little of the other. Andy has his own moral code, and will absolutely turn down jobs from people he doesn’t think deserve his skills, but what she thinks is fair and what the law says don’t always see eye to eye.”
“The law is not always fair,” Khan says.

“That’s about right,” Jill agrees. She turns her attention to her meal, and Khan does the same.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of things in this story came about because I was like "Huh, that makes no sense now that I'm actually thinking about it and not just in my happy place" about the movie. One of those was that it probably takes more than one person to design torpedoes and ships and things, especially if that person (regardless of whether his intelligence has been augmented or not) is still adjusting to a time three hundred years removed from his own. So I gave Khan co-workers who don't know the truth about him. Your thoughts on the idea, dear readers?
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Nothing about this past week makes sense.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for an emotional rollercoaster of a chapter that I'm posting before I talk myself out of it. Um. Please tell me if this worked for you or did not and why?

Other warnings for mentions of previous drug abuse and prostitution, although if you've been reading along so far you're probably not surprised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday passes quietly, without Magpie in town and with Jake gone most of the day. Khan does get to watch Jake and Jill spar Saturday afternoon, and finds himself somewhat impressed with Jake’s skills. He would not win against Khan, of course, but he clearly knows what he’s doing. Khan also notes that Jill and Jake seem to be more evenly matched than Jill claimed; she wins once, he wins twice, and the second of those almost ends in a draw before Jake manages to pin Jill at the last moment.

Smythe and Cruz also show up to watch the spar, but neither of them take Jill or Jake up on their offer to go a bout. “I learned my lesson the other day,” Cruz says, grinning. “And Smythe’s smarter than I am, he hasn’t even tried.”

Jill stretches and falls backward into a handstand, walking over and coming upright again. “That wasn’t terrible,” she says, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. “You need to show me how that works, though.”

“What, how I pinned you?” Jake asks.

“Yeah,” Jill says. “I wasn’t expecting that, which was how you got me.”

Jake grins. “I can’t give away all my secrets.”

She punches his shoulder lightly. “Show me,” she says.

As he walks her through the move, Smythe and Cruz make their goodbyes and leave, claiming a prior engagement. Jill and Jake pause to say goodbye, but immediately return to what they were doing once the door closes. “Yeah, I’m not sure I can pull this off,” Jill says after Jake walks her through it twice. “I think I’d need longer arms, or legs, or both.”

“Maybe,” Jake says. “John, care to spar with us? Two on one, or every person for himself or herself?”

“Two on one might be fairer, but we’re still going to lose,” Jill says.
Jake’s eyebrows go up. “He’s that good?”


Khan considers it for a moment, then shrugs. “All right.”

Jake makes a couple hand gestures as Khan steps onto the mat, jerking his head toward Khan, and Jill nods and gestures back, smoothing her hair back even though she has it pulled back and braided tightly to her head. Khan finds himself amused by the interplay, but doesn’t comment. “On three,” Jill says, bouncing on her toes. “One. Two. Three. Go!”

They move together seamlessly, covering for each other and doing their best to keep Khan off-balance. It still doesn’t make the fight fair; nothing would, short of both of them being engineered, but it does make it more interesting. Khan holds back just a little, just enough so the fight doesn’t end in a minute, and from the snort Jill makes she can tell.

She does catch him completely off-guard at one point, when she slips back, out of Khan’s reach. Jake presses his attack then, and Khan doesn’t get a chance to look back and see what Jill’s doing before he hears her running toward him on the mats. He looks back just in time to see her do a handspring, vault into the air, and land on his shoulders, her forward momentum making him stumble and go to his knees. Jake whoops in delight, catching Jill when Khan throws her off him and pushes back to his feet easily. At that point, Khan decides to stop holding back, and shortly thereafter the fight ends with him calling a kill on Jake and getting Jill pinned.

“God, that was awesome,” Jake says, jumping to his feet. “Again?”

“I need a minute,” Jill says, taking the hand Khan offers her and getting to her feet. “I can’t believe that almost worked, either.”

“I don’t think he was expecting you to jump on him,” Jake says, laughing.

“No one ever does,” Jill says, grinning. “Couldn’t quite call a kill out of it, though.”

“Have you been able to before?” Khan asks.

Jill nods. “You want me to demonstrate on Jake?”

Jake sighs. “Must you?”

“Yes,” Jill says. “Stand about--yeah, there.” She backs up behind him, takes a breath, and runs for him, handspringing into the air and landing on his shoulders. Jake goes down in a controlled fall, and Jill has her hands on his neck before he hits the mat. “Broken neck,” she says, glancing up at Khan.

“Have you ever used that move outside of a spar?” Khan asks.

Jill scrambles off Jake and gets to her feet. “Once, and it worked,” she says. She gives Jake a hand and pulls him to his feet easily. “The bad guy was fighting a different member of my crew, didn’t notice me, and I got the drop on him. It’s harder to use in a two-person fight because I can’t always get the distance I need to make the vault successful.”

Khan nods; it makes sense. “It was well done,” he says. “I admit I was not expecting that.”

“Awesome,” Jill says, grinning. “Want to try this again, or are you done?”
“One more? Please?” Jake asks hopefully, and Khan almost laughs before he stops himself. They are both so eager, he thinks, even though Jill knows she can’t win against him and he thinks Jake does too.

“One more,” he says, and the three of them move back into the center of the mat. This spar lasts about the same amount of time, but neither Jake nor Jill pull their blows and Khan only holds back enough that he doesn’t break either of them. It ends similarly to the last one, with Jill sprawled on her back and Jake pinned, and even after Khan releases him Jake doesn’t move. “Did I injure you?” Khan asks, kneeling next to him.

“No, I’m okay,” Jake says without moving. “Just haven’t had a spar that strenuous in a while. God, that was good. Shorty, you all right?”

“Yeah,” Jill says, also without moving. “Think I’ve got a few new bruises, though, and I want a shower.” She stays still for another few seconds, then jumps to her feet. “Need a hand?”

“No, just give me a moment,” Jake says. He groans and rolls to his feet, rubbing the back of his neck. “That really was pretty awesome,” he says to Khan.

“Most people would not be so excited about losing a spar,” Khan says.

Jake shrugs. “I learned a couple things even if I did lose, and I went into it knowing I probably would given what Jill said. You’re damned good, Harrison. I’d love to see you against someone who could give you more of a challenge than we could.”

“This was not unenjoyable,” Khan says. “Perhaps some day you will get your wish.”

“I hope so,” Jake says, stretching. “I really hope so. I’m going to go grab a fast shower and take off, I’ve got to be back in San Francisco tomorrow morning for a work thing I can’t really talk about. I should be back in a couple weeks, though, and I’ll call when I’m free and we’ll go from there.”


“I’ll do my best,” Jake says, kissing her forehead. “Good meeting you, Harrison. I’ll be in touch.” He extends a hand, and Khan shakes it. “Don’t do anything crazy, shorty,” he says, heading for the door.

“Hi, have we met?” Jill asks, laughing. “How about if I just don’t get caught?”

“That’ll work,” Jake says, flashing her a grin before he slips out of the room.

Jill laughs again and stretches her arms over her head. “Man, that was fun,” she says. “Thank you.”

“If you shower quickly, we can get dinner and go flying,” Khan says.

“Ten minutes,” Jill says, stretching up to kiss his cheek before she runs for the door.

While she showers, Khan does the same, using the sonics because he finds them easier with wings. He changes into regular clothes, puts his workout clothes in a locker, and comes out of the building a minute before Jill does, her wet hair pulled back in a braid and dressed in civilian clothes, gym bag over her shoulder. “Where are we going for dinner?” she asks.

“What are you in the mood for?” Khan asks.

“Spicy,” Jill says firmly. “And I think...something from Earth. Mexican, maybe, or Indian? Wait,
definitely Indian.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“I want naan,” Jill says, grinning. “And maybe a chai.”

“All right,” Khan says, smiling briefly. He takes her to a different place than the first night, not much from the outside but he sees Jill smile when they step inside and she can smell the spices. “When were you introduced to Indian food?” he asks once they have a table.

“As a kid,” Jill says. “My mother liked cooking and one of her friends had moved to America from--oh, now I can’t remember. Mumbai, maybe? So they would exchange recipes all the time, and my mom’s friend had a son a little older than I was, so I would eat dinner at his house sometime and he at mine, and I just got used to it. I was never a really picky eater, though. I know a lot of kids are, but I ate anything. Still do.”

“You were also physically active,” Khan says. “And likely burning many calories.”

“Also true,” Jill says. “My mom was pretty good at making sure I ate stuff that was good for me, though. I mean, she still had things like cookies in the house, but once I really got into gymnastics I was a lot more careful about what I ate and making sure I got enough protein in me and things.”

“Are you close to your parents now?” Khan asks, realizing he knows very little about them.

Jill’s mouth twists and she shrugs a shoulder. “Kind of not really,” she says. “I try to see them a couple times a year, when I’m not shipped out, and we talk fairly regularly, but we’re not, like, super close. Never have been. They don’t really understand me in some important ways. They’ve never understood why I joined Starfleet, for example, and my mother often tries to talk me into resigning my commission and settling down so I can give her grandkids before she’s too old to enjoy them and I’m too old to have them.”

“I see,” Khan says.

Jill shrugs again. “They love me, and they’re proud of me, but they don’t get me. It’s not a big deal. I don’t have a ton of parental issues. I don’t know if they’ll ever get grandkids out of me, for example, but I’m not about to have a baby just to make my mother happy.”

“Smart of you,” Khan says.

“I do try,” Jill says, giving him a quick grin.

Over dinner, they talk quietly about odds and ends; Jill’s plans for San Francisco, whether Magpie will return before she leaves, what Khan will be doing while Jill is in America. “I know you want to move your family,” Jill says softly. “But I’m asking you to wait until I get back, at least.”

“The torpedoes need to be built up to a certain point before I could even consider it,” Khan says. “We will not accomplish that in three weeks.”

“All right,” Jill says. Clearly, she has an idea or two, and just as clearly, she’s not ready to reveal those yet.

Khan considers pressing her for answers and decides against it. He thinks he can probably deduce much of what she’s thinking, truth be told, and he finds her reticence on this somewhat charming, given how freely she shares most of her thoughts and opinions with him.
When the bill arrives, both of them move to take it, and in the end Jill gives in, letting Khan pay for dinner. “So,” she says as they leave. “Back to the hotel to drop my bag and then to the park?”

“Yes,” Khan says and she smiles.

They take a taxi to her hotel and duck inside for Jill to drop her gym bag and pull on a hoodie and her fingerless gloves. “Why those and not regular gloves?” Khan asks as they wait for the lift.

“My hands feel too confined in regular gloves,” Jill says. “Also, most of them are too big for me unless I shop in the children’s department and their gloves are uniformly ugly. This is the best compromise I can make, and a friend made them for me because I couldn’t find a pair that fit. They were my holiday present last year, four pair of them.”

“What did you give your friend in return?” Khan asks.

“Nothing I made myself,” Jill says, laughing. “I’m not at all crafty or creative like that. I can’t sew, I can’t knit, I can’t cook, I can’t do any of that stuff. I think I gave her a necklace and earrings I found somewhere off-planet.”

“Did you ever want to learn?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jill says. “No, I was never interested in that sort of thing. I was more interested in learning how to bluff at poker and how to calculate the odds at blackjack and how to avoid being seen by security cameras.”

They exit the hotel and start heading down the block to the Tube station. About halfway there, Khan’s attention gets caught by the tall person walking toward them. He can’t quite tell the person’s gender—the face is androgynous, and whatever makeup he or she is wearing gives him no clues one way or the other. The long black trench coat they wear conceals body shape, giving him an impression of slender arms and legs, and their long black hair blends into the coat. “Jill-Bear,” the person calls and Jill laughs.

“Andy, what are you doing here?” She runs for Andy, though, hugging her hard and getting hugged back in return. “You shouldn’t be here,” Jill scolds. “I don’t want you mixed up in this...stuff.”

Andy tweaks Jill’s braid. “You can’t protect me from everything, sweetheart, and I think you and yours might need my skills.” He kisses Jill’s forehead and turns to Khan. “You must be John. I’m Andy.” She holds out a hand bare of any jewelry and Khan shakes it.

“Well, but I’m only here for two more days then I’m going back to San Francisco to pack up and stuff,” Jill says, looping her arm through Andy’s. “So I’m still not sure why you’re here.”

“I have presents,” Andy says. “Some for you, some for the bird, some for other people.”

Jill eyes Andy. “Please tell me you’re not giving her explosives.”

“Would I do that?” Andy manages to sound amused and indignant in the same breath. “You know I don’t deal in weapons. Well, mostly.”

“Mostly,” Jill says. “Except for that one time in Paris.”

“And that other time in New York,” Andy says. “And—anyway. John, I have a couple presents for you, is there someplace we can go and talk?”

“For me?” Khan asks, surprised.
“Unless there’s another John with wings I should know about,” Andy says, smiling and revealing a
dimple in his left cheek. Her eyes, Khan notes, are dark as her hair, and slightly tilted at the
corners.

“I’m pretty sure he’s unique,” Jill says. “Let’s go back to my hotel, since we’re right here.”

Inside Jill’s room, Andy takes off his coat to reveal slim-cut black pants and a black button-up
shirt. Khan can see the faint swell of breasts under her shirt, but doesn’t know if they’re real,
padding, implants, or if he’s just seeing things. He’s never met anyone quite like Andy before, and
without knowing much about her, he still finds himself intrigued, and wonders how he met
Magpie.

“I’d offer you tea but I’d have to nuke the water,” Jill says apologetically. “All I have is a
coffeemaker.”

Andy makes a face. “Delightful as that sounds, I’ll pass,” he says. “I’m in bloody London, I’m sure
I can get a proper cuppa later. For now, Christmas has come early and I’m playing Santa, or maybe
an elf, what do you think?”

“I think you’re too tall to be an elf and too skinny to be Santa,” Jill says, watching Andy take the
desk chair. “Also, I want your boots, where did you get them?”

“This little boutique in Soho,” Andy says, extending a leg to show off her boots. “You can’t have
these, though, they wouldn’t fit you because you have tiny feet and I do not.”

“You’re also a third of a meter taller than I am,” Jill says. “Anyway, presents. What’ve you
brought us?”

Andy picks up her messenger bag and opens it, taking out a box wrapped in silver paper. “For you,
John,” he says, holding it out. “Magpie mentioned your place was probably bugged, and, well, I
don’t really approve of bugging unless I’m the one doing it, so this will block anything currently in
your flat. You can turn it off, to allow Big Brother to see what you’re doing if you like, or you can
substitute a recording using this little gadget I built for you.” She takes out another box and hands it
to Khan. “This way they don’t realize they’re being blocked and you don’t have to worry about
them seeing things they shouldn’t.”

Khan takes the boxes. “Thank you,” he says for lack of anything else.

“I’ll show you how to use them later, although they’re fairly straightforward,” Andy says. “For
you, Jill, I have a jammer for your London flat—did you find one, didn’t you? If not, I can help with
that.”

“I’m two floors up from him,” Jill says, pointing at Khan. “So the jammers will come in very
handy.”

Andy grins. “Excellent. I do love it when my work is appreciated.”

“I always appreciate your work,” Jill says. “And your legs.”

“You can’t have my legs, darling, they’re attached to me,” Andy says serenely. “Where’s the
bird?”

Jill sighs and sits down on the bed. “Gathering information or on a job, I’m not sure which. She
had to leave London to deal with some stuff in Boston and then I think she was going to San
Francisco, and after that I don’t know. She’ll turn up. She always does. What did you bring her?”
“You’ll see when she gets it,” Andy says. “It’s a present, that means it’s a surprise. I promise it will not explode or wreak havoc, though.”

“Well, that’s something at least,” Jill says. “Where did you get in from? Do you have a hotel room?”

“I was in New York before this, and I do have a place to stay,” Andy says. “It really ended up being convenient that you were here, as I’ve a few things to take care of in the area. A client of mine requested some specialized gear and I wanted to bring it in person.”

“Who’s the client?” Jill asks.

“You know I can’t tell you that,” Andy says reproachfully. “Non-Starfleet, though, I can say that much. But Starfleet and I don’t deal much with each other.”

“Andy’s like Magpie in that regard,” Jill tells Khan, sitting down on the bed. “Are you hungry? We’ve eaten, but I could order you something from room service, or we could go out and keep you company.”

“I’ll get something later,” Andy says, waving a hand. “Not to worry. I must say, love, you certainly did well for yourself. I mean, of course Magpie gave me a description, but I thought she was being her usual extravagant self, and truly, not. He’s beautiful.”

“Don’t even start,” Jill says, holding up a hand. “I’ve already told Magpie no, never, not happening. Mine.”

“I’m appreciating aesthetics, not trying to steal your man,” Andy protests. “You should know I don’t poach.”

“I didn’t think the bird did either but she won’t stop trying to get in his pants,” Jill says, scowling.

“Probably because she knows it irritates you and thus amuses her,” Andy says. “And let’s be realistic, Magpie’s an artist, she appreciates beauty.”

“She is an artist?” Khan asks, surprised.

Jill nods. “She does pencil sketches and watercolors mostly, when she’s not data mining or hacking things. She thought about going full-time in art for a bit, decided she’d rather eat regularly and save up some cash, but she’s made a bit of a name for herself as an artist. She doesn’t paint as Magpie, just in case you were to go looking.”

“What name does she paint under?” Khan asks, curious now.

Jill looks at Andy, who shrugs. “R.M. Lewis,” Andy says. “Jill has some of her work in her San Francisco apartment, I have a couple pieces in my loft in New York.”

The name isn’t familiar to Khan, but he didn’t expect it would have been. He hasn’t exactly had time to take in twenty-third century culture since being revived.

“I bet she’d love to sketch you, though,” Andy says to Khan. “I’m surprised she hasn’t asked yet.”

“I haven’t time to be sketched,” Khan says briefly, moving to sit on the bed next to Jill.

“So she’d take a few pictures and work from that,” Andy says. “Or maybe she already has. She’s sneaky like that, and she has electronics that take pictures without telling you they’re doing it.”
“Yes, that you designed for her,” Jill says, laughing.

“Only one,” Andy protests. “Well, all right, two, but she helped with that one.”

“Did you design the bird pin she wears?” Khan asks.

“I did,” Andy says. “That’s version five, for the record. We improve it every couple of years, as new parts come out.”

“What does it do?” Khan asks.

“Many, many things,” Andy says. “It’s possibly the most complicated piece of equipment I’ve ever designed. It monitors security systems, lets you know when someone is coming in if you’re hooked in. Tells you if someone’s wearing a bug--within limits, it’s not as powerful as the jammers I build, but it’ll get most things. It can hack into most moderate security systems and download information, although it doesn’t have a filter so you’ll end up getting everything. And it’s kind of the bird’s calling card. See the pin, know who you’re dealing with, if you’re smart enough. If you’re not, you just think it’s a pretty pin.”

“When did you make the first version?” Khan asks.

“Mm, maybe fifteen years ago?” Andy guesses, thinking about it. He brushes back a lock of hair, considering. “Yes, that sounds about right, because Jill had just started at the Academy and Magpie was upset and I distracted her with new shiny toys until she stopped sulking.”

“She didn’t talk to me for six months,” Jill says, sighing. “Andy had to play go-between. It was not a fun time for anyone.”

“Especially me,” Andy says with a grimace. “But we got past it, eventually.”

“Eventually,” Jill agrees, falling backward on the bed. “Do you want a cuppa? I can run out and get you one, there’s a decent cafe half a block over.”

“Do you trust me with your man while you run out?” Andy teases.

Jill snorts. “Hands off, and I won’t be gone long. John, do you want anything?” She pushes up and kisses Khan lightly before getting to her feet.

Khan asks for tea, which makes Jill smile. She pulls her hoodie back on, grabs her wallet, and disappears. “So,” Andy says once the door closes behind her. “I thought I was unique, but I’ve never heard of a human with wings before, and I’ve seen a lot. It makes me wonder where you came from, and how you became what you are, but I generally leave the hacking to the bird.”

“Generally,” Khan comments.

Andy grins. “Well, every now and again I like to keep my hand in, just like Magpie occasionally helps me design hardware.” She tucks a lock of hair back, studying Khan. “And Jill occasionally steals things for us, even now.”
“What has she stolen lately?” Khan asks.

“That, my dear John, would be telling,” Andy says, laughing. “Although if I understand correctly, she’ll be stealing people for you soon, yeah?”

Khan doesn’t let himself show a reaction. “Where did you hear that?” he asks mildly.

“Where do you think?” Andy asks. “Magpie’s possibly my oldest friend in the world, John, and there’s very little we don’t tell each other. Which is how I knew this was something I needed to be involved in, because she didn’t want to tell me what was going on when we spoke. I got some of it out of her, some of it I pieced together on my own, some of it I’m still figuring out. I know enough to know that your family’s in trouble, being held at a secure facility that Jill and Magpie are planning on breaking into in order to get some of them out. I know you’re not in Starfleet willingly, and I know you know more about the kind of life Magpie and I had growing up than Jill ever will, although I don’t think you’re a survivor the way we are.”

“No,” Khan says. “Not in that way.”

“I’m glad,” Andy says softly. A shadow passes over his face. “I never wanted Jill to know what that was like, either, and...she came closer than I ever wanted to happen to her. But that’s her story to tell, not mine.”

“Will you tell me your story?” Khan asks.

“Do you really want to hear it?” Andy asks.

“I do,” Khan says, which seems to surprise her.

“Short version, I got kicked out of my house at fourteen,” Andy says. “Ended up on the streets, met Magpie, who was nine and knew nothing else. She taught me how to survive, I protected her a little, as best I could. We built up our skills--her with software, me with hardware--and built our reputations and eventually moved on from selling our bodies to selling our talents. We got our first place together when I was twenty, and we haven’t been on the streets since. I’ve been clean since I was twenty-one, and I haven’t had sex in a long time because...that gets complicated. I envy Magpie that sometimes, that she’s able to separate what she did from what she wants and take lovers as they please her. It’s...it’s harder for me.”

“I can imagine it would be,” Khan says.

Andy smiles a little and pushes her hair back. “Were you born in the gutter or did you fall between the cracks?” he asks.

“I was born for a purpose,” Khan says carefully. “And everything in my childhood and adolescence was about fulfilling that purpose.”

“I see,” Andy says. “And now?”

“Now I need to protect my family,” Khan says.

“Family’s important,” Andy says. “Especially the kind you choose. I know the hard way that biological connections mean jack shit.”

“Yes,” Khan agrees. “My sisters and brothers are not genetically related to me, but we are family in ways no one else could ever be.”
“How many do you have?” Andy asks.

“Seventy-two,” Khan says.

Andy whistles. “Big family.”

“At one point there were a hundred and thirty of us,” Khan says, not sure why he is telling her this. “Ninety-one survived to adulthood, eighty-four survived past that, seventy-two are still in hibernation.”

“Hiber--that’s what I was missing,” Andy says, eyes widening. “Okay. Now everything makes a lot more sense.”

“Does it?” Khan asks.

“Much,” Andy says. “So the next question is do you know how to revive your family, or do I have to research cryotubes?”

“I know how,” Khan says. “But I am not allowed to visit the facility where they are being kept without guards.”

“Which is why Jill’s going to break in and do it for you, which means you’ll need to teach her,” Andy says. “You can’t possibly hope to revive all of them, though.”

“No, I know better than that,” Khan says. “I am hoping we can awaken five or six.”

“That’s probably the best you’ll get and it’ll take multiple trips,” Andy says, thinking about it. “Do you know who you want to revive?”

“I do,” Khan says.

“Okay,” Andy says. “Good. Before Jill does this, I’ll need descriptions--images would be better, but I’ll take what I can get--and names and about three days.”

“For what purpose?” Khan asks.

“To create identities for them,” Andy says like it should be obvious. “Everything has an electronic trail in today’s world and while Magpie and I could probably hide six people for an indefinite period of time, my guess is you’ll want your family able to help you, which means they’ll need a way of moving around in today’s world. So Magpie and I will need a little time to set that up and find places for them to live and create a back-trail. Do any of them have wings?”

“No,” Khan says. “Only me.”

“That makes things easier,” Andy says. “Get me the information you can and I’ll start working on it while Jill’s moving back here. That way, by the time she settles in London we should be ready to go.”

“Why are you so willing to help?” Khan asks him.

“Because Magpie and Jill are mixed up in this, and I’d do anything for them,” Andy says. “Because I find you intriguing as a person, and I think you could use my help. Because you haven’t once asked me what gender I am, which I find intriguing, because most people can’t wait to find out what’s between my legs.”

Khan shrugs. “You are non-binary,” he says. “The rest is irrelevant to me, is it not? I have no
intention of pursuing a sexual or romantic relationship with you, and is there another reason why I would need to know your biological sex?"

“You know, I could really kiss you right about now,” Andy says, studying him. “That’s possibly the best response I’ve ever gotten.”

“I told you hands off,” Jill says, coming back into the room. “But I understand the impulse. Andy, your cup is the red one, Earl Grey with actual cream and two sugars. John, you have a chai latte because you didn’t specify a kind of tea and I know you like chai, and Jill has coffee because coffee.” She hands out cups and settles in Khan’s lap.

“Who doesn’t like chai?” Andy asks, sipping his tea. “This is excellent, love, thank you.”

“Happy to oblige,” Jill says. “And I don’t know who doesn’t like chai. Weird people without tastebuds. I just wanted actual coffee.”

“You always want coffee,” Andy says.

“I am a caffeine-based lifeform,” Jill agrees. “Caffeine, sugar, alcohol, and chocolate. The four major food groups. Combining them all into one is generally a bad idea, though.”

Andy laughs. “I remember the last time you got drunk on mudslides.”

“Oh, God, that was like ten years ago,” Jill says with a groan. “I was so fucking hungover, and I woke up without pants in someone’s bed I can’t remember who wasn’t wearing a shirt. Between the two of us we made a fully-dressed human who desperately wanted to crawl into a hole and die.”

“It was Trevor,” Andy says. “Which is how we knew no sex had happened because he’s queerer than a football bat and you didn’t meet the height requirement for sex with him anyway. He has a rule of not screwing people unless they’re taller than he is.”

“And he’s about Andy’s height, so yes, I failed on both counts,” Jill says. “He smelled really good, though.”

“He always does,” Andy says. “No idea what he uses, though, he won’t tell me.”

“What does Trevor do?” Khan asks.

Andy laughs and Jill snickers. “He’s a whore,” Andy says. “Sorry, I think the technical term is courtesan? Maybe? I don’t really keep up with the ins and outs of legalized prostitution, because when I was doing it it was very definitely not legal for so many reasons. But Trevor makes his living--and he earns a very good one--by letting people pay him for sex and time.”

“But only men who are taller than he is,” Jill says.

“No, that’s for personal pleasure,” Andy says. “For professional stuff he’ll fuck anyone with the credits, but for his own pleasure he only has sex with men taller than him.”

“I see,” Khan says, not sure he does.

“You’ll likely never meet him,” Jill says. “He lives in New York, doesn’t travel much, and he has no skills we need.”

“Did he ever show you--” Andy starts and Khan hides a laugh when Jill turns bright red.
“Yes,” she says, hiding her face in Khan’s shoulder. “Yes, he did.”

Andy laughs. “No need for embarrassment, love. I’m sure--”

“Shut. Up.” Jill says without raising her head.

“Have you shown him yet?” Andy asks, not at all deterred.

“No, and for the love of God shut up,” Jill says desperately. “It’s not bad enough I get this shit from Magpie, now you? Must every friend I have ask me details about my sex life in front of my current partner?”

“Jake hasn’t,” Khan feels obliged to point out.

“Jake doesn’t like to think about me and sex in the same sentence,” Jill says, taking a long drink of her coffee. “Which is fair because I don’t like to think about him and sex in the same thought either.”

“Who is Jake?” Andy asks. “Wait, I know this. He’s the one Magpie can’t decide if she wants to fuck or not. The Starfleet thing is throwing her for a loop.”

“Please God let her decide not,” Jill mutters. “Okay. Right. So. Moving on to another topic of conversation that does not involve sex?”

“I’m going to be horribly rude and inquisitive, but can you actually fly?” Andy asks Khan.

“I can,” Khan says.

“Have you taken her up with you?” Andy asks.

“I have,” Khan says. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because Jill’s always, ever since I met her, wanted to fly,” Andy says. “She joined Starfleet because she could get into space easily that way, and she has done all kinds of death-defying things to get into the air. I actually jumped out of a plane with her on her last birthday, an experience I will not be repeating any time in the next two centuries. So for her to wind up with the one person I’ve ever met who could possibly get her into the air without the need for specialized equipment or a spacesuit or anything...but I believe in fate.”

“You know that wasn’t why I stopped you,” Jill murmurs to Khan. “It wasn’t.”

“I know,” he tells her softly, touching her cheek. “But it does make one wonder about fate.”

“Do you believe in fate?” Jill asks him.

“Undecided,” Khan says. “I believe in free will.”

“Who doesn’t?” Jill asks, smiling. “Predestination’s so boring.”

“Do you believe in God?” Andy asks.

“I think I count as an agnostic,” Khan says. “Do you?”

Andy grimaces. “I believe there’s something out there bigger than us, but what it is or what its motives are I don’t know and I don’t think we’ll ever know,” she says. “However, having said that, I do believe in some aspects of the supernatural, and you may not believe me but I firmly
believe I’ve talked to a ghost or two. One saved my life once, kept me from OD’ing.”

“In which case we owe said ghost a debt of gratitude,” Jill says.

Andy laughs. “All I remember was that it was a woman, I never saw her, but we talked several times over the course of a week, and when I finally sobered enough to ask someone about the woman who’d been staying with me everyone looked at me like I’d just sprouted another head.”

“Do you remember anything about her?” Khan asks out of idle curiosity.

“I remember she told me I’d understand someday,” Andy says. “And I still don’t, but that was the first step toward me actually getting clean and staying sober, because I wanted to understand why she’d saved me, why she’d kept me from dying.” He shakes his head, thinking. “I vaguely remember a scent, but I’m not sure that was her, it might have been something else entirely.”

“What was the scent?” Jill asks. “You never told me this.”

“Right, because I make it a habit to talk about my days as a junkie whore talking with ghosts,” Andy says a little sharply. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. It’s just...I’ve never told anyone this story before and I don’t even know why I’m bringing it up now.”

Jill slides out of Khan’s lap and moves to kneel in front of Andy, setting down her coffee and taking Andy’s hands. “It’s okay,” she says softly. “Maybe you’re meant to. What was the scent, sweetheart?”

“Jasmine,” Andy says.

Khan makes a sound he can’t control and Jill glances back at him briefly before looking at Andy again. “Fate, right,” she says. “John? What’s the significance?”

“It’s nothing,” Khan says.

“It isn’t nothing,” Jill says at the same time Andy says “Tell me”.

Khan’s wings shift and he forces them back. “My...my wife wore jasmine,” he says. “It was the only scent she wore.”

“That’s a hell of a coincidence,” Jill says after a pause.

“You see why I said it was nothing,” Khan says.

“It’s either nothing, a remarkable coincidence, the faulty memory of a junkie on cocaine, or the ghost of your dead wife saved me eighteen years ago,” Andy says, trying for a glimpse of humor. “Pick one.”

“What else did she say to you?” Jill asks, still kneeling in front of him.

“She sang to me,” Andy says. “When I was too strung out to sleep and coming down and everything hurt, she sang to me, and it...it helped. I asked her, so many times, why she wouldn’t just let me die, and she told me it wasn’t my time, not for a long time yet. I had nothing, at that point, I was nothing--a junkie whore living on the streets, fascinated with computer hardware but unable to stay clean long enough to really do anything with it. She told me Magpie needed me, that someday someone else would, and I had to stay alive, I had to become more than I was.”

Khan sees a couple tears fall down Andy’s cheeks and doubts she’s aware she’s crying, but Jill
gently brushes them away. “You are so much more, Andy,” she whispers. “I don’t know who that
ghost was, but I’m grateful to her.”

Andy takes a deep, shaky breath and lets it out slowly. “I wasn’t, not for a long time,” he says.
“Getting clean, staying clean, was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. It’s still hard. I’ve been clean
for almost two decades and every day there are times I still just...I want it, and I know, I know I
can’t, that it’s not worth the price I’d pay, but oh, God, it felt so good.”

“What did she sing to you?” Jill asks.

“God, I don’t remember,” Andy says. She closes her eyes, another tear rolling down her cheek, and
licks her lips. Jill stays quiet and after a moment Andy starts humming softly.

Khan knows the melody, and for a moment he simply cannot breathe. His chest aches and all the
air in his lungs seems to have vanished and he feels too cold at the same time he thinks he is
burning up. He bites his lip hard enough to almost draw blood, struggling to contain himself.

When Andy stops humming, Jill glances back at him, and whatever she sees on his face makes her
stand up and kiss Andy’s forehead before she hurries back to him, cupping his face in her hands.
“You recognized it,” she says, leaning her forehead against his.

“It’s a lullabye,” Khan says, his voice sounding hoarse and raw to his own ears. “She...we did not
grow up with such things, but she taught me that one, and a few others. She said I would need to
know them someday, when--when we had children of our own.”

“Did she ever...was she psychic?” Jill asks hesitantly.

“I don’t know,” Khan says, closing his eyes. “There were times I swear she knew things I never
told her, but she never gave me a direct answer when I would ask her about them. She...she
believed in such things, but she knew I was a skeptic, so we didn’t always...” He swallows. “Andy,
where--if I may be rude, what is your ethnic background?” He feels cold when Jill moves to sit
next to him, letting him look at Andy, but she takes his hand, which helps.

“I’m kind of a mutt,” Andy says. “But, um. My biological mother was from China, and I think most
of her family was from that region. My biological father was...I don’t know much about him, he
was gone by the time I was two, but, um. From pictures, and the little my mother would talk about
him, he grew up in America, but if you go back enough generations his family was southeast
Asian. India, I think, but I can’t be certain where. I could...but you never had children, did you?”

“I can’t,” Khan says. “But my wife had brothers, and they had children, and...many of the records
are gone, it’s possible you may not be able to find out.”

“No, but I’m going to try,” Andy says. “What was your wife’s name, and her brothers’ names?”

“Her name was Rani,” Khan says. “She had three brothers, but the youngest died before he had
children. Ashish and Hitesh were the brothers that had children, and their surname was Safaya.”

Andy nods, tucking back a lock of hair. “Do you have an image of her? Or of them?”

“No with me,” Khan says. “I will see if I have one I can send you.”

“So...” Andy laughs. “If this turns out to be true, what the hell are you? My many generations
removed great-uncle whose real name I don’t even know?”

“My name is Khan,” he says simply.
“Khan,” Andy repeats softly. “Do you have a surname?”

“No,” Khan says. “Not that I use.”

“I don’t either,” Andy admits, dimple flashing as she smiles. “My biological father rejected me and my mother, my mother later rejected me, and I never thought I had a family history I wanted to claim. I mean, on paper I think I’m Andy Zheong, but everyone who looks for me knows to just look for Andy.”

“Was Zheong your mother’s name?” Khan asks.

“It was,” Andy says. “I can’t remember my biological father’s name. My mother remarried when I was four, but I never took his name.”

“May I ask why they rejected you?” Khan asks carefully, aware he probably knows the answer already.

“Look at me, Khan,” Andy says, pushing his hair back. “I’m non-binary in a binary world. I wouldn’t conform to expectations of either gender and I wouldn’t identify as male or female when pressed. Schools, even in today’s age, don’t like it when you don’t tick their boxes. By sixth grade I’d been kicked out of three schools. I spent the next two years mostly avoiding my parents and staying out of school but reading everything I could get my hands on, and then they finally kicked me out.” Her smile turns brittle. “And I ended up on the streets, developed a coke habit and discovered there are a lot of people who’ll pay good money to fuck someone without being too particular what gender that person is, and in fact it’s more of a turn on sometimes if they don’t know what’s under the hood but hey, all mouths are alike, right?”

“Oh Andy,” Jill murmurs.

Andy presses her fingertips to her eyes. “Tonight isn’t bringing out my best side,” she says. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually this...”

This time Khan gets up and moves to crouch in front of him. “You have nothing to apologize for,” he says.

“You really mean that,” Andy says, studying his face.

“Yes,” Khan says.

Andy sighs and abruptly leans forward, wrapping Khan in a hug. It should be awkward given their positions and Khan’s wings, but they make it work, and Khan pretends not to notice the damp patch on his shoulder or the way Andy shakes almost imperceptibly as she holds on.

Khan closes his eyes, breathing in the herbal scent of Andy’s hair and reflecting on how strange it feels to have so much contact with other people after so long without it. All humans need touch, even augmented ones, and Khan has memories of sleeping in piles with his brothers and sisters as younger children. He misses that, suddenly, misses waking with Ekaterina’s hair in his face and Bishop’s head against the back of his neck, or Anandi sleeping curled up within his wings.

He wants his family back, he wants them alive, and he wants to share them with the people in this
room, with his possible descendant and his...he doesn’t know what to call Jill, other than his. He thinks his family will approve of both of them, and of Magpie, and Jake.

How has it come to this? How has he gone from being so impossibly alone to this in a week? He really has no idea how Jill has managed it, how she has dragged him into her circle of people and worked her way under his skin in such a short amount of time. Maybe she is psychic, he thinks, not wholly serious but not wholly joking either.

Andy finally pulls back, eyes a bit red but looking much steadier, and Khan focuses his attention on her instead. “Are you all right?” he asks, touching Andy’s cheek.

“I am,” Andy says. “Thank you.” He leans his forehead against Khan’s for a moment, then gets to his feet, and Khan does the same, wings stretching a little before he folds them back. “I think I am going to go to my place,” Andy says, gathering her bag and her coat. “I want to talk to my sponsor, because this is what he’s there for, and...it’s not something either of you would understand, I think. Which isn’t a bad thing, it’s just...right now I need someone who knows the demons.”

Jill hugs him hard. “My turn to hold on,” she says, refusing to let go for a moment. She comes up about to Andy’s collarbone, and he bends his head to hers, his straight hair mingling with her curls. “I love you, you know that, right?” Jill asks. “And if you ever, ever need anything, call me. I’ll be there.”

“I know, love,” Andy says, kissing Jill’s hair. “I’m all right. I promise. I’m going to go to my flat and have a large cuppa and some biscuits, and a long talk with my sponsor, and I’ll see you sometime tomorrow when we’re all awake and coherent and caffeinated.”

“All right,” Jill says, finally letting go. She walks Andy to the door and closes it behind him, and for a moment just stands there, looking very small and very tired.

“It is not too late to go out,” Khan says finally, looking at her. “I think we could both use it.”

“I didn’t...” Jill sighs and begins braiding her hair back. “I didn’t expect any of that. None of it. I didn’t--okay, I kind of maybe expected Andy to show up, but the rest of it, not a chance in hell. I didn’t know.”

“Why would you have?” Khan asks her.

“No reason, but I still feel like I should have,” Jill says. “That I could have warned you somehow, or...fuck, how insane is this? I didn’t even know if I believed in ghosts before tonight.” She ties off the braid and pulls on her hoodie and her gloves.

“It could all be nothing,” Khan says, not sure who he wants to convince of what. “Andy admits he was on a lot of drugs, and...”

“You don’t believe that,” Jill says, tucking her wallet into a pocket and her hotel access card into a different one.

“No,” Khan admits after a moment.

“Yeah. Neither do I.” Jill shakes her head. “Let’s get into the air. Maybe this will make more sense.”

“Jill, I say this without anger, but nothing about this past week makes sense,” Khan says, following her out of the room.
“Welcome to the Jill Zone,” Jill says, laughing.

“The what?” Khan asks.

Jill has to stop laughing before she can answer. “The weirdest shit happens around me sometimes, and I just go with it because that’s life and this is a big galaxy and hey, what do I know about what’s normal and what isn’t? But a few of the officers on the Marshall, including my captain, they coined it the Jill Zone. I show up and weird shit starts happening and you just go with it because it’s easier and maybe it’ll make sense in retrospect, but it generally doesn’t. And a lot of the time it’s not anything bad, hell a lot of the time it’s just weird or good or whatever, but it’s things you never expected would happen and it just seems normal to me.”

“Now this you could have warned me about,” Khan says.

“Would you have believed me?” Jill counters. They get on the lift and she turns to him. “You have superior reflexes, speed, strength, intelligence, and wings. I have a weird-ass superpower of making the craziest crap happen around me and seem like just another Tuesday. Or Saturday, or whatever day we’re on. And it’s not even reliable, I mean sometimes absolutely nothing happens. Then I usually had most of the bridge crew staring at me wanting to know what I’d done, or not done.”

“After this past week, I think I believe in your superpower,” Khan says.

“Most people who’ve spent any amount of time with me do,” Jill admits sheepishly.

Khan smiles and brushes his fingers over her cheek. “Come,” he says when the lift doors open. “Let us escape gravity for a bit.”

“You say the best things,” Jill says, smiling back at him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so. If you've been reading Flying Free, Jim occasionally has dreams where he talks with a woman who might or might not be the ghost of Khan's wife Rani. Apparently being three centuries and more dead isn't enough to stop her from having a presence in that story. I wasn't going to reuse the same plot device to get her into this story--I wasn't actually going to put her in this story at all, but Rani has opinions and I just do what the voices in my head tell me. (Rani would like to note, however, that I couldn't actually use the dream idea to get her to show up as Jill isn't my POV character and for reasons I don't understand she can't talk to Khan directly. Assuming she even exists.)

Or it could all be nothing and coincidence and it's a big galaxy, things happen randomly sometimes. What do you think?

In my defense, I had planned for Andy to show up this chapter, but a lot of what happened after Jill got back with the tea was unexpected.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

She's damaged, in ways I'm not sure you're aware of.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Mentions of past sexual assault and attempted rape. Please read with your own self-care in mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jill leaves for San Francisco Monday morning. Khan expects the next three weeks to pass quietly, and somewhat lonely if he is honest with himself, but as always, Jill manages to surprise him. She calls, she emails, she sends him messages and images, and while it isn’t the same as having her physically present it does make the time go faster.

Also somewhat to his surprise, Andy sticks around in London, ostensibly claiming she has work to do but Khan doesn’t quite believe her. She won’t come near the archive, but she seeks him out in his apartment, or finds him for dinner when he gets off work. After Saturday, Khan doesn’t ask him about his searches for his family history, but five days after Jill leaves for San Francisco Andy shows up on his doorstep and hands him a printout.

“The records are incomplete, so it’s not guaranteed,” she says, fidgeting with a lock of hair. “But it’s as close as I could get, and I had Magpie double-check my work, and...we think it’s accurate.”

Khan closes the door behind him and looks at the printout, scanning the data. “She was your ancestor,” he says, not really needing to read it to be certain.

“Yeah, she was,” Andy says. “Which makes you mine, too. Clearly we’re not biologically related, but...who gives a fuck about that anyway?”

“I don’t,” Khan says and Andy laughs.


“That would probably be best,” Khan agrees.

“Will you--will you tell me about her?” Andy asks. “And her brothers? I think I traced my lineage back to Hitesh.”

“He was her younger brother,” Khan says. “He and I were...not on good terms for much of her life. He did not trust me, he thought I did not love her. After...after she died, we reconciled, because we were all the other had left of her, but it was never an easy relationship. Would you like tea?”

“Yes, please,” Andy says.
Khan nods and goes to make it, needing a moment to gather his thoughts and settle his composure. Andy takes his usual seat on the couch, and shortly thereafter Khan joins him with two mugs, handing one over. “Thank you,” Andy says, taking a sip. “Oh, I like this. Assam?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I thought you might prefer it to Darjeeling.”


Khan takes a sip of his own tea. “She was so beautiful,” he says softly, not quite looking at Andy. “Fierce and bright. The moment I saw her, I knew she would be mine. I didn’t love her, not then, of course, but I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anyone.”

“How did she feel about you?” Andy asks.

“She was furious with me for daring to threaten her family,” Khan says, smiling. “I told her I would let them all go if she stayed with me, and she warned me if I dared touch her, if I dared lay a feather on her, I would not live to do it again. I laughed, but I told her I did not do such things, I had no need for it, and none of my men would either. She didn’t trust me, but she agreed to stay.”

“And you fell in love with her,” Andy says.

“I did,” Khan says. “It was remarkably easy. One couldn’t help but be drawn to her, and I think all of my men loved her a little. They called her the lion-tamer.”

“For you,” Andy says, smiling.

“Yes.” Khan takes a sip of tea. “She used to joke she needed a chair and a whip to deal with me when I was in a mood. Then she said maybe she needed a hood and jesses instead, as I was more raptor than cat. I told her if anyone was being leashed, it wasn’t me, and she laughed.”

Andy laughs, too. “She sounds a little like Jill.”

“They are similar, in some ways,” Khan admits. “Not physically--they look almost nothing alike although Rani was only slightly taller than Jill--but in personality they have a few commonalities.” He considers. “Perhaps more than a few.”

“Perhaps you have a type,” Andy teases gently.

“It did occur to me,” Khan admits, feeling a bit sheepish about it. Andy smiles, though, and touches his hand.

“I was a little in love with Jill for a while when I met her,” he admits. “I mean, she’s never been interested in me as more than a friend, and I don’t think she ever figured it out, but I adored her. She was this tiny crazy girl--I mean, Magpie’s crazy, but Jill takes it to new and interesting levels--and she was game for anything we threw at her. I think if we’d suggested scaling the Empire State Building to steal something off its top floor she’d have gone for it.” She considers, tilting her head. “In fact, I’m sure she would have. She’s still crazy, still tiny, and I still adore her, but not as anything more than a dear friend.”

“What was the first job you worked with her?” Khan asks.

“There was a guy in New York, which is where we all were at that point,” Andy says. “He collected small sculptures--really small, like the size of my arm or something--and we ended up competing on an auction for a piece I really, really wanted. It was a tree, made of all kinds of wood and semi-precious stones, and I loved it, and he sniped me on it, and I bitched to Magpie about it
for a week until she finally said she had a friend who could probably get it for me. So she introduced me to her thieving friend, I gave Jill some tech to help her get into the guy’s house, and she got me the tree. I still have it, actually. The guy never filed any kind of report that it had been stolen, I don’t know why. Maybe he had so many he didn’t realize it was missing.”

“Do you collect art?” Khan asks.

“Only when a piece really speaks to me,” Andy says. “I do collect frogs, though. I have all kinds, from a tiny jade frog about the size of my thumbnail to a two-foot glass sculpture that sits in my loft in New York and glares balefully at unwanted guests. Jill bought me one for my birthday last year as a gag gift, when it gets activated it sings five different tunes and says seventeen random funny things. I adore it and I named it Gerald.”

“What does it say?” Khan asks.

“Everything from ‘Hello, sexy lady’ to ‘Have you seen any flies about?’ all in this accent that’s-- actually, not too far off from yours,” Andy says, laughing.

“I beg your pardon,” Khan says.

“I have video, hang on.” Andy takes out her tablet and flips through a few screens before showing Khan a bright green frog sitting on a table. At some unseen signal, the frog starts singing a tune Khan doesn’t recognize. The song cuts off mid-verse and the frog starts talking next, spouting random quotations.

“I do not sound like that,” Khan says, amused in spite of himself.

“No, no you don’t,” Andy says. “You have a much more pleasant and richer voice, and the accents are off, but Gerald’s definitely from somewhere in England. Or voiced by someone who was doing their best English impression.”

“Probably the latter,” Khan says.

“Probably, but it still makes me laugh,” Andy says, taking his tablet back. “Which was the intent. Have you eaten? I could cook you something, if you wanted, I’m not terrible in the kitchen.”

“Let me,” Khan says. “I enjoy cooking on occasion. I just prefer not to do it for one.”

“Who does?” Andy asks. “I hate it. I tend to cook in large quantities when I do cook and freeze things for months.”

“Not a terrible idea,” Khan says, getting to his feet. “Is there anything you don’t eat?”

“I grew up with a Chinese mother and spent six years on the streets,” Andy says. “I’ll eat anything so long as it’s either dead or moving slowly enough I can grab it.”

Khan smiles. “I promise not to make you chase your dinner,” he says, going to find what he has in his kitchen. Andy comes to watch him cook, leaning against the doorway with her mug in hand.

“How many languages do you speak?” she asks out of nowhere. “I know you and Jill kept slipping into Russian sometimes around me, and she mentioned you speak Spanish, too. What else do you speak?”

“Hindi and English were my primary languages as a child, but we learned many,” Khan says, glancing at her. “We--my brothers and sisters and I were raised together, but our genetic material
came from all over the world, and the scientists were very keen on us developing a primary language from the country with which we were associated. English was everyone’s secondary, or primary if that happened to be their country. But we wanted to learn how to talk to each other, so we learned each other’s languages. I speak many, and I still don’t speak as many as my sister Cat, but she was the best linguist among us.”

“I speak Mandarin, Japanese, and Spanish,” Andy says. “In addition to English. I grew up with Mandarin, learned Japanese in school, Spanish on the streets. Now I’m thinking I want to learn Hindi. Will you teach me?”

“I can,” Khan says. “Jill wants to learn, too. I have been emailing her basic vocabulary lessons. I can send them to you as well.”

“I’d like that,” Andy says, sipping his tea. “Do you speak the others I do?”

“Hai,” Khan says. “My brother Katsuro was of Japanese descent, and he and I were close as children. Several of my siblings spoke Spanish—most of us did, actually, but my sister Anandi learned it as her primary language. I was less interested in Mandarin, but Cat insisted on learning and making me and Konstantin learn with her.”

“Who else spoke Hindi as a primary?” Andy asks.

“Shashwat, Abhishek, and Nandi,” Khan says. “Two of them died on the ship. Shashwat is still in stasis.”

“I’m sorry,” Andy says.

“The ones who mattered the most to me are still alive,” Khan says, adding pasta to the boiling water. “And if I am more fortunate than I dared to ever hope, some of them may be awake in a matter of weeks.”

“Who mattered the most to you?” Andy asks.

“Cat,” Khan says, looking away from Andy because he doesn’t trust his expression to remain neutral. “Konstantin, Katsuro, Bishop, Alona, Matthew. Those are the ones I want to revive. Anandi, if for some miracle we can get a seventh.”

“I believe in miracles,” Andy says quietly.

“I don’t,” Khan says without looking at her.

“Then what is this?” Andy asks. “What do you call this whole thing? Jill running into you randomly on the street, choosing to stop you, and being the one person with connections inside and outside Starfleet who might be able to help you—who believed you, who trusts you enough to rearrange her entire life around you? With her connection to me, who turns out to be a distant descendant of your wife’s—the same wife who I honestly believe saved my life when I was a junkie? What the hell is this, Khan, if not damn near a miracle?”

“I did not ask for any of this,” Khan says, voice tight. He snaps off the burner on the stove and drains the pasta before it can overcook. “I never asked Jill to bump into me. I never asked her to help.”

“And she offered, because it’s what she does, she helps people,” Andy says gently. “Because she cares, Khan, and she loves you. She might not know it yet—she’s kind of slow on the uptake about her own feelings sometimes—but I know my friend. She loves you, she wants to help you, and so
do I. So does Magpie. Jake I don’t know about, I haven’t met him yet.”

“Jake wants to help Jill, not necessarily me,” Khan says.

“But by helping Jill he helps you, so he’s willing to do it,” Andy says. “Tell me what this is, Khan, if not a miracle, if not something bigger than coincidence. That’s the thing about miracles, they come when you’re not looking for them and they give you hope when you didn’t have it.”

“It was easier when I didn’t have hope,” Khan murmurs, almost to himself. “This...is rather terrifying.”

Andy steps closer to him, hands on his shoulders gently pushing him to turn around and face her. “You’re not alone,” she says, meeting his eyes. “And that scares you more than anything, I think.”

“Now you remind me of her,” Khan says softly. “She was so perceptive.”

“She would have had to be, to love you,” Andy says, drawing Khan’s head down until his forehead rests against Andy’s. “I believe in miracles, Khan. I believe this happened for a reason, that Rani saved me so I could one day help save you.”

“I’m not the one who needs saving,” Khan says, holding on to Andy without even realizing it.

Andy laughs. “Now that’s bullshit.” His arms go around Khan’s waist, resting just under his wings, and he holds on lightly enough that Khan could pull away if he wanted. “You’re not alone,” he says again.

Khan closes his eyes and breathes, and Andy doesn’t let go of him, in fact tightens her hold after a moment.

They finally separate when Khan’s comm-link chirps. “Probably Jill,” he says, moving to answer it.


“Harrison,” Khan says anyway when he answers.

“So what are you wearing?” Jill asks cheerfully.

“Irrelevant,” Khan says. “As I have company and was making dinner.”

“Hi, Andy,” Jill says. “Put me on speaker if we’re not going to have comm sex?”

Khan smiles and does. “Hi, love,” Andy says, taking the link as Khan moves to finish dealing with dinner. “What’s up?”

“Me, apparently, I don’t even know what time it is but fuck, I haven’t slept in...what day is it?” Jill asks.

“Friday evening, London time,” Andy says.

“Sometime Tuesday morning,” Jill says. “Ugh, I’m exhausted.”

“Why have you not slept?” Khan asks.

“I tried, it didn’t go well,” Jill says. “Screamed myself awake and decided that wasn’t fun enough to risk my sanity trying it again. I told you I get nightmares sometimes. Fortunately my apartment
is sound-proofed, so I didn’t scare my neighbors. Magpie’s going to come by in an hour or two and sleep with me, though, so I might have better luck. I do better when I’m not alone."

“How is the packing and everything going?” Andy asks.

“Oh, hell, I have no idea,” Jill says. “Boxes, boxes everywhere, and I’ve no idea what the fuck is in half of them. Jake’s coming by in a couple days to help me organize better, though. My crew is taking me out tomorrow night so we can get sloshed and talk about our escapades and they can wish me well, which should be suitably embarrassing and also expect a drunk call around four in the morning although I’m not sure whose time zone. If I send a bunch of stuff to London in the next week can one of you local people make sure it gets into my flat and pretend to put it away?”

“Yes,” Khan and Andy say together.

“Brilliant,” Jill says. “Andy, I tested out the tech last night, it worked brilliantly and I am now one frog richer.”

“What frog?” Andy asks.

“Not telling,” Jill says, laughing. “You’ll get it when I see you, but it doesn’t sing.”

“It couldn’t compete with Gerald,” Andy says solemnly.

“Did you show him the video?” Jill asks.

“I did, but I don’t think he thought it was as funny as you and I do,” Andy says.

“It is a singing frog that also says things,” Khan says. “I do not quite understand the humor. And dinner is ready.”

“Then I’ll leave you two to eat and go have more coffee,” Jill says.

“You need to sleep, Jill,” Khan says, carrying plates to the small dining table.

“I will, I promise,” she says. “When Magpie gets here, and if it gets really bad I’ll ask a friend to do me a favor and transport me to London so I can crawl into your bed for twelve hours. I just...not yet, not right now.”

“Honey,” Andy murmurs.

“I’m okay,” Jill says. “I’m okay. I called Magpie when I woke up and we talked, and she’ll be-- actually, I think that’s her at my door now. Talk to you both later. Love you. Bye.” She hangs up before either Khan or Andy can respond.

Khan takes his seat and Andy settles herself opposite him. “I’ll bet you ten credits she shows up on your doorstep a little buzzed tomorrow night after her outing with her crew,” she says, picking up her fork.

“That,” Khan says, “would be what I have heard referred to as a sucker bet.”

Andy laughs so hard he drops his fork, wiping tears out of his eyes. “She’s crazy about you,” he says. “I mean, she’s crazy period, but she’s absolutely crazy about you.” He soberes, picking up his fork again. “She’s also damaged, in a lot of ways I’m not sure you know about although the previous conversation should have been a clue to some of it.”

“Tell me what you are thinking,” Khan says, picking up his fork.
“Some of it shouldn’t be my story to tell,” Andy says. “But. Okay. You know I’m...I survived a lot on the streets, and the thing about surviving is you can recognize another survivor. When I met Jill, I knew she hadn’t...she hadn’t gone through anything like what Magpie and I did, and I was glad even though sometimes I hated her a little for it.” She looks down at her plate. “A couple years after she got out of the Academy, I hadn’t seen her in a while in person as she’d been shipped out and on missions and things. We finally met up in San Francisco, and I looked at her, and...I recognized what was in her eyes.”

“What happened to her?” Khan asks, quietly because he doesn’t trust his voice.

“She won’t tell me,” Andy says. “She won’t tell Magpie, either. When we pressed her on it, all she ever said was it wasn’t what we thought, it was fine, she was fine, and then she ran out the door and we didn’t see her for eight months and the topic has been strictly verboten since then. But I keep tabs on her, so does Magpie, and I know that she didn’t date, she didn’t try to have a romantic or sexual relationship with anyone for about two years after we saw her that first time. And that’s not like...that’s not like Jill. She likes sex, she likes going out and getting dressed up and having a good time, and she just shut it all down. And she still has nightmares. Some of them she’ll talk about—I’ve spent the night with her sometimes when she’s been on leave, and I’d say about two-thirds of the time she wakes up partway through the night. If she wakes up crying, she’ll talk about it. If she wakes up shaking, she’ll sometimes talk about it. If she wakes up screaming, she won’t say a word but she never goes back to sleep, sometimes for days.”

Khan sets his fork down carefully. “I should be there with her,” he says.

“I don’t know if she wants you there right now,” Andy says. “But if you want to be there, I’ll get you there. Hang on.” He gets up to get his phone and sends Magpie a quick message. A moment later, she calls and Andy puts the link on speaker.

“She’s out at the store getting chocolate,” Magpie says. “I’ve got maybe ten minutes. This? This is not going to be a good night. She’s strung out and exhausted and running on stim-pills and caffeine—which are a terrible combination, for the record—and she’s going to crash in about two hours, sleep like the dead, and wake up with a migraine assuming the nightmares let her get any uninterrupted sleep and given the shadows under her eyes I’m not holding my breath.”

“Did she tell you why she called you in the middle of the night?” Andy asks. “All she told us was she screamed herself awake.”

“Shit,” Magpie says. “No, I didn’t even get that much, just the standard ‘couldn’t sleep, talk to me and tell me I’m not crazy’ spiel. Screaming is not a good sign. I could use backup.”

“I’m sending John,” Andy says. “Someone’s got to stay in his flat and I have work to do anyway, and I think all three of us and she’d feel we were ganging up on her and she’d run. Give me ten minutes to contact a friend and arrange transport, and thank God it’s the weekend and he doesn’t have to be at work tomorrow.”

“I can handle ten minutes,” Magpie says. “Maybe she’ll actually tell John what the fuck happened.”

“Yeah, I’m not holding my breath,” Andy says, taking out her tablet, fingers flying over the screen. “John, you probably want to go throw a bag together.”

“Yes,” Khan says, already getting up from the table. He packs swiftly, enough for two or three days although he doubts he will be in San Francisco that long, and by the time he returns to the table Andy’s off the phone with Magpie.
“You have six minutes before you’re getting beamed to Jill’s flat,” Andy says, looking up from her tablet. “Any last words?”

“Who do you know with transporter technology?” Khan asks.

Andy grins. “Long story, but some of it’s mine and some belongs to a friend and we share custody and said friend is being kind enough to utilize the tech to send you to Jill’s place since said friend knows Jill. I’m working on building--there’s this really fascinating new transwarp technology that I want to get my hands on, but it’s mostly still classified, and hey there, agent.” She grins again, studying Khan. “Do you like me enough to steal Starfleet technology for me?”

“If you show me what you are doing with it,” Khan says.

“Deal,” Andy says immediately. “Sweet. This has so much potential.”

Khan smiles a little. “How will your friend know to find me?” he asks.

“He can always find me, and I told him to find the lifesign next to me who wasn’t me,” Andy says.

“Logical enough,” Khan says.

“I can be,” Andy says.

Khan chooses not to sit; his wings won’t settle enough for him to get comfortable. “Thank you,” he says after a couple minutes.

“You’re welcome, and I’m not doing this just for you,” Andy says. He gets up and gives Khan a quick hug and kisses his cheek. “Family helps each other out.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Yes, it does.”

Andy’s tablet chimes. “And that’s the signal. Call me when you want to come back to London and I’ll arrange it.”

“I will,” Khan says and feels the transporter take him.

He materializes in the middle of a cluttered and colorful apartment, with Magpie sitting on the couch and Jill pacing the path from living room to front door. “Oh, no,” she says when she sees him. “Shit, no, why you, why now? I told you I was fine, I told you Magpie would be here, you need to go right back to London and just--”

“Jill,” Magpie interrupts. “I asked him to be here. You didn’t tell me you screamed yourself awake. You’re not fine and you need to maybe, finally, possibly--”

“No,” Jill says desperately. “No, I’m--just get out, both of you, I’m fine, just--” She’s so tense she’s almost shaking and her skin has almost no color. “Just get out, leave me alone. Never mind.” She turns and bolts out the door, and Khan wastes no time in dropping his bag and following her, Magpie hot on his heels.

On instinct, Khan lets her run, keeping up with her enough that she’s always in his sight but letting her wear herself out. Magpie drops out after about a kilometer, but Jill keeps going and Khan keeps following her until he sees her start stumbling as she runs, until she trips over an uneven bit of sidewalk and goes down. He catches her before she can connect with the ground, and she huddles in on herself, hiding against his chest.
“I have you,” he murmurs, holding her close, folding his wings around her. “You’re safe, Jill.”

Jill takes a shuddery breath, then another, and starts crying, clearly too exhausted and too wired to hold back the tears. Khan gets to his feet and begins walking back to her apartment, carrying her. She cries almost silently, but her body shakes with the force of it and the tears soak his shirt, and she doesn’t really seem to recognize where they are or what’s going on.

When they reach her building, the door opens before he can reach for it and Magpie stands there. “Come on up,” she says and Khan follows her to the lift this time, rather than the stairs. Magpie lets them back into Jill’s apartment and Khan sits down on the bed, still cradling Jill in his arms.

“Honey,” Magpie says, kneeling in front of them and touching Jill’s shoulder. “Honey, look at me.”

Jill sniffs and scrubs at her eyes and her nose and looks at Magpie. She looks pretty wrecked, Khan thinks; swollen eyes and red nose and flushed cheeks. Magpie smiles a little and touches Jill’s cheek. “Let me get you a washcloth and some tissues.”

“I’m sorry,” Jill says, sounding utterly exhausted. “I’m sorry. I just...this is stupid, it was a stupid nightmare and I just can’t sleep and I’m so tired and I stop being rational when I get this tired.”

“It’s a nightmare you’ve never talked about that you’ve had for close to a decade,” Magpie says from the bathroom. She returns with a box of tissues and a cool cloth, and Jill blows her nose and wipes her eyes before pressing the cloth to her face. “Will you tell him? Not me, you obviously don’t want me to know, but will you tell John? Please?”


“He’s still going to love you,” Magpie promises, stroking Jill’s hair.

“He doesn’t love me,” Jill says into the cloth.

Magpie snorts. “Yeah, I call bullshit on that one, but fine. He’s still going to care about you, and he’s still going to want you.”

Jill sighs again. “I’m so tired, Magpie. Can I sleep first?”

“Do you think you can?” Magpie asks.

Jill takes the cloth away from her face. “No. Not yet.”

“Then no,” Magpie says. She kisses Jill’s cheek. “I’m going to see myself out. Call me when it’s safe to come back.”

“I will,” Jill promises. “Love you, bird.”

“Love you too.” Magpie surprises Khan by kissing his cheek before she leaves, taking her bag with her.

“You always see me when I’m falling apart,” Jill says after the door has closed and Khan stays quiet. “This sucks.”
“You’re exhausted, you’re strung out on caffeine and stimulants, and you’ve been upset for three
days over a nightmare you never told me you had,” Khan says gently. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You know I get nightmares,” Jill says, resting her head against his shoulder. “I didn’t...you had
other things to worry about and it’s not like nightmares are anything new for me. How many nights
did I wake up from nightmares while I was in London?”

“Four,” Khan says. “Out of seven I spent with you, and I am not sure one of those counts because I
forced your body to sleep after Dante.”

Jill sighs. “So, you know I get nightmares. This isn’t new. It’s just...this is a persistent one.”

“Tell me what happened to you, milaya moya,” Khan says quietly.

“Nothing, not exactly,” Jill says. “Okay, maybe it wasn’t quite nothing, but compared to what it
could have been it wasn’t anything much. It...I was on an away mission, my second year out of the
Academy. We...we got ambushed by Ventraxans, a species you’ve probably never heard of, they
withdrew to their own solar system to blow each other up about three years ago and now no one
goes that way. Humanoid, though, and pretty nasty, and three of them caught me and my partner,
who was male. They didn’t have much use for him, but me...” She sighs. “I hate that fucking
uniform. It makes me a walking sex object and a walking target, and they knew it. They left me in
the uniform, for what good it was, but they tied me up, and one of them, the leader, kept touching
me when he passed me, like you’d pet a dog, almost. And they kept talking about what they were
going to do to me, and I could hear them, and they knew I could hear them, that was the whole
point. Anyway, before anything really...before they could do much more than cut off most of my
uniform and, um, touch me, the cavalry arrived in the form of a very large well-armed security
squad from my ship, and that was that. I did my mandated sessions with the counselor, who said I
was incredibly lucky but that didn’t mean I didn’t have a right to feel used and violated and I
almost slapped her because I have friends who survived actual rape, who survived so much worse
than I did, and this was...”

“This wasn’t nothing,” Khan says. “Don’t you dare say it was.”

“The nightmares are when the cavalry doesn’t arrive,” Jill whispers. “When they have time with
me and everything they said...happens. And it’s not real, I know it’s not real, it didn’t fucking
happen, and I still wake up screaming from nightmares when two of them hold me down and the
third--” Her voice breaks.

“Jill, how long did it take you to trust someone else to have sex after this?” Khan asks softly.

“Almost three years,” Jill says. “And I’m mostly over it these days, it didn’t happen and the
nightmares don’t come as often and it’s okay, it’s just sometimes when I get tired or stressed out
the nightmares hit and I never sleep well alone and Tuesday morning was really bad and now here
we are. And I won’t tell Magpie or Andy because they both had it so much worse than I did and I
know it’s not a pissing match but I feel like...”

“You think they would think less of you, for your reaction,” Khan fills in when she stops.

“Yeah, maybe a little,” Jill admits tiredly.

“I think you don’t trust your friends enough,” Khan says. “I think you do them a disservice by
this.”

“Please, can we not right now?” Jill asks. “I just...I can’t.”
There are more details Khan wants to know but keeps from asking because he can tell it took almost all of Jill’s courage to tell him as much as she has, and if he presses her more she might just break.

“I think I want a shower,” Jill says. “Unfortunately it’ll have to be a sonic one alone because that’s all I have room for, but I still want to get clean.”

An instinct Khan can understand. “Do you want to go somewhere with water facilities?” he asks.

“No, I don’t,” Jill says. “I mean, I do, but no, I don’t. I’m tired and I’m probably going to crash soon anyway and I want to be in my own bed when I fall over.” She sighs and pulls away from Khan, and he lets her go, watching her stand up and stretch. “Back in ten.”

While she showers, Khan pokes around her apartment. She has a small collection of glass flowers on her windowsill, and a few handmade blankets in rich colors sprawl over the couch. The comforter on her unmade bed shows blue on one side, purple on the other, with assorted blue and purple and green pillows, and he smiles to see the battered teddy bear carefully placed on the side of the bed she doesn’t use.

What he doesn’t see, however, are any signs of her time in gymnastics; no medals, trophies, or anything else. It’s possible, he supposes, that she already packed them, but finds it more likely that she never had them out in the first place.

She doesn’t have a screen, which he finds interesting, but she does have a bookcase with some physical books in it. He looks at them and discovers she has a taste for fantasy, with some titles he’s never heard of and some older than he is. He picks up a worn copy of *The Hobbit* and opens it, seeing Jill’s name on the inside cover, written in childish handwriting. It makes him smile, and he moves to sit down on the bed again, taking the book with him.

“My favorite book,” Jill says when she emerges from the bathroom dressed in a purple t-shirt and blue pants. “I’ve had that copy since I was six. I won’t insult you and ask you not to damage it, but do be careful with it.”

“Did you also enjoy the trilogy?” Khan asks, looking up from the book. “I have not read this since I was a child myself.”

“I did, but this one has a special place in my heart,” Jill says, moving over to him. “I love fantasy, though, always have. My bear, there, his name is Bilbo, and I’ve had him since I had the book. I made him a little toy sword named Sting at one point but I lost it years ago. Bilbo’s coming to London with me but I can’t pack him up just yet. He’s always the last thing to go in my bag and the first thing to come out, and yes, he comes on ship with me. Did you ever have a teddy bear?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, I never did, but my siblings and I would sleep together, so I often woke up in a pile of people.”

“That sounds remarkably adorable,” Jill says, sitting down next to him on the bed. “And explains so much about why you’re so easy to share a bed with. You don’t kick or steal the covers or snore, and you don’t complain about my hair trying to kill you.”

“I was used to Rani’s, and hers was longer than yours,” Khan says. “It got everywhere and used to strangle me in my sleep. I eventually convinced her to braid it back when we slept, which you already do.”

“When I remember, yeah,” Jill says. “Did your sisters have long hair, too?”
“Somewhat,” Khan says. “Cat would grow hers out to about as long as yours, although hers was straigher, and then she would get annoyed and cut it all off. Then she would grow it out again. None of them had curls quite like yours, though.”

“I thought about straightening mine when I was younger, but decided I could live with the curls,” Jill says. “I used to keep it about shoulder-length, which was long enough I could pull it back but short enough it wasn’t really a hassle, and then some guy with a whip grabbed me and I grew it out and have kept it long.” She leans her head against Khan’s shoulder. “I think I’m starting to crash. I know you’re probably not tired, but would...would you stay with me?”

“That is why I am here,” Khan says.

“I really don’t deserve you,” Jill says, smiling a little.

“In truth I think that sentiment goes the other way round,” Khan says.

“It really doesn’t,” Jill says. “You weren’t looking for anyone when I stumbled into you and dragged you into my world, and now you’re kind of stuck.”

“With you, and Andy, who we have proven is a descendant of Rani’s, and Magpie, and Jake,” Khan says. “People who--not because I have asked it, but because you asked--are willing to help me on a quest they do not necessarily fully know or understand or may even agree with. Andy called it something like a miracle. I am not sure I agree, but it does stretch the bounds of credibility and coincidence that you of all people would be the one to offer to help me.”

“Fate,” Jill says. “You should get ready for bed. I’m going to move some pillows and things so you have a place to sleep that doesn’t involve crushing Bilbo.”

“May I ask you a question?” Khan asks as they get up.

“You can ask me anything you want,” Jill says.

“Where are all the trophies and medals of your time in gymnastics?” Khan asks, moving to change into pajama pants.

“In my parents’ house,” Jill says. “I didn’t want them, they take up too much room and collect dust and I don’t want to look like I’m bragging. That period of my life is over, I don’t need the reminders around me every day. Mum’s still proud of them, though, so she can have them.” She throws a few pillows on the floor and carefully moves Bilbo to a shelf above her bed, patting his stomach when she sets him down. “Sorry to move you out of the bed, Bilbo,” she says. “But he kind of takes up more space and I don’t want you to get squashed.”

“You talk to him like he is real,” Khan notes.

“Did you ever read a book called *The Velveteen Rabbit*?” Jill asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Khan says.

“I didn’t think you would have, even though it’s older than you are,” Jill says. “But I read it as a child, because my father loved classic books, and the basic premise is that toys can become real if you love them enough. If you don’t just play with them, but if you *really* love them for long enough, they become real. I’ve had Bilbo since I was six, and I’ve loved him every day since then, and I think...he’s real.”

“You do believe in fantasy,” Khan murmurs.
“That’s not fantasy, that’s just love,” Jill says. “If you love something enough, I believe it loves you back. Not always how you want and not always how you need it and you don’t always know, but if you love something long enough, hard enough, it loves you back. Even supposedly inanimate objects.”

Khan ducks into the bathroom to use it and wash up for bed and when he comes out Jill has crawled under the thick comforter and turned off all the lights except the one by her bedside. He moves to settle in the other side of the bed, reaching for her; she curls into his arms, her head under his chin.

“I’m sorry I fell apart on you earlier,” she says softly.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Khan says, rubbing her back.

“I do,” Jill insists. “I wasn’t being rational and I had a complete meltdown and I’m sorry.”

“Humans aren’t designed to go without sleep the way you were,” Khan says.

“You can,” Jill points out, sounding rather sulky about it.

“I was engineered,” Khan says. “You were not.”

“No, I’m just a freak,” Jill says around a yawn. “I’m going to have the worst headache when I wake up.”

“We will deal with that when it happens,” Khan says. “Go to sleep, Jill.”

“I’m getting there,” she says, yawning again. “Tell me a story.”

“A story?” Khan asks, not sure he heard correctly.


Khan honestly has no idea what to say for a moment--a feeling he’s starting to get used to where Jill is concerned. “All right,” he says slowly, considering his options. A thought occurs to him and he smiles a little. “Once upon a time, there was a prince,” he says, keeping his voice quiet and soothing.

“Did he have a princess?” Jill asks.

“No,” Khan says. “Will you let me tell this story or are you going to keep interrupting me?”

She giggles. “Sorry. I’ll be quiet.”

“In fact, the prince did not want a princess--or another prince--because every one he met only wanted him for his power and his wealth,” Khan says. “None of them cared about him as a person, they only cared about his status. So the prince lived alone, with his warriors and advisors, and was determined that he did not need anything else in his life.”

“Lonely prince,” Jill murmurs.

“He was content,” Khan says. “He knew nothing else. And then one day, he fought a battle, and he won--he always won--and he took prisoners from the conquered warriors, as he always did. And a woman came to speak with him, to demand an audience. She had no right to demand such things, but she did anyway, and the prince was intrigued by this woman who didn’t fear him, who held him in such contempt. He met with her, and she demanded he free her brothers. Not because she
had anything to offer him, but because she asked it.”

“What did the prince say?” Jill asks.

“He laughed,” Khan says. “And he asked her what she would give him if he did as she asked. She said she would not give him anything, that he should do it because it was the right thing to do. And the prince found himself fascinated, and he offered the woman a deal. He said he would let her brothers go, he would let all the prisoners of this battle go, if she would stay on their behalf. And she accepted.”

“And they fell in love,” Jill mumbles.

“Which of us is telling this story?” Khan asks.

She giggles again. “Well, isn’t that what happened?”

“Eventually,” Khan says, rubbing the back of her neck. “The prince fell in love with her almost immediately, but she resisted him. She did not want his wealth, she did not want his power, she did not really want his company. The prince had never met anyone like her before, and he fell in love, and he sought to win her over, to make her at least like him. And slowly she did, until one day they were walking in the gardens, and he confessed to her that he loved her, and hoped she would not think less of him. And she stopped, and looked at him, and told him that the only way she could think less of him would be if he did not kiss her right then, because she had grown to love him, too. So he kissed her, and from then on they were never apart.”

Jill doesn’t answer, and from her breathing Khan thinks she’s fallen asleep. “And he still loves her,” he murmurs to himself.

He doesn’t get an answer from Jill or anything else in the room, for which he finds himself grateful. He closes his eyes, holding Jill a little closer, and relaxes, setting part of him to be on guard in case anyone comes in.

Before he falls asleep, he could almost swear he feels a cool touch against his cheek, but that’s impossible. The window’s closed, Jill’s sound asleep in his arms, and nothing else in the apartment moves.

Still, though. If the last week has taught him nothing...”I miss you,” he says in Hindi, a bare whisper into the darkness.

He falls asleep before he can tell if anyone or anything responds.

Chapter End Notes

There’s a lot of me in Jill’s personality, although not her experiences. But The Velveteen Rabbit made a huge impression on me as a child, and to this day I am very careful about treating my very old, battered teddy bears with care in case I hurt them or something. I apologize if they get thrown on the floor, or kicked out of bed. I no longer sleep with them because my husband politely asked me not to, but it was very hard to give up. Pierre, my less-battered bear, now sleeps on the daybed in my office and I snuggle with him if I have a migraine and need to hide.
On a different note, for those wanting more canon characters, I think Kirk might show up in a chapter or two, and I'm not sure who he might bring with him. Any requests?
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

I was taught to take care of my people.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: Consensual knifeplay and cutting.

Again, thanks so much to folks reading and commenting and kudos-leaving. If you'd like to get an insight into my writing process, or just learn more about me in general, you can find me on DW here, and all my writing posts are tagged here. Be cautioned though that some of them may involve spoilers for upcoming chapters. You can also always email me at blueraccoon at outlook dot com if you have questions or want to talk, but be warned that by doing that you may end up getting ficbits and plot points bounced off you from a neurotic author.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Khan wakes momentarily confused, because the scent in his nose is sandalwood, not jasmine, and the hair tickling his skin curls wildly instead of lying straight and smooth. He could have sworn...and then he remembers everything, and something in his chest both tightens and eases at the same time.

In his arms, Jill sleeps peacefully. A glance at the chrono on her bedside table tells Khan it’s been about seven hours since she fell asleep, about four since he did. He hopes she will not wake any time soon, but it doesn’t look like she’s even edging toward consciousness.

He considers getting up, and is about to do just that when he notices the frown on Jill’s face. She twitches a little, frowning more. Khan immediately slips his hand under her hair, gently rubbing the back of her neck. “You’re safe, milaya moya,” he murmurs in her ear, holding her close. “You’re safe.”

After a moment, her face smooths out to peace and she sighs, relaxing. Khan keeps her close for a bit longer, until he thinks she will not wake if he leaves the bed. When he carefully slides out from under the covers, she snuggles into the warmth he left behind, her breathing slow and even.

Khan uses the bathroom and the shower, gets dressed, and makes himself a pot of coffee in Jill’s kitchen. He leans against the counter, sipping his coffee, and looks at Jill, still sound asleep and sprawled out over more of the bed than he thinks she should be physically capable of occupying. It makes him smile.

Eventually he takes his coffee and Jill’s copy of The Hobbit and settles in to read on her couch. He gets about a chapter in when his comm-link chirps with a message; when he looks at it, he actually sees two, one from Andy and one from Magpie, both asking if everything is all right. He sends them both back a quick note saying things are fine and Jill is sleeping, taking the precaution of
setting his link to vibrate.

That turns out to be a good idea, as a moment later he gets a call from Magpie. “Hello,” he says, keeping his voice quiet so as not to wake Jill.

“Did she tell you?” Magpie asks.

“She did,” Khan says.

Magpie sighs in relief. “Thank fucking God. Is she...is she okay?”

“I think so,” Khan says. “I also think she should tell you what happened, but I don’t know if she will.”

“She hasn’t so far,” Magpie says. “And it’s been years. I’m glad she told you, though. She told someone, which is more than I’ve ever gotten before.”

“I know,” Khan says. “How long does she usually sleep when she crashes like this?”

“Varies,” Magpie says. “Anywhere from eight hours to fourteen, but generally not more than nine or ten hours. How long has it been now?”

“Eight hours, approximately,” Khan says.

“So she’s probably got a couple more hours of unconsciousness before she rejoins the living,” Magpie says. “Do you want company? I promise to keep my hands to myself.”

“If you like,” Khan says.

“Be there in ten,” Magpie says. She hangs up and Khan goes back to the book.

Twelve minutes later, the door opens quietly and Magpie slips in. “Didn’t want to buzz in case it woke her,” she explains, crossing to the couch. “Did you get any sleep?”

“A few hours,” Khan says. “I do not need much sleep. Do you want coffee? The pot should still be good.”

“Love some, I’ll get it though,” Magpie says. “I brought bagels, too, if you want one. There’s a shop I know around here that makes fresh bagels at night, which is brilliant. I know for you it’s morning, but for those of us who live here it’s like eleven o’clock at night. One’s pumpernickel, one’s sesame, but the cinnamon raisin is for Jill when she wakes up.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, taking the pumpernickel bagel because he finds it first. He can feel the warmth through the paper wrapping, and ends up getting cream cheese on his thumb when he unwraps it.

Magpie comes back over with a mug of coffee and takes the sesame bagel out of her bag, unwrapping it and taking a bite. “So good,” she says, swallowing. “And I’m starving. The last food I had was like seven this morning.”

“Why did you not eat?” Khan asks, wondering why he seems to be surrounded by people who do not take care of themselves properly.

“I was busy or asleep,” Magpie says. “I forget to eat sometimes, it’s a streets thing. I had so many years where food was unreliable that these days I forget that I can eat when I want, not just when I get lucky, and I don’t always realize when I’m hungry because I spent so long ignoring it.”
As explanations go, this one is reasonable, if mildly depressing. Khan nods and takes a bite of his bagel. “May I ask who your mother was?” he asks after swallowing.

“She was a street brat like me,” Magpie says, sipping her coffee. “She was fourteen when she had me because there’s no real way to get reliable birth control on the streets and she got unlucky. She died when I was six from some infection that probably is really easy to heal if you’ve got access to decent medical care, but what doctor was going to soil his hands with the likes of us?” She shrugs and sets her mug down on a blue stone coaster. “No idea who my sperm donor was, and she never knew, could have been any one of a number of men.”

“How did you avoid getting pregnant?” Khan asks, too curious to be tactful.

Magpie’s mouth twists. “I didn’t,” she says. “I was fifteen, got knocked up, found a black market doctor who was willing to give me an abortion, but it went wrong, and now I can’t get pregnant because I’ve got nothing to get pregnant with. Never wanted kids, so it doesn’t matter, and I suppose I could always adopt if I ever lose my mind and decide I want to be a mama.” She shrugs again and takes another bite of her bagel.

“How did you get off the streets?” Khan asks.

“Andy,” Magpie says. “He and I, we’d been selling our services as a team for a couple years, managed to save up some money. I was working with Jill, too, a bit, and saved some credits from jobs I pulled with her, and eventually Andy and I managed to save up enough to get an actual place to live, not just a flop. It wasn’t much, but it was ours and safe, and we kept it while we kept building our reputations, and about six months after we got it we got a job that basically made us. After that, the work kept coming, the credits kept coming, and we knew we never had to go back. And before you ask, no, I don’t know what happened to my friends on the streets, the people I ran with. There’s an unspoken rule that if you get out, you do it and don’t look back, you don’t try to help anyone else because they’ll just drag you back down and there are too many to be saved. Andy and I got out together, and I’d have gone back for her, but I didn’t have to, and no one else mattered enough.”

“A hard life,” Khan says quietly.

Magpie shrugs. “Maybe, but it’s all I knew.”

Khan glances at the bed when he hears a faint sound, but Jill hasn’t moved and when he focuses, her breathing stays steady and even. “You’re good for her,” Magpie says quietly. “You care about her, not just because she wants to help you.”

“She is mine,” Khan says, looking back at Magpie.

Magpie smiles a little. “She doesn’t expect you to want her after you get your family back. I don’t know why. I think she thinks they might not approve of her, and you’ll choose them over her. She’s just a tiny average human, in her mind, and your family...isn’t average.”

“Neither is she,” Khan says.

“No, she isn’t,” Magpie agrees. “Will you still want her?”

“Why would I not?” Khan asks in return.

“What will your family think of her?” Magpie asks.

“I don’t know,” Khan says. “There are six dozen of them, I cannot speak for them all.”
“The ones that matter the most,” Magpie says. “What about them?”

“One of the reasons I talked to her was because she reminds me of them,” Khan says. “She...in another life, she could have been one of us. There is a fearlessness to her I recognize.” He considers his words, choosing them carefully. “She isn’t engineered the way we are, but she...I could never think of her as inferior, any more than Rani was.”

He hears a sound again and turns, and this time he sees that Jill has rolled onto her back and the hand not thrown over her eyes clenches at her side. He puts down the rest of his bagel and goes to her, taking the fisted hand and working it open gently. “Easy,” he says softly.

Jill groans. “Turn the world off, it hurts,” she mumbles. “God. Stim-crash migraine. Are the lights off?”

“Mostly,” Khan says.

“I thought I heard Magpie,” Jill says without opening her eyes or even taking her hand away from them. “Is she here?”

“I’m here, love,” Magpie says, coming over to the bed. “What do you need?”

“Hypo in my jewelry box,” Jill says. “The one on the top, next to the amethysts, I think the injector has a purple stripe on it.”

Magpie moves to the shelf above Jill’s bed and takes down a carved wooden box, opening it and taking out a hypospray. “Move your hand so I can--yeah, thanks,” she says and gets Jill with the injection.

“What did she just give you?” Khan asks.

Jill takes a breath, then another, and drops her hand from her eyes. “Combination of pain medication, anti-nausea medication, and a low-dose stimulant,” she says. “It’s the only thing that works for a stim-crash migraine, and it only really takes the edge off, but it helps.”

“How often do you get stim-crash migraines?” Khan asks.

“More often than you’d like,” Jill says. “Please don’t lecture me.”

“It really won’t do any good,” Magpie says. “But hey, at least she admits she has a problem.”

“I’m not addicted to them,” Jill says warily. “I just have problems with insomnia and caffeine only gets you so far before it stops working and I can’t always sleep when my body wants to, and sometimes mind and body disagree on sleep and the mind usually wins.”

Magpie sighs and sits down on Jill’s other side, stroking a few curls back from her face. “I worry about you,” she says. “I’m allowed.”

“What time is it?” Jill asks.

“About eleven-thirty in the evening,” Magpie says. “So Andy might be awake if you want to call him and apologize.”

“Can you text her first and find out?” Jill asks, slowly pushing herself up to sitting. She rubs her forehead and the back of her neck and crawls into Khan’s lap, shoving her head into the crook of his neck.
“I can,” Magpie says. “Let me know when you get hungry, I have a cinnamon raisin bagel with butter and cheese for you.”

“That sounds phenomenally good,” Jill says, considering. “Is there coffee? I smell coffee. Is there any left for me?”

“There is but I do not know if it is still hot,” Khan says. “I will make you a fresh pot.”

“Let me do it,” Magpie says. “Jill-Bear doesn’t look like she wants to move right now.”

“I don’t,” Jill says. “But I have to talk to Andy. And I owe you an apology, too, bird.”

“Family means we have to love you even when you’re an idiot,” Magpie says, taking out her phone and sending Andy a message. “But you worried us.”

“Why is it that the worst dreams are never about what happened but what could have happened?” Jill asks softly.

“Because you know it’s not real and you can’t escape it anyway,” Magpie says without looking up from her phone. “And you’re trapped in your own mind screaming for help and unless you’re better at dreaming than I am or you are, you can’t get out, and you know it’s wrong but you can’t change it. The dreams about what actually happened are things you’ve accepted, you’ve dealt with, and it hurts and it’s awful but you at least have the knowledge that you survived and it’s over and you’ve moved on. The dreams about what didn’t happen have no such mercy.”

“Smart bird,” Jill says.

“Bird who’s been there,” Magpie says. Her link chirps and she puts it on speaker. “Hi, Andy love.”

“Morning,” Andy says. “John, I have absolutely no idea how you sleep in your bed, it’s dreadful, can I replace it?”

“My bed is perfectly adequate,” Khan says.

“If you’re something that doesn’t mind sleeping on a board, sure,” Andy says. “I think I need to see a chiropractor to un-kink my spine from attempting to sleep on your terrible mattress, and I’m totally replacing it once I have tea unless you’re actually devoted to the thing and would be horribly offended if I dared.”

Jill laughs. “Wow, that sounds pretty terrible.”

“It is fine for me,” Khan says. “But if you insist, I will not try to stop you.”

“I really do because even if this works for you, I know Jill-Bear well enough to know she’d be miserable on it,” Andy says. “Speaking of, how the hell are you?”

“Stim-crash migraine and post-meltdown embarrassment,” Jill says. “Did the bird tell you I tried to run away?”

“Oh, yeah,” Andy says. “Not your finest moment ever, my love.”

“No, really not,” Jill says. “And I’m sorry. I’m...I’m really, truly sorry. I just wasn’t being rational due to exhaustion and stims and everything, and I panicked, and I’m better now. I...Magpie made me talk to John, tell him what happened.”

“I know,” Andy says. “I’m glad you finally told someone.”
Jill bites her lip. “Andy, can you come here? I...I should tell you and Magpie what happened, if you still want to know.”

“Of course we want to know,” Magpie says as Andy says “Give me ten minutes.”

“Right,” Jill says. “Okay then. See you in ten.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Khan asks Jill softly.

In response, she grabs his hand, holding on tight enough her knuckles go white. “No,” she says, sounding a little panicked at the thought. “Please, don’t, I...I need you here.”

“I am not going anywhere,” Khan promises her. “I just thought you might want some privacy.”

“No,” Jill says. “No, please, stay.”

“Of course,” Khan says.

“Coffee,” Magpie says. “And you need food, love. Can you come over to the couch so I can give you your bagel and John can finish his?”

“Yeah, I can,” Jill says, sliding out of Khan’s lap. He follows her to the couch and they take seats, Magpie handing Jill her bagel before going to make more coffee.

“Did you get this from Mozzie’s?” Jill asks, unwrapping her bagel.

“Where else would I get fresh bagels at almost midnight?” Magpie asks.

“Good point,” Jill says, biting into hers. “Oh, God, that’s good,” she says around a mouthful. She swallows and grins sheepishly. “That was truly terrible manners, I’m sorry. But oh, that hits the spot.”

“Thought it might,” Magpie says. “When was the last time you ate before you crashed?”

“Um,” Jill says. “I decline to answer that question on the grounds that it might make John frown at me, but in my defense, the stims kill my appetite and make me queasy if I eat too much.”

Khan takes a bite of his own bagel to prevent himself from saying anything.

“I got the scowl earlier when I admitted I hadn’t eaten since like seven in the morning,” Magpie says, laughing. “But you know how I am with food.”

“Yes, you have a very unhealthy relationship with it and your body’s sense of hunger and satiation,” Jill says.

“I do,” Magpie admits. “But between you, me, and Andy we’re all fucked up somehow. You can’t sleep through the night and live on stim-pills, Andy lives as a celibate because he’s afraid of having sex, and I hoard food that I then I don’t eat because I forget it’s okay to not be hungry.”

“If you combine the three of us you might have a well-adjusted human being,” Jill says, nibbling her bagel. “Either that, or you’d get a complete wreck.”

“Odds are on the second,” Magpie says. “But we do all right. I mean, you’re a productive member of society. Andy and I live in the gray areas, but we’ve carved out places for ourselves. Speaking of, I have a gallery show in two months in Boston.”
“Is there a theme?” Jill asks.

“Pencil sketches, the fantastical ones I was working on for a while,” Magpie says. “I have to finish up a couple, but most of the work’s already done. Speaking of, John, I really want to sketch you. I know you probably don’t have time, so can I get like fifteen minutes later with you and a camera so I can take pictures to work from?”

“I do not...” Khan pauses when he sees the disappointed look on Jill’s face that she then tries to hide. “I do not want any images of me published anywhere,” he amends.

“I can work with that,” Magpie says. “I promise not to show or sell any works with you in them without getting your consent.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“Were any of your siblings artists?” Jill asks.

“Not as anything more than a hobby,” Khan says.

“What were your hobbies?” Magpie asks, coming back over to the couch with a mug of coffee for Jill.

“I enjoyed reading, mysteries in particular,” Khan says. “Cat made me learn how to cook with her, and I enjoy that on occasion. Bishop and I would play chess. I understand there is now a three-dimensional version of the game, but I have not learned how to play.”

“Don’t look at me, I’m terrible at it,” Jill says. “Poker’s my game. Chess not so much.”

“I can’t play even two-dimensional chess,” Magpie says, sitting down on a giant floor pillow. “I’m not good at tactical thinking. Andy loves it, though, so she might be able to teach you the three-d version.”

“Speaking of,” Jill says as a transporter beam arrives in the apartment and deposits Andy. “Hi, love.”

“Hello, darlings,” Andy says, holding a travel mug in one hand. While she’s wearing her customary black, today she has on a simple short dress and knee-high boots, with a splash of color in the red scarf around her neck.

“I want your boots,” Jill says, looking at him. “Those are fabulous.”

“I want your dress,” Magpie says. “And it is so unfair that you have better legs than I do.”

“Why is it unfair?” Andy asks, moving to take a seat on another floor pillow, curling his legs to the side. He unwinds the scarf from his neck and drapes it over his legs before taking a sip of tea. “Good legs are not the sole provenance of birds.”

“She has a point,” Jill says, taking a sip of coffee. “So how bad is the mattress really?”

“It’s like sleeping on the floor,” Andy says. “Except I think the floor might be softer.”

“Damn,” Jill says. “Yes, please replace it before I have to sleep on it.”

“It really is not that uncomfortable,” Khan says mildly.

“It really is,” Andy says, smiling at him. “Don’t worry, I’ll pay for it and make sure you get
something suitably supportive. If you don’t like whatever I pick out, I’ll pay for whatever you pick out.”

“We were just telling John you might be able to teach him 3-D chess,” Jill says. “You play, right?”

“I do,” Andy says. “Three-dimensional and classic. I was on the chess team when I was in school, many many years ago, but I still play. There’s a park near my New York loft with chessboards, and you can usually find a partner in the afternoons, so sometimes I go over and find someone willing to play. I’m a little rusty on 3-D though, because the park only has classic boards, and none of my friends really play either version. But I remember the rules well enough to teach you. I have a board in my place here, if you want I can bring it back to London with me. I have to stop over at my apartment and get some stuff anyway.”

“I would like that,” Khan says. “I have not played chess in a while.”

“So I might stand a remote chance of winning a game until you remember all the tricks for classic and I teach you how to play 3-D,” Andy says, laughing. “Good to know.”

“We could always play poker,” Jill offers. “There’s four of us, five if I can pull in Jake, it could be fun.”

“Yeah, how about not,” Magpie says. “You always take all my money when we play.”

“It’s not my fault you have noticeable tells,” Jill says innocently.

“Which you won’t actually tell me about so I have no idea what they are to stop doing them,” Magpie says, glaring at her.

“Nope,” Jill says. “John, do you play poker?”

“Not often,” Khan says. “The wings are more of a tell than I like.”

“Yeah, I can see that being a problem,” Andy says. “Speaking of tells, Jill-Bear. Or at least telling stories.”

Jill looks down, crumpling the paper from her bagel in one hand and reaching for Khan’s hand with the other. He lets her hold on, her grip tight enough he absently wonders about losing circulation. “So,” Jill says, still looking down. “Two years out of Academy, I had a mission.”

She tells them essentially the same story she’d given Khan earlier, not looking at either of them while she does it. Neither Andy nor Magpie interrupt her while she talks, not letting go of Khan’s hand. He notices that she leaves out the bit about what the counselor told her but does acknowledge what happens in her nightmares, and when she finishes talking she slumps a little, looking exhausted and drawn.

Khan doesn’t know who moves first, Andy or Magpie, but suddenly both of them are hugging Jill hard and all he can see is three heads bent together. “This wasn’t your fault,” Andy says, sitting back on her heels to look at Jill. “You know that, right?”

“Oddly, that’s never been a problem,” Jill says. “I know I didn’t do anything but be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But why wouldn’t you tell us, then?” Magpie asks softly, squeezing Jill’s free hand.

Jill swallows and looks down. “I didn’t...I know what you two both survived, and I didn’t...this
“No,” Andy says. “No, this wasn’t nothing, Jill. They terrorized you and assaulted you, and you have every single right to still be upset over it. I’m not surprised you have nightmares still, about what didn’t happen but could have. I get those too, sometimes.”

“Mostly it doesn’t bother me these days,” Jill says. “It’s just...when I get stressed out, the nightmares come back and I can’t sleep because I’m afraid to have the dreams again. I know they’re not real and it doesn’t help.”

“There are ways to control your dreams,” Khan says quietly. “Katsuro studied them, he taught me a bit. I can teach you what I learned, if you like.”

“I really would,” Jill says, looking at him. “Why did he study it?”

“We dream, too,” Khan says.

“Will you teach me, too?” Andy asks.

“Might as well make it three for three,” Magpie says.

“All right,” Khan says.

“I dream I’m on coke again,” Andy says. “That I’m losing everything I’ve fought so hard to keep, and I can see my life crumbling around me, and all I want is the next hit.”

“I dream I’m ten,” Magpie says. “And Andy’s not there.” She doesn’t say anything else.

“Well, this is certainly cheery,” Jill says after a moment. She picks up her coffee and takes a long drink. “And my head is still pounding. How long ago did you give me the hypo?”

“Maybe an hour, why?” Magpie asks.

“Because after two hours I can take more pain meds,” Jill says. She rolls her head around on her neck, grimacing. “Ow. I don’t think that’s supposed to crack like that.”

Andy sighs. “Trade places with me,” he says, getting to his feet. Jill moves to sit on the floor and Andy takes her vacated spot on the couch, hands on Jill’s shoulders to get her settled between his legs. He flexes his hands and starts massaging her shoulders and her neck. “Christ, you’re tight,” he says, pressing his thumbs into the base of her skull.

Magpie snickers. “No comment, although I’m sure John could make one.”

“Shut up,” Jill says, dropping her head forward.

“Well, to be fair, you are rather petite,” Magpie says. “And he...isn’t.”

“You did see him without his pants on,” Andy says thoughtfully.

“I really did,” Magpie says with a happy sigh. “Definitely a highlight of my day.”

Jill throws the crumpled wrapper from her bagel at Magpie, hitting her forehead. “Stop perving on my lover,” she says. “It’s embarrassing.”

“He’s got nothing to be embarrassed about,” Magpie says, laughing.
“Oh, for God’s sake,” Jill says, and Khan finds himself glad he can keep a poker face under almost any circumstance.

“Bird-brain, enough,” Andy says mildly. Magpie giggles again but doesn’t say anything else.

“What time is your outing with your crew tomorrow?” Khan asks Jill to change the subject.

“It is at 2000 hours,” Jill says. “Do you want to come along?”

“I think that would not be a wise idea,” Khan says.

“Okay, point,” Jill says with a sigh. “Still wish you could. When do you need to be back in London?”

“No later than Sunday night,” Khan says.

“Any time you need to go back, I can get you there so long as you give me about fifteen minutes’ notice,” Andy says.

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“I think I want to go back to London with you, at least for a day or two,” Jill says. “Bring a bunch of stuff with me and start unpacking a bit. Also I have to meet with someone at the archive to talk about some details and get my credentials for the project, and I’d rather do that now so the red tape has time to clear before I actually start working on it.” She laughs. “I forgot about the part where I really do have to do research for this to hold water.”

“Sadly you do,” Andy says, patting her shoulder. “But you’re good at finding things out.”

“I can be,” Jill says. “We’ll see how this goes. My research paper days are more than a decade behind me and I don’t remember how to do citations or any of that. Fortunately those things are easy enough to look up.”

“It’s probably changed since then anyway,” Andy says. “It always does.”

“This is true,” Jill says. “So, anyway, yes, I will be going back to London for a couple days.”

“Does your head feel any better?” Andy asks. “You’re not quite as rigid.”

“A bit, yeah,” Jill says. “Thank you. I mean, there’s nothing really for it but time, but that did help. Maybe I can beg a full back rub from John later.”

“If you like,” Khan says.

“I really would,” Jill says. “For now, though, I think I want to go for a run, maybe some fresh air will help. You are all welcome to stay here or come with me.”

“Staying here,” Magpie says. “I love you but not enough to actually go running.”

“Do I look like I’m dressed for running?” Andy asks, smoothing her skirt.

“John?” Jill asks.

“I will go with you,” Khan says.

“I thought you might,” Jill says, scrambling to her feet. “Let me change into running clothes. Do
“No, this will be fine,” Khan says.

“Five minutes,” Jill says, moving to her dresser. Without a hint of self-consciousness, she changes into exercise clothes and sneakers, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. “Okay, I’m ready,” she says, slipping her link and apartment access card into a zippered pocket on her pants. “Let’s go.”

Khan gets to his feet and follows her out the door. In the lift, she turns to him and stretches up for a kiss. “Thank you,” she says, her hands linked behind his neck. “For everything.”

“You are welcome,” Khan says, his hands on her hips. “Are you all right?”

“I think so,” Jill says. “My head really hurts, though.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Khan asks.

“Yes,” Jill says immediately. “There’s a place I know not far from here where we could take off.”

He takes her into the air, glad it is dark and no one will be likely to see them in the sky. They stay aloft for over an hour by Khan’s internal clock, and only land because he can feel Jill shivering in the cold night air. “How is your head?” he asks after touching down a block from her building.

“Still hurts, but it’s better, and I can take more pain meds now,” Jill says. “Thank you. That was...that was exactly what I needed.” She takes his hand as they walk back to her building. “Now I just need to kick Magpie and Andy out so we can have sex.”

“I recommend not telling them the reason you want them to leave, or Magpie might insist on staying,” Khan says and Jill giggles.

“For all I know Andy might, too,” she says. “I think he has a voyeuristic streak.”

“It would not surprise me,” Khan says.

“Yeah, not really,” Jill agrees. “And here we are. I wonder if they’re even still here.”

It turns out that both Andy and Magpie are still in the apartment, heads together over a tablet. “The specs are off, though,” Andy says, tapping the screen. “I don’t think we could use it without modifying the processor.”

“Is it that different from the other one?” Magpie asks.

Andy makes a face. “Kind of. Depends on whether you’re okay with average calculations taking an extra half second per thousand.” She looks up. “Hey, loves. Have a good run?”

“Didn’t go running,” Jill says, going to her bathroom and ducking inside. “Went flying. So much better, and now I am taking pain meds and shortly life will be wholly improved.” She takes a bottle out of her medicine cabinet and twists open the cap, dry-swallowing two. “However, these are going to make me loopy and it’s after midnight and you two should go elsewhere to get some sleep.”

“It’s like eight in the morning for me,” Andy says. “I slept already, as best I could on a slab of
“I didn’t,” Magpie says. “I can keep going for another few hours, though. You want to take this to your place or mine and continue the conversation that neither Jill nor John will care about?”


“What are you discussing?” Khan asks.

“Tech specs for version six of my pin,” Magpie says, touching the bird in her hair. “We’re not quite spoiled for choice, but we have more options for things than we did last time we upgraded it. Tech keeps getting smaller and more powerful, which is good for us.”

“Who designed the actual casing of the bird?” Khan asks.

“I did,” Magpie says. “Well, I drew it, and then Andy built it.”


“I have a bracelet he made me,” Jill says. “It does double duty as jewelry and memory storage.”


“Rather like everyone in this apartment,” Andy says.

“That’s so sickeningly sweet I think I’m going to vomit,” Magpie says. “And on that note, let’s go talk tech somewhere else.” She scrambles to her feet and begins gathering her things. “One of you call me tomorrow when it’s sunny and I can take pictures of John, okay?” she asks, moving to hug Jill.

“Okay,” Jill says. “If we remember and there’s time.”

“You’ll remember and there will be,” Magpie says. “See you later, John.” She stretches up to kiss Khan’s cheek and heads for the door. Andy pauses to hug them both and follows Magpie out of the apartment.

Jill closes the door behind them and locks it before she activates the privacy seal. “Alone at last,” she says, turning to look at Khan. She grins and pulls the band out of her hair, letting it tumble down. “Did I mention how much flying turns me on?”

“I do remember that from last time,” Khan says, smiling briefly. Jill laughs and walks over to him, stretching up for a kiss. He lifts her to make it easier, and her legs wrap around his waist, her hands tangling in his hair.

“I have an idea,” Jill says against his mouth, biting his lip.

“What is your idea, milaya moya?” Khan asks, returning the bite and smiling when she squirms against him.

“You should look through my toy collection,” Jill says. “See what you want to play with now and what I should bring back to London with me.”

“Where is your toy collection?” Khan asks.

Jill kisses him again and squirms out of his arms, jumping to the floor. “Over here,” she says, pointing at the armoire standing on the south wall. She opens the doors and steps back to let him...
look inside. “I feel obligated to say that I didn’t personally buy everything in here, and yes, I have
toys I’ve never used because for a few years everyone kept giving them to me as birthday and
holiday presents, a tradition started by Magpie.”

Khan looks inside the armoire and blinks at the sheer amount of items on its shelves. She seems to
have them organized first by function, then by size, with a shelf at the bottom holding about half a
dozens pieces that he guesses are her favorites. Bins on the inside of one door hold cuffs and rope,
and a smaller one appears to have a few sets of clamps. The other door has a couple floggers and a
crop hanging on it. “I don’t own any whips, for obvious reasons,” Jill says when she catches him
looking at the floggers. “And some of my other impact play toys are in the closet because I ran out
of room in the armoire. But I thought this might be of interest to you.” She opens a drawer at the
bottom of the armoire and takes out a zipped black case, handing it to him. Khan opens it
curiously, and can’t quite keep himself from smiling when he sees the fine-bladed knives inside.

“When did you get these?” he asks, brushing a finger over the handles.

“About four years ago,” Jill says. “I bought them for myself, but I’ve never had a partner who felt
comfortable using them on me, or who I felt comfortable letting use them on me.” She grins.
“Want to try them out?”

“Yes,” Khan says softly.

Jill grins again and moves to take a box from one of the bins on the door. “I’d rather not move at
the wrong moment and screw things up,” she says. “That, and I like being tied down.”

“Yes, you do,” Khan murmurs, taking the box. “You should undress.”

“Should I?” Jill laughs, pulling off her hoodie. “Will you do the same?”

“No,” Khan says, watching her. “Not yet.”

“That seems unfair,” Jill says with a frown.

“Tell me your safeword,” Khan says, ignoring the comment.

She pulls off her t-shirt and tosses it in the general direction of the clothes hamper. “Ventrax,” she
says, not quite looking at him. “But I get--if you push me far enough, I forget I can safeword, so...if
I suddenly start asking you to stop and I don’t use it, it doesn’t mean I don’t need to, it means I’ve
forgotten I can.”

“If you need me to stop, I will,” Khan says quietly.

“I know.” Jill runs her hands through her hair and sighs. “I know.”

“Who didn’t?” Khan asks.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Jill says, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “It wasn’t. It--we hadn’t really
played together before, and we were in a scene, and it...I was down pretty far, and I didn’t like it,
and I couldn’t...I asked him to stop, but he thought I was playing, he didn’t know I meant it
because I didn’t safeword. He didn’t know.”

“That is not an excuse, Jill,” Khan says, moving to kneel in front of her. “If he were any good at
what he was doing, he should have been able to see you were in distress.”

“It’s not a big deal, really,” Jill insists. “It was ages and ages ago, and he didn’t hurt me, I mean it
wasn’t unsafe or dangerous or anything, it just...I wasn’t comfortable in the scene and I freaked out, and everything worked out in the end, and after that I started cautioning people I was going to play with that I didn’t always remember I could safeword, and it’s fine. I’m far from the only person who’s ever had that problem, you know?”

“Did you play with him again?” Khan asks.

“No, I didn’t, by mutual agreement,” Jill says. “And we’re ruining the mood.” She leans forward and kisses him, her hands sliding into his hair.

He considers pushing for more details before deciding to let her redirect things for now; whatever happened, and he doubts it was just a one-time issue, she doesn’t want to talk about it. He also doubts she carries around any conscious lingering trauma from a scene gone wrong. But it makes him determined to be more careful with her, to not let anything like that happen while she is with him.

He unfastens her bra easily enough, letting her pull away from his mouth enough to get it off and toss it after her t-shirt. After that it’s easy enough to close his hands around her wrists and pull her back on the bed, pinning her with one knee between her legs and his weight not quite pressing her into the mattress. “Stay there,” he says, moving to get the cuffs. Jill shifts a little to get more comfortable, but doesn’t move or take her hands from above her head, and Khan fastens the cuffs around her wrists carefully, brushing his fingers over the inside of her arms. He positions her the way he wants her, stretched out against the bed and arms raised just a little off the covers, before he locks the cuffs.

Jill’s breath catches and she shivers, relaxing into the hold. Khan skims his fingers over her collarbone, between her breasts, down her stomach before he moves to take off the rest of her clothes. He sets them aside and moves to get the knives, opening the case and studying the blades before selecting one. To get a sense of its sharpness, he tests it on the back of his hand, determining how much pressure he needs to break the skin. It turns out not much, and he smiles, pleased, before taking one of the alcohol wipes in the case and disinfecting the blade.

He moves to kneel between her legs, leaning down to kiss her lightly before he draws the blade over her skin, just above her collarbone. He doesn’t quite break the skin, but it leaves a red line behind. Jill swallows and he can see her pulse beating in the hollow of her throat. He traces the mark he left with his tongue before marking her again, and this time he presses harder when he ends the line, enough to cause blood to well up and make her moan.

“You love this,” Khan murmurs, considering where to mark her next, what he wants to see on her skin. “I could kill you, and you love it.”

“You won’t kill me,” Jill whispers, licking dry lips. “And yeah, I do.”

“How are you so sure?” Khan asks, trailing the blade up her throat to press against her carotid.

“You need me,” she says, a little breathless. “You need me alive and if you kill me, my friends will come after you, and you don’t want that. They might not take you down, but they’ll do their best, and you don’t want to deal with that.”

Khan laughs. “I don’t, you are right,” he says, taking the knife away from the vulnerable artery and drawing a line between her breasts. “And no, I would not kill you, not like this.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jill murmurs.
Khan smiles and continues marking her, sometimes cutting her skin and other times just leaving welts behind. He draws random lines, not quite making patterns, keenly aware of her skin temperature and her body language, listening and watching for any sign she isn’t enjoying this. He doesn’t get one.

She trembles under him, breath hitching every time he cuts her, and when he draws the final mark just above her pubic line she whimpers. Most of the cuts have stopped bleeding by this point, but he sets the knife down and shifts to lick the blood from the last mark he made. Jill moans, shifting against the bed, legs spreading just a little more. He brushes his fingers between her legs, feeling how hot she is, how slick. “Please,” she whispers.

“What do you want, milaya moya?” Khan murmurs back, touching the damp curls, holding her in his hand.

“You,” she says, a groan more than a word. “Please.”

He strokes her with two fingers, parting her and slipping his fingers inside. She shivers and gasps softly and her breath hitches when he presses a finger against her clit. “You like pain,” he says softly. “Why?”

“Endorphin rush,” she says, squirming against his hand, drawing up her knees. “Maybe I’m wired wrong. Does it matter? It’s--oh--not all pain, just some.”

“I know,” Khan says, almost to himself, more interested in how she whines and bites her lip when he touches her just right. A high-pitched noise escapes her at a twist of his hand and she tosses her head against the pillows, breathing hard.

“Please,” she begs. “I just--I need--”

“I know what you need,” Khan says, giving her just that, watching her come apart on the bed until she cries out and spasms around his fingers. “Do you need more?” he asks, letting her come down a little.

“I need you to fuck me,” Jill says, words the tiniest bit slurred and voice hazy with pleasure. “Well, I want you to get naked and then fuck me.”

“Do you, now,” Khan murmurs even as he eases his hand back and moves to get out of his own clothes.

“Really, I do,” Jill says, shifting a little against the bed. Khan thinks her arms have to be getting tired, but when he touches her hand her skin feels warm and she smiles a bit. “I’m okay. Just...I want you, is all.”

“I know,” Khan says, bending to kiss her. Her legs wrap around his waist when he pushes into her and she shudders, pulling away from his mouth to gulp in a breath, hair spread out over the pillows, eyes closed.

He can see the faintest hint of freckles on her cheeks over the flush in her skin, a pretty flush that spreads down her throat and over her chest. “Please,” she manages. “Please.”

Khan uses the hand not braced against the bed to trace the marks he left on her collarbone, on her right arm. “Can you come like this?” he asks, his voice huskier than he means it to be, but Jill shivers when she hears him.

“I think so,” she says, whimpering when he changes the angle slightly. “Oh, fuck, that’s good,
don’t—don’t stop, please, just like—oh—”

He doesn’t, and she comes twice more before he buries his head in her throat and comes, breathing in her scent and tasting salt on her skin. After a long moment or two, he eases back and moves to unlock the cuffs and unfasten them. Jill’s arms drop to the covers as soon as the cuffs let her, but doesn’t move her arms. “How are your hands?” Khan asks, setting the cuffs aside.

“They’re fine,” Jill says. “Shoulders are a little stiff, but worth it.”

“Are you tired?” Khan asks, nudging her to roll over. She settles on her belly and he straddles her hips, hands digging into her shoulders.

“Really not,” Jill says. “Not quite up for another round yet, though. Although I am hungry. I wonder what I have in the house. I think I’ve got some stuff.”

“Let me finish this and I will go peruse your kitchen,” Khan says.

“You are way too good to me,” Jill says, sounding a little embarrassed about it.

“I was taught to take care of my people,” Khan says. “Whether that meant ensuring adequate food supplies for millions or holding Rani while she slept, the end goal has always been the same, as it is now.”

“Am I your people?” Jill asks.

“You are mine,” Khan says, working his thumbs up the back of her neck.

“I like that,” Jill says. “Not that I expect anything once I help you get your family back, but I like it for now.”

Khan thinks about saying something, decides against it. She won’t believe him right now and he’s not entirely certain what would persuade her. Instead he continues working the tension out of her neck and back until her skin is warm and flushed from his hands and she’s gone limp on the bed. “Rest,” he says, moving off the bed and kissing the back of her neck. “I will sort out food.”

“If I don’t have any, the drawer next to the fridge has delivery and take-out menus in it,” Jill mumbles, showing no signs she wants to move.

“All right,” Khan says. He brushes his fingers down the back of her spine, smiling when she sighs and arches a little into his touch. Then he goes to pull on his slacks and find out what Jill has her in her apartment that might be edible.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Potentially, Jim shows up. I know some of you are probably thinking “About freaking time.” Sorry?
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Not subtle, is his Jill, but effective.

Chapter Notes

So, I hope you all had a Happy New Year and a safe one, and here's to the start of 2014. I figure I'm starting by posting a chapter, so we're already off on a good note, right?

This chapter got delayed a bit due to the story not wanting to be written in order (I have about four scenes that will fit in chapters later than now) and also my evil sounding board tempting me with AU ideas that then grew teeth. (In her defense, I did ask for prompts as I needed something more light-hearted due to some personal stuff.) If you are curious about the AU that currently runs a little over eleven thousand words (it's set modern-day and in college), feel free to drop me a comment or email me at blueraccoon[at]outlook.com and I can hook you up. I'm really not ready to post it anywhere yet, not until I finish at least one of the fics I've got going on AO3, but it appears to be turning into a Thing and I always welcome feedback.

If you're curious about some of my thoughts on writing and the writing process and how/why I write, you can check me out here.

As always (longest author's notes ever, jeez) thank you so much for reading, and special thanks for those leaving comments or kudos, they make my day :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Khan stays in San Francisco through Sunday afternoon, mostly because Jill doesn’t ask him to but clearly wants him to stay. He spends Saturday night with Andy and Magpie while she goes out with her crew, and none of them are surprised when she comes home giggling and unsteady on her feet. “I’m going to miss them,” she says, flopping down on her bed. “What have you three been up to? Anything exciting or illegal?”

“Nope,” Magpie says. “Andy and John have been playing 3-D chess and I’ve been sketching John. He won’t pose nude, though, which I find kind of unfair.”

“Mine,” Jill says. “Besides, you have an imagination, use it.”

“So unfair,” Magpie says. “But I did get some great pictures of him with his shirt off earlier, when it was sunny out. How drunk are you, love?”

“Not very,” Jill says. “I’m happily buzzed, is all, but nothing more than that. I was careful. And Evan saw me home, which was all kinds of awkward, but whatever, his loss.”
“Evan is the man you thought you were in love with?” Khan asks.

“Mmhmm,” Jill says, lifting her head enough to pull the band out of her ponytail before she drops her head against the bed. “And we’re still friends and it’s just...weird. But it’s his loss and I have you anyway so it doesn’t matter.”

“Why did he turn you down in the first place?” Andy asks. “I never got this story.”

“He was coming off a bad breakup and didn’t want to date anyone,” Jill says. “And getting turned down stung enough I didn’t try again. I think he kind of regrets it now, but it’s too late.”

Khan doesn’t comment on that, but a bit of him feels relieved.

“We haven’t been completely goofing off this evening,” Andy says. “We spent some time planning how to get into the facility holding John’s family. It’s going to be tricky, and I need about a week to build a couple things we’re going to need. Magpie’s started on electronic histories, and we think we have a place in London we can use for them to stay. I’m going to check on it when we go back tomorrow, and I’ll be in London a couple more days but then I need to hole up in my New York loft and build tech. Some of it I can’t transport easily.”

“Whatever you need,” Jill says. “How many are we planning on getting out?”

“Anywhere from two to eight,” Andy says. “It’ll depend on how well we succeed the first time. Magpie’s building stories and IDs for eight people, and if we don’t need them all it’s still better to have them than not.”

“Agreed,” Jill says. She stretches and pushes to her feet, shaking out her hair. “I need water. What did you three do for dinner?”

“Ordered in Chinese, there’s leftovers in your fridge,” Andy says. “We didn’t know if you’d be hungry or not.”

“I am starving, so yes,” Jill says. “I had some nibbles at the bar, but we didn’t have an actual meal. Would have interfered with the drinking, and there were some people determined to get seriously blitzed, of which I was clearly not one.”

“They’ll miss you,” Andy says.

“Yeah,” Jill admits, sounding wistful. “And I’ll miss them. But nothing stays static in Starfleet for long, and I’ve been on that ship for five years, time for a change.” She moves into the small kitchen, and Khan returns his attention to the chessboard.

“Mate in three, I believe,” he says after studying it.

“I should never have taught you 3-D chess,” Andy says with a groan. “This isn’t fair. Wait. No. I can get out of this.” She moves one of her knights.

Khan smiles a little; he had anticipated that move, and counters easily. “Check,” he says.

“Oh, fuck me,” Andy says. “I give up. This is the fourth time you’ve beaten me, and I used to think I was good at this game.”

“You are not in checkmate yet,” Khan points out.

“Yes, but I don’t see a way to avoid it,” Andy says, looking at the board. “I’m about to give up and
go with Jill’s suggestion of poker.”

“Count me out, I can’t afford to play her,” Magpie says.

“Blackjack?” Jill offers, emerging from the kitchen with a plate and a bottle of water. She folds herself down on a floor pillow and begins eating, handling her chopsticks easily.

“I do not play card games with you,” Magpie says firmly, looking up from her sketchpad. “You cheat.”

“I do not,” Jill says indignantly. “I have never cheated at cards in my life. That’s just wrong.”

“You’ll break into people’s homes and steal their things but you won’t cheat at cards?” Andy shakes his head. “You have a very twisted moral code, Jill-Bear.”

“There are rules to cards,” Jill insists. “I’m good at them, but I don’t ever cheat.”

“Twisted moral code,” Andy says again. “Not that I’m one to talk, really.”

“Really you’re not,” Jill says, pointing a chopstick at Andy. “You help people steal things.”

“Speaking of, where’s my frog?” Andy asks. “You said you had one.”

“Oh, I do!” Jill puts down her chopsticks and scrambles to her feet. “He’s been hanging out with Bilbo.” She hurries over to the shelves above her bed and picks up an item, returning to the couch with a plain white box. “Courtesy of--well, let’s not go there, let’s just say possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Andy laughs and opens the box, taking out a frog carved from pale green crystal, almost translucent in the apartment lighting. “Oh, he’s beautiful,” she murmurs, studying the frog. “I know just where to put him, too.”

“Why didn’t I get a present?” Magpie asks.

“Is it your birthday or any kind of holiday in which gifts are exchanged?” Jill asks.

“No, but it’s not Andy’s birthday either,” Magpie says with a pout.

“No, but Andy gave me tech that enabled me to acquire her frog,” Jill says and laughs. “Okay, okay, fine.” She goes back to the shelves and returns with another box. “For you, lover of shiny things.”

Magpie squeals in delight and opens the box, taking out a blue glass pendant on a silver chain. “Oh, it’s lovely, Jill,” she says, immediately putting it on.

“You don’t get a present, sorry,” Jill tells Khan. “At least, not now.”

“I think I shall survive without one,” Khan says mildly.

Jill laughs and kisses his cheek before folding herself down on her pillow again and picking up her plate. “So, tell me the plan for the break-in,” she says. “Do we have one?”

“We do but it’ll involve some pieces of equipment we don’t have yet that I have to build,” Andy says, setting the frog down. “Basically we need three portable shields so the sensors and cameras don’t see you and whoever you bring out with you, plus earbud comms so we can stay in touch and Magpie knows when to hack which cameras, plus some of the stuff you already have. I don’t know
if I can get you more sets of the gloves and boots in time, which might be problematic because--

hang on.” He moves the chessboard aside and takes out a tablet, calling up blueprints. “The easiest

way in is through the window here, but it involves climbing up the wall to get to the window. You
can do that no problem, but getting out with three people is going to be more difficult, and it’s a
seven-meter jump to the ground.”

“My people can handle that easily,” Khan says. “Especially the ones Jill will be taking out with

her. Getting in might be more difficult, but if all they have to do is get out through the window,
they will be fine. I could do it even without wings.”

“Right, okay, good to know,” Andy says, brushing back a lock of hair. “That makes life easier.
That’s really the only physically difficult part of the whole thing, as far as I can see. The rest of it’s
just avoiding guards and cameras and causing distractions, and Magpie and Jill and I have done
that before. We have earbud comms, but I need ones that’ll work while shields are running, which
is trickier. I can do it, but it’ll take me a little bit to modify existing equipment.”

“Do you need help?” Khan asks.

Andy shakes his head. “I shouldn’t think so. It’d take me longer to explain what I needed you to do
than for me to just do it. I mean, I’m not trying to say you don’t have the skills, but I know what
I’m doing and I generally work faster alone. Besides, I have to do this in New York and you’re
needed in London.”

“True,” Khan admits. “Still, I am good with technology.”

“I’ll email you with what I’m doing, if you want to know,” Andy says. “If you have ideas, we can
talk about it.”

“All right,” Khan says.

Jill looks at the blueprints, setting her empty plate aside. “Okay, so...where are the guards? I’m
guessing they patrol?”

“They do, and cameras cover the areas they don’t patrol as regularly,” Magpie says. She sets her

sketchpad down. “Security station here, and one here, and the patrols run every twenty minutes. I
think there’s a security station here, but it’s more for emergencies than actual staff, and of course
there’s a force-field here, just before the room with the cryotubes in it. That’s actually the easiest
part, because I can take it down without a problem and without alerting anyone. The annoying part
is that the cryotube room is shielded to a fare-thee-well, which isn’t a surprise, but means that one,
we can’t just beam you in and beam you out, and two, we’ll lose contact with you once you’re in
it.”

“Beaming takes all the fun out of it,” Jill says. “Besides, it’s easily detectable.”

Magpie rolls her eyes. “Right, well, anyway. Andy and I know the path you’ll need to take to get
in, but it’s going to involve some seriously good timing. We can definitely do it, but it’s not going
to be easy.”

“We never thought it would be,” Jill says. “How much acrobatics will be involved?”

“Hardly any, sorry,” Andy says. “The hardest part will be getting up the wall to get in the window,
after that it’s just sneaking.”

“Sneaking’s still fun,” Jill says. She takes a sip of water and caps the bottle, setting it down.
“What’s this blank spot here?” she asks, pointing at a section on the screen.
“We don’t know yet,” Magpie says, scowling at it. “The security around it is harder to hack than the rest of the building, and I haven’t had time to really get my hands into it yet. I don’t think it’s got lifesigns in it, though, and you shouldn’t have to go through it to get where you need to be, but I am not comfortable with you going in until we know every centimeter of the place. It’s next on my list of things to do, so I should have more data by Monday.”

“Right,” Jill says. “Any other blanks we need to worry about?”

“This one,” Magpie says, flipping screens. “Again, not somewhere you need to go through but still worrying. John, do you know anything about either spot?”

Khan shakes his head. “I do not,” he says.

“Jake might be able to help us out,” Jill says. “I think he gets back into town Monday, I can call him and ask.”

“Yeah, that’d be helpful depending on what I can learn,” Magpie says. “I mean, I can crack the security, but if he knows things, that’d be good.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Jill says. “Not quite sure where I’ll be Monday, I guess London, so we’ll see where he is and when we can connect. This is probably better done in person. Magpie, can you come back to London for a couple days, just to make life easier before Andy goes back to New York and I have to come back here?”

“Yeah, I can arrange that,” Magpie says. “You’re sounding remarkably sober for someone who was giggling her head off half an hour ago.”

“Fast metabolism and I told you I wasn’t drunk,” Jill says. “What time are we all beaming back to London tomorrow and will we have the capability to bring some of my things with us?”

“Noon,” Andy says. “And yes, but it can’t be too much.”

“Four boxes there,” Jill says, pointing. “Already packed.”

“We can handle four boxes,” Andy says. “And I think on that note I am going to leave and get some sleep, or at least have more tea. Bird, you coming with me?”

“Oh, is this my cue to leave so you can have sex?” Magpie asks, laughing. “Yeah, okay. Let me gather up my crap.” She gets to her feet and begins doing that while Andy puts away the chessboard. “John, again, thank you so much for letting me take pictures of you,” she says, bending to hug him. “I promise no one will ever see any of them without your consent.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.


“I can make an exception for Jill, right?” Magpie asks Khan.

“Yes, I suppose,” he says.

“Besides, this way if you sketch him naked I can tell you what you’ve got wrong,” Jill says.

Khan looks at her again and she giggles. “I promise to be very complimentary. And accurate, but the two go together.”
“How complimentary?” Magpie asks.

Jill bounces to her feet and leans up, whispering something in Magpie’s ear that even Khan’s hearing cannot catch. Whatever it is, though, makes Magpie whistle and look at him for a long moment. “Damn, you’re lucky,” she says to Jill.

“I know,” Jill says with a grin. “Now go away so I can have sex.”

“Going, going, gone,” Magpie says, hugging Jill. Andy does the same, leaning down to hug Khan and kiss his cheek, and then they leave. Jill shuts the door and activates the privacy seal behind them before kicking off her shoes and walking back over to Khan.

“Exactly what did you tell Magpie?” he asks, drawing her down into his lap.

“What do you think I told her?” Jill runs her fingers through his hair. “I tell her almost everything, Khan. Almost. She doesn’t know your real name, I don’t think she wants to know, truth be told.”

“Do you know her real name?” Khan asks.

“I know the name that’s on her legal ID and paperwork,” Jill says. “But for all intents and purposes, her real name is Magpie.”

“I understand,” Khan says.

“Yes, I thought you might,” Jill says. She kisses him lightly, then again. “Let’s go to bed,” she murmurs against his mouth.

“Yes,” Khan murmurs back, biting her lip because he likes the way it makes her squirm against him. He lifts her into his arms as he stands, more interested in kissing her than in setting her down; she laughs into his mouth but wraps her arms around his neck and lets him carry her over to the bed.

They end up with her on top of him, his hands on her hips and hers on his chest, her nails digging marks in his skin. She shudders and twists down against him when she comes, too breathless to make a sound; he’s right behind her, hands tightening enough on her hips he thinks he might have left bruises.

Jill collapses against him after, still catching her breath. “Damn, that was good,” she says. “I mean, it always is with you, but still. I’m sure we’re capable of having bad sex, but...then again, you are superior. I’m not, but you are.”

Khan folds arms and wings around her, holding her against him. “Bad sex is a waste of everyone’s time, and I prefer not to waste mine,” he says.

“Intelligent man,” Jill says with a husky laugh. She bites his collarbone, tugging at his skin playfully. “So it sounds like we’ll be ready to run the first op shortly after I move to London.”

The sudden change in subject makes him blink. “Yes, I think so,” he says, not quite sure he will be ready for it. So much risk, so many things that could go wrong, and perhaps the hardest part will be accepting that his role in the operation will be minimal. Out of necessity, but Khan has never liked delegating and he trusts few outside his family.

But Jill belongs to him, which makes her his family, which makes her family his by extension. And Andy and Magpie are Jill’s family. It still does not make him easy about the upcoming operation, but it helps. Somewhat.
“Did I ever tell you about the craziest job I pulled?” Jill asks, apparently changing the subject again.

“No, I do not think so,” Khan says, curious where she will go with this.

“The thing I was going after was on the fourteenth floor of the building,” Jill says. “You needed a keycard for the lift to get onto the floor, which we didn’t have. Security guards on every floor, not always patrolling but their average response time was under a minute for anything out of the ordinary. The room itself was shielded and you needed a different keycard than the lift to get into it, and the only entrance had guards maybe three meters from the door.”

“So how did you get in?” Khan asks.

“I crawled up fourteen flights of ventilation shafts, because they were big enough I could fit in them and Magpie hacked the one monitoring system on them to make it look like I wasn’t there,” Jill says. “Then I took a moment to catch my breath, opened the grate in the ceiling of the room from the shaft I was in—they’d put sensors on the floor, and the door, but not in the ceiling, which was stupid but worked to our advantage. Climbed down the wall, by which point Magpie had hacked the floor sensors not to register my weight, made it to the case, and from there on out it was easy. Pick up the object, replace it with similar object before the alarm beeped—she’d given me a five-second delay on that, which was just enough time. Put object in my backpack, back up the wall, into the ceiling, and down fourteen stories of ventilation shafts and out of the building.”

Khan realizes what she is doing, realized it after he asked how she had gotten in. Not subtle, is his Jill, but effective. “What was the closest call you ever had?” he asks.

She laughs. “It involved a dog bigger than me and an unfortunately timed rain shower,” she says. “Delayed the whole op because I had to wait until I stopped dripping water before I could continue, and we were on a time crunch, so...things got a little dicey there for a bit. We didn’t get caught, but they knew someone had been there almost as soon as I got away, and the thing I’d gotten had to wait six months before Andy could fence it.”

“Andy acts as a fence?” Khan asks.

“She did, for a while,” Jill says. “Still does occasionally, but less so these days.”

“Where did the dog come into the picture?” Khan asks.

“He took a liking to me and followed me, and when I was ready to start getting into the building he wouldn’t go away, and he barked when I tried to make him go away. Eventually I hid out of sight in a bush and his person came along to get him. He didn’t want to go, but the person was bigger than he was. The problem was while I was waiting for him to leave, it started raining, so...” Jill shrugs.

“I see,” Khan says. “Do dogs normally like you?”

“Yeah, mostly,” Jill says. “Cats and I are supremely indifferent to each other, but dogs mostly like me and I mostly like them. You?”

“Dogs are loyal,” Khan says. “I like that about them. And they can be trained. I never had one, but some of my men did, and I got along with them. I have little use for cats.”

“Most intelligent people do,” Jill says.

“We call my sister Cat because it is a shortened version of her name, but we spell it like the animal
because she can be remarkably feline when she wants,” Khan says. “There are times I would almost swear I can see her tail lashing, or her fur standing on end.”

Jill laughs. “Will I have to worry about her trying to claw my eyes out?”

“I think not,” Khan says. In truth, he remembers his own disorientation upon being revived and feels less certain. Any of his siblings are capable of striking first and asking questions later, and Ekaterina more so than most. He still, despite his eidetic memory, does not fully remember the few minutes it took for him to gain full consciousness, and no one in section 31 ever told him what he had or had not done.

“No,” Jill says, pulling back to meet his eyes. “You tensed when you said that. What’s wrong?”

She does need to know, Khan thinks. “The...revival is not instantaneous,” he says. “It takes perhaps five minutes to gain full consciousness and awareness, and in that time, I still do not remember what I did. Even after gaining consciousness, I was slightly disoriented for a bit. This could potentially work to your advantage when reviving my siblings, as they may be more likely to follow you without demanding answers you have no time for, but on the other hand...we are fighters, Jill. We kill without second thoughts and sometimes without first.”

“So it’s possible your siblings could attack me when I wake them,” Jill says. “Yeah, I figured about as much. I also figure you and they have some kind of code phrases you used to signal dangerous situations, or caution warranted, or whatever, and you’ll teach me those and if that’s the first thing they hear, plus my telling them I was sent by you, the odds are slightly more in my favor.”

“How do you know we have code phrases?” Khan asks, not because she is incorrect but because he wants to know her reasoning.

Jill snorts. “Give me credit for basic intelligence, Khan,” she says. “Please. Any group of people that’s worked together long enough develops shorthand. Andy and Magpie and I have a lot of it. Jake and I have some. I had codes I used when I went on missions from my ship. There’s absolutely no way you and your brothers and sisters didn’t develop something similar.”

“Point well taken,” Khan says. “I will teach you.”

“Thank you.” She kisses his chin and puts her head back down. “And if they attack me, well, I probably won’t be in any shape to figure out what happens next so I suggest you and Andy and Magpie come up with Plan B.”

He knows they need to and yet everything in him recoils at the thought. “I will mention it to Magpie,” he says reluctantly.

“I prefer to be an optimist but plan for the worst,” Jill says. “This way if things go well I’m not completely surprised, and if things go sideways I’m ready for it.”

“Sensible of you,” Khan says.

Jill laughs at that. “I’m many things, but sensible is not usually one of them,” she says.

“But you are not about to run into the facility holding my family without all the intelligence and planning you need to have the best chance of being successful,” Khan says. “What is that if not sensible?”

“Basic intelligence?” Jill suggests. “A hope to avoid dying and avoid getting your family killed?
Okay, I see your point, but it’s still not a word that’s usually applied to me.”

“What words usually are?” Khan asks.

“Crazy, impulsive, neurotic, freak,” Jill says easily. “Smart, on occasion. Lucky.”

“Why freak?” Khan asks.

“I am,” Jill says. “I’m not offended by it, or anything, it’s just accurate. I’m tiny, compared to the average human in today’s world, and my body does things it shouldn’t and doesn’t do things it should. I can dislocate different body parts at will, I can bend in ways most people can’t, but at the same time regen doesn’t work on me very well and I don’t respond well to a lot of drugs developed in the last century. I’m physically a freak, and emotionally and mentally I don’t...I don’t always belong in this century. Sometimes I think I’d have done better back in your time, or even earlier, maybe.”

“Why do you say you don’t belong in this century?” Khan asks.

Jill shrugs. “I’m too savage,” she says. “I have no problems with killing people, or hurting them. I won’t torture someone, but I don’t care if I break bones in a fight or shoot someone in the arm to disable them. Most Starfleet officers these days are more pacifistic than I am.”

“Then I should think your problem is less that you do not belong in this century and more that you do not belong in Starfleet,” Khan says. “Jill, when this is over, I doubt I will remain in Starfleet. It has nothing to offer me, and I have nothing I want from it. Perhaps you should consider doing the same.”

“What would I do instead?” Jill asks. “I mean, I don’t need to work, but I’d go crazy if I did nothing, and while I could go back to stealing you can only do that for so long before physically it gets too demanding. Besides, I love space, I don’t want to stay planet-bound.”

“I think it will depend on how our situation plays out, what options we have when things are done,” Khan says.

“Well, I’ll need to do something once you’re gone,” Jill says. “And now you’ve gone tense again. What did I say?”

“Why are you so convinced I will leave?” Khan asks softly.

“Because it makes sense,” Jill says. “Because you’ll--God willing and things working out in our favor--you’ll have your family back. You won’t need me, or Magpie, or Andy. I’m not saying I’ll never see you again, but--”

“But I think you want to convince yourself of this more than you want to convince me,” Khan says. “I have no intention of leaving you anywhere, milaya moya.”

“Things happen,” Jill says. “And I need a shower. Let me up, please.”

Khan sighs, but releases her, and she scrambles off him and disappears into the bathroom. He supposes that could have gone worse.

Jill takes longer in the shower than she normally does, and when she comes out of the bathroom she pulls on a black sleepshirt that comes to her knees. Khan doesn’t comment on the fact that usually with him she sleeps naked, but neither does he move to pull on pants. “Come to bed,” he says quietly.
“I’m not tired,” Jill says, not quite meeting his eyes.

“Do not,” Khan says evenly, “lie to me.”

She starts at that, but after a moment comes to bed, only resisting for a moment when he simply pulls her in against him, holding her close with an arm and a wing. Neither of them mention the earlier conversation, but it hangs in the room like a cloud, weighing everything down.

Slowly, Jill relaxes against him, her breath evens and slows, and she drifts into sleep. Khan wonders what in the galaxy he is going to do with her, what it will take for him to convince her that he is not just using her, he will not walk away when their business is over.

If he were a smarter man, he would do just that. Not necessarily a better man, because good men don’t break women’s hearts, but if he were smarter, he would walk away. He would consider Jill an ally, potentially even a friend, but nothing more than that, nothing more than someone he could use and whose help he could gain. And when this finished, when he had his family back, he would leave her to her life and Starfleet and her very much non-Starfleet friends and be on his way.

But genius has blind spots, and Jill appears to be his. She is his now, she belongs to him, and although clearly she doesn’t realize entirely what that means Khan knows full well. He knows what he did by claiming her, what obligations that puts on him and what it means for the future. He does not regret it, not for an instant, not even now. But it complicates things, and all he can do is keep going and wish for the best.

He wonders what Rani would think of her, of this situation they’re in. He wonders if two decades ago, when she saved Andy, she knew this would happen. For all he knows that was an instant ago to her--he has no idea how time passes for spirits, or if it even moves in a linear fashion at all. Truthfully, he doesn’t even know if he believes that her spirit still exists somewhere or not. He supposes he has to, that he has enough evidence to at least indicate it did exist, but he has always been a practical man, dealing in evidence and empiricism rather than faith and belief.

Something cool brushes against his cheek, there and gone in an instant, and for a split second he can almost think he smells jasmine. Almost.

Khan sighs and lowers his forehead to Jill’s hair, breathing in the very real spicy-sweet scent. She doesn’t stir and he closes his eyes against the dark, trying to will himself into sleep.

He wakes suddenly and rather painfully, when a fist lands in his solar plexus. It takes him a moment to catch his breath and realize Jill hit him while apparently in the throes of a nightmare. She cries out, an anguished wail, and he hesitates for a second, not sure whether to touch her or not. He decides to risk it and squeezes her wrist. “Jill, wake up,” he says intently. “Wake up. You’re safe, it’s safe here.”

She screams again and bolts upright, yanking her hand away from him and shaking all over. “Lights, forty percent,” she snaps after taking a breath. The lights obediently come on and she sucks in air, still shaking. Khan shifts to his knees and hesitantly reaches for her, but she shakes her head violently. “Don’t touch me. Not right now.”

He drops his hand. “The Ventraxans?” he asks carefully.

“Yeah. Yeah.” Jill buries her face in her hands. “It’s not real,” she says, trying to convince herself. “It’s not real. It was never real. And I think I need to throw up.” She all but sprints into the bathroom, and shortly after Khan hears her retch.
She has a water sink in the bathroom, and washcloths on a ring next to it. Khan dampens one with cool water and kneels next to her, pressing the cloth to the back of her neck while she clutches the toilet. Even after she finishes, she stays on her knees, breathing hard, but does take the cloth from him and sponge off her face with one hand, flushing the toilet with the other.

“I hate throwing up,” she says into the cloth. “I really hate it.”

Khan takes the cloth back and runs it under cold water again. Jill buries her face in it for a moment before folding it and draping it over the back of her neck. “I need to brush my teeth,” she says, pushing slowly to her feet. “Give me a minute.”

“I will be out there,” Khan says, gently touching her shoulder before he leaves the bathroom.

A minute or two later, Jill emerges smelling faintly of mint. “Well, that sucked, let’s not do it again,” she says, sitting down on the bed.

“Do you do this every time you have that nightmare?” Khan asks.

“Most times,” Jill says tiredly. “And the worst part now is that I’m exhausted, but I don’t trust myself to sleep again. If I go back to sleep after I have one of these, the odds of it coming again are higher, I’ve learned.” She rubs her hands over her face and through her hair.

“May I touch you?” Khan asks quietly.

She nods. “It’s okay.”

He moves to sit up against the headboard, wings folded back, and reaches for her. Jill settles between his legs, leaning back against his chest, his arms around her. “I’m so tired, Khan,” she whispers. “I’m tired and I’m scared.”

“Why are you afraid, milaya moya?” Khan asks, keeping his own voice gentle and quiet.

“So many things,” she says. “There are so many things that could go wrong between now and getting your family back, I can’t even list them all or even think of them all. I could fuck up really badly when I go to get them, and then what will we do if I get caught? They’ll know I was working with you, they’ll have to, so what will happen to you and to them? I don’t want you hurt because I fucked up. I don’t want your family in danger because of it. And I know, I know that of anyone on this planet or possibly in this galaxy, that Andy and Magpie and I are a really, really talented threesome and we’ve done shit like this before but not on this scale, not with people’s lives on the line. And I’ve done stuff in Starfleet that’s had people’s lives depending on me, and I’ve lost people, and I don’t...I can’t lose you. Not now. Not until they’re all safe.”

“How many times did you get your people home safely?” Khan asks. “Of all your missions, what was your success rate?”

“Ninety-six percent,” Jill says dully.

“Remarkably high, would you not say so?” he asks.

“If it were anyone else, sure, but I’m my own worst critic,” Jill says. “I hate this. I hate being so emotional just because I’m tired and I’m afraid to sleep. I know--I know--that Andy and Magpie and I are damn good at what we do, that of any team you could assemble to get your family back, we’re probably the best. I know that over nine times out of ten, I got my crew home safely, that I didn’t lose them. I know that given all that, and the information we have, and your family’s own skills, the odds of me being able to get at least two of them to you safely are pretty good. And
none of it makes a damned bit of difference right now.” Her voice cracks and she sniffs and
scrubs tears out of her eyes. “Just...hold me,” she says around the tears. “Please. Don’t try to
convince me of anything, it won’t work right now, just hold me. Please.”

He does just that, shifting so he can fold his wings around her as well, and Jill buries her head
in his chest and cries, breath hitching and hot tears splashing his skin. As he has found previously, she
does not cry for long--a few minutes, perhaps, before she takes a few steadying breaths and swipes
at her face with her sleeve. “I got you wet,” she says with a hint of a giggle, wiping his skin with
the sleeve of her shirt.

“I am not electronics,” Khan says. “I can get wet.”

She giggles again at that. “No, you’re most definitely not an android, despite what your co-workers
think.” Jill sighs. “I’m better now. It just...everything hits me after a nightmare like that.”

“I understand,” Khan says, pressing his lips to her hair.

“Did Rani get nightmares?” Jill asks softly.

“No,” Khan says. “No. I did.”

“Do you still?” Jill asks.

“Once in a while,” Khan says. “They tend not to be as violent as yours, however.”

“Most people’s aren’t,” Jill says.

“Do you have tea in your apartment?” Khan asks, changing the subject.

“You really did turn into a Brit,” she says, smiling a little. “I do have tea. I keep it mostly for
Andy, who is my general apartment-sitter when I’m not here, but I have some. I think I have a
couple black blends and then a couple herbal options. Andy gave me one that’s supposed to aid in
relaxation and general stress, maybe that would be good right about now.”

“I will make you a cup,” Khan says.

Jill nods. “Thank you.”

He lets go of her and slides out of bed. This time he does pull on pants before he goes to find Jill’s
kettle and her tea. When he takes a sniff of the jar marked “RELAX” he can smell chamomile and
mint and nods; it should work well enough.

When he takes the mug back over to the bed, he stops, looking at Jill. She sprawls on her back, hair
tumbled over the pillow, one arm flung over her head and the other outstretched on the bed, very
much sound asleep.

Khan sets the mug down on her nightstand quietly and settles in to watch her, senses on alert for
the first indication of a nightmare.

He’s still watching her well after the sun rises, until her link chirps and she rolls over to grab it.
“Calastinova,” she says blearily, clearly not awake yet.

“You ready?” Andy asks.

“What? What time is it?” Jill sits up and shoves a hand through her hair. “Oh my God, I fell asleep.
What time is it?”
“Almost eleven, dearheart,” Andy says. “The bird and I will be at your place in forty-five minutes. Please be dressed and ready to go.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jill says absently. She hangs up and looks at Khan. “How long have you been standing there?”

He shrugs. “I am fine.”

“Eleven? God. That never happens.” Jill rubs her hands over her face. “Will you make coffee while I get dressed and deal with my hair and my bags?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Come kiss me first, though.”

“I probably have morning breath,” Jill says but crawls out of bed and pads over to him. She stretches up and he leans down and their lips meet. “That’s all you get until both of us brush our teeth again,” she says, a hand on his chest. “Also, I promise you a backrub when we’re back in London tonight because you’re probably stiff from standing watch over me half the night.”

“I am fine,” Khan says, touching her cheek. “But if you like, I will not stop you.”

“I do like and you won’t,” Jill says. “Toothbrush, clothes, coffee.” She kisses his chin and disappears into the bathroom. Khan smiles a little and goes to make coffee.

Chapter End Notes

I was emailing with my sounding board during the writing of this chapter, and we decided that while we both adore Jill (I do more than her, but Jill's mine), she’s...kind of seriously broken in some major ways. My sounding board sent me a few songs that reminded her of Jill, and one in particular I think captures a lot of what she is very well. If you're curious, the song is "Red", by Elbow, and you can find the lyrics here and audio here (link goes to YouTube but there's no video, just a static picture). It punches me in the gut every time I hear it, but at the same time, it's so appropriate for her.

When I started this story, I don't know if I quite realized how damaged Jill is. I think I did, but more of it's come into play since then. My hope as I keep writing is that while she's in it to help Khan, he can also help her, and maybe fix some of what's broken or damaged about her. What do you think?
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

There are risks in reviving members of my family.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in updating; 2014 started on a very crazy note work-wise and my writing time has been limited for that and other reasons. Also I keep writing a section that will fit into the story in a few chapters, which will be great when I get there, but doesn't help so much now. Hopefully those of you reading along haven't given up on me and are still enjoying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It does not take them long to get ready to go back to London, and by the time someone knocks on the door both of them have had coffee. “I still can’t believe I woke you this morning,” Andy says, tugging Jill’s braid. “When did you go to sleep?”

“I don’t even remember,” Jill says. “I fell asleep, had a nightmare, woke up, and I didn’t mean to go back to sleep after it but John went to make me tea and I crashed while he was in the kitchen, and he didn’t wake me. What time was that, like three?” She looks at Khan.

“Approximately,” he says.

“You slept a solid eight hours?” Andy looks at Jill in shock. “When was the last time that happened?”

“God, I don’t even know,” Jill says. “The sad part is I think I could go back to sleep for another eight hours. I need more coffee. I’ve only had two cups this morning.”

“You can get more coffee when we get back to London,” Magpie says. “Are we beaming to your flat or John’s?”

“Mine, I think, it’s easier than transporting the boxes from his,” Jill says. “Also no one should have my flat bugged yet and I don’t know whether the jammers are on in his or not.”

“I left one on, but probably it needs checking,” Andy says. “So your place it is.” He takes out his tablet, fingers dancing over the screen. “Three minutes and we’re off,” he says after a moment. “Get your things and come stand by me.”

The four of them end up standing in a circle around Jill’s boxes, each person with his or her own bag. Jill covers a yawn with her hand and leans into Khan, seemingly without realizing she’s doing it. He smiles a little and puts a wing around her, and she hasn’t moved away when he feels the transporter beam take them.
They materialize in Jill’s living room, which is cluttered with boxes and other items. “The bird and I were working on unpacking some of your crap, and then she left me and I got sidetracked,” Andy says. “But if you give me a couple days and stay out of my way, I’ll have you organized.”

“Totally staying out of your way,” Jill promises. “Right now all I care about is whether the bed is made and the coffeemaker set up and if I have beans in the flat.”

“It is, it is, and you do,” Andy says. “You also have a tea-maker because you’re in London and it came with the flat, and I brought over tea leaves and milk and sugar because I am far better to you than you deserve.”

“You really are,” Jill says, moving to hug her. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. Or you, bird.” She leans into Andy for a moment before hugging Magpie.

“Yes, yes, it’s all one big love-fest here even though you won’t let me see John naked,” Magpie says, winking at Khan over Jill’s head.

“Even if I would, I don’t think he would,” Jill points out. “Not everyone has no sense of bodily modesty like you or me.”

“Which is such a shame,” Magpie says. “The world would be a lot happier if people were more comfortable with their own bodies.”

“Yes, but think about the billions of credits people spend because they’re not,” Andy says. “It’s in corporate best interests to make sure you only see the dozen things you want to change.”

“And this is why I’m not a capitalist,” Magpie says. “Money screws everything up.”

“Which is why you see it as your goal to liberate as much as you can from people who shouldn’t have it,” Jill says dryly.

Magpie grins. “Exactly. I’m like Robin Hood for the twenty-third century.”

“Do you give to the poor?” Khan asks.

“I do, actually,” Magpie says. “I have--it gets complicated, but at least half of what I make goes to people who need it more than I do. Some of it through non-profit agencies, some through more direct means. I tend to bring food to some of the street brats when I can, when they let me, and I slip money in with the wrappers.”

“Does that make me your Maid Marian?” Andy asks.

“You’re more like Marian and Will Scarlet together,” Magpie says. “Jill is my Little John.”

“That was terrible,” Jill says, poking Magpie’s arm. “And Little John was like two meters tall anyway, so it doesn’t even fit. You’re really stretching the analogy, my love.”

“It’s been ages since I read the stories,” Magpie says, laughing. “I’m actually not even sure I read them or if someone told them to me, it’s been a while. Is there another historical story you’d rather be in?”

“Not Camelot,” Jill says firmly. “Because I’d end up being Guinevere and there is no love triangle here.”

“No, we’re lacking in Lancelot,” Magpie says. “I could be Morgana, though, that’d be cool. And
Andy could be Merlin.”

“Why do I have to be the old man?” Andy complains.

“Because he’s freaky powerful and immortal and defies description,” Magpie says reasonably.

“Good save, bird,” Jill says. “Coffee, I need it. Someone point me to the coffeemaker and the beans.”

Andy puts her hands on Jill’s shoulders and turns her toward the kitchen. “Walk forward,” she says, guiding her. Jill laughs but lets Andy herd her into the small kitchen. “And I’m going to make tea while you make coffee. John, do you want tea or coffee?”

“Tea is fine,” Khan says.

“I want coffee,” Magpie says.


“Hey, be nice,” Magpie says. “I’m going to start unpacking some of your stuff while you make caffeine. What’s in the boxes?”

“The two bigger ones are mostly clothes,” Jill says. “My uniforms are here already, so it’s all civvies and shoes and undergarments. The white one on top is toiletries and makeup and hair stuff, and the brown one is more clothes, I think. If you’re looking for toys, I haven’t packed those yet.”

“Well, that makes my job less fun,” Magpie says with a sigh. “All right, I’ll see if I can wrangle your clothes into a sense of order. John, want to help me out and carry one of these into the bedroom?”

“If you like,” Khan says. The boxes are too awkward for him to pick up all four, but he does get two of them without much problem. Magpie picks up a third box and follows him, and they set the boxes down next to the closet.

“I have a question,” Magpie says softly when they’re in the bedroom. “Did you put her to sleep after the nightmare?”

“I did not,” Khan says, also quietly. “I went to make her tea and she fell asleep.”

“That never happens,” Magpie says. “And she didn’t have another nightmare?”

Khan shakes his head. “No.”

Magpie chews her lower lip, looking very young for a moment. “I don’t know what that means,” she admits. “She never goes back to sleep after a nightmare, no matter how tired she is. The couple times she has she always wakes up with another nightmare. I thought maybe you’d knocked her out, but if you didn’t, I don’t know, but I’m glad she got some uninterrupted sleep.”

“As am I,” Khan says. “Tell me something. She routinely uses stimulant pills and caffeine to keep her awake. Why will she not consider medication to help her sleep? I should think there are options in this century.”

“She doesn’t like them,” Magpie says. “There are some drugs that help you sleep but you have to have a registered sleep disorder before you can get some of them prescribed, and she doesn’t want that on her file. Over the counter stuff she says doesn’t work well for her, it just makes her groggy
without putting her to sleep and she had a really bad experience once where she took a sleeping pill and then couldn’t wake up from a nightmare. The stims give her migraines when she crashes, but she says it’s still better than sleeping pills.”

Khan can’t help but wonder if Jill has some repressed trauma around sleep itself that she may not even realize, something from childhood perhaps. He doubts she consciously remembers anything, but there has to be some reason she and sleep have such an antagonistic relationship. “Has she ever slept well?” he asks.

“Not that I know of,” Magpie says. “The nightmares used to be better, but then again, maybe not. She told me once she got night terrors as a kid and even after those stopped she still had nightmares. Only difference between then and now is that the nightmares now have a basis in reality. But she’s always had insomnia. She told me once it was a little better when she was training for the Olympics, that she was usually so physically tired by the end of the day she crashed, but she still had problems.”

“Has she ever considered cognitive therapy for her insomnia?” Khan asks.

Magpie snorts. “Yeah, right. You honestly think Jill would agree to go to any kind of therapy? I should think you know her better than that.”

“Point taken,” Khan concedes.

“I call her Cleopatra sometimes,” Magpie says. “Queen of denial. It’s a terrible pun, but so accurate. And we should go find the caffeine before Jill and Andy drink it all. I’ll tackle unpacking her later.”

Khan nods, following Magpie toward the kitchen. Jill hands her a mug and Andy hands him one. “Thank you,” he says, taking a sip of the tea. He doesn’t recognize the blend, and raises an eyebrow at Andy. “Not quite Assam, but what is it?” he asks.

“It’s an Assam-Ceylon blend,” Andy says. “A little lighter than regular Assam. I really like it, and I know Jill’s not much for anything but coffee, so I stocked teas I’ll drink and that I thought you might like.”


“I’ll stock your kitchen tomorrow or Tuesday if I have time,” Andy says. “If not, you can raid Jill’s.”

“Speaking of raiding my kitchen, who has the access cards to my flat?” Jill asks. “Because I don’t.”

“I have one,” Andy says. “Magpie, do you have the other?”

Magpie sets her mug down and rummages in her bag, pulling out a card. “Is this it? Here, have it back.”

“I’ll keep it for now, and when I have to go back to San Francisco I’ll give it to John,” Jill says, putting the card in her pocket. “Andy, you should hang on to the one you have for now. I can always get another one if I need it.”

“All right,” Andy says. “How long do you think you have before you have to get back to San Francisco?”

Jill tugs on a curl, thinking. “I think Tuesday I need to head back,” she says. “There’s someone I’m
trying to get in touch with, but he’s been shipped out. I think, if my sources are right, he’s due back on Monday, so I can try to find him on Tuesday or Wednesday.”

“Starfleet, clearly, but for what purpose?” Magpie asks.

“Um,” Jill says and ducks her head. “I don’t want to get into that right now in case it doesn’t pan out.” She glances up at Khan. “I’m not about to tell anyone anything about you, I promise. I just--let me talk to this person first.”

“As you like,” Khan says, rather curious who she wants to talk to and why. And what might not pan out? He doesn’t ask, because he doubts she will tell him, but he does wonder what she is up to.

“Andy, can you beam me back on Tuesday or do I need to get a shuttle?” Jill asks.

“I can handle it,” Andy says. “Not a problem, love. What are you going to do tomorrow?”

“Abandon my flat to you and Magpie to find order in it and hunt up Jake,” Jill says. “What’s the status on the house you thought you had available? Can we still use it?”

“Signs point to yes but we might want to have a backup in case it falls through,” Andy says. He looks at Khan. “It’s a big older house about a ten-minute taxi ride from the facility with your family. I think six or seven bedrooms and many baths, so it should work for your family once we start getting people. But I always like to have a plan B in case plan A fails.”

“Which is one of the reasons I want to find Jake, he’ll have options too,” Jill says. “Speaking of plan B, John, you need to talk to Andy and Magpie. While you do that, I’m going to have a shower in the lovely water shower in this flat once I can find my toiletries and towels.”

She stretches up to kiss Khan’s cheek and slips past Andy on her way to the bedroom. “Okay, so, what the hell?” Magpie asks.

Khan sets his mug down on the counter and forces his wings to fold back and stay still. “There are risks in reviving members of my family,” he says. “Revival is not instantaneous, it takes minutes to fully come to consciousness and understand the situation and even after one is conscious and coherent, one may still be disoriented.” He looks down at the tile floor. “My people are warriors,” he says. “It is possible that should one of them think Jill is a threat--”

“They’ll attack first and ask questions later,” Andy says quietly. “Be honest here, what are the odds of that happening?”

“Greater than zero but I think not a major concern,” Khan says. “It helps that the first two I want to revive are Russian, and she will be able to use the language. There are phrases I can teach her, codes they will recognize, which should help. If she revives Konstantin first, I think Ekaterina will not attack anyone until she assures herself Konstantin is all right.”

“Okay,” Magpie says, fiddling with a ring. “Okay. But...” She chews her lip. “If something goes wrong and one of your people thinks she’s a threat, I don’t know how we salvage that. Would they fight to disable or kill?”


“If she gets disabled, she can still talk them into sense,” Magpie says, tapping out a random rhythm on her bracelet. “If--if one of your people kills her, John, we’re all fucked and it’s going to land on you, and I hate saying this but if she gets killed trying to help your people, I’m bailing and you’ll get the fall out. She’s my best friend--one of two--and I really don’t like this.”
“Neither do I,” Andy says softly. “Be honest, John. Do you think any of your people are likely to try to hurt her?”

“I think that of the eight people I want to revive, I would only be concerned about Ekaterina and Alona,” Khan says. “I think if Ekaterina wakes to hear Konstantin’s voice, she will be much more rational than if she thinks herself alone. I think that while my people are warriors, we are also intelligent, and I believe that upon revival they will wait for more information before acting on the situation.”

“What did you do, when they woke you up?” Andy asks.

Khan shakes his head. “I do not remember fully,” he says. “I do not believe I attacked anyone, but it took some time for me to be aware and rational.”

Magpie sighs and rubs her hands over her face. “Well, shit,” she says. “I am going to choose to believe that you’re right and Jill won’t be in danger from your people, because otherwise I’m not going to let her go through with this, and she’d kill me for that. I wish we had a way for your people to see or hear you upon revival, though.”

“Do we?” Andy asks. “I could--”

“We don’t,” Magpie says. “The room holding the tubes is shielded to a fare-thee-well and if I break through it’ll set off way too many alarms. The best we’d get would be Jill taking in a recording, but I don’t know how useful that would be. I mean, we’re going to lose contact with her once she’s in that room, so the only way we’ll know if something goes wrong is if we don’t hear from her again after a certain amount of time, which sucks, but there’s no way around it.”

Andy sighs and pushes his hair back. “Well, crap,” he says. “We really need a plan B in case things go sideways anyway, but I don’t know what it’ll be.”

“Define going sideways,” Magpie says.

“If they realize someone’s there,” Andy says.

Magpie chews her lip, thinking. “The only room that’s massively shielded is the cryotubes one,” she says. “If security catches on Jill’s there, we help her find an out of the way corner and beam her out of there. Noticeable, but they probably couldn’t track it. Definitely not if she’s got a shield.”

“But if she has a shield how do we lock on to beam her out?” Andy asks. “I don’t know if I can build one that allows for transporter technology but obscures her from the security in the building. That’s...” She trails off, thinking. “It’s potentially doable but would require a lot of time and effort and resources. If I could get my hands on a couple things, it’d be more doable, but my usual sources don’t have access to them. The only source I actually know has them is covert ops at Starfleet, but not London based, it’s R&D stuff that I think is actually located in Brazil, of all the random places. I don’t know anyone down there so my odds of getting the stuff are fairly low.”

She looks at Khan. “Do you know anyone in Brazil?”

“Not currently alive,” Khan says.

“Figured as much.” Andy runs a hand through his hair and Khan thinks, not for the first time, that it may be wishful thinking but every so often he can see a resemblance between Andy and Rani. She had similar hair to Andy’s: thick, long, ruler-straight and black as space. Andy generally wears his loose, falling to his waist, whereas Rani had braided or tied hers back most of the time. Khan had always preferred her with it down, though, and when they were alone she usually unbraided it
for him. “Bird, you know anyone in Brazil?” Andy asks, jolting Khan out of his thoughts.

“I’d have to check but signs point to no or not that would be able to help us,” Magpie says. “We could ask Jill-Bear when she comes out of the shower. Maybe Jake knows someone who knows someone.”

“He’s Intelligence, isn’t he?” Andy asks. “He might.”

“I think I heard my name,” Jill says, padding into the kitchen on bare feet. She has a short purple robe wrapped around her body and a white towel around her hair, and Khan catches the scent of sandalwood when she stops by him. “What do you need?”

“A contact in Brazil who can get their hands on Starfleet covert ops prototypes,” Andy says. “Know anyone?”

“Hm.” Jill drums her fingers against the counter. “I can ask Jake but there’s no guarantee he can help, and other than him I don’t know anyone other than John who does covert ops stuff. What the hell is in Brazil?”

“Plan B,” Andy says. “If we need a fast way to get you out, we can beam you, except not if you’re shielded. There’s some tech in Brazil that might allow me to build you a shield that allows for beaming but doesn’t make you visible to anyone else, and might mask the traces of beaming so they can’t figure out where you went. Problem is it’s in Brazil, it only exists as a prototype or maybe one working model, and I don’t know anyone who can get it for me.”

“You also don’t know if it’ll even work,” Jill says. “And honestly, if things go fubar enough that you have to beam me out of there, we’ve all got more important things to worry about than whether they can trace the transporter. How about we focus on making sure the tech we need works the way we need it to and not bother with hard to get bits that might or might not help something that’s a last ditch plan anyway?”

“Well, when you put it that way,” Andy says, laughing. “Okay, point taken.”

“I can still see if Jake can help, though,” Jill says. “Since I know your obsession for new shiny things.”


“You also collect shiny things,” Jill says. “You have a jewelry case bigger than me.”

“That doesn’t take much,” Magpie says and Jill flips her off. “All right, fine, what do you collect?”

“Sex toys, apparently,” Jill says without batting an eye. “You should know that, you gave me a bunch of them, which I’ve still never used.”

“What did you collect before that?” Magpie asks.

“Gymnastics medals,” Jill says. “More suitable for mixed company but less pleasurable.”

“Well, but if you’re not using the sex toys are they really all that pleasurable?” Magpie asks.

“Yeah, but you should see people’s reactions when I show them the collection,” Jill says. “Man, sometimes I wish I hid a camera in there just to capture their expressions.”
“Do you go around showing your sex toy collection to many people?” Andy asks, a question Khan also wondered about.

“No, not really,” Jill says, laughing. She unwinds the towel from around her hair and drapes it over her shoulders, letting her hair spill down her back. “But I rarely have people in my apartment anyway.”

Magpie frowns, looking at her. “What happened?” she asks. “You have a red line, here.” She leans forward and touches the mark just under Jill’s collarbone.

“I’m sure I have a few of those,” Jill says, wrapping her robe a little more tightly around her. “Knifeplay, love, it happens. I was careful, nothing’s going to scar, I just have a few marks.”

“So you finally did find someone to use the knives with,” Magpie says. “Nice.”

“I did,” Jill says. “Worth the wait, too. Moving on, is it time for food? Can we decide it’s time for food and have some? I’ve only had coffee so far today and I think I need protein.”

“We can and yes,” Andy says. “We haven’t fully stocked your kitchen yet because what was the point, but there’s a couple options nearby if you want me to run out and get us all something. I think there’s a chip shop and a gyro place and some kind of pan-Asian thing, but I can’t vouch for the authenticity of the last nor the quality of its food.”

“I’d rather not do fried,” Jill says. “So either gyros or we take our chances on the pan-Asian. John, have you ever tried either?”

“The gyro place is acceptable,” Khan says. “I do not believe I tried the other place.”

“What the hell, let’s give it a try,” Jill says. “Let me give you money, though. You know what I like, just order me something that looks decent.” She moves to find her purse and get her wallet.

“Anything you won’t eat, John?” Andy asks. “And what is your preference on spicy?”

“I like spicy,” Khan says. “And I will eat almost anything.”

“I know what you want, bird,” Andy says to Magpie. “I’ll find you something you’ll eat.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” Magpie asks. “Actually, I should so you don’t have to carry it all back here yourself.”

“Here, have money,” Jill says, handing Andy her card. “And you’ve got the card to get into my apartment, so we’re good there. Come back in one piece with food and chopsticks.”

“We will,” Andy says, tugging one of Jill’s curls. “Back in a bit.”

“I need to call Jake,” Jill says once they’re gone. “Give me a minute?”

“Of course,” Khan says. Jill goes back into the living room to find her comm-link and he follows her, leaning against the doorway.

Jill dials, setting her phone to speaker. After a couple rings, someone picks up. “What time is it?” Jake asks sleepily. “Wait, what day is it?”

“Time depends on your location but the last I checked it was Sunday,” Jill says. “Also you’re on speaker but the only other person here is John. Where are you? Can you come to London for a day or two?”
“Sunday, okay, good, means I didn’t lose an entire day,” Jake says. He groans and Khan hears rustling fabric. “Ugh.”

“How much did you drink and what was her name?” Jill asks.

“Wasn’t like that,” Jake says. “Well, not exactly. One of the guys in my unit, he’s getting married of all things, so we went out to have a few rounds and make fun of him. I didn’t even drink that much, but we were leaving and someone screamed for help, so we ran, and I got there first. In the ensuing fracas I got slammed into the brick headfirst, but hey, that’s an asshole who won’t be bothering any more women ever. They treated me and sent me home and I’ve been trying to sleep off the headache.”

“Who took him down?” Jill asks.

“Me and Mike,” Jake says. “And the woman in question is fine and we made sure she got checked out by medical and has our info if she needs to talk, and counseling services and all that shit. It was me and Mike who took him down while Tony and Martin covered her and the other guys kept everyone from getting in the way. So, yeah, just another lovely night in the life, and I think we get free drinks at that bar for life now or some shit. When do you need me in London and what for?”

“Soon and planning,” Jill says. “Stuff I don’t want to go into on a link.”

“Right,” Jake says around a yawn. “Okay. Um. Give me like an hour to get some crap together and bother a buddy for transport and I’ll meet you at your flat?”

“Works,” Jill says. “Please don’t hit your head again before you get here, you only have so many working brain cells and your mother would be unhappy if you lost any. Speaking of, did you tell her about this?”

“No,” Jake says. “No, I did not, and you aren’t going to either.”

“Why? She’d be proud,” Jill says.

“And then she’d yell at me for letting some drunk or high asshole get the better of me and Mike and tell me to take remedial unarmed combat classes,” Jake says. “Do you know how much crap I get from my mom whenever I get injured, even if it’s completely out of my control?”

“She’s your mom and she’s Jewish, she loves you and she worries,” Jill says. “Tell her, Aaron, or I’m making you call her when you get here.”

“I hate you so very much,” Jake says. “Fine, in that case give me two hours because it’ll take her an hour to stop lecturing me.”

“All right,” Jill says. “And you love me and you know it. You’d have asked me out years ago if you weren’t afraid of me and I hadn’t conditioned you into seeing me as the younger sister you never wanted.”

“Sadly this is true,” Jake says. “But I’m still scared of you and now you’re in the same class of woman as my mom, terrifying and totally non-sexual. See you in a couple hours, half-pint.”

“Later,” Jill says and hangs up. She smiles, looking at Khan. “Jake’s mom is wonderful. Fierce as a mama bear when it comes to her kids, of which I count as one, and kind of scarily organized. I honestly think she could have become Federation president if she’d wanted to, but she didn’t. I love her to pieces and I should make time to go see her one of these days.”
“You are closer to her than your own mother,” Khan observes.

“Yeah, probably,” Jill says. “Jake’s mom gets me on a level my mom doesn’t, and she’s never judgmental about what I do with my own life. My mom still expects me to settle down and give her grandkids, so clearly there’s a disconnect somewhere and it’s not on my part. I should put on clothes and hang this up.” She walks to the bathroom to hang up the towel and Khan follows her to the doorway of the bedroom where she rummages through a box for clothes, eventually pulling on jeans and a red shirt. “I need a pedicure,” she says, looking at her feet. “My polish is chipping. I wonder if I packed any of that.”

“What aren’t you saying?” Khan asks quietly. The careless words, the comment about nail polish—she’s clearly bothered by something.

Jill sighs and looks in her overnight bag for a hair band, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. “It’s nothing.”

Khan stays quiet, but meets her eyes when she looks at him, and after a moment she sighs again. “Jake’s mom,” she says. “I met her my first year at the Academy, on spring break. She didn’t live that far from my parents so he took me home to meet her, and...she was wonderful. She’s always been wonderful. She adopted me pretty damn fast and I call her regularly to let her know how I’m doing, and I see her whenever I’m in New York, and I send her birthday presents and Hanukkah presents, and...” Jill rubs a hand over the back of her neck. “And she gets me. She gets all her kids. She doesn’t like what Jake does for a living, but she’s proud of him for it, and she worries about me but she’s proud that I’m doing what I want to do, that I’ve succeeded at it—she has a lot of opinions on gender and equality in Starfleet that I recommend asking her about if you have a spare six hours. And some of it I agree with. Okay, a lot of it.”

Jill shrugs. “By anyone’s standards she’s an amazing mom and a wonderful person. And I love her, and she’s my second mom, and I just...I get so frustrated when Jake takes it for granted, when he doesn’t realize just how awesome she is. He bitches about her lecturing him for getting injured, but it just means she worries, that he scared her, and she cares. He just...he’ll tell her anything because he can and she asks, but he doesn’t realize how rare that is. And it makes me want to shake him, and then send her flowers.”

Thoughts coalesce in Khan’s mind and he stays quiet, considering what he wants to say next and how best to approach it. “May I ask you a question?” he says finally.

“You can ask me anything you want,” Jill says.

“What happened after your nightmares, when you were a child?” Khan asks.

Jill groans and drops her head forward. “I had night terrors until I was about five,” she says. “Don’t remember those, but apparently they happen a bit in kids. Woke up screaming, and one of my parents would always come running in to make sure I was okay and stay with me. I had a nightlight in my bedroom, shaped like a little bird, and I was usually okay after so long as that was on. Grew out of the night terrors, but then I started having nightmares. I didn’t remember what they were about, but I usually woke up pretty damn upset and scared out of my mind. For a bit at first I went into my parents’ room and hid in bed between them and refused to sleep, but I was keeping them awake and my dad needed to sleep for his job, so that wasn’t ideal. So Dad gave me Bilbo and we started reading The Hobbit together at bedtime, and he told me Bilbo would watch out for me and make sure I didn’t have any bad dreams. Didn’t quite work that way, but having him made it easier to calm down after I woke up, and I had other books I could read when I couldn’t sleep, so...why? What does it matter what happened more than twenty-five years ago?”
“Do you really not understand?” Khan asks before he can stop himself. He knows full well that as perceptive as Jill can be with other people, she is not particularly good at understanding some of her own feelings. But this feels so obvious to him that he doesn’t understand how she does not see it. Perhaps she does not want to.

“I really don’t.” Jill says. “I’m not harboring any buried trauma over having nightmares as a kid. Some people get them, sometimes they grow out of them, sometimes they don’t. I didn’t. My parents did the best they could for me and they didn’t neglect me, or anything.”

Khan does not agree, but recognizes that he will get nowhere arguing the point with her. Jill sighs and smooths a hand over her hair. “I should start unpacking,” she says after a moment. “I mean, I’m terrible at it and Andy and Magpie will kindly but firmly make me stop and redo everything, but some stuff even I can’t screw up.”

“Would you like help?” Khan asks, an offer of assistance and an overture of peace at the same time.

It works; Jill smiles a little and walks over to him, resting her hands on his chest. “Yes,” she says. “Pax?”

She has no way of knowing that his brothers and sisters use the same word after an argument, or a spar, and still for a moment Khan’s chest feels painfully tight. “Pax,” he says, hoping his pause was not too obvious. It doesn’t seem to have been; Jill smiles again and stretches up on tiptoe, and Khan leans down to kiss her.

One kiss turns into another turns into Khan picking Jill up and her wrapping her legs around his waist to steady herself. “Screw the unpacking,” Jill murmurs against his mouth. “Do we have time for sex before Andy and the bird come back?”

“Probably not,” Khan says, not without reluctance.

Jill sighs. “Damnit. Okay, fine, let’s deal with clothes.” She kisses him again, though, and all in all by the time Andy and Magpie return with food they’ve unpacked half a box of clothes, if that.

On the other hand, Jill looks more relaxed and content, and she shamelessly steals all the water chestnuts from Khan’s plate. Khan does not bother protesting; it makes her happy. He does, however, stop Andy from helping herself to his snow peas. There are, after all, limits. Even for a descendant.

Chapter End Notes

So, you may have noticed that I still use credits and money and things in this story (and in FF, I think too). Apparently, and I didn't realize this when I started, I'm contradicting Star Trek canon--sort of. I believe Gene Roddenberry said money didn't exist in Trek, but at the same time there are races who use it, and there are Federation credits and latinum and so on. I remember hearing the no-money thing, but thought it was something from TNG, that TOS still dealt with money. So for the Trek purists among you, I apologize, but it's a bit late to fix it now.

I did wind up with a bit of social commentary disguised as fic that got edited out due to bogging down the story and serving no purpose to move it forward, but if anyone's
curious about some of that let me know.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tell me what you need.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to 2014! This year started off on a rocky note, and I sincerely apologize for the delay in updating; I've been doing the rollercoaster of meds adjusting and that always makes everything weird. Plus I got sick. But I'm better now, and I bring you fic! Hopefully you will like it.

As always, please feel free to tell me what you liked or didn't like; I welcome all kinds of feedback that isn't a personal insult :)

Shortly after dinner someone buzzes at Jill’s door and she pushes up to go get it. “Hey, shorty,” Jake says, leaning down to hug her. “Eema says you need to stop by New York on your way back to San Francisco. After she finished lecturing me.”

Jill laughs. “I’ll see what I can do. C’mon in. Magpie’s making coffee if you want some.”

“I’d love some,” Jake says. “Still not sure what time it is.”

“Does it really matter?” Jill asks.

“Not so much as long as there’s coffee,” Jake says.

“Smart man,” Jill says.

“Hey, John,” Jake says. “And...person I don’t know. Hi, I’m Jake.”

“Jake, this is Andy; Andy, this is Jake,” Jill says, gesturing between them. “Andy builds electronics and fun things. Jake does things for Starfleet he’s not allowed to talk about.”

“Hi,” Jake says. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Andy says from his seat on the couch. “I’d shake hands but I need both of them for circuitry at the moment.” He has a few pieces of electronics in his lap and on the table in front of him and wires wound around three fingers.

“What are you building?” Jake asks, coming to peer curiously at it.

Andy glances at Jill, who nods. “He’s okay,” she promises.

“It’s actually two things,” Andy says. “One is an earbud comm that’ll work through a shield. The other is the personal shield. I have to build them together so I can tune them to each other.”
“Wait, but what’s the purpose of the shield?” Jake asks.

“Quasi-invisibility,” Andy says. “It’ll mask heat signatures and if I’m really good, block some visual monitoring.”

“I don’t know anyone who can create something like that,” Jake says.


“Hardware, software, and thievery,” Jake says. “That’s kind of a scary combination. Or at least one I’d love to have on my side.”

“Define side,” Andy says. “I don’t really deal with Starfleet.”

Jake sighs. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“Maybe that should be telling you something,” Magpie says, coming out of the kitchen. She hands a mug to Jill and another one to Jake. “I heard voices. You take yours black, right?”


“Tea is steeping for you two,” Magpie says, looking at Andy and Khan. “I grabbed a random canister since I don’t know much about tea.”

“What color was it?” Andy asks.

“Red and gold,” Magpie says. “It was the prettiest one.”


“I do,” Khan says. “I like most tea, although I was never interested in rooibos or herbal teas.”

“I don’t do herbals either,” Andy says. “They always smell fantastic and taste like crap.”

“What’s the point of tea if it doesn’t have caffeine in it?” Jill asks.

“Honey, you say that about every beverage,” Andy says. “You’d drink caffeinated water if you could.”

“It exists,” Jill says. “But usually when I’m drinking water it’s because I’m dehydrated so caffeine is less of a priority. Anyway, we need to talk strategy. Everyone get your drinks, grab a seat and get comfortable.”

The living room has minimal seating but they manage, with Jill taking a spot in Khan’s lap on the couch and Jake dropping onto the floor next to Magpie. “What’s going on?” Jake asks.

“A couple things,” Jill says. “First off, do you know anyone or know of a place in the London area that could comfortably house between six and eight people?”

Jake frowns, thinking about it. “Maybe,” he says slowly. “I’d have to check with a friend, but...I’m not sure. How urgently do you need one?”

“It’s plan B, so hopefully we won’t,” Jill says. “But if we do, in a few weeks, three at most.”

“Maybe,” Jake says again. “I’ll look into it. Do you need anything else for these people?”
Jill looks at Khan. “Do we?”

“A place to exercise, spar,” Khan says. He knows his family well enough to know that is an absolute necessity.

“Now *that* I can help with,” Jake says. “I’ve got a buddy who owns a gym just outside London but still accessible by mass transit. He just finished renovating it and hasn’t opened it to the public yet. I’ve been there, it’s pretty sweet. I’ll let him know we need it for private use for an unspecified amount of time, and so long as we pay him something reasonable, he’ll go for it.”

“Yeah, money’s not a problem,” Magpie says. “Let me know what he’ll charge. I do expect you to negotiate him down a bit, though.”

Jake grins. “Always. What else have you got for me?”

“How much do you know about section 31’s holdings in London?” Jill asks.

“Um,” Jake says, scratching the back of his neck. “Not as much as I’d like to, more than is probably good for my continued health and well-being. What do you need? I don’t have anyone on the inside other than John, although I’m working on it with Mike.”

“That’s a third point we’ll bring up in a minute,” Jill says. “Magpie, can you show him?”

“I can,” Magpie says, taking out her tablet. She opens the plans for the facility and flips through them to show Jake the blank spots. “Do you know what either of these are?”

“What’s around this one?” Jake asks, pointing to one.

“What’s around this one?” Jake asks, pointing to one.

“Storage, mostly,” Magpie says. “From what I’ve seen it’s nothing all that dangerous, just basic materials for I think building weapons.”

“Then...I think so,” Jake says. “I *think* but you’ll want to verify that this is where they’re storing some of the explosive materials needed to build said weapons, and...what’s around the other blank spot?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Magpie says. “Blank hall leading in, no other exits that I’ve found. There’s a small antechamber outside it, but I don’t know what it’s for.”

“How big is it? I don’t have a good sense of scale from these.”

“Maybe ten meters square?” Magpie says. “Give or take half a meter.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jake says. “That makes sense. So, this facility is used to build weapons and also holding your family, right?” He looks at Khan.

“Yes,” Khan says. “If it has any other purpose I am unaware of it.”

“I’d need to study the schematics more to be certain, but I doubt it’s doing anything else,” Jake says. “You need space and shielding to build torpedoes--I’m guessing that’s what you’re building, as the design’s all wrong for phaser banks, those tend to be built into the ships rather than assembled elsewhere anyway. So. Here is where I think they’re storing at least *some* of the explosives to go in said torpedoes, but it’s likely not all of them because you don’t want some of those materials to come close to each other before all the shielding’s built into the torpedoes or you run the risk of things going boom. And this room, I think, is a clean room for building the chips to go into the torpedoes. They’re both probably shielded a lot more than the rest of the building in
hopes of containing any damage if things blow up in room one, and keeping prying eyes out from room two.”

“Not bad,” Magpie murmurs approvingly. “I’ll verify, but that does make sense.”

“Avoid both areas if you can help it,” Jake tells Jill. “I’d rather you didn’t get blown up or whatever nasties they’ve got for people who try to break into the clean room.”

“I’d rather I didn’t get blown up, too,” Jill says. “But I shouldn’t have to go near either area.”

“Which is good because security’s probably tighter around those,” Jake says. “Show me the route you’re taking in? Let me see if I can think of anything else.”

Magpie taps a couple things on her screen and a blue line appears. “In through the window here, and then you can see it.”

Jake studies the tablet, flipping screens when he needs to and poring over the entire layout of the facility. It takes him a few minutes, but no one interrupts or says anything. “Okay,” he says finally. “You may want to consider an alternate route here.” He draws a different line that lights up in red. “Mostly because if security patrols run the way they normally do, you’ll have more time to get through here.”

“How do you figure?” Jill asks, leaning forward.

“This is the likely route the patrols will use, given the guard stations here and here,” Jake says, drawing it out on the tablet. “They’ll cross here, not far from where you want to be, but only one patrol will go down this way. It’s a little longer but I think your odds of being spotted will be less. What does the visual monitoring look like this way?”

“There’s nothing extra,” Magpie says. “Standard heat sensors here, here, and here, and cameras here and here. Easy enough to avoid given the right shielding and timing.”

“Agreed,” Jake says. “Shorty, what do you think about the change in route?”

“I think it makes sense,” Jill says. “And it’s only longer by a few meters, so really not that different. Bird, can you program that in instead of what we were going to do?”


“Anytime,” Jake says. “Anything else?”

“Since you’re on a roll, do you know anyone in Brazil working in R&D?” Jill asks with a mischievous glance at Andy.

“Okay, that I wasn’t expecting,” Jake says, blinking. “And, uh. I know a couple people in R&D but they’re either based out here or in San Francisco. One of them might know someone in Brazil, but I’m not sure and--what do you need in Brazil of all places?”

“It’s not anything we need,” Jill says. “Andy would like to get his hands on some shiny things they have to help with a possible backup plan if things go pear-shaped when I break in. But the odds of us acquiring that technology are minimal at best. Figured I’d ask, though.”

“Specifically what would you be using the tech for?” Jake asks.

Andy tucks a lock of hair back. “I want to try and build a personal shield that blocks biometric
sensors but allows for transporters,” she says.

“Shit,” Jake says. “That’s...that’s impossible.”

“It might not be, but I’d need some stuff from Brazil first,” Andy says. “Remember, we thought transporters were impossible once upon a time.”

“Point, but still.” Jake blows out a breath. “I...can check but the odds of my getting you that tech are not ones I’d bet on.”

“Just don’t get yourself in trouble checking,” Jill says.

“I won’t,” Jake promises. “Will you guys need me for the actual op?”

“We shouldn’t,” Jill says. “If we do, I’m in serious trouble, and if I’m in trouble I don’t want to bring you down with me.”

“I’m Intelligence, everyone hates me anyway,” Jake says. “But okay. Seriously, though, if you need me, call. I’ll be around for the next month or so, I’m being forced to use some of my vacation time and they want me rested because my next job is likely to be six months to a year.”

“On-planet or off?” Jill asks.

“Off,” Jake says. “I haven’t been told where yet, though.”

“What kind of job is it?” Jill asks.

“The kind I can’t talk about,” Jake says. “As with all of them.”

“You actually hold to that?” Magpie asks. “Especially with Jill?”

“The less she knows, the less she can spill under duress,” Jake says. “It’s not about me not trusting her, it’s about two people can keep a secret if one is dead, and she gets in danger regularly as it is. If she ends up getting shipped out to wherever I am while I’m there, it could go very badly.”

“I don’t want to know,” Jill says. “Not all of us are data junkies, my love.”

“No, but now I want to find out what you’ll be up to,” Magpie says to Jake.

“Yeah, please don’t,” Jake says. “Security on intel missions is super-tight and I know how good you are and I am telling you they will most likely catch you hacking in to find out information. We have good people in Intelligence and a lot of the best tech people work there. Please don’t do anything that could put you in danger.”

Magpie pouts, which Khan finds amusing, but sighs. “Okay. I won’t.”

“Thank you,” Jake says. “Tell you what. When I find out where I’m being sent, I’ll tell you and if you want to try and hack that security you’re welcome to.”

“Deal,” Magpie says, looking satisfied.

“What’s next?” Jake asks. “I know you’ve got more for me. I haven’t seen you in like ten days or more, you’ve got to have more.”

Jill chews her lip, thinking. Khan keeps quiet, letting her decide what she wants to ask Jake and what she might reveal in the process. “Smythe and Cruz,” she says after a moment. “Tell me what
you think of them, what you know.”

“I looked up their files,” Jake says. “Like you knew I would. Cruz spent a while on ship, weapons specialist. He got injured about four years ago, and healed just fine but decided to go into something slightly less hazardous. Plus he got married after he healed up—reading between the lines he fell for one of the nurses, and she fell for him, and so they got married and decided to stay planetside. He transferred into section 31 about a year and a half ago on Marcus’ direct request. If you’re looking for weaknesses, his wife’s a good one and he’s got a daughter who just turned two.”

Jill grimaces. “I don’t like the idea of using his daughter against him. We’ll leave that as an absolute last resort.”

“How loyal to Marcus do you think he is?” Khan asks.

Jake rubs a hand over his stubble. “Good question. Without talking to him more it’s hard to say. Based on my current impressions, I’d say he’s loyal but not unquestioningly so. He didn’t put in for the transfer to section 31, Marcus did, but he went along with it. I think in part he did so because it came with a pay raise, but he doesn’t seem to have any issues with what he’s being asked to do. However, I think that if you were to give him tangible proof of the other projects at section 31 he’d be willing to help. Do I think he can be trusted? Not really. Do I think he might make a useful source of information given the right circumstances, maybe.”

Khan nods. “That lines up with my impressions,” he says. “And Smythe?”

“Don’t tell him anything you don’t want getting back to Marcus,” Jake says immediately. “His son went to graduate school with Marcus’ daughter. He’s been with section 31 since Marcus created it, and he’s absolutely loyal. I don’t know if he knows about the scientific research—and I use that word very loosely—going on over there but I don’t think it’d matter to him.”

“Is his son assigned to section 31?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jake says. “No, he’s in regular R&D in San Francisco, or was last I checked. Does section 31 have agents there?”

“In all likelihood, yes,” Khan says. “I do not know how widespread their net reaches, but I presume Marcus planted agents everywhere he could, to report directly to him. It would be what I would have done in his place.”

“Yes, but you’re smarter than Marcus,” Jill says. “Although Marcus isn’t stupid.”

“He is not,” Khan agrees. “And he is both cunning and paranoid enough to want men who are unquestionably loyal to him. Who would refuse a request from the head of Starfleet for information, especially if doing so came with rewards of pay and increase in rank?”

“Some of us,” Jill says.

“Seconded,” Jake says. “But we’re both Starfleet rebels anyway.”

“True,” Jill says. “Even so, John has a point. And...crap. Things just got hellishly more complicated, or maybe they did. She tugs on a curl. “What will Marcus’ network do without him?”

“Cut off the head, the snake dies,” Magpie says.

“Yeah, but...I’m not sure this is a typical snake,” Jill says slowly. “Whoever’s reporting to Marcus,
they’re already gray on the ethics scale depending on situation, but I’m willing to guess most of
them have flexible morals. With him gone, they’ll either want revenge or find someone else to take
over. It is possible that without a clear leader, they’ll fight themselves for it and tear themselves
apart, but it’s also possible a clear succession line exists and it’ll be a seamless transition.” She
twists to look at Khan. “What do you think?”

“Possible but I think unlikely,” Khan says. “Marcus would not want anyone close enough for fear
they would decide to replace him. I think that you have a valid argument, however, but I do not
think the situation is either or. Some of the section 31 agents may want revenge, others may fight
among themselves to control what remains of the power structure.”

Jake looks uncharacteristically uncertain, and Jill also notices it. “Tell me,” she says, looking at
him.

“Most of them are headquartered here, right?” Jake asks. “The agents.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “There is a satellite station in space, near Jupiter where the Vengeance is being
constructed, but a majority of the section 31 personnel work at the archive in London.”

“Right,” Jake says. “So...what happens if the archive blows up?”

Silence falls in the room. Khan finds himself surprised; he had not thought anyone in this century
would be capable of considering something like that. Certainly he has done similar things, and
worse, in his past. But those were different times.

Jill finally blows out a breath. “I...I see your point,” she says carefully. “But...shit. I don’t know
how I feel about this.”

“No one in section 31 is innocent,” Jake says. “Especially not the scientists and medical people.
They knew going in they were doing things that were unethical at best and illegal in all
probability.”

“But what about the people who got coerced into working there, or who are completely unaware of
some of the other programs?” Andy asks. “That has the potential for a hell of a lot of collateral
damage.”

“I didn’t say it was a good idea,” Jake says. “I’m just...we should keep our options open.”

“Yeah,” Jill says, subdued. “Yeah, we should, but let’s keep this one on a back burner for the
moment.”

“I think dealing with the agents is a problem that we can deal with when we get there, to be
honest,” Andy says. “Right now the priorities are one, revive those of John’s family we can; two,
take down Marcus; three, no idea; four, profit.”

Magpie snickers. “Three, figure out what to do with six dozen people from three centuries ago.”

“Okay, true,” Andy says.

“Still not sure how you get to profit,” Jake says.

“Me either, but we’ll figure it out,” Andy says. “Is there anything else we need to go over tonight?”

“Probably but hell if I know what,” Jill says. “John?”
“I cannot think of anything at the moment,” Khan says.

“Unless you’ve got anything else for us?” Jill asks Jake.

“Um.” Jake rubs his hands over his face and through his hair. “Maybe. I’m trying to tug a few strings to find out more about the enhanced interrogation program at section 31. I don’t, as yet, have a lot of information about it other than it exists—which is bad enough—and that they might be using actual people for experiments. The latter is kind of murky, though, so let me dig into it a bit more. I’m hoping to get video or image proof.”

“Make sure you have proof that you can prove isn’t doctored,” Jill says. “Otherwise...”

“Yeah, I know the drill,” Jake says. “I’ve got my ways, shorty, don’t worry.”

“I know you do, I’m just saying,” Jill says.

Magpie drums her fingers on her tablet. “I’m trying to hack into Marcus’ email, but it’s slow going,” she says. “I’m being careful so as not to set off any alerts, and I haven’t had the time I need to sit down and really get into it. Maybe this week. It’s something I want to do in my own place because I have more equipment there, though, so I’ll be out of touch for a few days.”

“Likewise, for different reasons,” Andy says, looking up from the electronics in her lap. “Need uninterrupted time to build things. I’ll probably head back to New York when you go back to San Francisco and hole up for a bit.” She looks at Khan apologetically. “Sorry to run out on you.”

“It is fine,” Khan says. “Needs must.”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Andy says. “Jill-Bear, you’re heading back Tuesday, right?”

“That is my plan,” Jill says. “Magpie?”

“Mm, I’m going to head back tomorrow,” Magpie says. “You lot can manage without me for a day, right?”

“It’ll be tough but I think we’ll survive,” Jill says solemnly. She covers a yawn and puts her head down on Khan’s shoulder. “God, why am I so tired? I slept a solid...number of hours last night.”

“Sleep debt?” Magpie offers. “It’s been a long week?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jill says, rubbing her eyes. “Ugh. I think it’s time for all you lovely people to find somewhere else to be so I can crash.”

“Probably,” Magpie says. She puts away her tablet and scrambles to her feet. “Andy, can I crash with you tonight?”

“I’m crashing in John’s apartment,” Andy says. “Since I think he’s staying in this one.” He looks at Khan. “I mean, is that okay?”

“It is,” Khan says.

“Jake, you’ve got a place, right?” Jill asks around another yawn.

“I do,” Jake says. “I can stick around London for a couple days, I’ll go back on Tuesday with you.”

“Three for San Francisco on Tuesday,” Jill says. “Cool. Let me get up to say goodnight to you guys.” It takes a few seconds, but she gets to her feet. Hugs exchanged and then three people
file out the door. Jill closes it after them and activates the lock and the privacy seal, then stands there with her forehead against the surface. “God, why am I so tired?” she asks, sounding cranky about it.

“When was the last time you slept well before last night?” Khan asks.

“Uh,” Jill says. “Let me get back to you on that.”

“I think you have just made my point,” Khan says mildly.

“Okay, fine, but still.” Jill sighs and pushes away from the door. “Come to bed with me? I know you’re not tired, but you did stay up the whole night watch--speaking of, I owe you a back rub.”

“You should sleep first,” Khan says.

“I hate to admit it but you’re probably right,” Jill says. “When we wake up, then. Or when I wake up.”

“All right,” Khan says. He follows Jill into the bedroom, wondering whether Magpie or Andy made the bed and when they did it. The green sheets and green-and-blue striped comforter remind him of the pillows on Jill’s bed in San Francisco, and he smiles a little.

They undress for bed and wash up and settle into bed, Jill curled into Khan with her head on his shoulder and one of his wings draped around her. “Tell me about one of your sisters,” she says softly.

Khan considers who for a moment. “Anandi,” he says. “She is not particularly tall, similar to Magpie in height. Her skin is about the color of your hair, maybe a bit darker, and she wears her hair either close-cut or she grows it out into what I can only describe as a puff. At the time we went into cryosleep it was somewhere between the two.”

“Where did she rule or work? What did she study?” Jill asks.

“She held much of South America,” Khan says. “And she was a biochemist by interest, specifically poisons. She used to test them on us as children, to find out the effects.”

“She poisoned you for fun?” Jill snorts. “That’s disturbing.”

“She knew we would not die,” Khan says. “We all had games we played on others.”

“Like what?” Jill asks.

“Cat liked to get close enough to call a kill without the other person reacting,” Khan says. “We called it counting coup. Many of us did this, myself included, but she was the most successful at it. She caught me many times, to my regret.”


“Did you give their things back?” Khan asks.

“Usually before they knew they were gone,” Jill says.

That does not surprise him, and he says as much. Again, Jill laughs, although she yawns in the middle.

“Tell me more about Anandi,” she says sleepily. “What were her hobbies? Did she have a
“She liked to cook,” Khan says. “Since it is in large part chemistry. She played Go when she could find someone willing to play her. She did not have a partner, nor do I think she ever wanted one. Self-sufficient almost to a fault, is Anandi.”

“What else did she study other than poisons?” Jill asks.

“She and Bishop were the ones to study how we had been created, how we came to be what we were,” Khan says. “Even after the wars started, and we were separated, they kept in touch to share data and research, when they had time.”

“Where was Bishop?” Jill asks.

“Western Europe,” Khan says. “Alona, Matthew, and Maeve all worked for him.”

“And Katsuro?” she asks around another yawn. “You said they were mates.”

“I did, but Katsuro ruled Asia, or parts of it,” Khan says. “They did not have much time together. I hope that when--if--we revive them they can be together.”

“When,” Jill says stubbornly.

Khan smiles a little. “When, then,” he says. He slides a hand up her back to rub the back of her neck. “You should sleep, milaya moya.”

“Don’t wanna,” Jill mumbles but he can tell she’s already close. He keeps up the gentle massage and as it usually does, it puts her under in a short time.

Khan stays awake for a while, holding her in case she has a nightmare or becomes restless. She does neither, her breathing slow and even, her body gone lax. She feels warm and solid against him, but still so small, and he wonders if her shoulders will be strong enough to carry all the weight she has taken on.

He knows better than to equate size with strength, of course, and Jill is made of titanium. But at the same time, she has weak spots, areas of brittleness and fragility. She covers them well most of the time, but Khan sees her clearly, and he knows the truth.

Somewhat ironically, he wishes he had someone else to talk to, someone to confide in about Jill, about the maddening contradictions and terrifying hope she gives him. But there is no one. His Rani is long dead and her ashes scattered, his family lies in cryosleep. He has no one to trust save Jill herself and her family, odd as they are.

Also, truthfully, he has no choice but to trust her, to continue on this path she set. She and her family know too much about him as it is, and were he to hurt Jill in any way, they would not hesitate to use that information against him. If he hurts Jill, if he betrays her trust, they will want revenge.

He also, to be brutally honest, has no other real options for saving his family. Jill gave him hope, and Andy was right in that it terrifies him, but Khan has never been one to run from his fears. He has hope now, a slender strand of it, and he has the outlines of a plan that may, possibly, bring his family back to him.

Eventually he falls asleep, more to escape the cycle of his own thoughts than from any need for rest.
The fire burns higher, brighter, seventy-two bodies incinerated without a chance for escape, without a chance for him to get to them. He tries anyway, but the heat and smoke force him back, his skin blistering from the flames and tears streaming down his face, making tracks in the soot covering his skin.

If he stays, the fire will devour him; it burns greedily, hungry for more fuel, and already flames run along the floor to lick at his feet. He looks at them, then at the wreckage before him, and closes his eyes. What does he have left? Let the fire take him.

Something jerks at him and he looks down, confused. A rope wraps around his wrist—he has no idea where it came from—and pulls sharply, again, and he--

Khan wakes with a jerk, his heart pounding and his breath sounding harsh and ragged to his own ears. He looks down at his skin reflexively, but sees no burns, no blisters, just untouched pale skin. He swallows, forcing his breathing to steady, and looks over to see Jill kneeling on the bed, her fingers wrapped around his wrist tightly. “You screamed,” she says, still clearly shaken. “You screamed and you tried to punch me when I touched you.”

“Did I hurt you?” Khan asks hoarsely.

Jill shakes her head. “I ducked out of the way, then I grabbed your wrist and squeezed as hard as I could, and you woke up after the third time.” She doesn’t let go of him, but loosens her grip. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Khan swallows again and breathes out slowly. It takes him a moment, but he pushes himself to sitting, the covers tangled around his legs. “There...there was a fire,” he says, wincing at how wrecked he sounds. “My family, they burned, I could not...I could not save them.”

“I’m sorry,” Jill says softly.

“I was going to let the fire take me,” Khan says, unable to keep the words back. “I had...I had nothing left.” He presses his lips together, fighting for composure, and when he thinks he has it by the tips of his fingers he reaches for Jill. “Come here. Please.”

She doesn’t hesitate, crawling into his lap and wrapping herself around him as much as she can. Khan folds his wings around her and buries his face in her hair, breathing in its scent and letting the soft curls tickle his nose.

Neither of them say anything for a time, but the adrenaline slowly ebbs from Khan’s system and leaves him feeling wrung out and exhausted in the aftermath. He focuses on breathing, slow and steady, on slowing his heartbeat and convincing his body to relax. Jill stays silent and still in his arms, but holds on and doesn’t let go.

After a while, Khan loosens his hold on Jill and raises his head. She takes this as a sign to shift so she can look at him, her dark eyes meeting his. “Are you all right?” she asks, touching his cheek.

“I believe so,” Khan says carefully.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Jill says, smiling ruefully. “I’m going to make us tea, okay? I’ll see what Andy stocked and if there’s anything good for emotional disturbance.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

Jill leans up and brushes her lips over his before she gets out of bed and pulls on her robe. She walks out of the room, leaving the door open. Khan stays where he is for a few moments, then gets
up to go splash water on his face. The cold shock of it helps to clear his head, and he takes a minute in the bathroom to run through some mental exercises designed to calm and order his thoughts. It helps until he closes his eyes and sees flames.

He sighs and pulls on his pants before going to find Jill. She hands him a steaming mug and picks up hers. “It’s chamomile,” she says. “She gave me Earl Grey, that Assam-Ceylon blend, a basic green, another black tea, and the chamomile. There’s also a note that everything is in airtight canisters so will last a while and not go stale.”

“How good was he?” Jill asks.

“Okay, now I’m impressed,” Jill says, taking a sip of her tea. “But the question is was he able to bring it back up again?”

“After six hours, yes,” Khan says. “Which was also on purpose.”

“Do I even want to know what you were doing for those six hours?” Jill asks.

Khan smiles. “Probably not.”

She laughs. “Okay. You can tell me another time.”

“How was the craziest thing Magpie ever did?” Khan asks.

“Hmm.” Jill considers, drumming her fingers against the counter. “Crazy as in most insane or most difficult?”

“Either,” Khan says.

“The most difficult thing she ever did was take down the firewall around Starfleet’s mission reports,” Jill says. “She’d heard that there were some disturbing admissions in them, and some people who wanted to quote “expose the corruption within Starfleet” unquote hired her to get them access. She made a ton of money, succeeded without getting caught, and Starfleet had egg on its face from some of the reports getting leaked. Didn’t expose any real corruption, just some embarrassments and a couple morally gray things.”

“And the most...insane?” Khan asks.

“Hm.” Jill tilts her head, thinking about it. “In my opinion, and Magpie’s may be different, it was when she took on the big bankers. She’s very indifferent to money so long as she can afford what she needs and wants, and she thinks everyone should have enough to do that. So she took the top executives at the five biggest banks on-planet--I think it was like twenty-five people--and hacked their
bank accounts. She transferred all the money to thousands of people who she felt needed a boost. It was billions of credits, maybe even trillions, I don’t know the numbers. But they could never prove what had happened, and no one who’d received the money was about to speak up. So she ended up getting away with it. She told me after that the hacking was the easy part, the hard part was figuring out who got how much.”

Khan has to smile at her audacity. “She really is a modern-day Robin Hood,” he says.

“In some ways, definitely,” Jill says with a return smile. “It’s one of the many reasons I love her.” She takes another sip of her tea. “It’s just past two in the morning,” she says. “Do you want to stay up, go back to bed, talk, have sex, what?”

He has no real desire to sleep again, not when every time he blinks for too long he sees fire and can almost smell the smoke. “Let us go back to bed,” he says.

They take their mugs back into the bedroom and settle again with mugs on the nightstand next to Jill and the floor on Khan’s side. Jill drapes herself against Khan, positioning herself so she can see his face. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” she says, brushing her fingers over his cheek, through his hair.

“What if we fail?” Khan asks quietly. “What if you are caught, if they find out about us, if Marcus simply kills my family while they are helpless?”

Jill breathes out slowly. “Then we deal with it,” she says. “Then we go out but we find a way to take them down with us. We start planning for contingencies and we don’t rule anything out, including blowing up the archive or suicide pills.” She bites her lip and looks at Khan. “Would that even work for you?”

“It would have to be an extremely concentrated dose,” Khan says. “The only sure way I know to kill one of my people is to sever the spinal cord. Cut the throat, sever the cord, and even we cannot heal from that.”

“There’s no guarantee I’d be able to do that,” Jill says. “I mean, if I get captured I can’t.” She licks her lips. “Tomorrow, you and Jake and Andy and I will sit down and start figuring out plans B through whatever we need. I don’t expect it’ll be a fun time, but it’s necessary.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Who do you know that can get suicide pills?”

“Jake,” Jill says. “He has one, keeps it in a false tooth, replaces it before every mission in case the previous doesn’t work. He has access to more. I don’t know if he’d have access to one that would kill you, though. We’ll ask.”

There are other options, but Khan would rather not bring them up right now. “We will discuss it tomorrow,” he says.

“We will,” Jill says. She kisses his jaw, then the corner of his mouth. “Tell me what you need.”

Khan closes his eyes briefly. No one has asked him that in a very long time. “This,” he says after a pause. “Be here with me, like this.”

“As long as you need,” Jill promises, putting her head down on his shoulder. Khan holds her closer and breathes her in, small and solid and warm.

He looks at the ceiling, in the darkness, seeing nothing but in his mind he can hear the crackle of flames and sizzle of sparks, and in the back of his throat he tastes the acrid, thick smoke. He forces
those impressions back, focuses on Jill in his arms, the scent and feel of her, chamomile and sandalwood and spicy-sweet, soft hair against his skin and smooth skin pressed against him. It helps, but not enough, and before he thinks better of it he rolls them over, pinning her under him, leaning down to kiss her.

He can’t kill the demons, he can only force them back into their cage with its bent and battered bars, and right now even that much eludes him. But Jill kisses him back and wraps her arms around his neck, wordlessly offering him anything he wants, anything he needs. She drops her head back when he nudges her and gasps when he bites her throat, shivering.

As if she knows what he needs, she doesn’t say a word, letting Khan satiate himself with her body, touch, taste, scent, sight, the sound of her moans and gasps and the short broken cry she makes when she comes. He doesn’t let her come down until tears streak her cheeks and her whimpers start edging toward pain instead of ecstasy.

It takes her a long time to stop shivering after. Khan holds her and strokes her hair, murmuring things in Hindi she will not understand. He feels calmer now, settled. Almost clean, mentally if not physically. The demons within him curl up in their cage, sated and quiescent for now. The lock will not hold against their next assault, but for now he ignores them.

Khan falls asleep more easily than he expected. He doesn’t dream.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The things you make me want to do to you.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long delay between chapters - it's been a combination of real life woes (my body hates me) and writer distraction (the evil foxtales planted a bunny in my head that's now, uh, about 100k words and growing, split between three storylines. I don't even know, man, but it is ALL her fault.)

Anyway, I hope you're not too upset with me, and I hope you enjoy this chapter. This one decided to be ALL THE PORN EVER so if that's not your thing, you can probably read the very beginning and the very end and be done. If you do enjoy the porn, by all means, have some. Have a lot. Seriously.

As always, comments and criticism gladly welcomed.

He wakes when Jill slides out bed, and reaches to pull her back against him before he even has his eyes fully open. “No, really, I need to use the bathroom,” she says. “Then I’ll come back and snuggle.”

Khan can’t argue with that logic and lets go of her. She slips out of bed and comes around to his side to kiss his temple before walking to the bathroom. While she’s in there, Khan pushes himself up to sitting and moves through some basic stretches, loosening muscles tense from the previous night. He thinks he would like to go for a long run if they have time, or perhaps take Jill flying with him.

She comes out of the bathroom wrapped in her robe, hair tousled from sleep. Khan holds out a hand and she comes over to him, taking it and moving to stand between his knees. “Morning,” she says, leaning down to kiss him.

“Good morning,” Khan says, brushing her hair back from her face. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did,” Jill says, draping her arms around his neck. “You slept like a log. I woke up at a couple points and had to make sure you were still breathing.”

Her concern touches him and he draws her closer, pulling her down until she straddles his legs, her hands on his shoulders. “No more dreams?” she asks, brushing her fingers over his forehead.

“No,” Khan says. “Did you?”

Jill shakes her head. “Quiet night. Not sure I trust it, but given the last few nights I’ll take what I can get.” She kisses his forehead, each eyelid, his cheeks, then his lips. “You up for a run?” she
asks, leaning her forehead against his.

“\text{I would like that,}” Khan says, his hands on her hips.

“I thought you might,” Jill says. “I usually want some kind of strenuous physical activity after a night like that, assuming I’m awake enough for it. Although.” She pulls back a little, looking at him. “\text{Run, fly, or spar?}”

“A run for now,” Khan says. “Perhaps a spar after.”

“We can do that,” Jill says. “Although do you need to be at work? I’m lost on days.”

“I probably should, but I will not,” Khan says. “Cruz and Smythe are currently reassigned as neither of them have the skills required to build the torpedoes. For now I am working alone, and I doubt anyone will notice if I am not in today. I may go later to try and make some progress.”

“All right,” Jill says. “I just don’t want Marcus coming after you.”

Khan shakes his head. “He will not,” he says. “Not right now. He needs me and he knows I will not hesitate to turn on him. I am capable of handling him, milaya moya.”

“I know,” Jill says. “I just...I worry. There are so many things that could go wrong, the last thing we need is Marcus causing problems.”

“I think he is the least of our worries at the moment,” Khan says. Strange to say, but true. “He may ask me to go to the station behind Jupiter soon, though.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Jill says. “But I think we can manage, especially if you manipulate him to go while I’m still in San Francisco and we’re not ready to pull the first op yet.”

“I can manage that,” Khan says, thinking about it. Actually, that will be relatively simple, and he nods. “I will message him tonight.”

“All right.” Jill kisses him lightly and gets up, stretching. “Let’s go for a run. I could use one, and I know you could.”

“Yes,” Khan says, getting to his feet.

They run about fifteen kilometers, taking a winding path that ends near the archive. “I’m guessing our finish here means you want a spar,” Jill says, stretching out her arms.

“How about you?” Khanasks.

“Oh, yeah,” she says, flashing him a grin. “Always.”

He smiles a bit. “Cat will like you,” he says.

“I certainly hope so,” Jill says, tucking a loose curl back behind her ear. “Otherwise...” She glances away and doesn’t continue. “Well, anyway, let’s go spar,” she says after a moment.

They get a gym easily enough and pull off socks and sneakers, moving to face each other on the mat. Khan waits, watching Jill, and still almost misses her first punch. Almost.

When it ends, he has her pinned under him, flat on her stomach with one arm behind her back and one over her head. She’s tense under him, but not struggling; on impulse, he kisses the back of her neck, licking sweat off her skin, and she catches her breath, shivering.
“Perhaps we should take this back to your flat,” he murmurs, biting her earlobe.

“Yeah,” Jill whispers, a breath more than a word. “Yeah, that’d...that’d be good.”

Khan smiles and bites her throat, not quite leaving a mark. He releases her slowly and gets to his feet; it takes her a solid thirty seconds before she pushes up slowly, and she takes a slow breath before moving to pull on her shoes.

He doesn’t touch her as they leave the gym, nor does he touch her in the cab back to the building. She glances at him on the ride back, clearly curious but not asking, but Khan keeps quiet until they’re in her flat and the door locked behind them.

Then he moves, fast, picking her up and pushing her against the wall, pinning her hands over her head and pressing a thigh between her legs. Jill shudders and tips her head back, swallowing hard; Khan licks the line of her throat, damp warm skin that still tastes of salt. “The things you make me want to do to you,” he murmurs, biting just under her jaw.

“Anything,” she whispers, arching against him, grinding down against his thigh. “You know that.”

“I do,” Khan says softly, possession and want curling fiercely in his stomach. He knows they have things to do today, plans to make and discussions to have, but that can all wait. For now he strips Jill out of her clothes, keeping her pressed against the wall and balanced by his hands, his thigh. She shivers and tries to reach for him before he pins her wrists again; her nipples are tight and he can feel her sex, hot and wet through the fabric of his pants. “Tell me what you need,” he says, bending his head to her throat again, biting just where neck meets shoulder.

“You,” she says, breathless and wanting. She whimpers when his hand slides between her legs and tries to push down against him, but she’s got no leverage the way he holds her. “Khan, please.”

“Leave your hands there,” Khan tells her, tightening his hold for a moment to reinforce the message. “Don’t drop them.”

Jill licks her lips, nods, and when Khan releases her wrists she keeps her arms where they are, wrists crossed above her head. He moves his hold to her waist, keeping her where she is for a moment, and sinks to his knees, her legs sliding over his shoulders and his hands on her thighs, supporting her. It can’t be that comfortable for her and he doesn’t care; he’ll rub out the tension later, soothe the hurt he’s caused.

He bites her inner thigh, enough to mark, bruise the skin. She cries out, pain and pleasure mixing; Khan smiles and bites her again, overlapping the first. Jill whines, would squirm but for how he has her against the wall. “Tell me,” Khan says against her sex, licking her with the tip of his tongue. “Tell me what you need.”

“Please,” she whispers, a catch in her voice. “Please.”

He wonders if she’d let him shave her, expose all that sensitive skin; he wonders if she’s done it before, what she thought. Aesthetically, it’s not a look he prefers, but the act itself he rather enjoys, and the end result has always been worth it.

He’ll ask later. For now, he licks her, teases her clit with tongue and teeth, shifts just a bit to get a hand free and slide his fingers into her. Jill whimpers, thighs tensing over and over again, breath coming fast in her throat. “Please,” she begs. “Khan, please.”

No, he thinks, pulling back just enough to keep her from coming. She whines, tries to push against his face and gets nowhere; when she tries again, he slaps her thigh sharply and she shivers,
subsiding. He thinks she should know by now that he doesn’t generally let her come until he’s had enough, but they can negotiate that later.

For now, she said anything, and Khan wants everything.

By the time he lets her come, her voice has broken to hoarse pleas and her body trembles all over, enough that she all but falls down the wall when he lets her. She collapses in a heap, panting for breath, still shivering enough that Khan moves to hold her, letting her huddle against him.

“I really, really need a shower,” she says finally, taking a breath. “I think you might, too.”

“Yes,” Khan says, releasing her slowly as she gets to her feet. “Tell me something.”

“What do you want to know?” Jill asks.

“Would you let me shave you?” he asks, pushing to his feet. “Have you done that before?”

“I have,” Jill says. “Well, kind of. Depilatory options these days run more to gels than blades, but I’ve used both. The gels aren’t always the best option for the bikini area.” She tilts her head, looking at him. “You like that?”

“I like the result,” Khan says, following her to the bathroom. “And the act.”

“Okay,” Jill says. She grins and stretches up to kiss him. “Yeah, I’d let you. I’m not all that fond of the way it looks, but God, the sensitivity.”

“Indeed,” Khan murmurs, kissing her back. “Do you have things here?”

“Actually, I do,” Jill says. “Do we have time? And I still want a shower first.”

“Yes,” Khan says to both.

They share a quick shower; Jill tries to make it longer by slipping to her knees but Khan stops her before she can take him into her mouth. “Our time is not limitless and I have things I want more,” he says, pulling her back to her feet.

“So not fair,” Jill grumbles. “Be a little more selfish next time, okay?”

“I am being selfish,” Khan says, amused. “I want this more than I want you on your knees for me.”

“Yeah, true, but--be a little more focused on your own orgasms, okay?” Jill asks.

“Perhaps,” Khan says, smiling at the strangeness of the conversation.

Jill makes a face at him and rinses out her hair. “You are the best lover I’ve ever had and you still drive me nuts,” she says. “Everything has a trade-off.”

“It does,” Khan says, more serious than he thinks she wanted him to be.

She steps closer to him, leans up for a kiss, and he thinks she’s about to say something but she doesn’t. “Are you sure you want this?” she asks instead.

“Yes,” Khan says, smoothing her wet hair back from her face.

“All right.” Jill kisses him one more time and turns to shut off the water. She looks at him as she wrings out her hair; he raises his eyebrows.
“What are you thinking?” he asks.

Jill steps out of the shower and wraps a towel around her hair. “I really would let you do almost anything with me,” she says, rubbing her body dry with another one. “I’ve never said that before and meant it, not like this.”

“Define almost,” Khan says, stepping out of the shower and reaching for a towel.

“Don’t piss on me,” Jill says, making a face. “That’s just ew. Or anything else along those lines.”

“No,” Khan says. “No, I would not.” The idea has less than no appeal, to be honest.

“Beyond that?” Jill smiles a little and shrugs. “I don’t know. I’d say it’s kind of all negotiable, after that. It doesn’t mean I’d agree to anything, but I’d at least consider it if you wanted it.” She moves to the counter, rummaging in her bag and pulling out a couple things. “What would you let me do with you?”

Khan goes to her, fitting himself against her back and leaning down to kiss the line of her shoulder. “What would you want?” he asks, breathing in the scent of sandalwood.

He sees her smile in the mirror. “Would you let me top you?” she asks, meeting his eyes in the mirror. “Have you done that?”

“I have not,” Khan says.

“Would you let me?” Jill asks, tipping her head back against his shoulder when he nuzzles her throat.

“Would you want to?” he asks, more interested in the clean taste of her skin.

“Yes, or I wouldn’t have asked if you’d let me, now answer the question,” Jill says, laughing and trying to pull away.

“I would,” Khan says, stepping back.

Jill grins again and turns to look at him. “I think you’ll like it,” she says, handing him a razor and a small tube of cream before she turns back to get a damp cloth. “I’m good at it.”

“Are you, now,” Khan murmurs, following her back into the bedroom.

“Mmhmm.” Jill crawls onto the bed and unwraps the towels, spreading one out under her hair and the other one under her hips. “My first boyfriend ever, I was fifteen, he was sixteen, and two months after we started dating he told me he’d realized he was gay. It explained so much, really. But we stayed friends, and long story short he asked me for help figuring out if he liked that or not, so we went shopping and tried a few things, and we both absolutely loved it. He still left me for the first cute guy who came along, but that was fine.”

“And you dated other men who liked it?” Khan asks, moving to kneel between her legs.

“I have, yeah,” Jill says. “I like men who aren’t afraid of their own bodies, who realize that it can be just as much fun to receive. I’m not saying it’s a requirement, but it’s definitely something I look for.”

“What would you have done had I said no?” Khan asks, running the cloth over her skin before reaching for the cream.
“Tried to convince you otherwise then left it alone if you insisted,” Jill says. “I don’t get any enjoyment out of guilting people into things they don’t want.”

“But you also do not simply accept a no,” Khan says. “You push, you entreat, you coax, you cajole. You accept a refusal under protest and with reluctance, and you rarely surrender the field so long as you think you have the slimmest chance at victory.” The shaving cream she uses has almost no scent, which he appreciates, and spreads thick and even over her skin and hair.

“Takes one to know one,” Jill says, propping herself up on her elbows. “Doesn’t it?”

He smiles briefly. “Perhaps. Lie back, please. I don’t want to cut you accidentally.”

“You wouldn’t,” Jill says, but lies back against the bed. “Not accidentally, no.”

Probably not, Khan admits to himself, brushing his fingers over the bruise he left on her inner thigh before he picks up the razor.

“Talk to me,” Jill murmurs. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He stays quiet for a moment, wiping the blade off on the cloth before drawing it over her skin again. “Do you know what I would do with you, were you to let me?” he asks, each stroke of the razor careful and deliberate, revealing more pale, smooth skin. “There are so many options, milaya moya, so many choices, I almost would not know where to start.”

“You lie,” Jill says, amused. “You know exactly what you’d do.”

Khan laughs. “I said almost.”

“Yes, so tell me,” Jill says, and he can hear her smile.

“I would leave you bare for me,” Khan murmurs, brushing a finger over smooth skin. “Send you to the archive in your uniform, in that short skirt, but I would keep you bare under it, open and exposed and ready for me, whenever I wanted. You would have to be careful, during the day, not to let anyone know the truth, and I think that would make you wet already, would it not? Knowing there was nothing between you and someone else’s eyes were you not careful?”

It’s making her wet now, in fact, and he smiles, wiping off the blade and continuing. “But perhaps that would not be enough for you,” he says softly. “I would want you ready for me, knowing I could come into the archive and find you, take you into the bathroom--there is one, off the main library room, it is not monitored. I would want you to be so wet for me, so desperate, that I could bend you over the sink and enter you, that one brush of my fingers would be all you would need to come. Would this be enough, or would you need more...incentive?”

He hears the catch in Jill’s breath, hears her swallow twice before she tries to speak. “What more would you want?” she asks finally.

“Oh desperate would you feel, were I to fill you, here?” Khan asks, sliding the hand not holding the razor back under her body, fingers slipping into the cleft of her ass and pressing gently. “How would you get through your day, with something inside you here, knowing I could find you at any
moment? You wouldn’t, of course, go to the bathroom to pleasure yourself. That wouldn’t be part of the game.”

“No,” Jill manages again, her voice cracking. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“I would make you wait,” Khan says, drawing his hand back and continuing the steady, even strokes of the razor. “I would make you wait until you thought perhaps I would not find you, until you wondered whether it really would be worth it to duck into that unmonitored bathroom. Until you finally did.”

“You’d be there,” Jill says, shivering a little. “Waiting for me.”

“I would,” Khan agrees, pleased that she’s caught on. “You would try to protest that you hadn’t come there for precisely the reason you had, that it was just coincidence.”

“What would you do?” Jill asks softly.

“Bend you over the sink,” Khan says. “Slide my fingers into you, feel how ready you were for me. I wouldn’t let you come, of course, but you would beg me for release, to fuck you the way you had needed all day long.”

“Would you?” Jill asks.

“I would,” Khan says. “But I would hold you up, keep you off the floor so you had no leverage, no way to do anything but let me take you, and I would not let you move until you stopped cursing me and started begging me instead.”

“Wouldn’t take much,” Jill says, again a catch in her voice. “Not with how ready I’d have been all day, waiting for you.”

“If I thought you begged enough, were sufficiently desperate, I would let you come,” Khan says. “Or perhaps I wouldn’t. Perhaps I would take my own pleasure and leave you wanting, wet and sticky down your thighs, so close to orgasm that it would take just the brush of my finger.” He does brush a finger over her clit at that, a bare touch, and she moans. “Leave you like that, to suffer out the rest of your day.”

“Please,” she whispers. “You wouldn’t be so cruel.”

“Would I not?” Khan asks, running his fingers over bare skin. “I think I could be, and worse.”

“How?” Jill says, shivering.

He’s almost done with the razor, and he knows she can tell the difference; when he brushes his fingers over her labia she whimpers a little, trying not to push into his touch. “I wouldn’t let you come, not then, not like that,” he says. “But at the same time, I could not send you back to the archive as you were, dripping wet and sticky and smelling of me. I would go to my knees for you, lick you clean, every centimeter of your skin. And I think that would be too much for you, wouldn’t it? You would come against my mouth, you wouldn’t be able to help it.”

“I wouldn’t,” Jill says, a moan more than a word. “Not after everything.”

“I’d have to punish you for it, of course,” Khan says matter-of-factly, stroking her with two fingers. “But not then. We wouldn’t have time, and I would want you to think about it, to anticipate what I would do to you later.”
She whimpers again, arching against his hand. “Please,” she whispers. “Khan, please.”

He knows it’s cruel and bends to kiss her, flicking his tongue against her clit. “I will be back in a moment,” he says, getting up. “Don’t touch yourself.”

Jill groans and flings an arm over her eyes, her other hand fistning at her side, but doesn’t move. Khan smiles a little, watching her, then goes to put away the razor and cream and get a new cloth.

She hasn’t moved when he returns, and he crawls over her, leaning down to kiss her lightly. “I can smell you,” he murmurs, moving back between her legs to run the cloth over her, wiping away every last stray hair and trace of cream. “You’re so wet, even now, so ready for me.”

“Always,” she murmurs back, spreading her legs more. “God, what you do to me.”

“I should make you wait,” he says, dragging the textured cloth over her clit. “I should leave you like this, wanting and desperate. Leave you to think about what I will do later, how easy it would be for me to make you come, over and over until you begged me to stop. We have to speak with Andy and Jake today, but how much would you actually concentrate if I kept you like this?”

“Not—not much,” she says shakily, swallowing a whine. “Please. Khan, please, don’t--”

“I think I will,” he says instead, sitting back on his heels. She whines, drags her arm away from her eyes to glare at him, desperate and frustrated. Khan smiles, crawls back up her body to kiss her, just a brush of his lips against hers. “If you touch yourself,” he says against her lips, “I will know, and I won’t touch you until you leave for San Francisco.” He slides a hand down her body, touches her sex. “This is mine, and I will decide when you come. Do you understand, milaya moya?”

“Oh, you bastard,” she says with a groan, gasping when he drags a finger over her clit. “Please, you can’t--”

“I can,” Khan says softly. “And I will.” He kisses her again, swallowing her moan, and gets up, off the bed. “Get dressed, pyara. We have work to do today.”

Jill swallows a whimper, not moving; Khan’s already fully dressed by the time she drags herself off the bed. “I will go make coffee,” he says, watching her. “Don’t take too long.”

By the time she comes into the kitchen, the coffee’s ready. She glares at him as she fixes hers, but says nothing. Khan smiles, satisfied, and lets her drink half her cup before moving to crowd her against the counter, taking her mug and setting it down before she drops it. “You know I will make this worth it for you,” he says softly, leaning down to murmur in her ear. “Be good for me, pyara, and I promise it will be worth it.”

“I really hate you,” she mutters, but she tips her head back for him and shivers when he nuzzles her throat.

“You don’t,” he says, biting her earlobe to make her whimper before he steps back. “Finish your coffee and call your friends. We have plans to make.”

“I really, really hate you,” she grumbles, picking up her mug again and using both hands to steady it.

Khan judges he’s teased her enough for the moment and leaves her alone as she finishes her coffee and calls Andy and Jake. Both of them say they’ll be over within half an hour, although for different reasons; Jake is out running and Andy sounds barely awake. Jill hangs up with Andy, makes herself another cup of coffee and rummages through the cabinets for a meal bar, pointedly
not looking at Khan or talking to him while she eats it and drinks her coffee.

He smiles again, far more amused and pleased than he thinks she will appreciate at the moment. But she relaxes as she drinks her coffee, and by the time she finishes she’s willing to look at him again, even if she does glare when she does it. “You really are a bastard,” she says, but her mouth quirks in a smile.

“Yes, you have noticed this before,” Khan says. He extends a hand; Jill glares more but crosses to him, taking it and letting him pull her in against her. She sighs, relaxing against him, more when he folds his wings around her and holds her close. “When was the last time you let anyone do this with you?” he asks, tucking a curl behind her ear.

“It’s been a while,” Jill says, leaning her forehead against his chest. “But the last time I did anything quite like this was...the Academy, and that didn’t last past spring break.”

It doesn’t surprise him, and he doubts it worked all that well then, either. She wants this, she wants to please him, to be good for him. But she needs careful handling, and a less certain partner would throw her out of the game entirely. Khan doubts any Academy cadet would be up to the challenge.

“All you have to do is trust me,” he says softly, pressing a kiss to her hair. “Just be good for me, milaya moya. I would not hurt you. I would not push you past your limits.”

“Just right up to them,” Jill says, but she smiles when she says it. “God, every time I think I’ve fallen as deep as I can for you I’m proven wrong.”

She leans up for a kiss, her hands on his chest. Khan thinks she’s about to say something, but she keeps quiet, pulling away from him after a moment. He lets her go, wondering what’s on her mind, but Jill says nothing as she goes to make a fresh pot of coffee.

Jake arrives just before the coffee finishes brewing, with Andy half a minute behind. Both of them have damp hair and in Jake’s case, stubble; Andy looks slightly more disheveled than usual and her hair is clipped back. Khan presumes he got out of the shower only a few minutes ago and didn’t have time to dry it.

“Coffee, shorty, please,” Jake says with a groan, throwing himself down on the couch. “Spent half the night on the phone with my brother, I’m exhausted.”

“Which one and what did he want?” Jill asks, handing him a mug. “Andy, love, there’s water heating for tea but it hasn’t boiled yet. I figured you could make it since you’re better at it than I am.”

“I am, yes,” Andy says, laying a palm against his cheek. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I am, yes,” Andy says, pausing to kiss Jill’s forehead before she crosses to Khan and gives him a quick hug. She pauses for a moment, looking at him. “You all right, uncle?” she murmurs in Mandarin.

“Do I not look all right?” Khan asks in the same language.

Andy studies him for another few moments. “You look like something from your subconscious took a bite out of you,” he says. “Nightmares?”

“Everyone has them,” Khan says, not surprised at Andy’s perception. “Even me.”

“Yeah,” Andy says, laying a palm against his cheek. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Khan glances at Jill, currently sitting on the couch with Jake and laughing at something he’s telling
her. “I think I would,” he admits quietly.

“Well, then,” Andy says, stepping back. He takes Khan’s hand and pulls him into the kitchen, where the kettle has just started to whistle. “What happened?” he asks as he rummages for a tea infuser and leaves and a mug.

“Fire,” Khan says, glad they are staying in Mandarin. “My family burned, I could not...” He looks down, takes a breath. “I could not save them.”

Andy sets her tea to steep and turns to look at Khan. “And you wanted to die,” she says softly. “Didn’t you?”

“I had nothing left,” Khan says, also quietly. “My family is my reason for living. Without them, what am I?”

“Is that the only family you have?” Andy asks steadily. “Is that really it? What about me, uncle? What about Jill? Are you really going to tell me we’re not it?”

Rather than answer him, Khan looks away. “You can’t do it, can you?” Andy asks. “You can’t tell me we’re not it. So you need to think a bit more about what your reason for living means these days, uncle, and what you might have left if you lost the ones not in this apartment.” She adds sugar to her mug and gives it a couple quick stirs before looking at him again, crossing to him. “I’m not saying we’re enough to keep going.”

“Only you can decide that, and I’m not one of those people who thinks suicide is an awful thing, or the coward’s way out. Sometimes there’s just...sometimes there’s no way to keep going. But I want you to promise me that you’ll think about it before you take that step, that you’ll consider all your family, not just the ones you grew up with.” He cups Khan’s face in his hands, meeting his eyes. “Please.”

Khan breathes. “I promise,” he says.

“Thank you.” Andy kisses his cheek and goes to get his tea, adding a splash of milk and dumping the tea leaves in the bin. “Let’s go find out what the daredevils are up to.”

When they walk back into the living room, Jill has dissolved into a giggling heap on the couch, face flushed and tears running down her cheeks. Jake slumps on the other end, looking resigned and long-suffering. “It wasn’t that funny,” he complains.

“Your face,” Jill gasps out, scrubbing tears off her skin with the sleeve of her shirt. “God, yes it was.”

“Can you do something about her?” Jake asks Khan plaintively.

“What would you have me do?” Khan asks mildly, but he does go to Jill’s end of the couch and perch on the arm, resting a hand on her shoulder and holding her a little more tightly than it would appear. She glances at him, but takes a couple deep breaths, subsiding.

“That was good,” Jake says. “Thank you. So what’s the plan?”

“The plan is to form the plan,” Jill says. “So let’s put everything we’ve got on the table and figure out what to do with it.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

You should know by now that I don't play fair.

Chapter Notes

Quick author's note for those not reading my other wingfic: I've been dealing with some health issues lately, specifically a herniated disc in my neck. Nothing else has worked, so I'm scheduled to have surgery to fix it a week from today (4/15, tax day woohoo). In the meantime, my left shoulder and arm are very annoyed with me and not working all that well, so typing is a bit problematic. That all being said, I may not be able to update again for a couple weeks due to surgery and recovery from surgery. I'll do my best, but my health has to come first ;)

As always, I very much appreciate all of you reading; I hope you're all enjoying. Comments are especially loved - even if there's something you didn't like, feel free to tell me about it! I've said before that I can't improve if I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

What they have on the table turns out to be more than even Khan had estimated. Magpie joins them by video after an hour, and between her own information, Jake’s intelligence, and Khan’s knowledge they have a detailed map of the facility in London with times and routes for security patrols, camera locations, heat and motion sensors, and other biometric markers. Khan studies the hologram on Jill’s coffee table, manipulating it carefully to see it from all angles.

“Are we thinking long-term, or right now are we focusing on the short-term of getting people out of there?” Jake asks, watching Khan trace Jill’s path through the facility.

“Short-term,” Jill says. “At least, for the moment. We need more heads than ours to figure out the longer-term, and we need to figure out exactly what the long-term *is.* Until we can decide what John and his people want to *do* once we get them all back, we can’t figure out how to handle Marcus best and how to take down section 31. I think. Anyone disagree?”

“I can tell you how to handle him best,” Magpie says cheerfully.

“Yes, bird, we know,” Jill says. “You’re not alone in that thought. And that very well may be what we end up doing, but let’s not plan a murder right now, okay?”

Khan considers that for a moment, the group they have. Jake, the sometimes assassin; Jill, who admits she enjoys killing; Magpie, who doesn’t care if it’s not one of her people and loathes almost all Starfleet officers; Andy, who seems unconcerned about discussing the killing of a Starfleet admiral. And then there’s himself, possibly the coldest killer of them all--but he wonders by how much.
It probably should disturb him that this knowledge reassures him more than anything else. It
doesn’t. The four of them are more like his brothers and sisters than he ever expected to find,
especially in this supposedly-civilized time.

“But we can plan one later, right?” Magpie asks.

Jill sighs. “Maybe. If you’re a very good girl and eat at least two meals a day for the next week and
we pull off the first two ops successfully.”

“Target date the Saturday after you move to London,” Magpie says. “With the second to follow the
following night assuming the first goes smoothly. Andy, how are we doing on that?”

“I need to hole up in my loft for a few days and work,” Andy says. “I’ll head back there when Jill
goes back to San Francisco. I expect to have everything built no later than a week before the op,
though.”

“I can’t be here for it,” Jake says. “I got a message this morning that I’ve been assigned to teach a
survival skills class since I’m not in the field right now. It starts in a week, and the Thursday before
the op we’re heading out for a week-long endurance thing. I’ll be completely out of touch until the
following Friday.”

“I thought you were on downtime,” Jill says. “I mean, it’s fine, your presence isn’t required for the
op, but I thought you had time off.”

“So did I,” Jake says. “But apparently brass decided otherwise. It’s fine, it’s only an eight-week
thing and it won’t be that difficult, but it does mean I’ll be a little less flexible with my time and my
ability to help until it’s done.”

“The only thing we absolutely need you to do is make sure the gym space is locked,” Jill says.
“And make sure we all know where it is, how to get there, and how to get in.”

“Roger that,” Jake says. “I’ll take care of it today or tomorrow. I know you’re heading back to San
Francisco, but I’ll take John with me so if I don’t get back here before you do, we’ll be good.”

“Andy, what’s up with the house?” Jill asks. “Have you heard back yet?”

“I did this morning, yeah,” Andy says. “We are confirmed to have the space starting in two weeks
until whenever we don’t need it anymore. It’s seven bedrooms, five and a half baths, enough
property that there aren’t neighbors immediately around. I haven’t checked out the security systems
on it in person, but I’ve seen the schematics and they look pretty good. I’ll obviously want to fix
some stuff, but that can wait until we get closer to the op.”

“How did you find it?” Khan asks curiously.

“Trevor,” Andy says. “He’s from serious money, and his family’s from London. They own this
place, but no one wanted to live in it because it was too big and too old for their liking, plus
London’s not as fashionable a city these days. The hot spots are San Francisco, Beijing, and a
couple other places, but London’s less interesting. And his family--by Trevor’s own description--is
very shallow and all about what’s hot, so this place has been empty for a while. He assured me
he’d have folks in to clean it and set it up for people before we need it.”

“What are we paying him for it?” Jill asks.

“I’m building him a couple things,” Andy says. “And he owes Magpie a couple big favors, so I
called them in on her behalf.”
“Do we need to worry about him talking to anyone?” Khan asks.

Andy shakes her head. “I told him I needed it as a safe house for a bunch of street brats. He won’t ask any more questions and he won’t say anything to anyone. And no, we don’t need to worry about anyone in his family coming home unexpectedly. Even if anyone went to London, they’d stay in the city proper, not where this is.”

Khan reflects again that some of Jill’s connections are almost eerily useful, and although he has never been a mystic, he does wonder if there might be a greater influence at work rather than mere coincidence. Andy alone would be enough to make him wonder, and he still doesn’t have an explanation for the ghost that might have been Rani.

Could it be her? Could she be arranging things from wherever she is now? Khan doesn’t know how he feels about the idea, although he does have to admit it would be very like her. She always wanted to arrange everything, always wanted things to be done the way she thought they should be. The rare times they argued were invariably over her wanting to meddle in situations he wanted her to stay out of.

He shakes himself mentally and pays attention to the people in the room, rather than distracting himself with thoughts of a woman dead for centuries. Jill glances up at him, as if she noticed his distraction, but whatever she sees in his face appears to satisfy her and she turns back to Andy. “Do not let Trevor come to London,” she says. “The last thing I need is him trying to get John into bed.”

“He wouldn’t--okay, no, I lie, he totally would,” Andy says, laughing.

“He absolutely would, and no,” Jill says. “Because he doesn’t understand the concept of monogamy and he doesn’t understand the concept of rejection.”

“Oh, he understands them,” Magpie says. “He just thinks they don’t apply to him.”

“He won’t come to London,” Andy promises. “Moving on. Bird, what’s up with those identities?”

“I have the first four locked and solid,” Magpie says. “Printing the actual documents will take me a couple days due to technical difficulties with my printer, but I’ll have them before we need them.”

“What happened to your printer?” Andy asks, frowning.

“Um,” Magpie says, looking guilty. “I may, possibly, have tripped over it while half-asleep and kicked it into the wall.”

Andy hangs his head. “Does it need to be rebuilt?”

“Maybe?” Magpie says hopefully.

“Translates to yes, please,” Jill says. “Oh, bird.”

“It shouldn’t be that difficult,” Magpie protests. “And I can always ask Casey.”

“You can,” Andy says. “But she’ll take two weeks and charge you way too much.”

“True,” Magpie admits. “So can you fix it?”

“I can, seeing as how I’m the one that built it,” Andy says. “But you’re going to owe me.”

“I thought you’d say that,” Magpie says. “We’ll sort it out later. For now, hang on a sec.” She looks down at something and Khan hears typing; a few moments later she nods and looks up.
“Okay, sent you the identities as I have them. Let me know what needs changing or editing before I start printing the stuff.”

“I will,” Khan says. “Did you give them new names?”

“I gave them last names but kept the ones you gave me,” Magpie says. “Figured that’d be easiest, and none of them were so unique it’d raise eyebrows.”

Khan nods. “Thank you.”

“Sure,” Magpie says. “Okay, are we good from my end? Do you need anything else from me? I’ve got a bunch of things to wrangle and since I am not a tactician nor am I all that good at making long-term plans, I’m thinking I can hang up and get back to work.”

“Yeah, I think we’re good,” Jill says. “Thanks, bird.”

“Catch you later,” Magpie says and disconnects.

“So,” Andy says to Khan. “What are you going to be up to in the next couple weeks?”

“I believe I may be near Jupiter,” Khan says. “There is a secret station out there, being used to construct the Vengeance. I have designed a substantial portion of it, and Marcus sometimes asks me to go there and check on the work being done. I believe I can arrange things so that he sends me before the first op.”

“Cool,” Jake says. “Wish I could go with you.”

“Do you design ships?” Khan asks, amused.

“Nope, but I can appreciate good ones,” Jake says. “I’m a good pilot, and the best pilots know exactly how their ships work.”

“They do,” Khan agrees. “If you would like data, I can most likely get it to you.”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Jake says, grinning. “Anything you’ve got, send it over. I’ve got an anonymous drop box, I’ll get you the info.”

Khan nods. “All right.”

“So, not to put the cart before the horse, but what do you want to do when you get your people back?” Andy asks. “Since I’m guessing Starfleet isn’t a place you want to stay.”

“No, it is not,” Khan says. “To be honest, I am not entirely certain. I cannot make decisions for my family without input from at least some of them. All of us have skills that would be valuable in today’s world, and I am certain we can find work for ourselves, but what our goal would be, I do not know.”

Jake shrugs. “You could take the Vengeance as payment for what Marcus did and head out into the galaxy,” he says. “Seek out new worlds and new civilizations or some crap like that.”

“Isn’t that what Starfleet does now?” Andy asks with a snort.

“Yeah, but they probably wouldn’t have to deal with the Prime Directive,” Jake says. “If they remove themselves from the Federation.”

“The Federation doesn’t like to let go of people,” Jill says. “Neither does Starfleet, for that matter.”
“Tell me about it,” Jake says, sighing. “But still, I bet you could get out of it.”

“We likely could, yes,” Khan says. Absently, he runs a finger up and down Jill’s throat, not really paying attention to what he’s doing. “Once we finish the first two ops, we can discuss it further and see which options we like.”

Jill shivers and nudges his hand away. “How many people can the Vengeance support, if supplied fully?” she asks.

Khan scratches the back of her neck, this time deliberately. “It is designed for a minimal crew; one person can run it if necessary. It can hold approximately a hundred personnel if adequately supplied, but it does not have resources for all of them to be occupied. There are no science labs, for example, and no real areas for recreation.”

“But you could probably refit some of it for those things,” Andy says. “I’m guessing, anyway.”

“It is possible, yes,” Khan says. “Marcus wanted a ship built solely for combat, something not designed for exploratory missions. But there are areas that could be redone, relatively easily.”

“And you’ve already got plans for those,” Jake says, not asking.

“I do,” Khan says, pleased at Jake’s perception. “I estimate it would take perhaps four months to make the changes and have the ship be more hospitable for a hundred crew.”

“Four months isn’t so bad,” Jake says. “We’ll figure out how to talk Starfleet into it.”

“Or bribe them into it,” Jill says.

“Whatever works,” Jake says, shrugging. “I mean, we’re not on a deadline here, are we? Other than the ops, I mean. But once we get John’s people back, or eight of them at least, it’s just a matter of gathering information and determining how best to use it. Am I right?”

“You are,” Khan says. He scratches the back of Jill’s neck again and she hides a shiver, but doesn’t push his hand away.

“So, here’s a question,” Andy says. “If we’re not on a time crunch, what’s to prevent us from just getting more people out until we’ve got them all?”

“We are not on a deadline,” Khan says. “But we do have a sense of urgency. If we wait too long, Marcus may end up instigating the war he wants, and if that happens...” He trails off, not needing to finish the sentence.

“We have to take him down before he gets us into war with the Klingons,” Jake says grimly.

“We do,” Khan says. He tugs the band out of Jill’s hair, running his fingers through the curls and scratching her scalp. She leans into his touch for a moment, but gives him a mildly annoyed look. Khan smiles slightly, but doesn’t stop what he’s doing.

“Follow up question, then,” Andy says. “Who among Starfleet brass are likely to go along with Marcus’s intent for war?”

Khan shakes his head. “I don’t know the power structure enough. Marcus is the only one I have dealt with.”

Jill chews her lip, tugging a curl. “Not Pike,” she says. “Definitely not him. Cartwright...I’m not
sure. Barnett--Jake, your thoughts?"

Jake grimaces. “Barnett’s likely,” he says. “He wouldn’t necessarily go searching for the war, but he’d be right there to demand we fight fire with fire. Cartwright...yeah, I’m not sure about her either.” He looks up, thinking. “My best estimate is that it’d be a quarter for the war, maybe forty percent against, and the rest undecided and it would depend on the circumstances under which we got into it.”

“And we’d have to consider public opinion and officer morale and all kinds of crap,” Jill says. She doesn’t appear to notice she’s doing it, but she tilts her head back into Khan’s hand, relaxing a little when he rubs the back of her neck. “And since I am not an admiral nor do I really want to be, I suggest we find a way to defuse the potential war before we have to wrangle it.”

“No argument here,” Jake says. “Harrison, do you speak Klingon?”

“I do,” Khan says. “Marcus insisted I study it.”

“No knowledge is ever useless,” Andy says. He takes the clip out of his hair and shakes it to settle it. “Okay, so. Short term plans. Jill and I are heading back tomorrow, me to New York and her to San Francisco. Somewhere between ten days and two weeks after that, she moves here for the foreseeable future and Magpie and I come back to settle into our place for the foreseeable future. The Saturday after we come back to London, we run the first op, with a repeat performance Sunday night if Saturday goes as planned. After that...we’ll take it from there.”

“That about sums it up,” Jill agrees. “When are you meeting Trevor to get the access stuff to the house and check it out?”

“I’ll get together with him when I get back to New York, and once I have the stuff I’ll probably duck back over to London for a day to make sure it checks out and see what I need to do about the security system,” Andy says. “I figure...maybe a week from now for that.”

“Works for me,” Jill says. She leans her head back against Khan’s hip, sighing a little when he runs his fingers up and down her throat. “Can it maybe be lunchtime now? Or whatever meal it’s time for?”

“Somewhere between lunch and dinner at this point,” Andy says. “And yes, it can. Take-away or going out? Your kitchen has no real food in it.”

“I have no preference,” Jill says. “Do you?” She looks at Khan.

He shakes his head. “There are multiple options for either,” he says.

“Are any of them sushi?” Andy asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “About half a kilometer from here. It has hot food as well.”

“Next question, is the sushi any good?” Andy asks, laughing.

“I thought so,” Khan says. “Would you like to go there?”

“I would,” Andy says. “You two?”
“I like sushi,” Jill says. “Jake?”

“Sure,” Jake says with a shrug.

“Let me grab my shoes and my purse and we can head out,” Jill says. She pushes up from the couch and heads to the bedroom. Khan follows her, closing the bedroom door behind them. Jill looks at him curiously. “I just need to--”

He doesn’t let her finish before he presses her against the wall, leaning down to kiss her hard, one hand working under her shirt to tease her nipple. Jill gasps into his mouth and her hands come up to grasp his shoulders; he pinches her and she whimpers, arching into his touch. “We--we don’t have time for--” she tries when he pulls back from her mouth.

“No,” Khan agrees, smiling. “No, we do not.” It doesn’t stop him from pressing a thigh between her legs, pushing up enough that she shudders and grinds down against him. “How easily could I make you come like this, pyara?” he asks softly, biting her throat not quite hard enough to mark. “What would it take?”

“Not much,” Jill says shakily, shuddering. “Not after before, and--”

“I thought as much,” Khan says, rolling her nipple between his thumb and index finger. She swallows a moan, moving against him, breath coming harder and faster in her throat.

He brings her almost to orgasm--and steps back, breaking all contact between them. Jill stumbles, clearly dazed, cheeks flushed and pupils dilated. “Get your things, milaya moya,” he says softly. “We wouldn’t want to keep your friends waiting.”

Jill swallows, takes a breath, thunks her head against the wall. “I am so very, very pissed at you right now,” she says but she clearly doesn’t mean it. “God, that wasn’t fair.”

“You should know by now that I don’t play fair,” Khan says simply.

“The payoff had so better be worth this,” she mutters. It takes her a good fifteen seconds before she manages to move, pulling on boots and grabbing her purse.

“Don’t sulk,” Khan tells her when she glares at him. “I told you, milaya moya. Be good for me, and I promise it will be worth it.”

Jill takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “You’re buying dinner,” she says.

“All right,” Khan says, amused. He brushes his fingers down her cheek and opens the door.

Neither Jake nor Andy comment when the two of them come back into the living room, and the four of them head out. While the restaurant is fairly empty due to the hour, none of them are willing to take a chance on casual or accidental eavesdroppers. As a result, conversation over the meal takes a very mundane tone; stories about Jake’s brothers, two or three about Jill’s missions, and a surprisingly engaging discussion about improvements with comm-links and PADDs.

Khan takes the bill when it arrives, even as Jake and Andy reach for their wallets. “John’s paying,” Jill says, giving him a mildly annoyed look. “It’s the least he can do.”

“Uh,” Jake says. “I think I don’t want to know why.”

“Oh, get your mind out of the gutter,” Jill says, making a face at him.
“I’d like to, believe me,” Jake says. “But the evidence points to a conclusion I don’t want to know about.”

“Then stop thinking about it,” Jill says sweetly.

“She has a point,” Andy says, laughing. “Although so do you.”

“Moving on,” Jill says firmly. “Andy, what was it you were saying about the flexible PADD design?”

Andy takes the hint and answers at length. Khan pays the bill and the four of them leave. “I think this is my cue to leave you guys,” Jake says once they’re on the sidewalk. “I need to make a couple calls and find out when I can hook up with Ethan about the gym space. So I’ll say goodbye now since you’ll probably head back to San Francisco before I’d see you tomorrow.”

“Probably, yeah,” Jill says. She leans up to hug Jake; he hugs back hard, tugging a curl when he steps back. “Keep in touch, okay?”

“I always do,” Jake says. “And I’ll call you tomorrow to figure out when we can meet about the gym.”

Khan nods. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” Jake says. “Catch you guys later.” He tugs Jill’s hair again and heads off down the street.

“I’m crashing in your flat tonight,” Andy says to Khan. “I figured you wouldn’t be using it.”

“I am not, no,” Khan says.

“Have you replaced the mattress yet?” Jill asks.

“I have,” Andy says. “It’s much better now and I think you will be fine with it if you ever end up using it.”

“What I may or may not,” Jill says. “We’ll see, I guess.”

As they head down the street, Khan slips a hand under Jill’s hair, scratching the back of her neck. She jumps a little and glares at him, but doesn’t push his hand away; he smiles, dragging a nail up the side of her throat, away from Andy and mostly hidden by her hair.

Jill takes a breath, pointedly ignoring him or at least doing her best to give that impression. “Andy, what time do you want to head back tomorrow?” she asks.

“Whenever I wake up,” Andy says. “Which will probably be around noon local time. We’ll need to beam to New York together and then I can either beam you to San Francisco or you can grab a shuttle.”

“If we beam to New York I have to see Eema,” Jill says. “So by the time that’s done I’ll need you to beam me over to San Francisco.”

“I can do that,” Andy says. “What are you going to tell her about everything?”

“I’m not sure,” Jill says. “I can’t lie to her, because she’d know immediately, but I don’t want to tell her anything that might get her in trouble later. So I have a feeling it’ll end up being similar to Jake telling her about his missions. A lot of ‘I can’t tell you that, please don’t ask’. She won’t like
it, but she won’t ask either.”

Khan feels mildly relieved by that. He trusts Jill not to reveal his secrets, but he doesn’t want her caught between a rock and a hard place, especially not by someone she considers a parental figure.

“Smart woman,” Andy says. “Sometimes you really don’t want to know.”

“Oh, she wants to know,” Jill says. “Eema wants to know everything. But she’s intelligent enough to understand when there are things she shouldn’t know or can’t know, so she doesn’t ask. She and Jake hashed that out when he graduated from the Academy, and although Samuel doesn’t do the same stuff Jake does there are still times he can’t talk about it either.” She glances up at Khan again. “Samuel’s also Starfleet, but based on-planet, he does security work mostly. But he’s based in New York, so he wouldn’t be able to help us here and it’s probably better that way.”

Khan nods, brushing his fingers over Jill’s throat. “It sounds it, yes,” he says.

“Especially since Samuel’s married and has two kids,” Jill says, shivering a little. “I don’t want to get him into anything that could get them into trouble, and Marcus is enough of a bastard that he’d do it.”

“Yes,” Khan agrees. To be fair, were he in Marcus’s place he might think similarly. Might--Khan has never liked using children as pawns or hostages.

Andy sighs. “That’s so depressing.”

“He might not,” Jill says. “I mean, maybe he has lines he won’t cross. There could be some redeeming factor to him.”

“He has a daughter,” Khan says. “A scientist.”

“Have you met her?” Andy asks.

“I have not,” Khan says. “I haven’t had a reason or any interest.” He did consider it at one point, wondering if he could use her, but never seriously enough for him to do anything about it.

“We might want to research her anyway,” Jill says. “Just to see if we need to worry about her or not.”

Khan nods. “We should, yes. I have a basic file on her, but never went into much detail.”

“Clearly she wasn’t that attractive or that intelligent,” Jill says, laughing.

“Or that useful,” Andy says. “So, this is kind of odd, but if you’re my uncle and Jill’s my sister, how the hell does that work?”

“It doesn’t,” Jill says, making a face at Andy. “Because he’s not my uncle and I’m not your aunt, and anyway we’re not married or going to be so it doesn’t matter.”

Once again, Khan wonders how he is going to convince Jill that he will not leave, that even after he has his family back he will not let go of her. He still doesn’t know, but his hand tightens on Jill’s shoulder anyway.

“I disagree,” Andy says, making a face at Jill.

“With which part?” Jill asks.
“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Andy grins.

“Oh, don’t be a brat,” Jill grumbles, swatting Andy’s arm. “I am so done with that right now.”

Andy laughs and looks at Khan. “I don’t want to know,” he says. “Well, I do but I don’t.”

Khan smiles a little. “You don’t,” he says.

“Really,” Jill says. “You really don’t.” She glares at Khan; he slips his hand around the back of her neck and tightens his hold.

“I told you,” he murmurs in Russian. “Don’t sulk, milaya moya. Just be good for me.”

Jill sighs and slumps a little. “I did tell you I was out of practice with this,” she says in the same language. “I’m not good at it.”

“You are,” Khan says, letting go of her neck to brush her hair back from her face. “This isn’t a matter of skill. Just trust me.”

“I do,” she says softly, leaning into his hand. “You know that.”

“Yes,” Khan agrees. “I do.”

Jill sighs again, but leans into him as they reach the building. Khan rests a hand between her shoulderblades, brushing her arm with a wingtip. “Call me in the morning or whenever you wake up,” she says to Andy. “We’ll figure it out then.”

“Works,” Andy says. He punches the button for the lift, which for once arrives promptly. “Be good to her, uncle,” he says in Mandarin as they get on. “She needs someone to take care of her.”

“I am,” Khan says simply.

“Good,” Andy says. “Very good.”

“What are you two discussing?” Jill asks, glancing between them.

“You,” Andy says easily.

“Color me surprised,” Jill says. “What is it this time?”

“Nope, not telling you that,” Andy says cheerfully.

“Also color me surprised,” Jill says. She smiles, though, and gives Andy a hard hug before the lift doors open. “See you in the morning.”

“Hai,” Andy says, giving Khan a quick hug before he gets off the lift.

Jill lets them into her flat, locking the door and activating the privacy seal once they’re both inside. “I’m still annoyed with you,” she says, but she smiles a little ruefully when she says it. “It’s damned hard to focus on things like getting your family out of their cryotubes when you’re teasing me like this.”

“Difficult but not impossible,” Khan says. He holds out a hand. “Come here.”

Jill walks over to him slowly, taking his hand. “This...I don’t know how to feel about this,” she admits. “I’m good at scenes, I’m good at playing, but...this feels different, and I don’t know what
you want or what the boundaries are.”

“I want you to relax,” Khan says, brushing her hair back with his free hand. “I want you to let me have control, let me take care of you.”

“You want more than a scene,” Jill says softly. “Don’t you?”

“I do,” Khan says honestly. “But we do not have to negotiate it all tonight.”

“Which is good, because I don’t think I could,” Jill says, smiling a little. “I just...” She bites her lip, looking down. “I don’t want to disappoint you,” she says, almost mumbling.

“You couldn’t,” Khan says, curling his fingers under her chin and tipping her face up.

“I could,” Jill says, color in her cheeks.

“No,” Khan says, kissing her forehead. “Not if you trust me. I would not push you past your limits, pyara. You know that.”

“I know,” Jill says, “And I do trust you. You know I do.”

“I do,” Khan says. “Just relax, Jill. You are safe with me, I promise. I will take care of you. Just relax and trust me.”

He keeps his voice quiet, soothing, sliding his hand down her throat to hold the back of her neck. She shivers a little, licking her lips; Khan tightens his grip and she sighs, relaxing into it. “You were so good for me today,” he says softly. “Just as I thought you would be.”

Jill blushes again, looking down. “I--” She stops, bites her lip. “Thank you.”

Khan files that away for later; she doesn’t know how to react to praise, and he intends to find out what happened there. But not now, not tonight. Instead, he leans down to kiss her, and when she responds and links her hands behind his neck he picks her up, hands on her thighs to support her. She laughs into the kiss and wraps her legs around his waist, holding on tight.

He carries her over to the bed, laying her down on it and settling on top of her. Jill sighs, scratching her nails over his scalp and down the back of his neck. “I like the way you feel on top of me,” she murmurs, dropping her head back when he nudges her.

“Why?” Khan murmurs back, biting her jaw, her throat.

“You feel...” Jill’s breath catches. “It’s--” She stops again, not looking at him.

“Tell me,” Khan says, quiet but intent. “Tell me what it is.”

“Overwhelming,” Jill says softly, still not looking at him. “I told you, I’d let you do almost anything with me, and...sometimes it just feels too much. Like I can’t even breathe, I want you so much, I want anything you’ll give me.” She bites her lip, color rising in her cheeks. “You could...you could really hurt me,” she says after a moment. “And I try not to think about that, but...sometimes I can’t push it back.”

She expects him to hurt her, Khan thinks but doesn’t say. She expects him to leave. And there’s nothing he can say to convince her otherwise, not now. That twists uneasily in his stomach, frustration and hurt mixed; he pushes it down and brushes a kiss over Jill’s throat instead. “I would not,” he says quietly.
“I didn’t say you’d do it on purpose,” Jill says, shivering when he bites her again. “Just...you could.”

“I could,” Khan agrees. He kisses her lightly. “But I would not, not if I had any choice in the matter.”

She closes her eyes, scratching her nails over the back of his neck. “Moving on,” she says. “You promised me you’d make it up to me for driving me crazy all day.”

“Did I?” Khan asks, nuzzling her collarbone.

“You did,” Jill says, letting go of him when he moves to pull her shirt off. “And if you don’t I’m going to be very, very cranky with you.”

Khan laughs and leans down to kiss her. He slides his hands up her sides and under her back, lifting her slightly to unhook her bra. “I wish you had packed some of your toys,” he says as she tosses her bra on the floor and he slides his hands over her breasts. “Another time.”

“Yes,” Jill says, arching into his touch. “First thing I’ll pack when I go back to San Francisco.”

“Good,” he murmurs, rolling her nipples between thumb and forefinger. Jill whimpers and bites her lip, swallowing a cry when he pinches. “Let me hear you,” he tells her. “I don’t want you to hold anything back from me.”

“I don’t think I could even if I tried,” Jill whispers.

Khan smiles at that, shifting back so he can lean down and take one of her nipples into his mouth. Jill shivers, tangling her hands in his hair, fingers flexing when he bites gently. “Tell me what you want,” she says huskily. “Please.”

“I want you,” Khan says, raising his head. “I want to take you apart.” He kisses the valley between her breasts, bites her collarbone. “I want to watch you come around my hand until you think you can’t anymore, and then I want to fuck you, feel you hot and wet and tight around me and make you come again, when it almost hurts and you don’t think you can take anything else.” He crawls up her body, kisses her lightly. “I want everything,” he says against her lips. “And I will have it from you.”

Jill’s breath catches in her throat; she swallows, closing her eyes. “Please,” she manages, swallowing again.

“Do you have anything with you I might bind you with?” Khan asks, smoothing a curl back from her face.

She shivers. “I...I think I packed the cuffs,” she says slowly. “In my suitcase. If I didn’t, I probably have a scarf or two in there.”

Khan kisses her again and brushes his fingers over her cheek before he gets up. He does find the box of cuffs in Jill’s suitcase, along with a soft black scarf, and brings them both over to the bed. Jill licks her lips when she sees them, color spreading down her throat to her collarbone. She gives Khan her hands, twisting her wrists to make sure the cuffs fit, and relaxes as best she can when he positions her the way he wants her, arms stretched over her head and spread wide, enough that she’ll feel the stretch but not enough to hurt. He locks the cuffs and Jill closes her eyes, breathing out slowly.

“Good,” he murmurs, stroking her arm, her chest. “Very good.” He folds the scarf and settles it
over her eyes, tying it with a flat knot so it won’t be uncomfortable. “Can you see anything?” he asks, laying her head back against the pillow.

“No,” Jill says after a moment. “Maybe a tiny bit of light, but that’s it.”

Easy enough to fix. Khan trails his fingers over her stomach and moves to flip the light switch. Enough ambient light comes in through the blinds that he can still see without a problem, but he doesn’t need much light for that.

He keeps in contact with Jill as he moves back around the bed, leaning down to kiss her before he unbuttons her jeans. She lifts her hips without him telling her to as he takes them off, and shivers when his fingers stroke over sensitive skin as he removes her panties. She’s already wet for him, spreading her legs as soon as the clothes hit the floor. “Good girl,” Khan murmurs, sliding his hand up her stomach to cup her breast, rubbing her nipple.

He’ll have to remember to tell her to pack clamps, he thinks, tugging on her nipple. He knows she has multiple pairs, and from the way she responds to this, it’s clearly something she enjoys. She arches up when he pinches her, making a soft moan. “Could I make you come like this?” Khan asks, resting a knee on the edge of the bed. “Would this be enough for you?”

“I don’t--I don’t know,” Jill says, out of breath. “I...I don’t think so but with you, I never know.”

Khan smiles slightly and releases her nipple, scratching down her stomach. “I would like to find out,” he says, raking his nails over her inner thigh. “But not tonight.”

“Anything you want,” Jill says around a moan.

“What if I wanted to leave you like this?” Khan asks, cupping her sex in his hand. “What if I chose to tease you, to leave you on the edge of coming and nothing more?”

“You wouldn’t,” she says, a hint of desperation in her voice. “You wouldn’t, you said you wouldn’t. Please--”

“I did say I would not,” Khan agrees, slipping a finger between her labia, pressing it against her clit. “But what if I did? You’ve already said anything I wanted. What would you offer me to come? What would you promise me so that I would give you release?”

“Anything,” Jill pleads. “Anything at all.”

“One day,” Khan says, pressing a second finger hard against her clit, making small, fast circles. “I want one day from you. Twenty-four hours, anything I want and full access to your toy chest.”

“Yes,” Jill says--more of a whimper, really. “Yes. Please--”

“Come for me, pyara,” Khan says, rubbing her clit hard and fast, watching her shudder and squirm against his hand. “Come for me.”

It takes seconds before she cries out, hips bucking up. Khan gentles his touch but doesn’t pull his hand away until Jill falls back against the bed, breathing hard. “Beautiful,” he murmurs, crawling over her and leaning down to kiss her.

“Thank you,” Jill says softly. She’s not responding to the compliment.

Khan cups her cheek in his hand, brushes his thumb over her cheekbone. “Mine,” he says, low and firm.
“Yeah,” she whispers, breath hitching when he slides his hand down to close around her throat. He doesn’t hold her tightly enough to restrict her airflow, just enough to make a point.

“I want everything,” he says, kissing the corner of her mouth. “I want everything you are, everything you might be, everything you want. And you’ll give it to me, won’t you?”

It takes Jill three tries to get out one word. “Yes,” she manages finally. “I...yes.”

He kisses her, claiming her mouth and drinking in her whimpers, her broken moans. “I could leave you like this,” he says against her lips, pressing his knee between her legs. “Bound and helpless and wanting. Couldn’t I?”

“Please,” Jill says, swallowing. “Please, don’t--”

“I won’t,” Khan promises her. “But I could.”

She shudders all over. “You could,” she whispers.

He doesn’t. He pushes her right up to the edge of her limits, until she begs him to stop, her voice broken and her body slick with sweat under his. When he unlocks the cuffs, she burrows into his arms, clinging to him and crying softly.

Khan holds her, presses kisses to her hair, murmurs things she doesn’t understand. “I have you,” he says in Russian, stroking her hair and her back. “I have you. Just relax.”

Jill mumbles something Khan doesn’t quite understand but doesn’t ask her to repeat. She sighs, relaxing against him, and a few moments later she’s fallen asleep, the cuffs still around her wrists and the scarf over her eyes. Khan smiles and leaves the cuffs on but gently removes the scarf; Jill doesn’t stir.

After a while, he gets up to wash up and make himself a cup of tea, but when he comes back to the bedroom to check on her, he finds her curled into a ball in the center of the mattress, whimpering in her sleep. Khan immediately sets down the mug and moves to touch her, one hand on the back of her neck and one around her wrist. “Jill, wake up,” he says in Russian. “You’re safe here.”

She whimpers again, sounding anguished; Khan grits his teeth and squeezes her wrist hard. “Wake up,” he says firmly; Jill shudders and sucks in a breath and bolts upright, breathing hard.

“Easy,” Khan says, not quite letting go of her. “Just breathe.”

Jill nods, taking a deliberate breath and letting it out slowly. Again, and again, and after a minute she nods again before unbolting the cuffs around her wrists. “I’m okay,” she says, a little hoarse but steady. “It wasn’t...it wasn’t that bad.”

“What do you want to talk about it?” Khan asks.

“No, not really,” Jill says. “I want a shower, though.”

“Do you want company?” Khan asks.

She hesitates, then shakes her head. “Not right now, if that’s okay.”

“Whatever you need,” Khan says.

Jill smiles a little and leans over to kiss his cheek. “If you could make me a cup of tea while I’m in the shower, that would be wonderful,” she says. “Please?”
“Of course,” Khan says, brushing a couple curls back from her face.

“That thank you.” Jill leans into him for a moment before she gets up to go shower. Khan watches her until the bathroom door closes, then gets up to go make tea.

He still doesn’t know what he’s going to do with her, how he’s going to convince her he will not just leave. He wonders if Cat will be able to, or Konstantin. Then he thinks that in two weeks he may see them again, and his chest tightens almost painfully.

Some of his siblings he may not see again, and although any death hurts, there are some he can bear more easily than others. But Ekaterina, Konstantin...to lose them would be to lose too much of his soul. He loves them more than almost anyone or anything in the universe and without them...

Khan takes a breath and focuses on making tea, on rummaging through Jill’s cabinets to find a box of biscuits. He will have them back. He will have them alive and whole and returned to him.

Nothing else is possible.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

I am starting to feel as though we are all chess pieces and someone is using us in a game.

Chapter Notes

First off: for those who care, surgery went exceedingly well and I am now probably doing way more than I should be but my arm doesn't hurt! (I can't drive yet. I get the clearance for that on Wednesday, I hope.)

Second off: I think I have figured out how to end this story, but it's either the best idea I've had or the worst and honestly? I can't tell. I suppose we'll see when we get there. You guys have stuck around so far, so I'm hoping I can somehow pull this off. Wish me luck?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the morning, Khan says goodbye to Jill before he leaves to deal with Marcus and his official projects. She’s still half-asleep and snuggles into him for a long moment, warm and soft and content; Khan stays three minutes later than he intended simply because he does not want to get up and let go of her.

But he does in the end, and when he goes down to his own flat he finds Andy in a green kimono slumped against the counter holding a large mug. “Morning, uncle,” she says around a yawn, shoving at her hair. “Water’s still hot if you want tea.”

Khan glances at the chrono, figures he has time, and nods. “Thank you,” he says, going to get a mug and infuser. “Jill was still mostly asleep when I left.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Andy says, rubbing his eyes. “Only reason I’m up is I had to talk to Trevor and his schedule’s so irregular I grab him when I can.”

“Arrangements for the house?” Khan asks, making his tea.

“Yeah,” Andy says. She takes a sip of tea and rolls her head around on her neck; Khan hears a few things crackle and pop. “When I get back to New York, he’ll give me the security codes and cards and I’ll come back here at some point before the official move date to make sure it’s cool and change whatever needs changing. The...” He looks up, remembering. “The Wednesday before the first op, he’s having a crew come in to clean the place, air it out, and stock it with things like linens and towels and groceries. So if there’s anything in particular you or your family will want, let me know and I’ll pass it on to him.”

“I will,” Khan says. “Thank you. What are you building him in exchange for his help?”
“He wants a voice-controlled entertainment system,” Andy says. “They’re actually not that hard to find these days, but he wants some specific things that would make buying one difficult. Plus I do better work than whatever you can find at the store.”

Of that, Khan has no doubt. “What favors did he owe Magpie?” he asks.

“Many,” Andy says. “The big one, though, was he had a regular client for about six months, saw the guy once a week. But the guy started getting...creepy. Enough that Trevor told the client he didn’t want to see him again.”

“I take it that didn’t go well,” Khan says.

“No.” Andy smiles a little and shakes his head. “No, it didn’t, and the guy started stalking him. Problem is, proving stalking is almost impossible in New York, and courtesans are legal but the cops have a pretty strong bias against them, so while he filed a report it got sucked into a bureaucratic black hole. Trevor was getting seriously spooked, so he asked Magpie for help. Magpie hacked the guy and...let’s say she manipulated some facts to make it look like the guy had done some pretty illegal things. She passed on the data anonymously to the cops, who did get involved, and in a surprise to all of us, when the cops started digging they found evidence that he’d committed three murders. So he’s locked up in prison now, for the rest of what will hopefully be a very long miserable time.”

“Were his victims courtesans?” Khan asks.

“All three,” Andy says. “Trevor feels--fairly reasonably--that Magpie saved his life, and he’s not about to forget that. He’s incredibly loyal to his friends, so Magpie could ask him for anything in the universe and he’d find a way to give it to her. And he knows how she and I feel about the street brats, so I explained we had a group of them in London needing somewhere safe and private to stay, and he couldn’t offer to help fast enough.”

Khan nods, taking a sip of tea. “Sometimes I wonder how much coincidence someone can reasonably be expected to believe,” he says reflectively.

“How do you mean?” Andy asks.

“As you said to me the other week, before we went to San Francisco,” Khan says. “How is it possible that out of the billions of people on the planet, the one person who has the ability to help me not only encounters me but offers me that help? For that matter, how is it that I am your generations removed uncle? It strains the limits of credibility, at a minimum. Then consider your experience with a...a spirit that may or may not have been my wife’s. Add in both your and Magpie’s connection to Trevor for housing and Jake’s connection to someone with a private exercise space. This should not be possible. This series of events and connections is so far beyond what any normal person would consider reasonable that I honestly am not sure what to make of it.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” Andy says, smiling. “It is pretty wild when you think about it.”

“I am starting to feel as though we are all chess pieces and someone is using us in a game,” Khan admits.

“The question is who’s playing the opposite side,” Andy says. “And what the stakes are.”

“Questions for which I have no answers,” Khan says.

“Neither do I,” Andy says. She looks up, considering. “If you’re out there, aunt, could you at least tell us the stakes?”
Khan laughs. “I somehow doubt you will get an answer.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you’re right,” Andy says. “But she did like to arrange things, from what you’ve said about her.”

“Like is perhaps an understatement,” Khan says. “She had to arrange things just so. No detail was too small for her, nothing was too insignificant, and she was determined that everything be perfect. Fortunately, she was usually not unreasonable if things did not go as she planned. She was focused, but not to the point of bad manners or a terrible attitude.”

“Which is a very good thing,” Andy says.

“Yes,” Khan agrees. “She prided herself on her etiquette.”

“Manners are important,” Andy says with a laugh. “Which is why I invited myself into your flat and replaced your bed without asking you if I could.”

“Clearly,” Khan says, smiling a bit. “But manners are different for family.”

Andy’s face softens at that and he smiles. “They are,” he says. “Do you need to get going?”

“Yes,” Khan says, glancing at the chrono. “I will see you when you return to London.”

“If not before, but yes,” Andy says. She sets down her mug and moves to give him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Be well, uncle.”

“And you,” Khan says, touching Andy’s cheek before he moves to change into clean clothes and head out.

His day passes quietly, if perhaps less productively than he would like. But he does accomplish much of what he intended, and he does send a message to Marcus about touching base with him and perhaps heading to the Vengeance for a progress report. Marcus doesn’t respond before Khan leaves for the day, but he has a tendency to make Khan wait for answers. A remarkably petty power play, in Khan’s estimation, but also predictable.

On his way back to his flat, his comm-link chirps. “Harrison,” he says, answering and setting privacy mode.

“Hey, it’s Jake. Are you free?” Jake asks. “I’m heading over to the gym, can you either meet me there or I’ll pick you up?”

“I am,” Khan says. “Where should we meet?”

“Where are you?” Jake asks. Khan tells him, moving out of the way of traffic. “Okay, you’re actually sort of on my way. Give me ten and I’ll come grab you in a cab and we can head over there.”

Khan gets off the link and moves to the corner, idly people-watching while he waits for Jake. He sees a few things of passing interest, but nothing more than that, nor did he expect to. Eight minutes after he hung up a black cab pulls up to the corner and Jake gets out, waving for Khan to come over. He gets into the cab and the driver pulls back into traffic.

“Sorry for the short notice,” Jake says, turning to look at him. “We were playing contact tag all day long and finally got hold of each other about half an hour ago. Lew’s heading out of town tomorrow, so this was our only shot. It’ll take us a while to get there from here, though.”
“It’s fine,” Khan says. “Where is he going?”

“Off-planet somewhere,” Jake says. “He’s got a business trip for something. I don’t know exactly what, but he has his fingers in a bunch of pies. Jill head back this morning?”

“At some point, yes,” Khan says. “She and Andy did. I haven’t heard from either of them, though.”

“Not surprising,” Jake says. He studies Khan for a moment. “So, uh,” he says. “This is really awkward, but...” He takes a breath. “She’s crazy about you,” he says. “And I’ve...I’ve seen her get hurt before. She’s trying to convince herself she won’t when this is over and you leave, but at the same time she believes you are leaving. So tell me--what’s going to happen?”

“She is mine,” Khan states. “And I am not leaving her. I know she does not believe me, but she will. I have time.”

“You say you’re not, but she’s still Starfleet, and it means a lot to her,” Jake says. “I really doubt you and your family will sign on, so what happens then?”

“It means a great deal to her but I think this is causing her to doubt its motives,” Khan says. “Leaving Starfleet is a decision I cannot nor will make for her. But no, my family will not be serving. It has nothing to offer us that we would want.”

“It’s...it’s not all bad,” Jake says carefully. “I’ve been in as long as Jill, and I’m not as idealistic about it as she is, but I still believe it does a lot of good, that it’s necessary. I’m kind of cynical about a lot of it really, given what I do, but I wouldn’t still be in it if I thought it was completely corrupt.”

“No, I did not think you would,” Khan says. “But are you reconsidering it?”

“Maybe,” Jake admits. “I know more than Jill what Starfleet’s capable of, but some of what we’ve learned disturbs me. I think...I think it’ll depend on what happens when we expose this, how they react.” He rubs a hand over his stubble. “She’s going to kill me if she finds out we had this conversation, but...I’m her big brother, and I look out for her. And I want to know you’re not going to break her heart.”

“I am not,” Khan says simply. “I give you my word.”

That seems to appease Jake and he nods, relaxing a bit. “All right. I’m not--for the record, I’m not trying to imply that I think you would. It’s just...she’s my sister.”

“I understand,” Khan says. “Believe me, I know how much family means.”

“Given what we’re doing, I’d think so,” Jake says, laughing.

“You have two brothers, am I correct?” Khan asks.

“I do,” Jake says. “The dorks. Samuel’s three years younger than me, married with a daughter and a son. David’s two years behind Samuel, also married with a daughter. They’re cute kids.”

“Are you close to them?” Khan asks.

Jake shrugs. “Reasonably, I guess. I talk to them a couple times a week, and when I’m on leave I try to base out of New York so I can see them and the kids and my parents. We did a family trip last year to Colorado, spent time in the mountains, that was fun. They’re not necessarily my best friends, but they’re my brothers, and if push came to shove I’d do whatever I had to for them. I’ve
also got a bunch of first cousins, and some of those have kids, too although they’re all younger than me so not all of them have settled down yet. Both my mom’s side and my dad’s side are big on family, especially my mom’s side. My mom’s rule is that people come and go but family is forever, and family are the people who take you in no matter what.”

“It is a good rule,” Khan says.

“My mom’s smart,” Jake says. “Kind of terrifying sometimes, but smart. And family’s everything to her, but she’s also very clear that blood doesn’t define family.” He grins a little. “Stick around long enough, you’ll meet her.”

Not until after Marcus has been dealt with, Khan thinks but does not say. “Perhaps,” he says instead.

“If you don’t plan on breaking up with Jill and you stay on Earth or within the Federation, it’ll happen,” Jake says. “Hell, even if you leave the Federation she’ll meet you somehow. She’ll make it happen, or she’ll make me make it happen.”

“I see,” Khan says, amused. “What does or did she do?”

“She started as a kindergarten teacher,” Jake says. “But when she got pregnant with Samuel she decided she wanted something that let her be home more, so she started her own business. She knits and crochets and does some weaving and some needlepoint, so she sells handmade goods, blankets and scarves and all sorts of things. All her kids and grandkids and nieces and nephews have at least one blanket she made, and some other stuff. My Aunt Linda, her youngest brother’s wife, went into business with her when she and Michael got married. Aunt Linda quilts, which Eema doesn’t.”

“And your father?” Khan asks.

“He teaches economics at the local community college,” Jake says. “He’s been there decades now, but he likes what he does. He’s gotten offers elsewhere, but he’s comfortable and he says where he teaches now he can work with students who really need his help.” Jake smiles a bit. “He’s just--he’s a good man. So not like me, but I admire the hell out of him.”

“Why do you say he is not like you?” Khan asks.

“Because Abba always tries to see the best in everyone,” Jake says. “Because if you give him a scenario his first answer is always going to be to help whoever needs it most. He’ll give away the last credits in his wallet if he thinks someone needs them. He’s not--he’s not naive, but he believes that people are inherently good, some just don’t realize it.”

Jake laughs. “And I’m completely not like that. I’m cynical and jaded and I don’t really think everyone’s inherently good. Some people, yeah, but I don’t think humanity’s guiding trait is altruism. It’s self-interest.”

“But you do help,” Khan says. “You agreed to help Jill before you even knew the full details of the situation. Even now, you know the risks and are still assisting.”

“Because she’s my sister,” Jake says. “And I’ll do anything for family.”

“That does not make you a bad person,” Khan says. “It simply means your priorities are different than your father’s.” He smiles a little. “I am not a good person, Jake, and I admit that. But you are not me, and I think you are a better man than you believe.”
“Why do you think you’re not a good person?” Jake asks. “From what I’ve seen of you, you’re devoted to your family, and you’re not so arrogant to think you don’t have anything to learn from this century. You’re grounded enough to know there are things you don’t know, and you want to learn what they are.”

“But I would do anything for them,” Khan says. “And I mean anything. I have almost no lines I would not cross were I to need to protect them. I do not want to learn for intellectual curiosity, I want to learn because knowledge is power.”

“I still don’t think that makes you a bad person,” Jake says. “I think it makes you someone aware of his own motivations, which is more than I can say for most people. Would you abuse a child, a helpless person?”

“No,” Khan says.

“So there are some lines you wouldn’t cross,” Jake says. “Would you rape someone?”

“I see where you are going,” Khan says.

“I wasn’t trying to hide it,” Jake says. “Would you?”

“No,” Khan says.

“So, here’s the thing,” Jake says, shifting a bit in his seat. “Jill offered you her help freely, with no thought for what it might cost her, because that’s how she works. She plunges into things without thinking about the consequences or the implications and she doesn’t ask for anything in return because she doesn’t like to use people. You and me, we wouldn’t do that. We might offer help, but we wouldn’t do it without all the information available and without any kind of plan, and we’d make damn sure we had a way out if we needed one. We might not make payback part of the conditions for offering our help but we’d find a way to make sure the person needing our help knew how much he owed us and that we would call that in at some point.”

“I don’t disagree,” Khan says.

“Good,” Jake says. “This--I was going to say this doesn’t make Jill a better person than us but let’s face it, she’s a better person than we are. Always has been, always will be. But it doesn’t make us bad people. It just means we’re more motivated by self-interest. But selfishness isn’t inherently bad either.”

“It isn’t,” Khan admits. “And...you are right about Jill.”

“I’ve known her a long time,” Jake says. “She’s one of the best people I’ve ever known. She’s also one of the most fucked up.”

Khan has to laugh. “Why do you say that?”

“Man, have you met her?” Jake laughs as well. “Neurotic doesn’t even begin to cover it. Neither does insecure. You look at her on the surface and you see a bright Starfleet commander, professional when she has to be but not uptight at all, or rule-bound. Then you get to know her a bit better and realize that she’s...that the outer layer covers a lot of damage and weak spots, and that she has more triggers than a rack of phasers. A lot of them have solid reasons for existing, I’m not saying she doesn’t have any cause for some of this, but she’s...” Jake shrugs. “She’s damaged, and she needs someone who will be good to her, who will take care of her and help her get stronger, become more whole.”
“I will,” Khan says quietly.

“I think I believe you,” Jake says. “I want to believe you.”

“Why would you not?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know you that well, and I don’t know all of what you’re hiding,” Jake says. “So I don’t know if something’s going to come up that will force you to make a decision that might hurt her. I can’t predict the future, I don’t know if something might happen that would tear you two apart. What happens if your siblings don’t like her?”

“They will,” Khan says matter-of-factly.

“Are you certain? You have a lot of them,” Jake says. “Are you absolutely certain all of them will accept her?”

“My family trusts my judgment,” Khan says. “When they learn what she did, what she offered to save them, they will take her in as one of us.”

Jake nods. “Okay, point.” He glances out the window. “Almost there,” he says, looking back at Khan. “I just...I don’t want her hurt.”

“No,” Khan says. “Neither do I.” He considers for a moment and decides to ask. “How would you suggest I convince her that I am not leaving?”

“Don’t leave,” Jake says wryly. “It’s not--she’s never going to believe you until it happens, and even then she might not believe you. Eventually she will. She’s intelligent, and I think it’ll sink in at some point. I just don’t know when.”

The cab slows to a stop and Jake swipes a card to pay the driver and leave a tip. He and Khan get out of the cab and it drives off. Khan looks around, taking in the area, a mix of commercial and residential from the looks of it. Relatively quiet, although the hour might have something to do with it.

“This is it,” Jake says, pointing at a two-story building, combination of older and newer materials. Several windows face the street without visible shades but since Khan sees nothing on the other side he presumes they are treated. A ramp leads to the front door, rather than stairs; the two of them take it and Jake hits the buzzer next to the door.

“Yeah,” a man says, answering.


“One sec.” The connection drops; a few moments later the heavy door swings open. Khan takes a moment to study the man on the other side. Not overly tall, thinning brown hair, a bit stocky; he wears jeans and a plain blue t-shirt. “Hey,” he says, stepping aside to let them enter. “Welcome, and--okay, that’s not something you see every day.” He studies Khan’s wings, clearly fascinated.

“And he’s not here to be studied,” Jake says. “John, this is my friend Lew Kingston. Lew, this is John.”

“Hey,” Lew says, extending a hand. “Sorry about the staring. Just--well, I’ve never seen that before.”

“It’s fine,” Khan says, shaking hands, mildly surprised by the calluses and firm grip. “It happens.”
“Yeah, I’m sure,” Lew says. “Okay, so. You two want the full tour?”

“Yeah, we do,” Jake says.

“Sure, no problem.” Lew closes the door and punches in a code on the keypad next to it. “We’ve got two floors and the basement,” he says. “Let’s start on the top floor. We do have a lift, but stairs are easier.”

“I think we can handle the stairs,” Jake says, grinning.

“I sure hope so,” Lew says, grinning back.

The tour does not take long; Khan does not know much about exercise equipment in this century but Jake appears knowledgeable enough, asking Lew questions about brands and specifics, along with work done on the building itself. Mostly what Khan cares about are the three large multi-purpose rooms on the ground floor, designed for sparring or gymnastics or anything else. Lew explains the dividers between the rooms can come down, which Khan appreciates. It will make an acceptable sparring space, and for all he knows, his family will want to use some of the equipment on the top floor.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Lew says when they get back to the front desk. “I’m already cutting you a deal, Jake, you know that. I’m holding off on opening to the public for however long you and your friends need it, and that’s costing me a pretty penny. But you asked, and I owe you, so in honor of that, I’m only going to charge you a token price per month.” He names it, and Jake pretends to choke.

“You’re joking,” Jake says, staggering back a step. “A token? That’s more like asking me to pay for Big Ben. Do you think I’m made of money?”

“I don’t know what you’re made of, Jake, I never looked under the hood,” Lew says serenely.

Jake snickers. “Let’s try this instead.” He counters.

Khan stays quiet, watching the negotiation. Both Lew and Jake appear to be enjoying themselves, bantering and bickering while prices go back and forth. They finally reach a deal about thirty percent lower than Lew’s original price, both of them seeming satisfied by it. “Deal,” Jake says, extending a hand.

Lew nods. “Pleasure doing business with you.” They shake. “Let me just go write this up so we can sign it and you can pay me the first month.” He goes behind the desk to its computer and Khan turns to Jake.

“Fair deal?” he murmurs in Russian.

“Oh, yeah,” Jake murmurs back. “Really, his first offer would have been a fair deal, but I don’t pay asking price on anything.”

Khan smiles faintly. “Intelligent of you.”

“We’re not all idiots in Starfleet,” Jake says.

“No,” Khan says. “I never thought you were.”

“Some of us are more intelligent than others, though,” Jake admits after a moment. “What are you working on that Marcus doesn’t know about?”
Khan looks at Lew, absently humming to himself, and shakes his head slightly. “Not here.”

“Fair deal,” Jake says. “I’ve got a safe room, you have time after this?”

“I do,” Khan says, mildly surprising himself.

“Cool.” Jake takes the PADD from Lew and scribbles his name, handing over a credit stick. “First two months on there, plus a little extra for cleaning fees,” he says. “I’ll do the rest by automatic transfer, like we said.”

“Good deal,” Lew says. He takes the PADD back and hands over a slim folder. “Access cards, codes, instructions for the security system, all that stuff. You need anything else, message me.”

“Will do,” Jake says, slipping the folder into his inside jacket pocket. “Catch you later.”

“Nice meeting you, John,” Lew says, shaking hands with him. “Enjoy my place.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

They leave, but Jake doesn’t hail a cab right away. Instead, they walk two blocks east to a busier street, then another block west to a cab stand. Jake gives an address Khan isn’t immediately familiar with, but doesn’t explain in the cab, and Khan doesn’t ask.

When they get out of this cab, Jake looks around, then nods. “Not quite there yet,” he says, heading east again. They walk a block, then Jake hails another cab and gives a different address. The drive takes about ten minutes, and again, neither of them speak during the trip.

They get out of the car and Jake takes him down a side street into an alley that looks old enough to have been there before Khan’s original time. Three buildings down, Jake bounds up the stairs to an old, possibly decrepit building, but the security panel he accesses is clearly modern, and the door opens silently after Jake punches in a code and scans his handprint. “Call me paranoid, but in my line of work they generally are out to get me,” he says, motioning for Khan to follow him into the building.

Khan smiles a little and follows him inside, up one floor to a sparsely furnished flat. Jake pulls off his jacket and tosses it on the bed--made neatly, which surprises Khan a bit--and goes to make a pot of coffee. “Have a seat wherever,” he says. “This room’s safe. No bugs, no wires, no one knows where it is except me and two people on my team. We keep safe houses all over the galaxy, wherever we’ve been we set at least two up. This one we set up about three years ago, but I checked it and it’s still safe.”

“How often do you need them?” Khan asks, choosing to remain standing for the time being.

“Depends on the day, phase of moon, whoever we’ve pissed off,” Jake says, flashing him a grin. “We do all right, though. I’ve been in this line of work since I graduated the Academy, they snapped me up which is fine because this is where I wanted to go. Haven’t lost a team member since I got promoted to leading mine, and that was four years ago. You hungry? I’ve got--let me see what I’ve got.” He leaves the coffee to brew and pokes his head into the fridge. “I have half a roasted chicken and some random roasted vegetables and potatoes to go with it, and I could make some kind of pasta, I’ve got some stuff for that.”

“You cook?” Khan asks, mildly surprised.

“Yeah,” Jake admits, looking a bit sheepish. “Yeah, my mom insisted we all learn how to cook basics and fend for ourselves. I can roast a chicken, bake a loaf of bread, mend a buttonhole and
sew on a button, clean just about anything, and make a bed with hospital corners. I can also kill a person a few dozen ways with no weapons and more depending on what’s at hand, and I don’t have a whole lot of morals about making it take a while.” He turns to face Khan, hands loose at his sides, eyes steady. “I probably couldn’t take you down,” he says. “But I sure as hell could make you work for it. Do I have to?”

“Why would you?” Khan asks, also keeping his body language steady and relaxed. “You have no reason to think I would turn on you, or on Jill.”

“I don’t,” Jake says. “But John Harrison is a false cover that doesn’t go very far and I don’t know anything about who you used to be. So tell me that. Tell me why Marcus revived you, instead of anyone else in your family. Tell me what your long-term goal is, because I know you have at least one, and tell me what you’re working on that he doesn’t know about.”

“And if I don’t?” Khan asks.

“I’m really hoping we don’t have to go that path,” Jake says. “Do we?”

Khan has to respect his attitude, his candor and his willingness to take Khan on if he feels it necessary. Jake’s right, he wouldn’t win, but it would not stop him from trying. He studies Jake for a moment longer, taking in the scruff, the clothes loose enough to hide weapons but not loose enough to entangle him if he has to fight. He has a slender chain around his neck, disappearing under his shirt; Khan wonders what it is.

He deliberately relaxes, taking a chair from the small table and turning it around to straddle it. “No,” he says, folding his arms on the back of it. “No, we do not.”

“Cool, because if you kill me Jill’s going to be pissed,” Jake says, grinning. “And I don’t care where you’re from or what you’re capable of, you do not want to piss her off. So, chicken or pasta, and you take your coffee black?”

“I do,” Khan says, amused by the quicksilver change in Jake’s attitude. “And whatever you want.”

“Eh, chicken’s less trouble and I need to eat it,” Jake says. He pours two mugs of coffee and brings one over to Khan. “Be about ten, tell me what I need to know in the meantime.”

Khan takes a sip of the coffee, not surprised at its strength. “There are incomplete records from my time,” he says. “Many--most--of them were destroyed in the wars. Some by us, some by humans who did not want anyone to be able to recreate what the scientists had done to us. Of what did survive, Marcus studied them, and determined I would be the best candidate for revival. I was the one of the best engineers, the best innovators, and I was ruthless. My brother, Katsuro, was possibly a better engineer but he did not kill unless directly threatened.”

“Right,” Jake says. “Makes sense. Why hasn’t he bothered reviving anyone else in your family?”

“Two of us would undoubtedly revolt on him and take power,” Khan says. “He thought the risk in one person bearable.”

“Clearly it isn’t, since you plan to turn on him,” Jake says. “But he’d never have figured you would get help, especially not from us boring normal people.”

“To be fair, neither did I until Jill collided with me,” Khan says.

“Yeah, she’s good at that,” Jake says, glancing over his shoulder with a smile before he turns back to heating up the chicken and vegetables. “Did she tell you about the Jill Zone?”
“She did,” Khan says. “I am starting to believe in it.”

“You really should,” Jake says. “We can’t quantify it but it’s sure as shit real. What are you working on, what were you working on before this started?”

“Some minor projects with explosives,” Khan says. “Personal weapons I did not bother sharing with Marcus, but I only have a prototype of one and one working model of the other. And…” He pauses, uncertain about whether to share the information, and decides he might as well. “Based on some information I had, and some more Andy asked me to research, I believe I can construct a personal transporter that utilizes transwarp technology to take a person farther than regular beaming, and would be portable enough to be carried in one’s pocket. I have not yet had time to construct the prototype but the theory is solid.”

“Shit,” Jake says, turning to stare at him. “Do you have any idea what kind of a game-changer that could be? How far are we talking?”

“From Earth to Qo’noS,” Khan says.


“Due to some…changes in my plans, I now want it to be able to take two people,” Khan says. “I would also like to be able to mask the signature if desired.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Jake says. “How long do you think it’ll take you to construct?”

“Given access to materials and enough time, perhaps a week,” Khan says. “Less time if we revive my siblings and they can assist. Since we will likely need to have enough to transport all of us, we will need to build multiple models.”

“Yeah, I see that,” Jake says, turning back to the food. “Where did you even get the idea?”

“I wanted to be able to come and go as I pleased, with no restrictions,” Khan says. “It is remarkable what one can theorize given sufficient motivation.”

“Have you told Andy about this yet?” Jake asks.

“No, not yet,” Khan says. “I will. I believe we could collaborate. She…would like that, and I think it would be helpful.”

“What’s up with you and him anyway?” Jake asks. “I mean, might be none of my business but there seems to be something more than the rest of us.”

“Perceptive,” Khan says, not surprised. “If you trace the bloodline back far enough, Andy’s father was my wife’s brother.”

“Huh,” Jake says. “Also, I didn’t know you’d been married. Was she--was she like you?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, she wasn’t. She died, long before we left Earth.”

“I’m sorry,” Jake says. “So, okay. Weapons, untraceable transport that can get you pretty much anywhere in the known galaxy, what the fuck do you need us for? You can probably hack into the security of the building holding your family better than Magpie can, right?”

“Surprisingly, no,” Khan says. “I thought so, but she has programs I have not had time to develop, and she has had more success getting information about it than I had. I learned in my lifetime to
defer to the experts when they knew more than I did, and Magpie and Andy both know more about hardware and software in today’s time than I do, even with what I have learned. My research has been primarily focused around ship design and weaponry.”

“And Jill?” Jake asks quietly, bringing two plates over to the table and going back for silverware. He also gets a bottle of water and two glasses and sets everything on the small table, taking the seat opposite Khan. “Tell me what you need her for.”

“What would you have me say?” Khan asks equally quietly, watching him. “From a logistical standpoint, she is small, she is flexible, she has a past history of stealing. She is ideally suited for breaking into the facility and returning with my family. She has offered me her help, and I am not so spoiled for assistance that I can afford to reject it. She...” He stops, not wanting to continue, to reveal more of himself than he already has done.

“She has faith in you,” Jake says, startling him. “She believes that what you’re doing is right, that your actions are justified, and that if she doesn’t help you, she’ll regret it. I know my sister. She believes in fate, she thinks she was meant to meet you, and she thinks she’s meant to do this. Maybe she’s right, I don’t know, I’m less of a fatalist than she is. But she believes in you, and I think even if you didn’t need her help, you’d need her for that. When was the last time anyone did?”

“Are you a psychologist or an operative?” Khan asks in exchange.

Jake grins. “In my line of work, you need to be both half the time. You don’t have to tell me I’m right. I know it.”

“Arrogant, aren’t you,” Khan murmurs.

“Nah, not if it’s backed up,” Jake says. “And I don’t make false promises.” He grins, slouching in his chair a bit. “And normally I’d totally offer to prove it but you’re sleeping with my sister and that would be wrong, plus she’d kill me.”

Khan has to laugh at that. “My apologies,” he says, meaning it more than perhaps he should, but he has never been bound by what conventional wisdom dictates he should want.

Jake laughs with him. “Well, if things ever change, call me.”

They quiet as they eat, demolishing the rest of the chicken and everything else between the two of them. “Now would be the wrong time to mention I put poison in the herbs, wouldn’t it,” Jake says, looking at the empty plates. He laughs and gets up, gathering plates. “I didn’t. Wouldn’t. My mom taught me better than that. If I kill someone, unless I’m paid to do it another way I always make sure my target has at least a warning or a chance to fight back. And I don’t like poison. It’s often obvious and unreliable.”

“You should talk to my sister,” Khan says, also standing up and bringing dishes and silverware over to the sink. “She made an extensive study of them.”

“Remind me not to piss her off,” Jake says, efficiently scraping plates and loading the washer. “Although was she attractive?”

“I thought so,” Khan says.

“Okay, might be worth the risk,” Jake says, grinning. “Jill’s the danger junkie, but I get really tired of sex with people who’ve never jumped out of a space shuttle.”
“Have you?” Khan asks.

“So many times,” Jake says. “Easiest way to get down to a planet sometimes that doesn’t depend on beaming, and a lot of places I go beaming’s too noticeable or not practical. Put on the suit, cue in the oxygen, get kicked out of the shuttle and eventually land somewhere. It’s awesome. Once my parachute didn’t deploy properly, I crashed into a very deep pond. After that we made a suit change to have fucking backup parachutes, which we’d been fighting for for, oh, three years.”

“What was the justification against it?” Khan asks.

“Cost, suit design was too efficient to allow a backup, and they swore the primary would never malfunction because the assholes who designed the things never actually tested them live,” Jake says, scowling. “Rule one of life, if it can break, it will. Rule two, everybody lies.”

“I like your rules,” Khan says.

“They’re good ones,” Jake says. “The only things I have ever found that don’t break are one-piece knives made of adamantium and I’m not holding my breath that mine won’t crack someday, but for what I paid for them, they damn well better last.”

“Adamantium?” Khan asks. “I thought that was only for use in ship-building.”

Jake dries his hands and bends, pulling a knife out of his boot. Standard utility knife size, but it looks completely solid from handgrip to blade; Khan takes it when Jake offers it, testing its weight and balance. It may possibly be the most balanced blade he has ever held, he thinks, its grip solid, and when he touches it to the back of his hand the skin parts before he even realizes he has broken it. “I have three,” Jake says, taking the knife back and wiping it off before he puts it back. “They cost a pretty penny and they’re the best blades I’ve ever used.”

“Could you acquire more?” Khan asks. Ekaterina, he knows, will want them.

“How many are we talking?” Jake asks.

Khan tilts his head, considering. Nine of them, plus Jill. “How many can you get?” he asks.

“I can get one, five, ten, or multiples of ten,” Jake says. “But if you need more than ten I need credits up front and about three weeks. They’re not made on Earth and it takes time to make them, get them, and bring them back to Earth. I can do it, but I need three weeks to be on the safe side.”

“How much would thirty cost?” Khan asks.

Jake whistles through his teeth. “Three million,” he says. “You have it?”

“Actually, I do,” Khan says. He has that and more, but since no one uses paper money these days, credits are remarkably easy to hack.

“Yeah, doesn’t surprise me,” Jake admits. “Okay. I have to be back in San Francisco by Thursday afternoon. If you can get me the credits before then, I’ll put in the order and see if they can expedite it. Here.” He moves over to his jacket and pulls out an old-fashioned business card. “Anonymous bank account, drop it in there,” he says, handing it to Khan.

“I will,” Khan says.

“Can you get back here on your own?” Jake asks. He gives Khan the address and the cross street.
“Yes,” Khan says, adding it to his mental map of London. “Why?”

“You might need a safe room,” Jake says, shrugging. “Code to get in the building’s six-one-nine-four-nine-seven-five, and I’ll add your handprint before we leave tonight. If you need it, use it, just don’t get followed.”


“I’ve only known Jill to be wrong about two people she was ever involved with,” Jake says. “One, she was still in the Academy and he got expelled, and she won’t talk about him so don’t ask. The other...he played her, and she fell for it, and she got hurt. I didn’t like him, I never did, and she didn’t listen to me. You, on the other hand, I like, and she’s crazy about you. If I tried to warn her off at this point, she wouldn’t listen to me, so I might as well join the madness until or unless it goes pear-shaped.”

“Tell me about the one in the Academy,” Khan says quietly.

Jake groans. “She calls him the one big mistake she’s allowed to make,” he says. “He...he was into her for a lot of stupid reasons and didn’t give a fuck about who she actually was. It lasted three weeks, and he was a controlling asshole for all of them, and it finally came to a head at a party. They’d both had a couple drinks, she didn’t want to go back to his room, he backhanded her across the face. She punched him and broke his nose and then kicked him in the balls, he dropped to the ground, everyone came running. In the ensuing investigation three other girls came forward saying he’d hit them, one saying he’d forced her. He was expelled from the Academy and Jill made me promise not to track him down and kill him. She said she’d made her mistake and paid for it, he’d paid for his, whatever happened next was on his conscience.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” Khan asks, keeping his voice quiet with an effort.

“I don’t,” Jake says. “I did for a while. He went to jail for a bit, did his stint in rehabilitation, for the joke that is, then I think he left the planet and I didn’t track him past Earth.”

Khan nods. “I see.”

“Don’t tell her I told you,” Jake says. “Please. She’ll get pissed.”

“You seem to live in fear of making her angry,” Khan observes.

“Have you ever truly seen her get angry? Not annoyed, not just irritated, but truly, honestly angry?” Jake asks.

“I have not,” Khan admits.

“Yeah, there’s a reason I have a healthy fear of her,” Jake says. “I--she doesn’t know I saw this, but I was on a mission same planet she was at one point. There was a terrorist group, she’d gone there with supplies for the main government, I was infiltrating the terrorists. They kidnapped her--it happens to her a lot--and I didn’t catch all of what they said, but they’d made the mistake of putting her in cuffs sized for a human adult male. She got out of them, stole a weapon from one of them, took them all down before her party found her. Then she hacked off the leader’s head and set it on fire. She was pissed.”

Ekaterina would approve, Khan thinks. So would Alona. “I see,” he says.

“You will at some point, I’m sure,” Jake says. “Anyway. You have any nefarious or non-nefarious
plans for the evening? I’m supposed to be meeting a contact in about three hours, but I’ve got about two before I need to pretend to be someone else.”

“Thank you, but no,” Khan says. “I should head back to my flat.” He wants to start work on the transporter; he has some materials, and he thinks he can get some of it going before he contacts Andy.

“Cool,” Jake says. “Let me walk you out so we can get your handprint added.”

They do that and Jake shakes his hand firmly before Khan heads back into the city, lights and noise surrounding him as he walks down the street. His comm-link buzzes with a message and he looks at it.

*Miss you. Call me when you can. J.*

Khan smiles, and does just that.

Chapter End Notes

Big brother Jake is big brotherly. He's so cute sometimes.

Also - yes, adamantium is a *total* D&D reference, humor me. I figured they had to have something stronger than steel by the 23rd century, right?
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

His best course seems to be to just feign ignorance and continue on.

Chapter Notes

Slowly advancing plot is advancing slowly. I'm working on it; hopefully you guys won't mind if I take a slightly scenic route. I do actually know mostly where I'm going, though, so we're making progress!

As always, comments/criticism gladly welcomed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, just as he has settled in to determine what materials he needs for the transporter versus what he will need to acquire, his comm-link chirps. Marcus, of course, and he spares a moment to level a glare on the device before answering. "Harrison," he says curtly.

"John," Marcus says. Overly familiar as always, but Khan is used to that by now. "I got your message but couldn't get back to you until now. What do you need?"

"I want to make a trip to the Vengeance," Khan says without preamble. "Some of the latest modifications I proposed should be installed by now and I wish to see if they are sufficient or if they need more refining."

"Of course," Marcus says. "I'm glad to hear you're so engaged with it still. How long do you think you'll need to be there?"

"A few days, no more," Khan says. "I can leave tomorrow morning."

"I'll meet you at the archive in London at 1000 hours," Marcus says. "I was intending to head there myself anyway, I'd like to see what they've done."

Khan resists the urge to smash the comm-link against the floor. He knows full well that Marcus has no intention of letting him go to the Vengeance alone; it would be far too easy for him to steal it and take off. And to be fair, for a few months he did consider it, but not now. Not with the plans they already have. "All right," he says instead. "Tomorrow, then."

They hang up without saying goodbye because there are limits to this pretense of cordiality; Khan has never made it a secret that he loathes Marcus and the feeling is likely mutual. But at this point Marcus needs him more than Khan needs Marcus, whether Marcus realizes it or not.

Since his concentration and his mood will no longer allow him to focus on the transporter, Khan spends a bit getting Jake the credits for the knives and checking in on a few other things. One of the weapons he designed has a tendency to overheat, and he wants to identify the flaw and fix it
before he needs to use it. He also wants to build another one but sized for Jill; he thinks she will like it.

While he has contacts to obtain some of what he needs, he hesitates before messaging one of them. After a moment, he messages Jake instead, laying out what he needs and asking if it would be possible to obtain it, along with estimated cost.

Jake does not return his message by the time Khan decides to just give up and go to bed, which doesn’t surprise him. However, just after he turns off the light his comm-link chirps with a message. Curious, he snags it, looking to see who wants his attention.

*Let me know what you think of the bed. I changed the sheets before I left because that's just polite.*

A.

Khan smiles and sets the link down. Idly, he wonders if he can complete the transporter before Jill moves to London. He has never enjoyed sleeping alone; the only time in his life he truly welcomed it was after Rani died, when the wounds were too raw for him to want anyone else in what had been her space.

For months after she died, he kept her things just as she had had them, the bottle of jasmine scent on her dresser and her combs next to it. He wore her wedding band on a chain around his neck but never admitted it to anyone, not even Cat. Some had thought he was prolonging his grief by not moving on, but Khan had not been able to stomach the idea of putting away the last shreds of her he had.

He still has a few of her things. Most of them were left behind when they escaped Earth, but some he kept on the ship, as they all kept a few treasured possessions. Upon revival, Khan had demanded access to the ship to gather his, and while Marcus did not want to let him go, in the end he capitulated when it became clear Khan would not cooperate unless that demand was met.

Abruptly, he gets up, walking over to the dresser and opening the top right drawer. He takes out the small carved box and moves back to the bed, sitting down on the edge and slowly opening the lid. Inside sits Rani’s wedding band, her favorite pair of earrings, a small bottle of her scent and a few pictures of her, one from their wedding day. He has her journals still, but those remain on the ship. Khan had not wanted to risk Marcus getting his hands on those, and taking any kind of reading material would have meant it being reviewed. The thought of anyone else reading her journals is unbearable, so for now they stay in the hidden compartment that had been next to his cryotube.

He hasn’t looked at her things in a while, for obvious reasons, but tonight he needs the memories.

Khan takes out her wedding band, turning it over and over. It will not fit even his little finger; she had such small hands. The chain on which he wore it coils neatly in the box, but he does not want to put it on again. He doubts Jill would mind, but he would.

If he focuses enough he can still feel Rani’s hand in his, smooth and soft and cool, her skin dusky against his own. So different from Jill’s, but neither better nor worse. They are so similar and yet so different, and to be honest, Khan is starting to wonder which one wraps around him more tightly.

Gently, he puts the ring back in the box, closing the lid. He stays where is for another few moments before he gets up to put the box away.

Sleep doesn't come easily, but it does eventually, and when he wakes in the morning he is grateful he doesn't remember his dreams.
While he finds it tempting to make Marcus wait for him, the power play would not be worth the result. He has to be exceedingly careful in handling the admiral for the next few weeks, even though it makes him grit his teeth and envision squeezing Marcus's skull until it breaks.

As he leaves his flat, his comm-link chirps with a message. *I can get you all that, but it'll cost.* The price Jake quotes him does not really surprise him; he has the money, but has to wonder how much Jake might be keeping for himself out of the deal.

It doesn't matter; if he has to pay a middleman, it might as well be one he somewhat trusts.

Khan gets to the archive by 0915 and spends a satisfying forty minutes taking care of a few details. He transfers credits to Jake first, adding in 5% more than Jake asked for just to be on the safe side. Then he runs his usual report on the archive network to see if anything has happened he needs to care about. He doesn't see anything particularly out of the ordinary, but he does note two personnel transfers to the medical section. Neither name is familiar to him, but he marks them for further investigation and copies Magpie on a note in case she wants to poke around.

Then he opens a new message window to Jill, considering what he wants to say for a moment. He appreciates the anonymous address Magpie set up for him; he can be more direct, and he thinks Jill will appreciate that as well.

She may not be as thrilled with the contents of the message, but Khan smiles anyway as he types.

*As we expected I am heading to Jupiter today. I will be back in a few days. I may not be able to contact you until I return to Earth, so if you do not hear from me, do not worry.*

He could leave it there. But he doesn't. *Be good for me,* he says. *If you pleasure yourself, I will know, and I doubt you will like the consequences. I will contact you when we get back to Earth. Until then…*

He sends the message and logs out of the anonymous session, content for the moment. Even his usual hatred toward Marcus has dulled to a low simmer rather than the fire that usually burns in his veins. It does not change his determination that Marcus will die, and by his own hand, but the need pulls at him less.

As well...once Cat finds out what happened, what Marcus has done, she will want to watch him die. Likely want to help him kill the man, but some things Khan will not share even with his closest sister.

With thoughts of murder on his mind, he takes the lift up to the main level and waits patiently for Marcus. His link chirps with a message three minutes before ten and he looks at it curiously.

*I hate you so very, very, very much. J.*

Khan has a difficult time hiding the laughter, and he's not entirely certain he has managed an impassive face when Marcus walks in, but he calms himself soon enough that he doubts Marcus notices.

As always, Khan surveys Marcus's heavy frame with a tinge of contempt. If he has let his body degrade to this extent, what does that say about the rest of his faculties? The man is—supposedly—a leader, yet he carries a paunch and his shoulders slope. Hardly impressive, or confidence-building.

"John," Marcus says warmly but doesn't offer to shake hands. He learned his lesson the last time Khan almost broke his hand. "There's a shuttle ready for us over at the docking bays. Looking
forward to seeing her, aren't you?"

"I will be interested in the outcome of the modifications I proposed," Khan says neutrally.

"What else have you been up to?" Marcus asks as they leave the archive and walk toward the bays.
"You sent me your report, of course, but I'd rather hear it from you."

Translation: Marcus is clearly too busy and too important to read reports from him, even though he needs Khan's brain and his instincts more than anyone else he has under him. Not subtle in the least. The only redeeming value is that neither are the Klingons.

Khan answers absently, more interested in his own thoughts about what he will do with Jill once he sees her again, if he can finish the transporter in time to see her before she returns to London. He'll have to tell her to send him an image of her armoire, he thinks, in case he sees anything he wants to use that she doesn't pack.

Whatever he says appeases Marcus, and they get on the small shuttle without incident. Khan pilots the craft, as he frankly doesn't trust Marcus's skills behind the controls. The trip to Jupiter only takes a few minutes and they dock at the base. As they get off the shuttle, Khan's link buzzes quietly to let him know he has a message; he ignores it for the time being.

It would, of course, be too much to ask that Marcus leave him alone while on the Vengeance, and Khan resigns himself to having a fat, bumbling guard dog at his side. In a small and admittedly petty display of annoyance, he walks quickly, faster than Marcus is comfortable with and enough to keep him from trying to converse due to lack of breath.

After about twenty minutes of Khan prowling through the ship, Marcus concedes defeat and tells Khan he has other things to check on and will find him later. He walks off, red-faced and breathing hard; Khan waits until he is certain no one is watching him before he looks at his link.

*Watch your back. Not liking some scuttlebutt I'm hearing about potential for…accidents…behind Jupiter. Call me when you can. AJ.*

Khan frowns at that, putting his link away. He could likely survive most accidents that might happen…unless he ends up vented to space. Even he cannot survive that.

He makes a pretense of looking at the modifications he designed for another two hours, critiquing some even when he finds nothing substantially wrong. He has a reputation of cold, arrogant perfection to maintain, after all.

Four hours after stepping on board the Vengeance, Khan finds himself in a quiet corner he knows to be unmonitored. He doesn't know how long he has, but it will do for now.

Jake picks up almost immediately. "Yeah," he says.

"Tell me," Khan says.

"One sec." Khan hears a couple clicks and one beep. "Okay. Secured link, there we go. I don't know much. That's the problem. I just...I was reading things and I saw three recent reports highlighting safety issues with that station and on the ship. They don't—I don't think this is just pencil-pushers being anal. Someone commissioned those reports deliberately, because some of what they're calling out as potentials—that would never in a million years happen unless someone caused it to happen. But if it's documented as potential…"

"Then someone has plausible deniability," Khan says quietly.
"Yeah." Jake sighs. "I can't get there to watch your back myself, but I might be able to send someone who can. How long will you be there?"

"Three days, perhaps," Khan says. "I think I can manage that long."

"Yeah, I'd still feel better if someone had your six," Jake says. "Let me make some calls, I'll get back to you."

Khan finds it rather amusing, truth be told; no one but his siblings has ever insisted he needed someone to guard his back. But he appreciates the effort. "Thank you," he says rather than argue.

They hang up and Khan takes a few moments to assess his options. Frankly, he doesn't have many at the moment, and his best course seems to be to just feign ignorance and continue on.

So he does.

Late in the afternoon, he gets another message from Jake. *Next shuttle. Her name's Marika.*

Curious, Khan makes his way to the shuttle bay, not bothering to explain his presence. A shuttle lands a few minutes after he gets there, and he waits patiently, watching three people disembark.

Two of them he marks for Marcus's lackeys—tall, muscled, and not overly bright. They carry cases of equipment and head purposefully toward the exit.

The third, a woman, disembarks last. The way she moves reminds him of Anandi, efficiently graceful. She has a bag slung over her shoulder and her black uniform has no rank designation. Khan watches as she pauses to say something to one of the personnel servicing the shuttle. Whatever she says makes the man nod and point toward Khan, and the woman smiles before walking over to him.

She stands about as tall as his nose, dark red hair tamed in a bun and bright green eyes. "Marika Holland," she says, extending a hand. "Agent Harrison, I presume?"

"Yes," Khan says, shaking her hand and jerking back in surprise when her skin—and his—visibly glow for a moment. When he breaks contact with her, the glow disappears. She says nothing, waiting for him, and Khan studies her again. The eyes are contacts, the hair likely dyed. He takes her hand again, carefully, and the glow reappears, less bright this time but still evident. "All right," he says finally, letting go. "I'm intrigued."

Marika smiles. "I'm half-human," she says. "Half...let's just say half not. The combination led to some interesting genetic quirks. I'm moderately psychic on a few levels, for one."

"Which levels?" Khan asks.

Marika glances around them and shakes her head. "Let's go somewhere a bit less open."

The station does not lend itself well to privacy, so Khan ends up taking her to the personnel quarters. He sees people on the way, but oddly, none of them seem to notice him or Marika. He sees people look in his direction, but they look *through* him, not *at* him. Interesting…and very, very useful.

Inside his quarters, he activates the privacy seal and Marika pulls a jammer out of her bag, flipping it on and studying the display before she nods. "Okay, so," she says. "I've worked with Jake about eight years now. I owe him a lot of favors, he called one in. I am officially Starfleet, and officially I am here as transport for the goons I brought in. But...I'm really good at staying off the radar, so I'm sticking with you until you head back to Earth."
"How good are you?" Khan asks.

"Turn around," Marika says.

He raises his eyebrows, but does, facing away from her. After about fifteen seconds, she tells him to turn around again.

Khan does...and doesn't see her. He knows she's still in the room, but...interesting. He takes a moment, looking carefully, and after a few seconds realizes there's one spot in the room that he doesn't want to look at, that his eyes keep skipping over. He smiles faintly and focuses more, and slowly he sees Marika—blurry around the edges, but there. "How difficult is it to maintain that?" he asks.

Her form ripples and then becomes clear. "Not," she says. "It's actually harder to turn it off than it is to keep it on. I can't quite hold it over a second person, but if you're with me people will be less likely to notice you."

"What other talents do you have?" Khan asks.

"I'm a touch empath," Marika says. "I can't turn it off, and I can't limit how much I receive. Sometimes I get nothing, sometimes I get everything, and I can't control it. And I'm very unreliably precognitive. Whatever I see generally comes true—in some fashion or another, but a lot of the time it's distorted and I don't understand what I'm seeing. And I don't have a time frame. Sometimes what I see happens in days, sometimes in months. I saw something ten years ago that hasn't come to pass yet."

"What was it?" Khan asks.

"I'm not entirely certain," Marika says honestly. "Precognition often comes in metaphors, and I don't always understand them. I saw—it was a place I'd never been before, a world or a city I don't know, and believe me, I've been to a lot since then. There was a tower, higher than anything else in the city, and I saw someone standing on its balcony, looking out over the whole. A man, I think. And he—someone pushed him off the balcony, and he fell and he kept falling and falling. I saw his face, and he wasn't even scared, he was—it looked like he wanted to crash. And just before he would have landed, two people—well, two forms really—grabbed him and hauled him up into the sky again, and then the vision ended."

"What was the man look like?" Khan asks curiously. "And the people who grabbed him?"

"I thought of him as the shadow man," Marika says. "He was shifting grays and blacks all over, like shadows covered him. His face—I remember it, so clearly, but I can't describe it to save my life. I just remembered how...hopeless he looked, that he didn't even want to try to save himself." She sighs, shakes her head. "All my visions stay with me, but that one more than most. The figures, the people who grabbed him, it was like they were mirror images of each other. One was covered in shadows like the man, but you could see light through them, so bright it hurt my eyes. The other was made of light, but you could see darkness underneath."

"How will you know when it has happened?" Khan asks. "If it was that unclear?"

"I always do," Marika says. "It's—I can feel it. Why do you ask? Do you not believe me?"

"I have learned not to disbelieve many things these past few months," Khan says.

Marika studies him for a moment, then steps forward and lays her fingers against the inside of his wrist. Khan feels a frisson of energy, enough to make the hair on his arms stand on end, but
nothing glows. He doesn't pull away, although he could, but after maybe twenty seconds Marika steps back, shaking her hand like she's trying to get something off it. "Okay, you're…different," she says. "I wasn't expecting that."

"What were you expecting?" Khan asks.

"Not what I got," she says. "You're—" She shakes her head. "I see emotions as colors," she says. "I can feel them, but I see them in my mind. The brighter the color, the more powerful the emotion, and a lot of times they bleed into each other, because emotions aren't that neat and compartmentalized. But you—everything I got was outlined in black, sharply defined, and you have very few things that meld into each other. How do you live like that?"

"Survival," Khan says simply.

Marika shakes her head again. "I can't even imagine. I did get a bit more from you than I normally get on a first impression, though. And…frankly, you scare me."

"Why?" Khan asks. "I have not threatened you. I have not done anything hostile toward you."

"No," Marika says. "No, you haven't. But the core of you—there's so much anger there, so much rage, and yeah, it's controlled, but if you ever let that control slip…" She blows out a breath. "I don't want to be around for the fallout."

"I see," Khan says. "What else did you see?"

This time Marika smiles a bit. "Whoever it is, they're lucky," she says. "Possibly crazy, but lucky nonetheless."

Before Khan answers her, his link chirps. "Harrison," he says briefly.

"John, where did you go? I wanted to talk to you about some of the modifications," Marcus says. He tells Khan where he is.

"I was looking at other things," Khan says and doesn't elaborate. Marcus glares at him, but Khan ignores it and after a moment Marcus sighs.

"I want to know why you modified the shielding on the core," he says curtly. "That was designed in accordance with Starfleet best practices, and we do have a bit of experience at this." Implication: Khan doesn't know what he's doing.

"Your best practices were not designed for a ship with these modifications to its warp core," Khan says evenly. "Were you to use that shielding and something happen to the core, the entire compartment would flood with radiation." He goes on to explain further, deliberately simplifying it.
Marcus scowls at him, but doesn't interrupt him.

"You're using more power to shield it than you are to run it," he says finally when Khan finishes, clearly looking for some way to prove him wrong.

"Would you rather the ship blow up mid-warp?" Khan asks with a touch of impatience. "Insufficient shielding and energy containment will destabilize it. You'd either explode the ship or have to eject the warp core."

He swears he hears a snicker behind him but doesn't look and Marcus doesn't react. He does, however, ask several more questions, each one growing more and more irritated when Khan doesn't react and doesn't allow him to win any of the arguments.

Finally, Marcus all but growls in frustration and sighs, shaking his head. "Fine," he says. "I'm heading back to Earth on the next shuttle. I trust you'll keep yourself occupied until you head back."

Khan normally would feel relieved at this, but given what Jake told him earlier he feels a prickle of wariness down his spine. "I should be returning in two days," he says instead.

Marcus nods. "And back in London you already have a few projects. I'll check in with you in a week or so."

"As you like," Khan says.

Clearly Marcus does not like but also clearly he has no logical ground for anger or hostility. He nods again and heads out of engineering, leaving the scent of anger and petulance in his wake.

Khan resists the urge to roll his eyes and turns to a nearby computer, scanning a few things just to see if he missed anything or has any new suggestions.

He doesn't see anything particularly urgent requiring his attention, so he logs out and heads back to his own quarters. When he gets there, he activates the privacy seal and faces away from where he thinks Marika is, taking advantage of the privacy and space to let his wings stretch fully. After so long being folded back, it almost hurts to extend them, but the relaxation that follows makes him groan inwardly with relief.

"Okay, that's beautiful," Marika says. "Can I—would you let me touch them?" She asks it hesitantly, but Khan is glad she can't see his face. No one has ever asked outside his family and Jill, and he feels an instinctive revulsion at the thought.

Still, though. "Yes," he says, still facing away from her. "Be careful, some of the feathers are fragile."

He hears her come closer, and then she touches his left wing, light and gentle, stroking over the feathers, enough to make his skin prickle all over. He doesn't have that much sensation in the feathers themselves, but the skin underneath is almost too sensitive, and as she brushes her fingers over his wing, his whole body shivers. When Marika traces the line of where his wing meets his back, he hisses in a breath and steps away.

"I'm sorry," she says immediately. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Khan says, folding his wings back and turning around to look at her. She looks paler than normal, her pupils dilated. "Are you all right?" he asks carefully.

"You—" Marika licks her lips. "I don't understand you. I don't think I want to."
"Explain, please," Khan says.

Marika shakes her head, taking a deep breath. "I touch you and I feel so much anger," she says. "I can't. I can't process that. And I don't understand how you have so much rage inside you and yet so much—there are people you care about so deeply you'd do anything for them, and I don't understand how you balance that at all. But it terrifies me, because you're a walking bomb with two seconds left on the timer and I think…I think if anything ever happened to someone you loved…the world wouldn't be left standing." She takes another deep breath, stepping back from him. "I'm staying with you until we get safely back to Earth," she says. "And then I don't think I ever want to see you again."

"I would not fault you if you left now," Khan says matter-of-factly.

"No," Marika says. "No, you need someone to guard your back and I finish my assignments. But I don't think I want to know anything else about you, and I don't want to know what you're hiding and why you're actually here. I give you my word I'm not going to betray you either through action or inaction, and regardless of how I feel about you I'm not going to let it affect me professionally."

"I did not think you would," Khan says. She still looks pale and shaky, but she bites her lip and breathes, slow and steady. After a few moments, she looks better. Not good, but better.

"And the hell of it," Marika says with a not-quite smile, "is that I'm still…you've got this magnetism about you, this intensity. I can sense it even without touching you, I can do that occasionally in people with…let's say strong personalities. Usually when I get that, I'm more drawn to the person, you know? So it's like half of me wants to find out what makes you tick and half of me wants to get the hell out of here." She laughs. "So I'm staying in neutral."

She moves over to the small table and takes a seat, rubbing the back of her neck. “Jake warned me I might have a strong reaction to you,” she admits, looking up at Khan. “But he didn’t tell me why.”

“How did you meet him?” Khan asks, taking the other chair at the table and turning it around to straddle it.

“I went through the Academy a few years after he did,” Marika says. “My last year, he was teaching a class on survival skills. That was the outward purpose, but really he was doing it to see if he could identify people who might be good recruits for Intelligence. He saw what I could do and after the class ended, asked me if I’d consider it. I said I would, because he’s right, my skills are right in line with that sort of work. He’s been a mentor to me ever since, and he’s saved my life more than once.” She smiles a little. “I had a crush on him at one point, honestly, but I never told him and he never indicated he knew. Probably just as well. Intelligence tends to be a bit easier about fraternization, but it wouldn’t have been a good idea.”

She’s rambling a bit, but she still looks a bit pale; Khan keeps quiet, letting her talk it out, calm down. “How did you meet him?” she asks. “He never mentioned that.”

“Through his sister,” Khan says, wondering if Marika knows Jill.

“Jill,” she says. “Yeah, okay, that doesn’t surprise me. She would know someone like you. Actually. Wait.” Marika looks at him closely, then takes a breath and reaches across the table, touching his hand. “Oh,” she says after a moment, taking her hand back. “Oh. It’s—but it’s not entirely her, is it? There’s—someone—I’m confused.”

“I had a wife, before I met Jill,” Khan says, wondering why he’s telling her this, but on the other
“Hand, what harm can it do? ‘She died, years ago.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Marika says softly. ‘How did you meet Jill?’

‘She ran into me on the street,’ Khan says. ‘Quite literally.’

Marika laughs at that. ‘Yeah, that’s…that’s her. Jake introduced me to her about six months after I graduated. Now she’s messy, emotion-wise. So many colors and everything bleeds into everything else.’

‘That does not surprise me,’ Khan says.

‘I like her, but she gives me a headache if I touch her,’ Marika admits. ‘There’s just so much going on with her.’

‘What is Jake like?’ Khan asks out of curiosity and also because Marika seems to be calming down the more they talk.

‘Still waters run deep,’ Marika says. ‘He likes to play things cool when you talk to him, but when I touch him I know how deeply he cares about things. I don’t touch him often, though. I know he doesn’t like being read, and I don’t want to invade his privacy.’ She rubs a hand over the back of her neck again. ‘I won’t touch you again unless you tell me I can,’ she says. ‘I can—I need skin to skin contact to read someone, and I have gloves I can wear. That might be for the best.’

‘As you like,’ Khan says. He doesn’t particularly care, to be honest; she isn’t reading his mind, just his emotions, and she won’t get any useful data from those. But if she is going to be watching his back, he would rather she not be terrified while she does it.

Marika’s mouth twists and she shrugs. ‘There are pros and cons,’ she says. ‘If I can’t read you, I can’t read anyone, which means I’m cutting both of us off from any potential information about things we need to know. On the other hand, no offense, but I really don’t want another look inside your head.’

‘Most people wouldn’t,’ Khan says.

‘Yeah, that’s not really a surprise,’ Marika says. ‘You’re very self-aware. Which I have to say is kind of funny given that you and Jill are a pair, because she? Is not.’

‘No,’ Khan admits. ‘She is not always aware of her own motivations and feelings.’

‘Usually not aware,’ Marika says. ‘Is that what attracted you to her?’

‘No,’ Khan says, his wings shifting a bit. ‘No, it was not.’

‘What was?’ Marika asks.

Khan considers his answer, what he wants to tell her. ‘She reminded me of women I care about deeply,’ he says. ‘My sisters.’ Before she can ask more, he continues. ‘Have you siblings?’

‘No,’ Marika says. ‘Because of my genetic background, it was difficult enough for my mother to carry me to term. The odds of her having another successful pregnancy were low. Most humanoid species can interbreed, but there are varying levels of difficulty. I’m the only one of me that I know of, and it was really hard for my parents to have me.’

‘Which of your parents is human?’ Khan asks.
“My mother,” Marika says. “Did your parents have wings?”

“No,” Khan says, not going into more detail.

“Were they both human?” Marika asks. “Although I can’t think of a winged humanoid race, to be fair.”

“There is not one that I know of,” Khan says.

“Huh.” Marika leans back in her chair, studying him. “We’re a pair of freaks, in that case. Humans are psi-null with exceedingly rare and often dubious claims otherwise. But then, that’s Jake and his circle of people for you. Everyone’s a freak to some extent.”

“Including Jake?” Khan asks.

She grins. “Jake’s a freak in the sense that he’s like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. On one hand, he’s a very intelligent, well-spoken man with a solid family where he calls his mother twice a week if he’s around and goes to Shabbat dinner when he’s in town. On the other hand, he’s a cold-blooded ruthless field operative who doesn’t blink when told to kill someone and has no real problem with torture. He won’t use sexual coercion, but anything else he doesn’t really care so long as he thinks it’s justified.”

“That is not so much a case of him being a freak but more him needing both sides to balance the other,” Khan says. “It is a delicate act.”

“And you would know, wouldn’t you,” Marika says. “Does Jill balance your rage?”

Khan’s wings shift again. “It is more complicated than that,” he says.

“Yeah, somehow I’m not surprised,” Marika says. “How do meals work around here? Is there a mess or what?”

“The quarters have small kitchenettes,” Khan says. “Stocked with plain foods and meals. There is a mess in the main part of the station, but I think it has closed by now. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, somewhat,” Marika says. “I’m guessing the kitchenette’s behind that door?” She points and Khan nods. “I’ll go forage. Do you want anything?”

“No, thank you,” Khan says. He thinks she also may want a chance to calm herself, away from him.

Marika nods and gets up, heading into the kitchenette area. In amusing timing, Khan’s link chirps just as she leaves the room. “Yes,” he says, answering it.

“She get there okay?” Jake asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “But I do not think she appreciates you sending her very much.”

Jake snorts. “Yeah, I’m sure, but she was the best for your situation regardless of circumstances, and she owes me. She might actually be able to help us out once you two get back to Earth, she’s between assignments at the moment and her next one won’t start for another six weeks.”

“I doubt she will want to,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I’m not really caring,” Jake says. “Okay, no, that’s not fair. I do care, but she’s damned useful for undercover things, and with stuff like this, she’s better than I am at sneaking around.
Hard to beat someone who you can’t see. Or hear, I don’t know if she told you about that part. If she’s doing her ‘don’t look at me’ trick, you can’t really hear anything she says either unless you know she’s there.”

“What other species is she?” Khan asks.

“Haven’t a clue,” Jake says. “She’s never gone into detail about it, and her file lists her as completely human. I only know she isn’t because I work with her. You guys learning anything new?”

“No,” Khan says. “Not as of yet. Perhaps tomorrow. How are her computer skills?”

“Not her strong suit,” Jake says. “She’s proficient enough but she’s not a hacker by any means. She doesn’t like computers much, she says she doesn’t trust anything that has intelligence but not emotions.”

“What does she think of Vulcans, in that case?” Khan asks.

Jake laughs. “She appreciates that they have mental barriers so if she touches one of them she doesn’t read a whole lot, but she hates the code of logic and lack of emotion. Anyway, I actually called to make sure she got there okay and you two were all right, but also to let you know that I made contact with that doctor Magpie and I found out about, Tyler? I didn’t tell her anything about you, but I did ask her if she had time for coffee and conversation, and after some verbal footwork on my part, she agreed, so we’re meeting for coffee tomorrow afternoon.”

“Is Magpie going with you?” Khan asks.

“She is not,” Jake says. “She says she can’t leave her place now, she has too much to do. I think I can manage a meeting with a scientist on my own, especially in public.”

“I should hope,” Khan says. “Have you heard from Jill today?”

“Yes,” Jake says in a very long-suffering tone. “Yes, I did, and I don’t know what the fuck you told her but man, she’s cranky about it. Don’t, for the love of God, tell me.”

“I was not going to,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jake says. “Is Marika there? I need to tell her something.”

As he asks, Marika comes back carrying a bowl and spoon. She takes her seat at the table and Khan hands her the link. “Jake,” he says. “He wishes to tell you something.”

“Boss,” Marika says, taking it. “We are going to have words when I see you again.” She listens for a moment, and when she speaks again she does so in a language Khan has never heard before. It does not sound like any of the dozens of Earth languages he is familiar with; he presumes it to be her father’s natural dialect.

It reminds him a bit of harp music, precise and melodic, truth be told. He thinks Cat would love to study it; perhaps that might be an option someday.

Marika makes a face at the link in response to something Jake says, and rubs the bridge of her nose. When she speaks again she does so in a tone of extreme reluctance, and sighs heavily when she finishes. “All right, fine,” she says in English. “But you owe me.” She makes a face at the link again and hands it back to Khan.
“I’m pretty sure I don’t owe her,” Jake says cheerfully. “But we’ll sort it out. I’ve got to run, I promised Samuel I’d swing by tonight to spend some time with the kids. Be careful, stay alive, I’ll see you in a few days?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “You do the same.”

“Always.” Jake hangs up and Khan closes his link.

“What did he want from you?” he asks.

Marika swallows a bite of her meal before answering. “He wants me to spend a couple weeks in London in case you and yours need anything. I told him I’m pretty sure you guys have it all covered, but he is his mother’s son and he worries. I have absolutely no idea what you’d need me for but I will apparently find out. So when we get back to Earth I’ll swing by my place to pack a bag and then join you all somewhere.”

Khan finds himself in accord with Marika. He does not know what they might need her for, and a part of him is irritated that Jake volunteered her without consulting with Khan or Marika herself. On the other hand, she is useful, or could be.

Actually, if he considers it more…with the right credentials to pass the security scan, she could easily get into the archive. Once inside, she would be able to move freely and get information without anyone the wiser. And that would be exceedingly helpful to all of them.

“I think I have an idea on how you might be useful,” he says. “But we will need to decide on some details first.”

“Always,” Marika says. “Speaking of details, where do you want me to sleep? That bed’s not quite big enough for two when one has wings.”

“You can take the bed,” Khan says. “I do not need much sleep, and the floor has enough room for me should I decide to lie down.”

“I really don’t want to kick you out of your bed,” Marika says reluctantly.

“It is fine,” Khan says. “I have slept on worse.”

“Haven’t we all,” Marika says. “The worst night’s sleep I ever had was on a godforsaken bitterly cold planet, in the middle of blizzard season. There were three of us, and we managed to find a cave and hole up, but the mouth of the cave got buried by snow and it took us almost a full day to dig out of it.”

“What were you doing there?” Khan asks.

“Long story,” Marika says. “Not really worth the telling. Where was the worst place you ever slept?”

“My bed,” Khan says. “The night after my wife was cremated.”

Marika blows out a breath. “Okay, yeah, that’s…about as bad as it gets.”

“Yes,” Khan says quietly.

Marika looks at her bowl, saying nothing. After a moment she starts eating again; Khan leaves her to whatever thoughts run through her mind and goes over to the desk computer, checking to see
what messages he has. His official Starfleet inbox has nothing of value, which does not surprise him, but the anonymous box Magpie set up holds three messages he cares about.

The first one, from Magpie, tells him she’s running searches on the two new doctors at the archive but so far hasn’t turned up anything of interest. Khan figured that would be the case, but appreciates her thoroughness.

The next message, also from Magpie, has an attachment consisting of an email thread between Marcus and a scientist Khan does not know. The discussion on the thread makes Khan grit his teeth; neither Marcus nor his pet scientist seem in any way bothered about their options for biological weapons based on Khan’s biochemistry. He thinks it ironic that Marcus considers him a barbarian, when the truth is quite the opposite.

_Murder’s too good for him._ M. Khan sees her comment when he closes the attachment and has to agree.

He writes back a quick note thanking her and asking her to pass on anything else she sees like this.

Jill’s message is the last, of course; Khan smiles faintly as he opens it, wondering just what she has to say. _You should be so very, very glad you’re out of range for me to punch you_, she says. _What gives you the right to order me around like this? That being said…I do miss you. Come back soon. Sleeping alone sucks. JC._

Khan opens a window to reply to her. _Be good for me, pyara_, he says. _If you wish to negotiate this once I return to Earth, we can certainly do that. As for what gives me the right…you know as well as I do that you enjoy submission, that you have gone a very long time without letting anyone take control from you. There is no shame in this, nor weakness, and you know that. Just trust me, Jill, and I promise I will take care of you._

He considers adding something else, decides against it, and sends the message.

When he turns around, he sees Marika lying on the bed, facedown, arms at her sides. “Are you all right?” he asks.

“I saw something,” she says without moving. “I don’t know what it was, but I saw something.”

“Tell me,” Khan says.

She takes a breath, slowly pushing up to sit. “Ancient Rome,” she says. “The arena, and the gladiator fighting the lion. And I think—I think you were the gladiator.”

“Who was the lion?” Khan asks.

Marika shakes her head. “I don’t know. And I don’t know who won, I snapped back before I saw that. Not very useful, is it.” She smiles a little ruefully. “And now I’ve got a killer headache. If you don’t mind, I’m going to take a blocker and try to sleep it off.”

“I don’t,” Khan says.

“Thank you.” Marika pinches the bridge of her nose before she gets up to go rummage in her bag. She dry-swallows the pill, walks back over to the bed and lies down, pulling the pillow over her head.

Khan dims the lights and moves over to the computer. He cannot physically assemble the transporter here, but he can at least plan the schematics.
As he does, he wonders about the arena. Marcus as the lion? Starfleet itself? He doesn’t know.

“This,” he murmurs to himself, “is why I never put much faith in fate.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple things, including one I forgot from last time:

1. I hope you all like Marika. She kind of showed up when I wasn't expecting her. She will likely show up again, because I rather like her despite her having just been formed in my head.

2. The personal transporter thing is a concept I'm stealing from the Khan backstory comic, in which he invented one. I meant to note that last chapter and forgot. I am, needless to say, rejecting most of the other ideas from that comic arc, but the transporter is so useful that I am keeping it.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

I ended up ripping out the first third of this chapter and starting again, and I'm in some ways a little uncertain about what I have here, but I don't have the morale to go back and rip it out again, so here we are. I hope you enjoy it; if you like Marika, let me know, please! I'm not quite sure what happens with her next, but we'll figure it out.

As always, thank you so much for staying around for the ride; if you've just joined me over here, welcome and have a seat! I have finally figured out the main plot arc and possibly the ending, so we no longer are flying into unexplored space; we now have a rough map.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He and Marika manage to find a cordial balance over the next day. She doesn’t touch him or ask many personal questions, and he doesn’t treat her with anything other than courtesy and respect. She doesn’t have the technical background to understand much of what he’s working on, but she does ask intelligent questions and at a couple points they help Khan refine his ideas.

Unfortunately, neither of them manage to reassure themselves or each other about the sense of dread both of them feel. Marika glances around every chance she gets, so twitchy Khan thinks it a good thing no one else really knows she is there. Her apprehension translates itself to him, and while he mostly does his best to ignore it, he can’t quite settle his nerves or convince himself Marcus needs him more than he needs to be rid of him.

He intended to stay two more days, but finds himself thinking it would not be a dreadful thing to leave early, to catch a late shuttle back to Earth and send Marika on her way. It would give him time to acquire the necessary materials to build the transporter, for one, and he could undoubtedly find a way to see Jill—which, if he is to be honest, is most of his motivation at this point. But humanity can only escape its base urges so much of the time, and after all his time dealing with Marcus and Marcus’s lackeys, confined on the station or on the Vengeance, Khan’s temper—never a strong point of his—has stretched almost to its breaking point.

One final email from Marcus and Khan all but snarls when he gets up from the terminal, wings flaring out before he forces them back. The time frame for Marcus’s death grows shorter even as Khan knows he cannot do anything about it just yet, not until they have proof of his actions and Khan’s family are safe. But not one moment beyond that will Marcus breathe, Khan vows.

“You’re giving me a headache,” Marika says quietly, startling him out of his thoughts. “I’m only a touch empath and I swear I can see the anger radiating off you. It’s giving me a migraine. Could you please, please think of something else?”

What he would like to do is take Jill flying, get into the air and escape this artificial environment. Since that is not an option…Khan bites back a growl of frustration. “I am going to go for a run through the station,” he says. There is a suitable track; officers need to exercise, whether or not Marcus does so himself.
Marika sighs and gets up from the bed. “I’m going with you,” she says. “I can’t watch your back if you’re there and I’m not. Besides, maybe I can run off the headache.”

“Is it a headache or a migraine?” Khan asks, moving to change his shoes.

“Why do you ask?” Marika asks, doing the same.

“There are acupressure techniques I know that can help with headache, and some I know for migraine, but they are not the same,” Khan says. “If I knew which it was, I might be able to help you.”

“Huh,” Marika says. “You’d think they’d be similar.”

“A migraine is not a headache,” Khan says. “It is categorized by a severe headache, but it is in reality a neurological disorder with several parts.”

“Yes, I know that,” Marika says. “I get migraines. If—if something triggers my empathy or my precognition hard enough, I get a migraine from it. Sometimes I get them from strobe lighting. But most people look at me weirdly so I just say I get headaches. Who did you know that got them?”

“My sister studied medicine,” Khan says. “She taught me some of what she knew, and several of us learned various acupressure and massage techniques to use on each other. My—my wife occasionally had migraines, usually around her menstrual cycle.”

“That’s not that uncommon,” Marika says, getting up. “Hormones and all that. I wouldn’t know, I don’t have a cycle, but I’ve heard.”

“You don’t?” Khan looks at her in surprise, again wondering just what this other half of her might be. To be fair, he hasn’t studied xenobiology in detail, but the bit he had come across indicated ovulation was an almost universal constant.

“Nope,” Marika says. “I’m a mule, essentially. Sterile by cross-breeding. Which, for the record, is really okay with me.”

“Jake said your file lists you as fully human,” Khan comments as they leave the quarters and head for the exercise track.

“It does,” Marika says. “Then again, Jake said you were human—more or less, and I’d know what he meant when I met you.”

“Do you?” Khan asks.

“Somewhat,” Marika says. “You’ve got wings and that’s not the most inhuman thing about you.”

Not for the first time, Khan thinks her eyes change color in certain lights; he is certain the green is fake, but she hasn’t taken out the lenses to show him. But in certain lights it looks almost as though her eyes glow unnaturally brightly. “Does Jake know many people who are more or less human?” he asks, not commenting on her eyes.

“His team,” Marika says. “I told you, we’re all freaks to some extent. If you’re asking if we’re biologically human or alien, the answer is that it depends on the person and it depends on their comfort level of sharing. I’m not revealing details like that without my team’s permission. I will say that there are five of us, Jake makes six, and each of us has at least one or two unique skills that you can’t really find most other places in the galaxy or the universe. Even Jake.”
“What are Jake’s skills?” Khan asks as they settle into an easy run.

“Nope, that’s for him to tell you,” Marika says. “Also, can’t you go any faster than this?” She grins and puts on speed; Khan easily matches her, and eventually they end up at a not-quite sprint. Khan glances down at her and sees what he would swear are gills on the side of her neck, half-opening as she runs. He doesn’t ask and Marika doesn’t appear to notice his glance.

They make two circuits of the track, and three-quarters through the third Marika stops dead and screams higher than any human voice should be capable of reaching. Khan hears the click in the silence after she screams, grabs her and pushes them both back, and the blast goes up where they just were.

The explosion knocks them both prone; Khan feels heat on his back and his wings, some searing points of pain he knows will heal without intervention. He thinks his left arm broke from the force of the blast, as well as some ribs, and he has suffered enough concussions to know he probably has one. But the arm is the worst of it. As soon as he can, he pushes himself up, off Marika, gritting his teeth as he studies his arm.

“Let…” Marika swallows, tries again. “Let me.” She pushes up to sitting, slowly, and reaches for Khan’s arm. “Do me a favor and think of something non-murderous, okay?” she asks hoarsely.

Khan takes a breath, thinking of Ekaterina, of how happy she and Konstantin will be to see him again, to be reunited again. Of all the things he will show them about their new world, the galaxy.

Marika sets the bone quickly; he feels a flare of pain but then it begins subsiding, the bone aware and working to heal itself. “Are you injured?” Khan asks, holding his arm against his torso as they get to their feet.

“Yes, but it’s nothing you can do anything about,” Marika says, and when she stands she sways on her feet and her skin has a distinctly bluish tone. “I’m—I’m all right for now, I’ve got about four hours, and then I’m going to die unless Jake can get to me or get me to our team doctor.”

“Where do you need to meet him?” Khan asks, steering her toward the shuttle bay. He sees personnel running in to survey the damage, but they once again do not appear to notice him or Marika. Khan has nothing of value still on the station, and all his work is safely stored on a memory chip secure inside the collar of his shirt. He touches the hidden pocket, to make sure, and is reassured by the faint weight.

“Starfleet Medical,” Marika says. “If you can get me there, I’m going to pass out once we get in the shuttle, it’ll give me another hour or so.”

“What about this would kill you?” Khan asks.

“It’s the empathy thing,” Marika says, her words slurring a bit. “I’m usually only a touch empath, but bombs—I can sense them, sometimes, and knowing it’s there and then feeling it go up—bombs have their own kind of awareness and it—it hurts me when I feel something explode. Psychic shock. I’m not making any sense and I know it but I really don’t do well in volatile situations where things are likely to blow up or get shot. If I don’t know it’s coming, I can’t protect myself and if I can’t protect myself a bomb can make my brain shut down. There are drugs, but I don’t have them on me because they’re addictive and I don’t trust myself. That’s why I need the doctor.”

Jake knew this might happen and yet sent her anyway, Khan thinks as he gets himself and Marika a shuttle and clearance to head back to Earth. He deliberately sent her into a situation that he knew might kill her, and he didn’t care, because he gauged it worth the risk. He decided Khan’s life was
worth more than Marika’s, that Jill’s needs were greater than Marika’s own.

With Marika unconscious, Khan calls Jake from the shuttle comm-link, explaining briefly what had happened and that they are on their way back to San Francisco.

“Meet you there,” Jake says. “If you get there before I do—which you won’t, because I’m in San Francisco, so never mind. When you get to the ER entrance, tell them she’s a patient of Dr. Martin’s and he’s expecting her.”

“Who is Dr. Martin?” Khan asks.

“A guy who made a really good boot centuries ago,” Jake says. “Also our team doctor. He knows what she needs.” He says nothing for a moment. “And yes, I knew this was a possibility. I thought the risk of the station actually exploding was low, compared to someone just going after you, but I knew it could happen. Marika knew it could happen. She could have refused to go. She didn’t. So you can think I’m a cold, heartless bastard all you want but I’ve heard it before.”

“You and I are not that dissimilar,” Khan says instead.

Jake laughs without humor. “No, we’re not. Difference is Jill’s my sister, not my lover. But we’d still do anything for her, wouldn’t we?”

Khan doesn’t answer; he doesn’t have to.

“Anyway,” Jake says. “Catch you there.” He hangs up and Khan focuses on getting the shuttle to its destination.

Marika stirs as the shuttle lands, blinking her eyes open and blearily reaching up to peel out the contacts. Under them, her eyes are an eerie blue, pale and luminescent, with slitted pupils. “Can you walk?” Khan asks, not remarking on her eyes, or the still-blue tinge to her skin.

“No,” she says, fumbling for her safety harness. “Not really, no.”

Khan didn’t expect she could. He gets out of his own harness, goes around to get Marika out of hers, and lifts her into his arms, mildly surprised when she weighs less than he expected given her size. She may, he thinks, be lighter than Jill but it’s hard to judge.

As he carries her to the emergency entrance, medical personnel run toward them, one making a beeline to move the shuttle once Khan nods toward it. “What’s wrong with her?” one of them asks—Khan has no idea of rank from the plain blue uniform, nor does he care.

“She is a patient of Dr. Martin’s,” Khan says as Marika appears to pass out again. “He should be expecting her.”

“Yes, he is,” another one says. “I’ll go alert him she’s here.” She sprints back toward the entrance.

“What happened?” the first person persists. “I mean, if Martin needs anything—“

“He won’t,” Marika murmurs, eyes still closed. “He knows what I need.”

By the time they get to the medical center, Khan sees Jake standing next to a worried-looking redhead, a gurney in front of them. He lays Marika down on it carefully, stepping back out of the way. The redhead immediately pushes up Marika’s right sleeve, attaching a patch to her forearm, before doing the same to her collarbone and her forehead. “All right, you,” he says, nodding to Jake. “Let’s go fix this.”
Jake shrugs and pushes the gurney down the hall, and with nothing else to do Khan falls into step with him. “Gabe, this is John,” Jake says. “John, this is Gabe Martin, our team doc and resident miracle worker.”

“I wouldn’t have to work miracles if you’d stop trying to die,” Gabe says, hitting a button on the wall to open a set of double doors. They go through and Gabe motions for them to go left, into a private room. Once the four of them get inside, the doors close and Jake moves to take something out of a cabinet. He studies it, taps at a few things, and Khan feels a sense of pressure for a moment.

“We’re clean,” Jake reports, setting the jammer down on a counter.

“Right,” Gabe says. “So what the fuck happened?”

“Bomb,” Marika says, her voice a little slurred and strangely accented. Khan has to wonder if she’s even a quarter human, but doesn’t ask. “I felt it, I screamed, John pushed us back and it went up. I was too close to avoid the shock.”

Gabe sighs. “Well, at least it’s fixable,” he says. “John, do you need medical treatment?”

“No,” Khan says. His arm still twinges a bit but the bone has mostly knitted, and his other injuries have either healed or will be healed soon.

“Good, because I don’t know a fucking thing about fixing wings,” Gabe says, moving to get a hypospray from another cabinet. “Psychic shock, yes. Tongues that don’t retract, unfortunately yes. Infected suckers on skin, yes. Wings, no.”

Khan swallows a snicker. “What are the second and third on that list from?”

“Two guys on my team,” Jake says. “One has a…let’s say prehensile tongue, kind of like a frog’s. He got hit in the head once, and it banged the muscle, and he had a tongue hanging down to his navel for a while until Gabe fixed it. The other guy has retractable suckers on his hands, forearms, and feet. Fantastic for climbing up walls or smooth surfaces or across the damn ceiling, less exciting when he turns out to be allergic to something in the alloy and the suckers swell up and get infected if we don’t catch it in time.”

“Are they also part alien?” Khan asks.

“That…gets complicated,” Jake says, moving away from Gabe and Marika. “Here’s the thing,” he says quietly when he and Khan have moved back into the corner. “Earth ruled that genetic engineering except in cases of severe birth defects or disabilities was illegal hundreds of years ago. You might know something about that.” He quirks a grin and Khan hides a smile. “But not everywhere in the galaxy has the same ethics, and not everywhere has stopped trying to…enhance humanity. Officially, no place in the Federation will genetically engineer anyone unless it’s for medically necessary reasons. Realistically, I know two labs where you can walk in, say you want a tail, discuss size, options, appearance, and so on, and have it done. Both the guys on my team decided it was worth the risks to do it, and one other person is considering it.”

“What is the point of a prehensile tongue, though?” Khan asks.

“What are the point of wings on a biped?” Jake counters.

“I did not ask for these,” Khan points out.

“But that’s the thing,” Jake says. “Someone did. You don’t just randomly screw around with
genetics and have surprise wings. I’m not a geneticist and I’m not a doctor, but I know a few things, and you will never convince me that whoever created your wings didn’t intend to do it. There’s just no way. Avian life forms are so very, very different from humanoid, it’s not like—if you’d had a tail, that would be one thing. Humans evolved from monkeys, so tails are somewhere in our evolutionary past, as are prehensile feet. But wings? That’s a whole different ballpark. Humanoid beings aren’t designed for flight in the first place, we’re very, very firmly land-based creatures. The human body—leaving aside various alien races—is so completely non-aerodynamic that I’m frankly amazed you even manage to fly in the first place. Wish like hell I could go with you, but that’s another matter. But the point is, whoever spliced your genes did so deliberately with the intent of creating wings at a minimum, no idea what else they threw in. Do you even know all of it?”

Khan glances at Gabe, talking quietly with Marika—less blue now—and looks back at Jake. “Not all of it,” he says. “We salvaged as much data as we could from the doctors and the scientists, but they…gambled, and not everything they did was toward a probable outcome.”

“Honestly, I’m amazed you all survived,” Jake says. “Past childhood, even.”

“Not all of us did,” Khan says. “There were a hundred and forty births. Ninety-one of us survived to fight the wars. By the time we left Earth, there were eighty-four of us, and now there are seventy-three.”

Jake blows out a breath, looking at the floor. He scratches the stubble on his jaw, saying nothing for a moment. “Are any of them—were any of them—like you? Not with wings, but…different?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But I am the only one who survived to adulthood that we know of. It is possible some of my family have mixed DNA, but we do not know about it.” In truth, he often wondered if Ekaterina had feline DNA mixed with hers, or if Konstantin had traits of a wolf.

“So why did you?” Jake asks.

“I haven’t an answer,” Khan says simply.

Gabe clears his throat. “If you two are done, Marika needs to talk to you, and she’s only going to be awake for another ten minutes,” he says.

“You did fix her, right?” Jake asks as they walk back over to the bed.

“Of course I did,” Gabe says, sounding offended. “But you know as well as I do that she needs to trance down and heal. Be at least eight hours, twelve is more likely.”

“What do you need us to know?” Khan asks Marika, looking down at her on the gurney. The blue has receded from her skin, but she looks paler than he would expect, and shadows pool under her cheekbones and her eyes.

“I saw something,” she says, taking a breath. “About you.” She looks at Khan, her eyes eerily bright in the dimness of the room. “You were the gladiator again,” she says. “And there were a pack of lions circling you, but—you weren’t alone, there were people with you in armor, people I didn’t know. And there—there was a stand in the arena, and two people stood on it, blindfolded and in white, with a sword at each of their throats. And if you—if you lost, they’d be killed, and everyone knew it.”

“Who won?” Khan asks, his voice quieter and more steady than he expected.

“Who were the people?” Jake asks immediately following.
“I don’t know who won,” Marika says. “But the—the people in white were you and Jill.”

Khan looks at Jake, who grits his teeth and rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Marika’s never seen something that didn’t come to pass in some fashion,” he says. “But she doesn’t always know when it’ll happen.”

“Well, then,” Khan says. “I suppose I should practice my swordfighting.”

Jake snorts. “Somehow I doubt you need much practice. Anything else, Marika? I know you need to trance down soon.”

“No,” Marika says. “No, that was it.”

“Then heal yourself,” Jake says, touching her forehead gently. Marika sighs, closes her eyes, and goes completely still.

“So what happened?” Gabe asks. “Let’s go get coffee and talk.” He punches a security code into the panel by the door and the light above it flashes red after it closes behind them. “Was anyone else injured? Where did this even happen?”

Khan shakes his head. “No one else was injured. I cannot tell you where.”

“Oh, fucking security clearance,” Gabe says. “Fine, but is anyone going to be looking for you?”

In truth, Khan wonders why Marcus has not tried to contact him, either in hopes he survived or… did not. But as soon as they round the corner his link chirps. He looks at it and sees six missed calls and two messages. “If you will pardon me,” he says, moving away from Jake and Gabe to call Marcus.

“Where the hell have you been?” Marcus demands as soon as Khan calls him. “What the hell happened there, Harrison?”

“Apparently, a bomb,” Khan says with as much sarcasm as he can muster. “I was in the exercise area at the time. Another officer was with me, and she was injured by the blast. Rather than wait around, I took her to Starfleet Medical.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” Marcus asks angrily.

“I was rather more concerned with saving the officer’s life,” Khan says evenly.

“Who was it?” Marcus asks. “I didn’t get reports of any of my people being injured.”

“I never caught her name,” Khan lies smoothly. “She has not yet regained consciousness.”

Marcus sighs heavily. “You have to tell me when you get caught near a bomb,” he says patronizingly. “Do you have any idea what it was like not knowing where the hell you were or if you’d even survived?”

“I do,” Khan says, idly considering whether he has time to stop by Jill’s apartment before he returns to London tonight. He thinks they could both use a hard scene, truth be told. “Was there significant damage to the station or its projects?” he asks, changing the subject.

“No, not that I’ve been made aware,” Marcus says. “You didn’t notice anything?”

“I had other priorities,” Khan says, his tone indicating what he thinks of the question.
Marcus really can’t say anything to that. “Were you injured?” he asks.

“Not seriously,” Khan says.

“Well,” Marcus says and stops. “I assume you’re heading back to London?”

“At some point tonight or tomorrow, yes,” Khan says. “Unless you have need of me elsewhere.”

“No, not until they determine the extent of the damage out there and figure out what might need fixing,” Marcus says. “Keep in touch.”

They hang up and Khan takes a moment to breathe and push down the anger before he goes to find Jake and Gabe again. He gets about three steps down the hall when someone punches him in the kidney and he grunts in surprise and pain, turning and grabbing the wrist of his attacker before he has time to process what just happened.

“You asshole,” Jill says, glaring at him with suspiciously bright eyes. “You almost get blown up and you don’t tell me? I had to hear it from Jake? You didn’t think ‘Oh, maybe I should let Jill know I survived deadly peril’ on your way here?” She yanks her wrist out of his grip and he lets her go.

“There was nothing you could have done,” Khan says even though he knows it won’t appease her. He’s right, it doesn’t, and he grabs her fist when she moves to punch him again. “Don’t,” he says quietly.

“Next time, fucking tell me,” Jill says, scrubbing at her eyes with her free hand. “I almost had a heart attack when Jake said there’d been an explosion.”

“Hopefully there will not be a next time,” Khan says.

“There damn well better not be,” Jill says. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, and when she pulls back from him he lets go of her hand. “Is Marika all right?”

“She will be,” Khan says. “Or so I am told.”

“Okay. Good.” Jill shakes herself all over. “Do you have to go back to London tonight? Or, um, Jupiter?”

Khan shakes his head. “Not until tomorrow,” he says.

“Spend tonight with me,” Jill says softly, in Russian. “Please.”

“Of course,” Khan says, touching her cheek. “We should find Jake first, though.”

“He and Gabe are in the lounge,” Jill says. “It’s just down the hall and around the corner.” She covers his hand with hers, holding it to her cheek for a moment, before she pulls back. Khan would kiss her, but the space is already too public and he too conspicuous to chance it.

They head to the lounge, where Jake isn’t quite pacing and Gabe sprawls in a chair watching him. “I tried to warn you but you were on the call and then she told me to shut up or she’d hit me somewhere that would make giving my mom grandkids difficult,” Jake says. “And while I don’t want kids, I’d at least like to ensure the equipment works.”

“Why?” Jill asks. “It’s not like you’ve done anything with it lately.”

“So wrong,” Jake says. “So very, very wrong. I just don’t tell you about them.”
“Names,” Jill says. “Tell me the last three names and I might believe you.”

Jake sighs. “Reena, Oliver, and Aiden. Happy now?”

“Yes, because I did know about Aiden, and that was a year ago,” Jill says.

“Yes, and when was the last time you got laid before John?” Jake counters.

“Can we please not have this discussion?” Gabe asks with a wince. “Please? I don’t need to know about any of your sex lives.”

“Always the prude,” Jill says, tsking at him.

“No, always the asexual,” Gabe says. “Difference. I’m not bothered by discussions of sex, I just don’t care.”

“You’ll never know what you’re missing,” Jake says. “But leaving that alone for another time, I’ve got to go prep for a stupid class on teaching people how to survive stupid situations. Jill, want to help me out and play injured?”

“No after last time,” Jill says. “When you did break my arm.”

“Only a little,” Jake says, but he ducks his head sheepishly.

“A break is like pregnancy, either it’s broken or it’s not,” Gabe says.

“But there are levels to how serious a break is,” Jake protests. “And she was fine in a week. Would have been fine in a day if she responded to regen.”

“Yes, but I don’t, and no, I’m not helping you out,” Jill says. “I have more important things to do. Gabe, are we okay? Is Marika going to be all right?”

Gabe nods. “She will,” he says. “I’ll keep an eye on her until she’s fully recovered, and then she’s not my worry until someone tries to kill her again.”

“Speaking of, Gabe, I’m going to grab these two and get out of here,” Jake says. “Call me if you need anything, or if Marika needs anything, okay? When she gets out of here send her my way.”


They say their goodbyes and leave. “Your place or mine?” Jake asks Jill as they exit the complex.

“Yours is both two blocks closer and undoubtedly neater,” Jill says.

“Yes, because Eema raised me to be compulsively neat,” Jake says. “Something she didn’t get you in time for.”

“Nope,” Jill agrees. “Cab or walk?”

“Walk,” Jake says. “Three of us won’t fit in a cab with one person having wings and it’s only a kilometer.”

From the angle of the sun, Khan estimates it to be mid-afternoon. The weather is pleasant enough, but no one talks much on the walk. Occasionally Jill’s hand touches his, and once his wing brushes against her shoulder and he sees her shiver.
Jake’s building looks absolutely ordinary, which doesn’t surprise Khan in the least. They go inside and take the lift to the top floor; when they get out, Jake swipes an access card and scans his handprint before his door opens. “Little paranoid,” he says, pushing the door open. “C’mon in.”

Inside, Khan sees a studio apartment similar in shape and layout to Jill’s, but with far less possessions and color. Everything is either neutral or black, the low bed neatly made with white sheets and a gray comforter and the couch a faded green. The only real splash of color in the apartment comes from a beautifully made blanket in shades of blue, draped over the back of the couch. “Coffee?” Jake asks, heading for the kitchen. “Sit anywhere you want.”

“Coffee is good,” Jill says. “Although do you have milk?”

“I do,” Jake says. “Got it delivered this morning. Can you hit the jammer?”

“Yeah,” Jill says, moving to a desk against the east wall and picking up a small box. She fiddles with it for a bit then sets it down. “Clear,” she reports.

“Okay,” Jake says. “So what the fuck happened?”

Khan grimaces and tells them the short version. By the time he finishes, Jake has handed him and Jill mugs of coffee and taken a seat on his coffee table facing them. “So…basically, we don’t know if you’re safe from Marcus trying to kill you or not,” Jake says when Khan’s done.

“We do not,” Khan admits. “I had thought it unlikely, but…now I am less certain.”

Jill tugs on a curl, looking unhappy. “As far as Marcus knows, you have no resources,” she says. “No one knows you, no one would vouch for you or miss you if you were gone. If he thinks you’re too dangerous to keep around, there’s not much that would stop him from trying to kill you.”

“So what do we do?” Jake asks, taking a sip of coffee.

“Plan A, we make Marcus think you’re indispensable,” Jill says to Khan. “Plan B…we go underground, save what of your family we can, and figure out a plan to get the rest.”

“Let’s try for plan A,” Jake says. “We’re not ready to go underground yet, not when it’d mean you and me going with him.”

“And how many false IDs do you have?” Jill asks.

“Uh,” Jake says. “More than ten, less than a hundred? You?”

“Less than you but enough to get by,” Jill says. "And Magpie and Andy have their own, too. They'd obviously be coming with us."

Khan thinks he doesn't quite know how to feel about this, about four people so willing to link their fates to his when they have only known him a matter of weeks. Then again, none of this makes any logical sense.

“Yeah, but while all of us likely have escape plans not many of them likely mesh with each other,” Jake says. "And coordinating that would be a bitch. So let's opt for plan A for now." He looks at Khan. "You have any miracles in your back pocket that would make Marcus think you're worth keeping around?"

Khan takes a sip of coffee. "I do," he says, considering what he wants to reveal to Marcus. The transporter is certainly not an option, but one of the weapons could be, especially if he gives
Marcus the impression he is still working on the prototype. And his time at the station behind Jupiter did give him some new ideas for the Vengeance—despite his loathing of Marcus, the puzzle of creating new technologies for space combat interests him enough that he has spent significant time on it.

"So tomorrow or when you get back to London, show him some of it," Jake says. "And hopefully we'll get some breathing room. Meantime, I guess we should coordinate plans to drop off the radar if we need to."

"I'll talk to Magpie about it," Jill says. "She and Andy and I are matched up because we made a deal ages ago that if one of us went, the other two would. If you give me one or two aliases, she can work it in." She looks at Khan. "Do you have an alternate identity?"

"Yes," Khan says. "I have not used it for much, however, so I do not entirely trust its security."

"If you give me the information Magpie can fix that," Jill says. "It's how she got her start, making false IDs and personas. She's the best."

Khan nods. "All right. Will Magpie have time for all this?"

"She'll make time," Jill says. "After she finds out what happened, assuming she doesn't already know."

"You did not tell her?" Khan asks.

"I called on my way to the hospital, she didn’t answer, she’ll call me back when she’s free," Jill says. "And frankly, I wanted to make sure you were all right before I talked to her, or she’d have freaked, too."

"What about Andy?" Khan asks.

"He’s your niece, you call him," Jill says. "Like, now would be good."

Khan grimaces, but acknowledges the point and takes out his comm link, moving to the kitchen area to call Andy.

"Mistress of mechanics, tell me what’s broken," he answers breezily.

"Andy," Khan says.

"I don’t fix people, uncle," Andy says, immediately dropping into Mandarin. "Are you broken?"

"No, I am not," Khan says. "But...there was an incident." He tells her about it briefly, noting Marika’s injuries but not including anything about why she was there.

"Well, shit," Andy says when he finishes. "Sounds like Marcus has decided you’re actually expendable after all."

"That is our concern, yes," Khan says.

Andy mutters a rather impressive stream of curses upon Marcus’s lineage and body; Khan has to admit, he’s impressed with her vocabulary and knowledge of ancient curses. When Andy finally runs out of steam, Khan gives him a moment to catch his breath. "Right, so," Andy says. "What now?"

"I work on making myself indispensable to Marcus," Khan says. "And the rest of you create one
cohesive escape plan should we need to disappear.”

“Yeah, okay,” Andy says. “I need—where the hell are you, anyway? San Francisco? I’m in New York, so’s Magpie, and we can’t really get anywhere else right now, plus we’ve got some stuff that —“ She stops, clearly thinking. “Okay. Wait. You’re a genius. If Magpie gets you a basic report of what she’s done to create our alternate personas and set up a plausible escape route, you can tie that in with your own and whatever Jake’s got, can’t you?”

“Likely, yes,” Khan says. “My only limitation in this time is not knowing as much as I would like about what paperwork is required and what should be common knowledge.”

“Hang on,” Andy says, distracted. Khan hears the sound of typing in the background and stays quiet. “Okay,” Andy says after a moment. “I’ve asked Magpie to send you information so you can take this on and we can focus on the stuff for the op. If you run into issues, call me or her, but I have faith in your ability to work computer magic.”

Khan momentarily wishes for Matthew; annoying as he can be, he is also a hacker without peer, or was in their time. Khan fully expects Matthew to dive into current technology with delight and come up in about five years. Unfortunately, Matthew isn’t here.

Fortunately, Khan’s own skills with computers were almost as good as Matthew’s, and he has had time to learn. “Thank you,” he says. “I should manage, I think.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking so too,” Andy says. “So, did you tell Jill or did she find out some other way?”


“Just wondering if you’ll need medical treatment,” Andy says. “She gets violent when she gets scared. She’s never hit me, or Magpie, or anyone else that wouldn’t or couldn’t hit back, but I don’t think you’d get the same exemption.”

“She did not hurt me,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I’m not sure she’s done with you yet,” Andy says. “In so many ways, but anyway. I have to run, take care. I’ll talk to you in a few days, unless you need me sooner or I need you sooner.”


“Likewise,” Andy says.

They hang up and Khan takes a moment to refocus his hearing on Jake and Jill, wondering what they are talking about.

“What'd you tell her?” Jake asks quietly.

Jill sighs. "That I was working on something that could…that could be pretty dangerous, and I couldn't tell her much but I promised I'd tell her what I could when I could, or have you do it. You?"

"Same deal," Jake says. "She lecture you?"

"A little," Jill says. She laughs softly. "Then she got it out of me that we were—that he and I were —and started interrogating me about that."

"Oh, boy," Jake says. "What'd you tell her?"
"Um," Jill says. "Can we—can we not go into that right now?"

"Yeah," Jake says slowly. "Yeah, of course, but—is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine, just—I don't want to get into it right now," Jill says.

Khan figures this is as good a time as any for him to rejoin the conversation and walks back over to the couch, taking Jake's vacated seat on the coffee table. "Everything okay?" Jill asks, a little more quickly than usual. "Is Andy all right?"

"He is fine," Khan says. He fills them in on Andy's suggestion.

"Makes sense," Jake says. "So are you heading back to London tonight or tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Khan says. He won't be able to accomplish anything in the next fifteen hours that would make a difference one way or the other.

Jake looks at Jill. Something passes between them, she shakes her head minutely, and Jake sighs. "Okay," he says. "If you're sure."

"I am," Jill says. She doesn't explain as she gets to her feet. "Let's get going," she says to Khan. "We can grab food on the way back to my place."

"As you like," Khan says, also rising to his feet. "Please let me know when Marika has healed," he tells Jake.

"Sure, no problem." Jake gets up and walks them both to the door. He bends to hug Jill, murmuring something in her ear Khan doesn't catch. She snorts and punches his shoulder lightly.

"Catch you later," she says, stepping back.

"Take care of her," Jake says to Khan in Hebrew.

Khan nods. "I will."

Chapter End Notes

A couple things here that you may or may not have caught but I wanted to talk about anyway:

1. Khan's comments on migraine are drawn from my life; I get chronic headaches and chronic migraines, and explaining the difference to people is often a serious pain in the ass. If you are ever curious about migraines, ask me; I know a ton.

2. Something I've noticed while writing this story and FF is that my take on the Trek universe is less...optimistic than the original series intended. Gene Roddenberry wanted TOS to be more of a utopia if I'm remembering correctly, and maybe I'm just more cynical than he was but I don't think you can change humanity that much in only a few hundred years. Even alien influence wouldn't be enough to make that drastic a shift. So my head canon has an underbelly, has a dark side, and an active black market and criminal element. Ask me my thoughts on some hot topics in current world now and how I think they'd work in Trek sometime.
3. Is it me or does everyone in this story spend an awful lot of time asking Khan to take care of Jill? She'd be very annoyed if she realized. She might actually have realized, but not said anything.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

It is a dangerous game we are playing. The stakes have not changed.

Chapter Notes

Hey folks, welcome back or welcome if you're new. I don't have much to report this week but writing is going fairly well, and I'm almost up to a section I wrote ages ago, so hopefully soon I'll have a nice long chunk for you.

As always, thank you so much for comments, kudos, just reading and sticking with me. I would not be continuing on this without you. (Note: that is NOT a plea for "feedback or I won't write more". It's just an insecure author admitting that writing into a void isn't much fun.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jill stays quiet in the lift down, and says little on the sidewalk except to ask Khan to hail them a taxi. Once in the taxi, she looks out the window, her body language still if not quite relaxed. The main clue he has to her mental state turns out to be her fist, which clenches and relaxes against her thigh, over and over.

Khan doesn’t ask questions until they get to her apartment and the door has closed behind them, privacy seal activated. “Talk to me,” he says quietly. “What is wrong?”

“I’m not saying I told you so,” Jill says, not looking at him. “But…now what? I can’t watch your back all the time and I don’t trust Marcus any more than I could throw him. You thought he needed you enough that he wouldn’t try to kill you, but clearly that was an incorrect assumption.”

“It…may have been,” Khan says carefully. “It is also possible that Marcus was not behind the explosion, that one of his lackeys decided he did not want me around anymore. I still think Marcus needs me, that I am too valuable an asset to outweigh me as a liability.”

“Yeah, but either way the end result is you almost getting blown to pieces,” Jill says. “And if it’s not Marcus, that means anyone could be out to get you.”

“True,” Khan concedes. He walks over to Jill, resting his hands on her shoulders, not entirely surprised when she flinches. “It takes a great deal to kill me, pyara,” he says. “Which is not something most people realize.”

“I know,” Jill says, still not looking at him.

Khan tips her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. “Why are you angry with me?” he asks.

“Because you didn’t tell me,” Jill says. “Because when Jake called me, the first thing he said was
‘John’s all right’, and that’s never a good way to start a conversation. Because you scared me and I don’t like being scared. I hate it, actually.” She takes a breath to steady herself, letting it out slowly. “Because I had a really bad nightmare last night and I wished you were there, and I don’t— I don’t want to have to depend on you that much, because eventually you’ll go be with your family and…” She swallows, looks down, half-heartedly trying to pull away from Khan but he wraps his arms and wings around her, holding her close. After a moment, she sighs and slumps against him.

“I’m sorry I was not there to help you after the nightmares,” Khan says softly, stroking her hair. “Or at least available by comm-link.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jill says into his chest. “I don’t blame you for that.”


Jill sighs again; after a moment, she wraps her arms around his waist. “I don’t want to need you,” she murmurs. “But I don’t know if I can help it.”

Khan says nothing because she won’t believe anything he says on the subject, not yet. He will convince her otherwise, but now is not the time. Instead, he slips his hand under her hair, rubbing the back of her neck gently. “If you keep doing that you’ll put me to sleep,” Jill says, but doesn’t pull away or ask him to stop.

“How much sleep did you get last night?” Khan asks.

“Uh,” she says. “Maybe three hours?”

“Perhaps you should nap,” Khan says, keeping up the massage.

“I want a shower first,” Jill says. “And I don’t…” She stops. “I don’t want to sleep alone and I know you don’t need sleep.”

“No, but I will stay with you,” Khan says. He’d offer to share the shower, too, but that isn’t an option in this apartment.

“You have things to do,” Jill says but it’s a weak protest at best.

Khan kisses her hair, holding her close a moment longer before he steps back. “Go shower, milaya moya,” he says, smoothing her hair back. “I will be here when you are done.”

Jill looks at him for a long moment, but whatever thoughts cross her mind she doesn’t articulate. “Okay,” she says finally. “Okay. I’ll go shower.”

She walks into the bathroom, the door closing behind her.

Khan looks around the apartment, seeing what may be a method to the madness, or at least proof of more packing and rearranging things. He walks over to the bed, noticing Bilbo tucked under the covers next to Jill’s side of the bed. It makes him smile even as it makes something in his chest tighten. That she still feels the need for a physical security blanket…

He sits down on the edge of the bed, absentmindedly picking the bear up. He can feel worn patches in its fur from years of her holding it, and its nose is somewhat pushed to the side; he doesn’t quite know why and then realizes it must be from her kissing it. A seam runs up the bear’s back, and Khan can see a couple other spots that have clearly been mended through the years. But overall Bilbo is in remarkably good shape.
Gently, Khan puts the bear back down, considering his options. Before he can think about them too much his comm-link chirps. “Yes,” he says, answering.

“What the hell happened?” Magpie asks. “Jill called, left me a message saying she needed to talk to me urgently but then she didn’t answer her link when I called her. What’s going on? Is she all right? Are you all right?”

“Yes, we are fine,” Khan says. “There was an incident.” He gives her a brief explanation, again mentioning Marika’s injuries but not her role.

“Shit,” Magpie says when he finishes. “So you’re okay? Is Jill pissed at you?”

“Yes,” Khan says to both.

“Did she punch you?” Magpie asks.

“She did,” Khan admits.

“Yeah, not surprised,” Magpie says. “It’ll take her a while to cool off.”

“Does she do this often?” Khan asks.

“Only to people who will punch her back,” Magpie says. “Otherwise she just yells at the target for a bit before she starts crying. She gets angry when she gets scared, and she gets violent when she gets angry.”

“Andy said something similar,” Khan says.

“Yeah, we’re familiar with it,” Magpie says. “She put a hole in the wall once. Jake was telling me once she almost gave him a concussion.”

“Have you and Jake been conversing?” Khan asks.

“On and off,” Magpie says. “He’s not awful, for a Starfleet officer. Anyway, speaking of him and Andy, kind of, Andy called me earlier. So I am sending you a bunch of information and documentation and some general guidelines. I’m pretty sure you can fill in the blanks, but if you run into any issues call me.”

“I will,” Khan says. “Thank you.”

“I’m hoping we don’t need whatever plan you come up with, but in case we do…” Magpie trails off.

“Yes,” Khan says.

Magpie sighs. “This just keeps getting better and better. Not your fault, though. I blame this wholly on Marcus. When do you get to kill him again?”

“Not soon enough,” Khan says grimly.

“Yeah, agreed,” Magpie says. “Make it take a while, would you? And on that cheery note, I have to go. This firewall won’t hack itself and a girl’s got to make a living. Call me if you need me or if Jill kicks you out, I’m in San Francisco overnight.”

“I will,” Khan says. He hangs up; in amusing timing, Jill emerges from the bathroom a few moments later, hair tumbling down her back and wrapped in a short blue robe.
“I heard you talking to someone,” she says. “Who called?”

“Magpie,” Khan says. “She told me to call her if you do not want me to stay with you.”

Jill snorts. “She still wants to get in your pants,” she says. “Although at this point she’s more interested in having you pose for her, and she doesn’t generally sleep with her models.”

“I see,” Khan says. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m all right,” Jill says unconvincingly.

Khan holds out a hand. “Come sit with me.”

Jill hesitates, but walks over to him and takes his hand, settling in his lap when he draws her in. She sighs and tucks her head against his shoulder; he strokes her hair, folding a wing around her.

“I’m still mad at you,” she mutters after a moment.

“I know,” Khan says.

She sighs again. “You scared me,” she says. “I don’t like being scared.”

“It is a dangerous game we are playing,” Khan says quietly. “The stakes have not changed. We both know that.”

“The stakes have changed,” Jill says. “We didn’t think your life was in immediate danger before.”

“We always knew there was a risk Marcus would decide I am too big a liability to be used,” Khan points out. “And we do not know he was behind the explosion. On reflection, I think it actually fairly unlikely. He would not have wanted to risk damage to the station itself or his projects, nor would he have wanted much collateral damage from other personnel. And he has to know that killing me in a situation like that would be difficult if not wholly impossible.”

“I’m not comforted by this,” Jill says. “Because if it wasn’t him, that means anyone else could be out to get you.”

“It is possible,” Khan admits. “But the odds of another attack on me are lower on Earth.”

“Lower but not out of the realm of possibility,” Jill says. She thumps her head against his shoulder. “I want a drink.”

Reluctantly, Khan lets go of her, watching her walk over to the kitchen and pull a bottle of vodka out of the freezer. She pours two large glasses without asking Khan if he wants one and puts the vodka back. “L’chaim,” she says, handing Khan a glass.

“Thank you,” Khan says, taking a sip. He nods in appreciation at the smooth taste.

“I buy good vodka,” Jill says. “It’s the Russian in me. And cheap vodka is just nasty.” She knocks back a healthy portion of her drink without grimacing.

“Cat would agree with you,” Khan says.

“It’s not really a bad philosophy in general,” Jill says. “Buy the quality product, it’ll always be worth it in the end.” She studies him for a moment and smiles a little. “I certainly hope that works for you,” she says. Her smile fades a bit. “And that the price isn’t too high to pay.”
“Yes,” Khan says.

Jill takes a seat next to him, taking another sip of her drink. “It’s been an all-around shitty day,” she says, looking at her glass. “Nightmares and paperwork that doesn’t stop and stuff for the research project I actually have to at least start, and an hour-long conversation with Eema I didn’t want to have. It’s not that I didn’t want to talk to her, because I always love talking to her, and it’s not that she was being awful, but she kept asking questions I didn’t want to answer.”

“What was she asking?” Khan asks.

“I…I don’t want to get into it,” Jill says, not looking at him. “Can we not talk about it?”

“We can,” Khan says, wondering what she won’t tell him and won’t tell Jake.

“Thank you,” Jill says. She leans against him, pressing her forehead against his shoulder. “We never did get dinner, and I’m out of food except meal bars and coffee,” she says. “Are you hungry?”

“No,” Khan says. “Are you?”

“No,” Jill says. “No, I’m really not.”

Khan takes another sip of his vodka, moving Jill’s hair out of the way so he can rub the back of her neck. She sighs, but doesn’t pull away except to take another sip of her drink. “I feel like a whiny petulant brat,” she says. “I need to shake this mood, but I don’t want to go running and—in what may be a first for me—I don’t really want sex, either.”

What she needs is likely a hard scene, Khan thinks, but doesn’t say it. He isn’t certain how well she would receive the observation and would rather not set her off, not when she’s already so wound up.

“I know,” she says after a moment. “I know.”

“What do you know?” Khan asks.

“That what I need and what I want are two different things,” Jill says, sitting up to look at him. “And you know what I need. So do I, I just don’t want to admit it.”

“I would not have you unwilling,” Khan says quietly.

“I know you wouldn’t,” Jill says. She studies him for a long moment, saying nothing, then downs the rest of her drink and sets the glass on her nightstand. She takes one slow, deep breath, then another, and slides off the bed, onto her knees in front of him. “Please,” she says softly. “Get me out of my head.”

“I will,” Khan says, looking at her, considering his options. He takes a moment, then reaches for her, tangling his hand in her hair and pulling her up, into his lap. He knows his grip is tight enough it hurts, and Jill swallows a whimper from it but doesn’t protest. “Tell me one thing,” he says, easing his hold. “Do you want the right to safeword or not?”

Jill swallows, licks her lips. “No.”

“Are you certain?” Khan asks.

She swallows again. “Yes.”
He doesn’t ask again.

Instead, he takes her apart, methodically and carefully, centimeter by centimeter until she shatters, until she collapses sobbing in his arms. He holds her, strokes her hair back from her flushed, damp face, brushes tears off her cheeks. He murmurs praise and comfort in languages she doesn’t understand until she falls asleep, exhausted and spent.

She doesn’t stir half an hour later when he eases her off him and gets out of bed, walking over to the window. When Khan opens the curtains slightly he can see the moon, full and bright, no clouds to blur its light. Reflected light, from the sun, of course, but still beautiful.

He remembers in his time, how far out of reach it had seemed. They’d dreamed of getting there, of getting off Earth, finding new worlds. But when they’d built the ship, it had been a last-ditch effort, a desperate hope to escape with their lives. They’d put their hopes and dreams and ambitions into cryogenic suspension and left a planet they never thought they’d see again.

They still might be in that sleep, might be light-years from Earth now had it not been for Nero. Khan doesn’t think of the Romulan often. His feelings on the man are mixed and surprisingly powerful. He cannot fault the man for wanting vengeance for his wife and his daughter; quite frankly, Khan would have done just as much if not more had something like this happened to Rani, or any child they had.

But on the other hand, had Nero not done what he had, Khan would not be here now, his family hostage to secure his cooperation. They would still be in stasis, for...how long? Years? Centuries? They had never expected the cryosleep to last indefinitely; they knew enough about the mechanics to know it would not work.

Khan cannot decide whether he would rather still be asleep or not. Before—before Jill bumped into him, he would have said asleep, absolutely, and meant it. If he had had a way to put himself back into cryosleep, rather than wake his family, he would have taken it. But now...now he isn’t sure.

His comm-link chirps quietly and he moves over to his clothes to get it, glancing at Jill to make sure she hasn’t woken. “Yes,” he says softly, walking back to the window so as not to disturb her.

“Found out who was behind the explosion,” Jake says in satisfaction.

“Tell me,” Khan says immediately.

“You ready for this one? It was Cruz,” Jake says. “Apparently he doesn’t like how chummy you are with Marcus, felt Marcus was playing favorites. He had the opportunity to get out to the station the day after you and Marcus went there, saw a chance after Marcus left and took it.”

“How did you find out?” Khan asks.

“Cruz told Smythe, who told Marcus, who arrested Cruz,” Jake says. “Not very bright on Cruz’s part, if you ask me.”

“No,” Khan agrees. “Not at all.”

“Cruz apparently wanted in on the torpedo project,” Jake says. “Said he thought that as a weapons specialist, he should have been included in the build, and didn’t know why you were and he wasn’t.”

Khan shakes his head, his wings ruffling. “I overestimated his intelligence,” he says.
“Yeah, so did Marcus,” Jake says. “But I thought you might appreciate hearing that and knowing
that it doesn’t look like Marcus wanted or wants you dead. He was pretty pissed about it, actually,
scuttlebutt says, and Cruz is looking at a lot of time in a rehab facility and a dishonorable
discharge.” He pauses. “Or we could just kill him.”

“Would that not lead to more investigation?” Khan asks. “I would prefer not to draw attention to
ourselves.”

“If you want him dead, I can make it happen,” Jake says. “Might not be able to let you kill him, but
I can deal with it.”

Khan considers for a few seconds. “Do it,” he says.

“That’s what I thought you’d say,” Jake says. “I’ve got it handled. I’ll send you video when I have
it, as proof.”

“How is Marika?” Khan asks.

“She’s okay,” Jake says. “Still in trance, but she’ll be fine by tomorrow morning.”

“What species is she?” Khan asks. “She isn’t human. I do not think she is even half human.”

“She probably isn’t, but she’s not telling what her actual species is and I’m not asking,” Jake says.
“Whatever she is, we haven’t seen another one like her that I know of. I did some searching, but I
can’t find any records of anyone like her.”

“Where did she come from?” Khan asks.

“Her file—and what she’s told me—says she grew up in Colorado,” Jake says. “She still bases out
of there, near Denver. She did the homeschool thing, applied to the Academy at sixteen, got in. I
picked her out for intelligence work her senior year and the rest is history.”

“Interesting,” Khan says.

“Yeah,” Jake says. “She’s good at what she does, though, so I don’t much care about her biology
except as it relates to her work. She’s never given me a reason not to trust her. How’s my
sister?”

“Sleeping,” Khan says.

“Not asking more,” Jake says quickly. “And on that note, I need to get going and plan an
execution. I do love my life.”

Khan almost laughs before he controls it. “You would have fit in well with my family,” he says
instead.

“Here’s hoping I still will,” Jake says. “Catch you later.”

“Yes,” Khan says. He hangs up and turns to look at Jill, still sound asleep but having moved into
the middle of the bed, sprawled out over most of it. It makes him smile.

They don’t have much time left before the first op. To be perfectly honest, Khan isn’t sure if he’s
ready for it or not. He doesn’t consider himself an optimist and the thought of everything that could
go wrong makes him pause. It has never stopped him before; certainly he and his family did not
have any advantages when the wars began. But things feel different this time. He has too much
personal investment for him to feel comfortable with the risks.

It won’t stop them, of course. Frankly, Khan thinks that even were something to happen to him personally the others would push on. And he will not admit his fears to Jill; she carries such a weight as it is, she does not need his own uncertainties added.

He walks over to the bed, sitting down on its edge and reaching out to brush a few curls back from Jill’s cheek. She smiles a little in her sleep and nuzzles into his hand; Khan doesn’t mean to wake her, but she blinks her eyes open after a moment. “What’s wrong?” she mumbles in Russian.

“Nothing,” Khan says in the same language. “You should sleep.”

“I’ll sleep after you tell me what’s wrong,” Jill says, pushing up to kneel facing him. “You look troubled.” She lays her hand against his cheek. “I thought I heard voices.”

“Jake called,” Khan says. “He found out who was behind the explosion.” He tells her the rest briefly.

“Well, that’s good for us,” Jill says, shoving her hair back. “So why do you look so unhappy?”

“I am not,” Khan says.

She scowls at him. “If I can’t lie to you, you can’t lie to me,” she says. “Talk to me.”

Khan smiles faintly. “I am not unhappy, pyara,” he says. “Merely…thinking about what lies ahead. We still need a plan for what happens after we revive those of my siblings we can, or for what happens after we deal with Marcus.”

“I know,” Jill says, chewing her lip. “I know. I have…I have some thoughts on it, but I’m—I’m not quite ready to share them yet. I want to try and figure out more of what’s involved, and it may be the craziest idea I’ve ever had—which for me is saying something. But I may have a potential idea.”

“Is this related to the person you wanted to speak with?” Khan asks.

She shakes her head. “No, and that didn’t pan out,” she says. “He’s shipped out and I don’t expect to see him again before we’d need his help. Maybe later, but right now that’s on hold.”

Khan nods, brushing a curl back from Jill’s cheek. “How are you feeling?” he asks.

“A bit sore,” she admits. “Some of my muscles ache. It’s a good feeling, but I might take some painkillers in a bit.”

“You should,” Khan says. “You will need your strength for packing and moving.”

Jill sighs. “I know. I’ll be right back.” She kisses him lightly and climbs out of bed, ducking into her bathroom briefly and emerging with a pill bottle. “These should make me amusingly loopy in a bit,” she says, dry-swallowing two. “I cannot wait to get to London with water facilities for showering. I could really use one of those right now.”

“Why did you not find an apartment with them here?” Khan asks.

“Didn’t seem worth the expense when I’m not usually here more than a few weeks,” Jill says, coming back over to the bed. “Also, most starships don’t have water facilities unless you’re the captain or really, really lucky. I didn’t want to get used to it and then have to get un-used to it when
I shipped out.” She sits down next to Khan and takes his hand, her fingers small and warm against his. “I’m sorry I was a bitch to you earlier.”

“You weren’t,” Khan says, absently brushing his thumb over her knuckles.

“You almost got blown up and I was being horrible about it,” Jill says. “I’m sorry. I don’t…I don’t handle it very well when I get scared and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“It is fine,” Khan says. “I was not seriously injured.”

“Yeah, but still,” Jill says. “Accept the damn apology, would you?” She makes a face at him.

He laughs. “Apology accepted,” he says.

“Thank you,” Jill says, mollified. “You probably need to head back early in the morning, I’m guessing.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But not for several hours yet.”

“I’m actually kind of hungry,” Jill admits. “There’s a diner I know that delivers 24 hours, I can hunt up a menu. Do you want anything to eat?”

“All right,” Khan says.

They eat at the couch, Jill in her robe and Khan in his trousers. Surprisingly domestic, really, but not uncomfortable. Jill tosses the cartons into the trash when they finish and crawls into Khan’s lap, tucking her head against his shoulder and reminding Khan a bit of a small, contented cat.

He strokes her hair, brushing curls away from his nose and mouth, and says nothing. She brushes a kiss against his collarbone, relaxing against him. “Let’s go to bed,” she says finally. “I’m too tired to stay awake much longer without giving myself a migraine.”

“Yes,” Khan says, picking her up as he stands. Jill laughs but lets him carry her over to the bed, wrapping her arms around his neck when he sets her down. He kisses her lightly and lets go. “Do you need more pain medication?”

“No, I’m okay,” Jill says. “I just need sleep.” She wriggles under the covers and holds them back for Khan, who slips in next to her, tugging her back in against him.

He doesn’t mean to sleep, but she’s warm and soft against him, breathing softly against his shoulder. He can smell the sandalwood on her skin, more immediately familiar than jasmine at this point, and the dark and quiet lulls him unconscious before he can stop it.

He knows the city, harsh and forbidding, tall buildings and jagged skylines against an eerily purple sky. The ground shakes slightly under his boots; the air tastes of something acrid, like smoke but not quite. The stars hide under thick gray clouds, and he sees no people around him, no indications of life. Abandoned, he thinks, but not quite. That’s not quite accurate and he doesn’t know why.

“Come, brother,” Ekaterina says and he turns to his right, seeing her in the black leathers she always favored, her knives gleaming silver against them. “We have work to do.”

“We have a war to win,” Khan says without thinking about it.

“Da.” Ekaterina laughs. “But when have we not? And we are not alone this time.”

“No,” Khan says, looking past her at Konstantin, at Katsuro and Bishop. Alona and Matthew walk
on his left, and Khan cannot see them but knows Anandi and Maeve are with them. Not alone, not in this.

“Do you think she knows we are coming?” Cat asks, studying the sky.

“She knows,” Khan says. “She will be ready.”

“Good.” Ekaterina nods, absently dropping a knife into her hand and flipping it.

“It won’t make up for the lives lost,” Maeve says quietly.

“Nothing ever does,” Matthew says. “But at least we can save these.”

Something booms in the distance, loud and low and echoing through the empty buildings and streets. “They know we’re here,” Bishop says. “Let’s move.”

They run, the nine of them, bodies moving in synch and footsteps thudding against the cracked ground. The lights get brighter as they go, even as the buildings become cracked and empty, piles of debris and material cluttering the ground, an obstacle course they have to pass. Not impossible for them, nor necessarily difficult, but the lack of light and familiarity with the situation makes them a little more cautious. None of them can afford injury at this point.

Khan hears Anandi cry out and falters a step. “Go,” she snaps, flinging her arm out. “Vamos. I twisted my ankle, I’ll be fine in a minute.”

Matthew and Konstantin drop back to pick her up, each one taking a side; Khan leaves them to it and puts on speed, Cat and Alona keeping pace with him easily. Almost there. They’re almost there, and then—

He wakes with a sudden shock and gasp, feeling as though a bucket of ice water just upended over his head. He doesn’t—running, and his family, and a city he’s never—

Jill, Khan thinks, consciously willing his body to relax and his breath to steady. Jill was in danger, and they were going to get her. Likely a dream brought on by the day and Marika’s vision. It means nothing.

He hopes.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if I remembered to ask this or not, but please do let me know what you think of Marika. She's still fairly new to me, I'm feeling her out.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

What, exactly, am I supposed to do with this astounding lack of information?

Chapter Notes

The plot thickens. Or something. Cryptic author is cryptic (or may just be making it up as she goes along, take your pick).

Since Marcus does not know Khan has easy access to transporter technology, he takes a shuttle back to London rather than ask Andy for assistance. This also gives him the opportunity to take a box of Jill’s things with him; she says she only has a few things left to pack, although given the state of her apartment Khan wonders if she will be able to find them.

He carries the box into his building, and is just about to climb the stairs to his floor when he hears a voice call out “Harrison!” behind him.

Turning, he sees Smythe standing there, slightly disheveled. Khan sets the box down on the steps. “Smythe,” he says politely.

“Are you all right?” Smythe asks. “When I heard—I couldn’t believe it. I still can’t believe it. I don’t know why he’d do something like that. Were you injured?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, I avoided the blast.”

“I heard a couple people were, one pretty badly and you took her back to Earth for medical treatment,” Smythe says. “Will she be okay?”

“Yes, I think so,” Khan says. “I did not get many details about her condition, but the doctor seemed to think she would be fine.”

“Okay, good,” Smythe says. “And Admiral Marcus told me there was no real damage to anything else out there, which…it might count in Calvin’s favor, but I’m not sure about that. I haven’t seen the admiral that furious in a long time. I almost thought he was going to have a heart attack.”

“You have worked for him a long time,” Khan observes.

“I have,” Smythe says. “He’s a good man. I certainly wouldn’t want his job. Anyway, I just—I wanted to make sure you were all right. I still don’t understand why Calvin was so upset over it. He may be a weapons specialist but he’s never built one, so…” He shrugs. “Then again, have you?”

“Not quite like these,” Khan says, entirely true as the torpedoes are a wholly new design.

“Fair enough,” Smythe says.
“What are you working on these days?” Khan asks curiously.

Smythe shrugs. “More R&D. The admiral’s got me researching older ship designs to see if there’s anything in them we haven’t incorporated but possibly could. He did mention you were a bit of an historian, so if I run into any issues, you might be able to help. That true?”

“Somewhat,” Khan says without elaborating. It makes him wary of Smythe but also wondering what Marcus has in mind. Marcus has to know Khan would recognize the attempt to put Smythe on him as a guard dog. A warning, perhaps? Or more petulance?

“What’s your area of specialty?” Smythe asks.

“The Eugenics Wars,” Khan says.

“That was the first ship to leave the solar system with people aboard, wasn’t it? The Botany Bay?” Smythe asks. “After—I mean, after the wars ended.”

“It was,” Khan says. “If you’ll excuse me—“ He picks up the box again. “I appreciate your courtesy in checking in.”

He climbs two stairs before Smythe catches up to him. “We need to talk,” he says quietly.

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because Cruz wasn’t working alone,” Smythe says. “He’s being set up as the fall guy, but this wasn’t his deal, not entirely.”

Khan studies Smythe for a moment. He doesn’t get the sense Smythe is playing him, and it would make sense that this not be entirely Cruz’s fault. “Upstairs,” he says, nodding. “I am on the fourth floor.”

Smythe sighs but climbs the stairs. Khan lets them into his apartment, sparing a moment to hope Andy isn’t there. He shouldn’t be, given their conversation last night—but then again, given the events, it would not surprise Khan to see her there.

So of course, he opens his door to see her sitting at his dining table working with a pair of glasses on and a very tiny screwdriver. She glances up, her eyes hugely magnified by the glasses, and curses, setting down the pieces she’s working on and taking off the lenses. “Hi,” she says. “Sorry. I didn’t— I didn’t expect you until later today.”

“It is fine,” Khan says. He sets Jill’s box down by the couch. “David Smythe, a colleague of mine from the archive. Smythe, this is my nephew Andy.”

“Hi,” Andy says, cautiously cheerful. “Uncle John gave me an access card to his flat, and I needed to be in London for a few days, so I let myself in. But I’ll be going now. Please don’t touch that, I’ll come back for it later.”

“I didn’t know you had family,” Smythe says to Khan in surprise. “Your file doesn’t—“ He stops. “Ah, that is, never mind.”

“It’s complicated,” Andy says, carefully putting away his tools. “What’s this all about?” he asks Khan in Mandarin.

“Smythe has information about the explosion,” Khan says in the same language. “Cruz was not working alone.”
Andy’s eyebrows wing up. “Interesting,” she says. “Do you want me to stay?”

Khan considers it. “I think not,” he says. “I would rather Marcus not know about you in detail.”

“True,” Andy says. She flips her hair back over her shoulder and picks up her bag, getting to her feet. “Sorry, David,” she says. “I slip into Mandarin when I’m not thinking about it.”

“I didn’t know you spoke it,” Smythe doesn’t quite ask Khan.

“I enjoy languages,” Khan says. He supposes he should offer Smythe tea, but really doesn’t feel like pretending to be sociable. “Andy, I can call you later.”

“Sure, I’ve got to be around for a few days,” Andy says, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “See you around.” He pauses to kiss Khan’s cheek and leaves quickly, long legs carrying him quickly out the door.

“I didn’t know you had a nephew,” Smythe says again, looking around the sparsely finished flat. “He can’t be that much younger than you.”

Khan shrugs. “It is somewhat complicated.” He studies Smythe, decides to push a little. “I would prefer he not get back to Marcus.”

Smythe smiles a little. “We’re not drinking buddies, Harrison.”

“Your son went to graduate school with his daughter,” Khan states.

“Yeah, he did, but that’s not—I work for him, I respect him, but I don’t tell him things he wouldn’t care about,” Smythe says. “And…” he hesitates. “You mind if I sit?”

Khan gestures toward a chair and Smythe takes it. Khan doesn’t do the same, leaning against the counter instead, his wings half-folded around him. Smythe looks up at him, sighs, and rubs his hands over his face. “I know Calvin,” he says. “I’ve known him a while, worked with him a few years before you came along. And—yeah, he can be hotheaded, and he can be an ass, but it’s not—it’s not like him to do this. Not at all. I think—I know—one pushed him into it. I just…I don’t know who and I don’t know why. I talked to him, yesterday, and he was—he was proud he did it, angry you survived, but at the same time, he just—he said he wasn’t the last of it. He wasn’t the only one who had it in for you.”

At that, Khan does take a seat, turning the chair around to straddle it and save his wings. “Tell me what you know,” he says evenly.

“I know that there are a lot of folks in—in section 31 that don’t like you,” Smythe says after a moment. “I know that you’ve got a reputation for being a cold, arrogant bastard, and that a lot of fellow officers think you have some kind of leverage over Marcus to get you into this program. No one I’ve talked to ever knew you before you showed up in London, so everyone wonders where you came from and how you got to be where you are now.”

Not for the first time Khan thinks Marcus would have done better to keep him isolated on the Jupiter station, rather than run the risk of allowing him to acclimate to modern-day London. The idea of him having leverage over Marcus strikes him as suitably ironic; he makes a note to tell Jill about that later. “All right,” he says instead. “Now tell me what you think.”

“I think you’re a genius, and a cold bastard,” Smythe says honestly. “I think you didn’t go through the Academy, and I don’t know how you met the admiral but I’m not entirely certain it was your idea, either.” He takes a breath, looks down at the table. “I think that I admire the admiral a hell of
a lot, and I respect him, but goddamn he wants a war and I don’t. He thinks it’s inevitable, I don’t. He thinks a lot of things I don’t, and…I’m no saint, I never claimed to be or wanted to be. And maybe he’s right. I’m not an admiral, never wanted to be, and maybe he’s seeing things I’m not, maybe he knows things I don’t about the situation. But I don’t think provoking a war with the Klingons is going to help anyone except the weapons designers and the medical staff, and I don’t—honestly, I don’t know if the Federation would survive it. I don’t—“ Smythe stops again. “I won’t actively betray him,” he says slowly. “I owe him too much. But I don’t have to tell him much, either, and I don’t have to tell him whatever you might tell me.”

“Not having to is not the same thing as not doing it,” Khan says neutrally.

“No, it’s not,” Smythe says. He runs a hand through graying hair and sighs again. “I don’t blame you for not wanting to trust me,” he says. “I wouldn’t either.”

“What do you want me to do?” Khan asks. “You come to me, you tell me Cruz admitted his complicity in planning something he thought would kill me and anyone else caught close enough. You tell me there are others who would do the same, but that you don’t know who they are or what they might be planning. You tell me you disagree with Marcus, but you will not betray him. What, exactly, am I supposed to do with this astounding lack of information? In what way does this help any of us?”

“I might—I might be able to find out who wants you dead and what they’re planning,” Smythe says. “I can’t promise anything, but I might be able to learn a few things. If I do, I’ll tell you everything I know. For now, just—watch your back.”

“I will,” Khan says.

“Your girlfriend know about this?” Smythe asks.

“Yes,” Khan says, again disliking the term. “I saw her yesterday.”

“Did she punch you?” Smythe asks, smiling a little.

Curious, Khan tilts his head. “Why do you ask?”

“She reminds me of my wife,” Smythe says. “Alice’s never punched me, but she’s thrown a few pots and pans in my direction before. Your lady seems more the type to inflict damage herself, and after seeing her wipe the floor with Cruz, I’m almost wondering if you should be seeking medical help.”

“She didn’t injure me,” Khan says. “Nor did she throw anything at me.”

“Why her?” Smythe asks. “What drew you to her?”

Khan considers how honest he wants to be with Smythe, what he can reveal and what it might gain him. “She reminded me of a woman I knew,” he says finally. “One I cared about deeply.” Not inaccurate save for the tenses, and if it makes Smythe think of him as less cold, it might be worth it.

If it isn’t, Khan will kill him if it becomes necessary.

“How?” Smythe persists. “I met my Alice—god, thirty-six years ago. I was fresh out of the Academy, she was just out of nursing school, we met at a party—long story, but I knew as soon as I looked at her she was something special. Took me ten months to convince her I wasn’t an asshole, another eleven to get her to marry me. She drives me crazy, but I can’t imagine life without her.”
He smiles a little, looking at Khan. “Your lady reminds me of her, honestly.”

“She is…different,” Khan admits. “Not like most women I have met these days.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Smythe says. “She’s not like most officers I’ve met, either. Although…” He grimaces. “We lost a lot at Vulcan, and it’s…no one was the same after that.”

Khan nods. “Wars rarely leave anyone unchanged,” he says.

“You say that like you’ve fought one,” Smythe says.

“I study history,” Khan says matter-of-factly. “There are hundreds in our past.” Absolutely true and not acknowledging the implication, even though Smythe is right.

“True,” Smythe says. “And there might be one in our future. What do you think about our odds against the Klingons?”

This time Khan grimaces. “I would not rate them highly,” he says. “Even with Marcus’s plans—the Klingons live for battle in ways humans—and most other Federation species—do not. The Federation is not unprepared but underprepared. The Klingons are likely making plans for what they undoubtedly see as an inevitable conflict. Marcus is as well, but the Klingons will wholeheartedly support their leadership. The Federation citizens…will not.”

“Not unless we’re provoked,” Smythe says.

“True,” Khan says. “But I think the Klingons are not likely to aggressively start a war. If they would do so, they should have already.”

“I think they’re waiting for something,” Smythe says. “But what that is, I don’t know.”

To be honest, Khan doesn’t either. He doesn’t have enough experience with Klingons to delve deeply into their psychology. Between himself, Alona, and Konstantin, they could likely come up with a plausible theory, but on his own Khan lacks sufficient data.

He keeps his face and his body still, but a pang of loneliness tightens around his heart, replaced in moments by rage. He will have his family back. Whatever the cost.

And if that cost is Jill’s life? a small voice asks inside his head. At that, Khan gets up abruptly, probably startling Smythe, and goes to put the kettle on for tea. He can’t keep a poker face or his wings still with that thought in his mind.

“I don’t get you,” Smythe says. “I really don’t. I’m not sure I’m meant to, either. Doesn’t matter, really.”

“Why do you say that?” Khan asks, turning around to look at him.

Smythe shrugs. “You and me, we’re not friends,” he says. “Likely never will be. I respect the hell out of your skills but I think you’re an arrogant bastard, and I can’t imagine any reason I’d have to spend time with you outside of the workplace. I don’t need to know what makes you tick so long as I know I can depend on you to get things right professionally. I don’t need to know what you think of me personally, either.”

He pushes to his feet. “I’ll let you know what I find out, if anything,” he says. “Just…watch your back. And your lady’s.”
"I will," Khan says. Smythe extends a hand and Khan takes it, not surprised by either the soft skin or the firm grip. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll see myself out.” Smythe nods and heads for the door. Khan waits thirty seconds after the door closes to scan the apartment and make sure Smythe left no bugs.

That done, he calls Andy. “Is the coast clear?” Andy asks. “What was that all about?”

“Come over, I will tell you,” Khan says. “But what are you doing in London?”

“Oh, you know,” Andy says. “My relative almost gets blown up, I get a bit skittish about his safety, and Magpie shoves me out the door. I was almost at the point of being able to transport my stuff anyway, and I worked on the shuttle here. Might have to go back to New York in a day or two but I’m okay for now.”

Khan finds himself touched by Andy’s concern. “I was not seriously injured,” he says anyway.

“I know,” Andy says. “Still. I just found my uncle, I don’t want to lose him this early. Anyway, I’m going to head over to your place, give me half an hour.”

“Take your time,” Khan says. He hangs up and finishes making his tea, setting an insulated mug aside for Andy when she arrives.

About twenty minutes later, Andy walks in the door carrying a messenger bag over one shoulder and towing a rolling duffle bag. “Hi,” she says. “I seriously didn’t mean to—I had no idea you were going to have company.”

“Neither did I,” Khan says. “There is tea for you.”

“Thank you,” Andy says. He sets down his bags and crosses to Khan, giving him a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Who was injured? You said someone was but didn’t tell me more.”

“A colleague of Jake’s,” Khan says. “He had asked her to come to the station as he was concerned something might happen.”

“Good sense,” Andy says, moving to get her tea. “I like Jake. He’s practical.” She takes a sip, leaning against the kitchen counter. “So what did David Smythe want?”

“To tell me very little,” Khan says, somewhat irritated about it. “He does not agree with Marcus but will not betray him. He knows Cruz did not work alone, but does not know who he worked with. All in all I have little data and less upon which to theorize.”

"It's something that he's even willing to tell you about this," Andy points out. "That he came to you rather than let Cruz hang. Speaking of, I expect Cruz won't be able to play fall guy for very long. Either we'll kill him or Marcus will have it done."

"Yes," Khan says. "You seem remarkably unbothered."

"He tried to kill you," Andy says. "I'm not that nice a person."

Khan smiles faintly, taking a sip of his tea. "Nor are any of us, I think," he says.

"No, not really," Andy says. "Not when it comes to things like this." He tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. "But none of us ever had the luxury of being someone like that, except maybe Jill."

"No," Khan says softly. "I do not think she ever did."
"What do you mean?" Andy asks.

"Her biological parents," Khan says. "They did not throw her out, but they certainly did not provide for her well-being. I am in no way saying her life was as difficult as yours and Magpie's was, but...she certainly did not have the luxury of a secure home life. Only Jake had that, I think."

"Yeah," Andy says. "Yeah, I've thought that before. She doesn't seem bothered by it, but Magpie and I have often told each other that we think she just doesn't know better. She adores Jake's mom, though, so that's something, but she didn't have her until the Academy. She didn't...she didn't really have anyone until after the Olympics. Magpie at least had the other street brats, and I had them once I landed on the streets, but..." She sighs, takes a sip of tea. "Sometimes I wonder who among us is the least fucked up, and oddly I think it might be Magpie."

"Who has her own issues," Khan says.

"Yes," Andy says. "You should visit the nest sometime and see the pantry full of food. I make her go through it every six months and donate things that are about to go bad or hit their expiration dates, but still. I hesitate to call it an eating disorder because she does enjoy food, and she doesn’t really worry about weight or appearance. Hoarding is more appropriate, and if you ever peek in the bags she carries, she always has a few meal bars and other nonperishables in them. Along with a change of clothes, a few toiletries, and so on and so forth."

“And you?” Khan asks quietly. “What do you take with you?”

“I haven’t had sex since I got clean,” Andy says, not quite looking at Khan. “It—it gets mixed up for me, because for years I was having sex I didn’t want to have because I had to earn money somehow, or drugs. And then...I got clean, and I didn’t want to have sex anymore because I wanted to prove myself as more than a junkie whore, and now I don’t because…” He licks his lips, looks down at his mug. “I have yet to find someone who wants to be with me and accept that my biology doesn’t define my gender. That whatever I have or don’t between my legs, it doesn’t change that I’m non-binary, that I’m male and female and neither all at the same time.”

“I am certain such people exist,” Khan says. He counts many of them among his own family, truth be told, but at the moment his thoughts turn to Matthew, who always valued intelligence—and, to be fair, appearance—over biology.

“Yeah, you’d think, but I have yet to find one,” Andy says. “Or at least I have yet to find one who interests me.” She shrugs and takes another sip of tea. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t really miss sex all that much. Never got to have it for its own sake before I hit the streets.”

Khan takes the hint and doesn’t press.

Andy pushes his hair back. “Trevor’s coming to London tomorrow to show me the house and go through it all with me,” he says. “I think it’d be better if you didn’t go with me, I’ll show you after.”

“Yes, I agree,” Khan says. “How long are you staying in London this time?”

“A few days,” Andy says. “I need to go back to New York to grab something, but then I can settle in here. We’ve got about a week before the first op, so I’d rather be close. Magpie will be heading out this Saturday. She and I are going to set up at the house so we have time to make sure its security is what it should be. Also, if you tell us your family’s sizes we can get clothes for them. Do any of them have a preference in color or style?”
“Things in which they can move freely, and nothing that will draw attention to themselves,” Khan says. “Ekaterina always preferred black, leathers if she could.”

“Easy enough,” Andy says. “Message me and Magpie with sizes and we’ll do our best.”

“I will,” Khan says. “Thank you.” He takes a sip of his own tea.

“I had the weirdest dream last night,” Andy says after a moment. “There was—I don’t even know how to describe it, it was like an arena or something. Ampitheatre, that’s the word I want. But it was old and kind of falling apart, and there was a storm brewing overhead, lightning and thunder but it hadn’t started raining yet. There were two people in the arena, both in ancient armor with swords, and they weren’t fighting yet, they were going to, but I don’t know what they were waiting for. And then it started raining, only…it was raining blood.” She shivers a little and takes a sip of her tea. “It was pretty disturbing.”

“It sounds it,” Khan says. “Have you had dreams like those before?” He wonders what this is all about; Marika’s vision, his own dream, now Andy’s. It makes no logical sense, and it bothers him.

Andy shakes his head. “No, I haven’t. I don’t usually remember my dreams unless they’re really vivid nightmares, though. This didn’t—this didn’t feel like a nightmare, but I don’t really know what else to call it.” He shivers again, looking at his mug. “Other than disturbing.”

“I would agree,” Khan says.

“If Jill calls and says she had a similar dream I’m going to be freaked,” Andy says.

“She did not have any disturbing dreams last night,” Khan says. “At least, not that I am aware.”

“Okay, well, that’s something,” Andy says. “And Magpie hadn’t slept yet when I left to come here. She’s probably crashed out by now, though.” She sighs, slumps a little against the counter. “My shoulders are killing me. Too much time hunched over very tiny electronics using very tiny tools.”

“The shower in this flat has acceptable water pressure,” Khan says. “Would you like a shower?” He would offer her a massage, but is uncertain of boundaries and whether Andy would be comfortable with that.

“I think I would,” Andy admits. “Let me finish my tea first.” He takes another drink. “Is Jill okay?” he asks. “She was pretty freaked, according to Magpie and the message she left on Magpie’s phone.”

“She is,” Khan says. He sets his mug down on the counter, considering his words. “Do you ever find yourself concerned that she will break under pressure?” he asks finally. “That she—”

“No,” Andy says before Khan can finish. “No, I don’t. She always holds it together when she needs to. It’s after everything’s over that she falls apart. But she’s strong, uncle. She’s—okay, she’s fucked up and a little broken, but she’s strong, and she’ll hold it together as long as she has to until she doesn’t have to anymore. Then she’ll collapse.”

A reasonable assessment, and Khan nods. “She gives of herself more than she should, I think,” he says.

“If she didn’t, we wouldn’t be here,” Andy says. “I don’t think you really get the right to say she’s giving too much of herself when she’s doing it all for you.” She smiles faintly.
“You have a point,” Khan admits. “Still. I do not want her to burn herself out.”

“No, neither do I,” Andy says. “But I don’t think she will. I think the biggest problem you’re going to have with her is her conviction that once this is done you’re walking away.” He studies Khan. “Are you going to do that?”

“No,” Khan says simply.

“Good,” Andy says. “Just making sure. If you were—well, then we’d have issues.”

Khan’s wings ruffle a little and fold around him before he folds them back. “If this goes as planned, if we save my family—I will owe her a debt I can never repay,” he says quietly. “And I am not a good person, but I do pay what I owe.”

“I don’t think you’re a bad person,” Andy says. “I think you’re complicated.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive,” Khan says.

“No, they’re not, but I still don’t think you’re a bad person,” Andy says. “If you were, you wouldn’t have welcomed me as a relative. You would be making plans to leave once you had what you wanted.” She tucks a lock of hair back behind her ear. “If you were truly cold, Jill wouldn’t be helping you. She has a good sense of people. I’ve only seen her get it truly wrong once, when she was in Academy.”

“Jake mentioned that,” Khan says, carefully because he doesn’t trust his voice. “Do you know what happened to him?”

“He left Earth and I think ended up on a frontier planet somewhere,” Andy says. “But Magpie and I didn’t track him once he left Earth because our connections aren’t as good off-planet. We did have a monitor in place to let us know if he ever returned, but he hasn’t. But we’re not talking about him, not really. We’re talking about you and how you’re not actually evil.”

“I never said I was an evil person,” Khan points out. “I said I was not a good man.”

“Yeah, and there’s a gray zone in there,” Andy says. “But if you go by that, none of the group of us are all that good. I’m okay with that.”

Khan smiles a little. “All right.” He picks up his mug again and takes a sip. “Do you need somewhere to sleep tonight?”

“No, I’ve got a place,” Andy says. “Thanks, though.” He takes a seat at the small dining table, looking up at Khan. “So, in other news, I heard a rumor that you might be working on a personal transporter that would totally revamp the existing model and be really awesome. Any truth to this?”

“Yes,” Khan says, turning another chair around and straddling it. “Where did you hear this?”

“Jake mentioned it to Magpie who mentioned it to me,” Andy says. “Is it transwarp?”

“It is,” Khan says. “I have not yet acquired all the pieces I need for it, but I believe the theory is solid.”

“Tell me more,” Andy says, leaning forward.

Khan smiles and does, explaining the concept and what he expects the transporter to be able to do. “If I key it to biometrics, it would be safe from tampering,” he says. “Originally I intended to make
it limited to one person, but I think I can adjust that to take two people.”

“Which would be helpful if you and Jill need to go somewhere fast,” Andy says. “And I’d think that once you build the first one, building more wouldn’t be difficult so long as you prove it works.”


“I think I’m in love with your brain,” Andy says, laughing. “That’s just—it’s brilliant, and beautiful, and I love it. I’d love to get in on building it, too. What materials do you still need? I might be able to get some of them for you.”

“Let me take inventory of what I already have,” Khan says. “I think my primary need would be the processor chip. I already have the power source, and the memory chips, but I need to determine what processor would work and not cause the device to overheat.”

“Hm.” Andy leans back, considering. “How big is the thing, total?”

“If I can manage it, about the size of my palm,” Khan says.

“Okay.” Andy drums her fingers against the table. “I think your best bet is something that came on the market about three months ago. Message me with the specs you already have and I’ll double-check, but I think that would be the best option. It’s a little less powerful than the current models, but it runs a lot cooler.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. “Have you ever built chips?”

“No, not usually,” Andy says. “I don’t have the set up for it. Building chips like that requires a clean room. I can examine the hell out of them, and modify them once they are built, but I’ve never done it from scratch. Maybe someday, if I ever invest in a clean room, but I have other priorities.”

Khan nods. “Understandable. Tell me what you are working on for the op.”

“I’ve built the earbuds, and tuned them to the shield,” Andy says. “But I’m not entirely convinced it doesn’t need more tweaking, so I’m going to be fiddling with that a bit. I’m also having an argument with the other shields I built—I’ve built three, and one is tuned to an earbud. But the other two shields are threatening to block the earbud frequency by proximity, and that’s not acceptable. So I need to argue with them until they get it.”

“What exactly does the shield block?” Khan asks.

“Infrared, so Jill and whoever else won’t show up on heat sensors,” Andy says. “They have a little bit of a visual thing as well—if you know she’s there, you’ll see her, but if you don’t know, she might just look like a shadow or something. It’s not a true invisibility thing, those don’t exist, but it has some protection. It’ll also block biometric sensors—it hides her heartbeat and her breathing. The down side to that one is we absolutely can’t beam her out of there while it’s operational.”

“I see,” Khan says. “Unfortunately, I doubt I will have the personal transporter finished before the first op. Even if I did, it would not necessarily be able to take three.”

Andy shrugs. “It’s not crucial,” he says. “I’m pretty sure we’ll get through the first op without issues. After that, I don’t know, but I’d rate our odds on the first op pretty highly.”

“Why do you say that?” Khan asks.
“Because no one’s tried anything like it before, so security won’t be expecting it,” Andy says. “We have solid information, we have a solid plan, and—frankly, we’re damned good at this. We know what we’re doing.”

“So long as that does not lead to hubris and over-confidence,” Khan says.

“It won’t,” Andy says. “We’re intelligent, uncle, give us some credit.”

“I do,” Khan says. “But even the most brilliant people in the universe have blind spots.”

“What’s yours?” Andy asks, smiling.

“At the moment, it appears to be a very small human woman with curly hair and a tendency to nightmares,” Khan says ruefully.

Andy laughs, reaching across the table to touch Khan’s hand. “Yeah, I can’t blame you for that one,” she says. “It could be worse.”

“It could,” Khan says. He takes Andy’s hand for a moment. “And if all goes well, soon you will have other family members.”

“Just because you consider me family doesn’t mean your siblings will,” Andy says carefully.

“It means exactly that,” Khan says. “Family to one of us is family to all. We do not welcome others in often, and when we do, we mean it for life.”

Andy swallows hard and looks down at their hands on the table. “So what does that mean for Jill?” he asks softly.

“She is mine,” Khan says simply.

“But what does that mean?” Andy asks, looking at him.

“It means she is mine to protect, mine to take care of,” Khan says. “It means I have claimed her, that she belongs to me and with me.” His wings ruffle a little. “She needs someone to take care of her. I do not mean that you and Magpie have not done so, but she needs a partner, someone who will be there for her nightmares and her worries no matter what. Someone who puts her before anyone else.”

“She comes before your siblings?” Andy asks softly. “Are you certain of that?”

“Rani did,” Khan says.


“I did,” Khan says and doesn’t elaborate further.

Andy studies him. “Does she know this?” she asks finally.

“She doesn’t want to believe me,” Khan says. “She may be my blind spot, but she is also her own worst enemy.”

“Yeah, I know,” Andy says with a sigh. “She always has been. But in a way we all are, you know? I have yet to meet someone who isn’t as hard on himself as the people around him.”

“We are our own worst critics,” Khan says.
“This is true,” Andy says. “Some of us are just worse than others. Jill…she has a lot of confidence in her professional skills, in her ability to do the job and get it done well. But personally, she’s a mess. She’s insecure and neurotic and doesn’t have any faith in the concept of someone else wanting her romantically.” He doesn’t quite smile. “But I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, am I.”

“No,” Khan says. “No, you are not.”

“Didn’t think so.” Andy runs his hands through his hair, pushing it back behind his shoulders. “I need to yell at hardware for a while until it bows to my will. Do you mind if I do that here? Or would you rather I go somewhere else?”

“If you would like to stay, you are welcome,” Khan says. “I have some work of my own to do, and then I need to start acquiring the materials I need for the transporters.”

“Which I can help with,” Andy says. “Okay then. Let’s get to work.” She gets up, going to get her duffle and her messenger bag. Khan watches her set up her tools and her project for a moment before he goes to his computer to start his own work.

Andy does end up spending the night, mostly because by the time he and Khan pull themselves out of technology it’s two in the morning and he looks utterly exhausted. Khan frankly doesn’t trust Andy’s ability to get home safely, so points him to the bedroom. He gives Andy ten minutes, then goes to check on him and ensure he actually made it to the bed.

He finds Andy face down on the bed, shoes off but clothes still on, one arm flung over her head and the other curled against her chest. Good enough.

Khan watches her sleep for a moment, amused at himself. He has never been a nurturer, never particularly wanted to be a parent. Of course he has always taken care of his people, but there is a difference between ensuring his subjects had food and shelter and tucking them in at night.

But Andy is his relative, a living link to Rani and one Khan never expected to encounter. So he stays in the doorway, watching Andy sleep like the dead, until he hears his computer chime with a new message.

The message turns out to be Jake. It’s done, but it wasn’t me or one of mine. You have any idea why Marcus would want Cruz dead?

Khan doesn’t quite laugh. Instead, he calls Jake. “Yeah,” Jake says when he answers. “Talk to me.”

“Cruz wasn’t working alone,” Khan says. “Are you certain it was one of Marcus’s men who killed him?”

Jake sighs. “No, I’m not,” he says. “I don’t even know how he died, just that he is no longer among the living. How did you find out he wasn’t alone?”


“So basically you’ve got a target on your back and we’ve got no idea who put it there nor do we know how many of them are lining up to take a shot,” Jake says. “Well, that’s fantastic. Do you think it could be Marcus behind it all?”

“Honestly, no,” Khan says. “I think there is a possibility he is, but I doubt him to be the probable source. He needs me alive and he needs me to cooperate with him, and he knows I would not
hesitate to turn on him if I thought it necessary. My recommendation would be to look at Marcus’s staff.”

“Yeah, I’m with you on that one,” Jake says. “I’ll see what I can learn, and you said Smythe was going to check out a couple things too. In the meantime, watch your back more than you normally do. Marika’s heading to London day after tomorrow to help with that.”

“Are you sure that is a wise decision?” Khan asks. “She is uncomfortable around me, and I would not have her resentful of you or me.”

“I know, but no, I don’t think it’s a bad decision,” Jake says. “Besides, she volunteered. She says something about you keeps sparking visions and she wants to know why. She’s uncomfortable around you because you keep triggering her empathy and her precognition, but at the same time she finds it interesting that you can do this.”

“All right,” Khan says. “But I think I would prefer her leave before the first op.”

“Yeah, okay, I get that,” Jake says. “And yeah, that’s fine. She’s got an assignment coming up in a few weeks anyway, so she’ll need time to prep for it. I just don’t want you caught alone before Jill or I or anyone else can get there. Okay, Jill mostly, because I’m stuck teaching stupid people how to survive stupid situations without being stupid about it.”

Khan smiles a little. “I appreciate your concern,” he says.

“Apparently some of my mom rubbed off on me,” Jake says, sounding sheepish about it. “Also, I look out for my sister, which in this case means I want you to stay alive and in one piece. How’s she doing?”

“I have not heard from her since I left San Francisco,” Khan says. “She was fine when I did leave, however.”

“Okay, cool,” Jake says. “I’ll swing by her place tomorrow and see what’s up.” Khan hears the sound of him taking a drink. “So the first op is…what, six days?”

“Yes,” Khan says, his wings mantling at the reminder. “Yes, it is.”

“Yeah,” Jake says. “It’ll be okay.”

“You don’t know that for certain,” Khan says mildly.

“Of course I don’t,” Jake says. “But I think we’ll be okay. Even if I am having bizarre dreams.”

“What was your dream about?” Khan asks, tensing as soon as Jake admits it.

“I don’t—it was weird,” Jake says. “Something about a battle, but fighting with swords and shields, no real technology at all. It was in some place I knew in the dream but have no idea about in real life, and wherever we were was kind of abandoned, old and falling apart.”

Khan grits his teeth. “Likely brought on by stress and Marika’s vision,” he says, not convincing himself.

“Or something,” Jake says. “I don’t know. I don’t usually remember my dreams, but this one stuck. Anyway, I should get going. I’ll keep you posted if I hear anything, you do the same?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Were you able to acquire the materials I asked about?”
“I’ll have them all by end of day tomorrow and I’ll get them to you by tomorrow night,” Jake says. “If you need anything else, let me know.”

“I will,” Khan says. “Thank you.”

“De nada.” Jake hangs up and Khan takes a moment to just breathe. Marika’s visions; Andy’s dream; Jake’s dream; Khan’s own. He doesn’t know about Magpie or Jill, and hesitates to ask.

But what does it all mean? Why are they all dreaming of abandoned cities and antique battles? Khan doesn’t know, and he lacks sufficient data to theorize. Frankly, his only possible hypothesis at the moment is not one he wants to contemplate. Why would Rani be sending them all these dreams? What would the point be?

He growls softly and goes back to his desk, studying the weapon on it and determining what he needs to modify next. If he cannot make sense of his dreams, he can at least prepare himself for whatever battle they signify.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Everyone's temper is running short.

Chapter Notes

Not going to lie, I made myself snicker a few times with lines in this chapter. Hopefully they'll amuse you, too.

Stupid author note - the timeline in this story is a bit wobbly and I appear to have skipped a couple weeks. I beg your forgiveness for the shortened timeline and promise I will do my best to maintain a consistent timeline and not lose days or weeks in future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marika shows up two days before the first op, hair a nondescript brown and eyes a nondescript hazel. “I’m not here for long,” she says, not sitting down, hands tightly folded at her waist. “Just—I saw something, and I wanted to tell you about it in person.”

Khan raises an eyebrow at her. “Go on,” he says when she says nothing. In truth, he’s both somewhat relieved to see her and somewhat irritated by her presence. Relieved, in that he appreciates she’s alive and well. As well, she showed up just after he had hit a stopping point with his work, and letting those ideas sit for ten minutes can’t hurt.

But he had no forewarning she was coming, no indication from her or Jake, and he does not want her anywhere near the first op. He doesn’t trust her, he doesn’t trust her not to cause problems due to visions or whatever else she can sense, and he wants her as far away from London as possible by Saturday night. Another galaxy would be ideal. He had implied as much to Jake earlier in the week, and Jake had taken the hint. So why Marika is here now, Khan doesn’t know.

She bites her lip, looks down at her hands. “I don’t know why you keep triggering my visions, but I really wish you’d stop,” she says after a moment. “It’s not—it’s not pleasant, to say the least, and I’m sure you don’t really care about what I’m telling you, but at least this way I’ve done my due diligence and I can leave with a clear conscience.”

“What did you see?” Khan asks evenly.

“The arena again,” Marika says. “It was storming, incredibly strong, and everyone was fighting among lightning and thunder and sand getting blown everywhere. The arena was crumbling around you, like I saw lightning hit a section and it collapsed. I saw someone throw you an axe, and you caught it right before it would have slammed into your head. But it—it was different this time. You weren’t alone, and although you were outnumbered you were winning.”

“Where were Jake or Jill?” Khan asks.
“That’s the thing,” Marika says, twisting her hands. “I didn’t see them. I didn’t get a sense of where they were at all. I don’t think they were dead, but they weren’t—they weren’t in the vision at all.”

Khan likes this even less than Marika showing up on his doorstep. He appears to be surrounded by people with little to tell him; Smythe has yet to provide any data that Khan can actually *use* and Jake’s own sources have come up empty in the last few days. The latter doesn’t surprise him much, however. Jake admits that most of his best information involves things off-planet, and his Earth network of resources isn’t as strong. Still, he’s trying, and Khan appreciates it.

“If you see anything else,” Khan says because he supposes it’s expected of him. He really doesn’t have much use for Marika’s visions. He knows they’re headed into a battle, that he has a war of sorts ahead of him and it will require all his intelligence and strength to survive with his family relatively intact. He doesn’t need her to tell him of crumbling ampitheatres and battle-axes to know to keep his guard up.

It doesn’t help that Andy has had similar dreams in the last week, that Magpie has circles under her eyes and won’t talk about whatever’s on her mind. Last night was the third night in a week that Jill woke up in hysterics, incoherent and panicky. Khan’s temper cannot get much shorter without someone dying.

“Yeah,” Marika says. “I’ll tell you, if I’m around.”

She sounds like she might not be, which would suit Khan perfectly. He doesn’t say that, of course, but both he and Marika turn as the door unlocks. Marika takes a step back and Khan moves to the door even though he knows who it likely is.

“Hi,” Jill says, Andy behind her. “We—oh. You’ve company.” She peeks under Khan’s arm. “Oh, hi Marika.”

With no way out, Khan steps back to let Jill and Andy enter the flat. Jill sets her backpack down by the door and slips off her shoes, but doesn’t go to shake hands or touch Marika. “Andy, Marika, Marika, Andy,” she says, gesturing. “What’d you see?”

“How do you know I saw something?” Marika asks.

“Because you avoid me like the plague unless you’ve seen something important,” Jill says matter-of-factly. “And you don’t much like John, either, so why are you here?”


“That’s the third time in two weeks,” Jill says. “Has that ever happened before?”

“No,” Marika says softly. “And it keeps—some of the important things are always the same, but some of them keep changing and I don’t know what it means.”

“Sounds like the future’s in flux,” Andy says, pausing by Khan to kiss his cheek. “Wouldn’t surprise me. I just wish whoever or whatever is offering signposts would clue in that metaphors to thousands of years ago are not really all that helpful. Not unless we’re meant to conclude that Zeus or Athena are behind this.”

“I think not,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I’m thinking whatever our problem it didn’t start in the Greek pantheon,” Jill says. “Anything else, Marika?”
Khan looks at her in mild surprise. He has never seen her be this brusque before, bordering on open rudeness.

Marika shakes her head. “No, not that I’ve seen, not unless you want me to try and read you.”

“I really don’t,” Jill says. “The last time you tried you gave us both migraines that lasted for three days, and I can’t afford that right now.”

“No,” Marika says. “If I see anything else—“

“Do us a favor and don’t tell us until next Tuesday,” Jill says. “It won’t help.”

Andy, too, looks at Jill in surprise, but says nothing.

“I won’t,” Marika says, not sounding offended. “Good luck.”

“Thank you,” Andy says when Jill says nothing.

Marika nods and sees herself out. Andy locks the door behind her and looks at Jill. “What the hell was that?” she asks. “Could you possibly have been any ruder?”

“Yes,” Jill says. “I don’t really like her, she doesn’t really like me. She says she does but she avoids me like I’ve got bubonic plague or leprosy. I think her visions are mostly useless, the empathy can be so easily used against her, and she’s useless in a fight. I don’t need to see metaphorical images of my future to know it’s going to be difficult and I don’t need anyone’s concentration even a little distracted by battle-axes flying through the air and lightning strikes.”

“Kitten, easy,” Andy says quietly. “We’re not your enemies, nor are we your subordinates.”

Khan takes the two steps to stand next to Jill and closes his hand around the back of her neck tightly. She jumps in surprise and glances up at him; he doesn’t let go, and after a moment she sighs, bowing her head. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m sorry. I’m in a shitty mood from a shitty day and I just want to run the first op and be done with it and the last thing I need is someone I already barely get along with telling me she’s seen visions of Khan fighting ancient warriors in a crumbling arena where I’m Sir Not Appearing In This Fight.”

“Also, how much sleep have you gotten in the last few nights?” Andy asks.

“Uh,” Jill says. “I can count it on both hands and have one hand left over. I try, and then I wake up screaming and then I don’t go back to sleep again. I was going to give up and take the damn pills tonight.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea,” Andy says. “I think, actually, the idea is for you to go take a long hot shower, then have a cup of relaxing tea which I will make for you, then take the pills and go to bed. I promise one of us will stay with you and make sure you don’t have any bad dreams and wake you if you do.”

“Okay,” Jill says. “Okay. I’ll go do that.” She leans into Khan for a moment, though, pressing her forehead against his chest. He eases his hold, rubbing the back of her neck and folding a wing around her, and thinks he feels a tear or two through his shirt before she pulls away.

“So,” Andy says once the bedroom door has closed behind Jill. “You, too?”

“Is anyone not having dreams with similar themes?” Khan asks.
“I can’t speak for Jake,” Andy says. “I’ve had three in the last week about the amphitheatre or a similar surrounding, always with storm clouds overhead and a metallic smell in the air. Magpie won’t talk about hers but I saw her sketching something—you know how the Olympics and other games have the winner’s podium? She was drawing one that was falling apart and cracked. What has Jill been dreaming?”

“That’s the problem,” Khan says. “She doesn’t remember them by the time she wakes. The only thing I have gotten from her is a sense of disaster on an apocalyptic scale. The last two times she woke it took me well over an hour to calm her enough that she was no longer shaking.”

“What the hell is this?” Andy asks in frustration. He pushes his hands through his hair, looking up at the ceiling. “Aunt, if you’re out there, could you knock it off?”

“I doubt this would be her doing,” Khan says, although to be fair, he has wondered.

“She’s the only potential spirit I know,” Andy says, finding a glimmer of humor. “And if it’s not her, maybe she can intercede for us.”

“Possibly,” Khan admits. “Unlikely, but possible.”

“They tested you and yours for psychic abilities, didn’t they?” Andy asks.

“They did,” Khan says. “As far as I am aware, there has never been a full-blooded human being with the ability.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Andy says. “I mean, there are claims, but nothing’s ever been quantified. I’m just…” She shrugs. “I’m wondering if exposure to Marika triggered something in you, which then triggered something in us. Proximity effect or some bullshit.”

“It is possible, I suppose,” Khan says. “I do not know how probable.”

“I figure anything’s possible,” Andy says. “Right?”

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth,” Khan says.

“I hated him,” Andy says.

“Pardon?” Khan asks.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Andy says. “He was an ass and a condescending bastard and a drug addict and I wanted to strangle him with his own tie. I hate people who are so much smarter than everyone else that they feel obliged to tell the world about it.”

Apparently, everyone’s temper is running short, Khan thinks. For about five seconds, he gives serious thought to going out to find a suitable criminal to murder slowly.

“Why did you read the stories?” he asks instead.

Andy shrugs. “I read everything I could,” he says, moving to the kitchen to put the kettle on. “I could usually escape into a story, and since my home life wasn’t all that lovely, I read a lot to pretend I was anywhere else. My biological mother collected old fables and fairy tales, so I read a lot of those, Eastern and Western. My biological father left behind a lot of classic mystery and pulp novels, Christie and Conan Doyle and Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and so on. My stepfather was into space opera, of all things, so I read a lot of really old science fiction that was...
very light on the science. I found other stuff, horror and adventure and fantasy and just classic fiction. Mostly I read stuff from before 2100 because it was cheaper to get, and once I was on the streets I read whatever was available. I’m surprisingly widely read for a boy who never graduated high school.”

“Not surprising,” Khan says quietly.

“Maybe not to you,” Andy says, glancing at him before she gets down mugs and tea infusers. “Do you want tea?”

Khan shakes his head.

“If I thought she’d fall for it I’d put valerian in it,” Andy says. “But I haven’t got any and the last time I tried to sneak it into her tea she threw the mug against a wall.” He turns to look at Khan. “Could you knock her out? Didn’t you do that once, after Dante?”

“I did,” Khan says. “It might work, but I have no real confidence it would prevent nightmares. Her problem is not falling asleep, but the terrors from her unconscious, and no acupressure points will help with that.”

“And it wouldn’t work after she wakes up from the nightmares?” Andy asks.

“No, I think not,” Khan says. “But more than that, if I did—“

“She wouldn’t trust you again,” Andy finishes when he stops. “Yeah, I get it. It just—it hurts to see her so strung out. I haven’t seen her willingly take a sleeping pill in the last…eight years.”

“Will she be all right for the op?” Khan asks.

Andy smiles without humor. “Do we have a choice?”

“We can abort,” Khan says even though every single atom in his body protests at the sentence and he barely gets it out.

“No. No, we can’t.” Andy turns back to the kettle when it whistles. “And she’ll be fine. Pre-job nerves. She’ll settle down by tomorrow night.”

Andy sounds like she is trying to convince herself as much as Khan and Khan has nothing to say that would be comforting or even not concerning. This would be so much simpler without them—No. He cuts that thought off before it forms.

Jill walks into the kitchen, barefoot and damp hair spilling over the shoulders of her green sleepshirt. She wraps her arms around Khan’s waist and leans her head against his chest, saying nothing; he holds her, breathes in the scent of sandalwood. “I’ll be fine,” she says finally. “It was just—I don’t want to talk about it. Long day. I’m fine. I will be fine.”

“Did you take the pills yet?” Andy asks, handing her a cup of tea when she pulls away from Khan.

“No, not yet,” Jill says. “Figured I’d do it with witnesses so you knew I’d actually taken them, and I promise not to palm them.”

“Where are they? I’ll get them,” Andy says.

“Bathroom, medicine cabinet, second shelf in the blue bottle,” Jill says.
“Why are they here?” Khan asks after Andy leaves.

Jill shrugs. “Because half my things are? I brought them thinking I might try them last night, didn’t.”

“You need to sleep, milaya moya,” Khan says quietly.

“I know.” Jill takes a sip of the tea. “I know. Just—“ She bites her lip, looks at her mug. “I know you don’t need to sleep, and Andy’s here, but…would you stay with me? I’m always afraid the pills will make it so I can’t wake up from a nightmare.”

“I will,” Khan says, brushing a curl back from her forehead.

“Bilbo’s in my flat,” Jill says. “And God, that sounds ridiculous but I want him.”

Khan kisses her hair. “I will go get him for you.”

Jill blushes, but nods. “Thank you.”

He already has an access card; it’s nothing to climb two flights of stairs, let himself in, and pick up the bear sitting on the bed. He looks around quickly, to see if he can find anything else she might need or want, and doesn’t see anything obvious. He does see a storage chip on the nightstand on his usual side of the bed, though, and picks it up, thinking he must have left it there the other night.

Back in his own flat, he walks in to see Jill and Andy sitting on the couch. “And here we go,” Jill says, picking up the bottle. She tips two blue pills into her palm and swallows them with a sip of tea. “Should take about fifteen minutes to kick in.”

“Will we need Khan to carry you to bed?” Andy asks. “Should you go there before you fall over?”

“In a little bit,” Jill says. “Okay, yeah, probably.” She sets her mug down and reaches up for Bilbo. “Hey, old friend,” she says, hugging him close. “Let’s try and sleep, okay?”

Khan says nothing, but touches her shoulder. Jill leans her head against his wrist for a moment before getting up. He follows her into the bedroom, where she crawls under the covers, Bilbo hugged to her chest. “You don’t really have to stay,” she murmurs. “I know you have work to do. How’s the transporter coming?”

“The second one is almost finished,” Khan says. “I locked it to Andy and Magpie’s biometrics. The third one will be for Jake, and beyond that I cannot build them until I have my brothers and sisters to key in.”

“And the weapons?” Jill asks.

Khan turns off the light, leaving them in relative darkness with a bit of outside light from the blinds. “The second prototype overheated earlier today,” he says. “But I know the problem. I was too strictly controlling the heat produced by the weapons fire. If I redirect some of that, it will increase the output and bleed off enough that it will be cool to handle without extra shielding.”

“Did Jake get you what you needed to build the first real one?” Jill asks.

“He will have by tomorrow, but I am not building anything else until after the first op,” Khan says. “I would rather not risk anything this close to our plans.” He sits down on the edge of the bed, smoothing her hair back. “How did the archive go?”
“Terribly,” Jill mutters, leaning into his touch. “I’m learning all kinds of shit I never wanted to know, and the creepy head librarian keeps hitting on me.”

"Morrilton?” Khan asks.

“Yes,” Jill says. “He makes my skin crawl. Makes me wish weapons were allowed in the archive. Okay, allowed in the section I’m in.” She yawns and rubs her eyes. “If he gets truly obnoxious I’ll punch him and then probably get disciplined, but it might be worth it.”

Khan smiles a little. He does appreciate her proclivities toward violence, even when it leaves him with bruises. They sparred yesterday and she actually managed to crack one of his ribs, which neither of them had expected. She also gave him a black eye, but that healed before they finished.

Cat, he thinks, will approve.

“I’ve only been there a few days and I’m already annoyed with it,” Jill says, her words starting to slur a bit. “Let’s make this whole thing fast, okay? If I actually have to produce a research paper there might be blood involved and I’m not sure it’d be mine.”

“Yes,” Khan says to both points.

She yawns again into her pillow. “Am I forgetting anything we need to do before Saturday night?”

“We will run through the plan Friday night and again Saturday morning,” Khan says, rubbing the back of her neck. “You should sleep, pyara.”

“I know.” Jill groans and rubs her face. “I don’t want to.”

“Andy and I will be here,” Khan says. “You are safe here.”

“Except from the inside of my head,” Jill murmurs, hugging Bilbo a little tighter.

Khan says nothing because there’s no counter he can make. Not for the first time this week, he wonders about the intelligence of their plan, its linchpin looking incredibly fragile at the moment. If she falters, if she breaks…

He promises himself that if it becomes necessary, he’ll kill her himself, a quick, merciful death. The others—he has faith in their ability to escape if they need to. If they need to go together, they have a plan as well. But without his family…

He grits his teeth. Marcus has said nothing about the seventy-two people still in stasis, and Khan has not asked in weeks. There would be no point in subjecting himself to a power play he cannot win yet. He reminds himself he has heard nothing, seen nothing to indicate Marcus is aware of their plans or has any plans of his own toward Khan’s siblings. Smythe hasn’t mentioned anything, and Khan believes him aware of the cryotubes although not aware of Khan’s origin among them.

Jake has heard nothing; true, most of Jake’s truly useful contacts are off-planet. But he does have an ear for scuttlebutt and an ability to collate seemingly random data points into coherent intelligence.

And then there is Magpie, whose insatiable appetite for data and skill at finding it remind Khan strongly of Matthew. Magpie doesn’t always understand what Starfleet information she finds, but she finds it all regardless. Had she heard anything, she would have said.

So far they appear to be off the radar. They may not stay there, but for now, Khan will take what
He looks down at Jill, realizing she’s fallen asleep, her head still cradled in his palm. Bilbo’s head snuggles just under her chin and she looks all of twelve, lips slightly parted and lashes dark against her cheeks.

A sense of movement catches his attention and he turns to see a shadow in the doorway. “She asleep?” Andy asks softly.

“Yes,” Khan says, keeping his voice low. “Do you need to talk?”

Andy walks into the bedroom, leaning against the wall by Khan. “She’ll be all right,” he says. “I’ve seen her do this before. She gets incredible nerves and then twenty-four hours before a job she settles down and everything’s fine. She’s never frozen on a job. Never. She keeps going until it’s all done.”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” Khan asks.

“A little of both,” Andy admits. “I think it would be different if we weren’t all having dreams. They’re all different but also so similar, you know? Marika’s visions of the battle, my dreams of the ampitheatre, Magpie and whatever she saw. What have you dreamed?”

Khan looks at Jill and carefully eases his hand out from under her head, getting up slowly so he doesn’t disturb her. She doesn’t move and Khan gestures toward the door. He leaves it open slightly so he or Andy can hear if Jill has nightmares, and follows Andy to the couch. She brushes her hair back and picks up her mug. “What have you dreamed?” she asks softly.

“Twice,” Khan says, his wings stretching at the memory. “Not an arena, nor an ampitheatre, but…a city, one I knew yet upon waking have never seen. Abandoned, falling apart, a smell of metal and fire. I am…in the dreams, I am walking through the city with my brothers and sisters. We are heading to a specific destination, and there will be a battle. A war. But both times I have woken before we arrived, and I do not know our enemies.”

Andy chews his lip. “I wonder what the decay means,” he says. “Everyone’s dreams involve something falling apart, an old place that hasn’t been maintained. The battle, that’s kind of obvious, but why the antique feel? I mean, battle-axes? And steel armor?”

Khan shakes his head. “I do not know. It is not unheard of for groups of people to share similar dreams, but not all that common, either. Lucid dreaming in theory can be shared, but none of us have been aware we are dreaming and the people generally need to be in proximity to each other. It is possible that we have suggested it to each other enough that it imprinted and we shared a dream with similar themes. That is the most likely theory, honestly.”

“But it could be something we don’t know about,” Andy says.

“It could,” Khan admits. “There are enough differences that…honestly, I lack enough data to theorize.”

“I’m not a dream specialist,” Andy says. “I wish Jill remembered hers, though. Maybe she’s seeing things we aren’t.”

“It is possible,” Khan says. “But she doesn’t remember and frankly, I would rather not try to make her.”

“No, neither would I,” Andy says. She sighs and takes a sip of tea. “I just…ugh. I believe in the
supernatural, I have to, but I don’t understand this or understand the reasoning behind it.”

“There may not be reasoning, positive or negative,” Khan says. “A map is a neutral object. The
dreams we are having may simply be someone or someone’s attempt to provide us with guideposts.
How we interpret those is up to us.”

“I’m having a really hard time attributing neutral or positive sentiment to dreams of death and war
and things crumbling,” Andy says. “Maybe it’s just me, but battle-axes don’t generally promote
health and cheer and positive sentiment.”

“Generally true,” Khan says, smiling a bit.

“Do you even know how to—wait. I forget who I’m talking to. What weapons do you not know
how to use?” Andy asks.

Khan considers. “I have a fairly good familiarity with all simple melee weapons, and skill with
edged ones, although I prefer a longsword to a rapier and find shortswords somewhat impractical.
A mace or a club is easy enough to use, although quarterstaffs are more difficult due to the size and
weight. My sister Alona uses one primarily because it gives her reach—she is not much taller than
Jill. I will have to find one for her if we can revive her, as I doubt we will be able to retrieve hers
from the ship. The problem with an axe is that if it is not balanced well, it is more of a liability and
you are unlikely to be able to use it effectively without injuring yourself.”

“And phasers or ranged weapons?” Andy asks.

“Once I know the weapon and its range and accuracy, they are my primary preference,” Khan
says. “I am not loath to engage in melee combat, but I prefer to use ranged weapons at least at the
beginning of a battle. My sister would disagree.”

“Why?” Andy asks.

“Cat believes that if it is something that can be taken away from you or broken, it should not be
something you use often or rely upon,” Khan says. “But she has never been anything but eager for
a fight, and she prefers her knives to any other weapon, which is why I asked Jake to acquire some
for her.”

“Knives can be taken away, though,” Andy says.

“Not from her,” Khan says. “Not unless she throws them, but in that case the target would likely be
dead before he could use the knife.”

“Right,” Andy says. “Okay then. What about your other siblings? Do they have preferences or
dislikes?”

“Katsuro rarely uses a weapon unless he has to, but no one I have ever met can best him in
unarmed combat, myself included,” Khan says. “Bishop uses whatever is to hand. Anandi prefers
poison when she is not in battle, Matthew enjoys swords if he has the opportunity. I expect
Matthew and Bishop to be interested in the Klingon bat’leth.”

“Any of them do explosives?” Andy asks.


Andy snorts. “Man, you guys are brutal.”
“I suppose due to how we were raised,” Khan says. He hears something and turns toward the bedroom, listening more carefully. Again, he hears a soft sound and gets up, walking quickly to the bed.

Jill seems sound asleep, her face even and relaxed, but she murmurs something and twitches. Khan kneels down next to the bed, laying his hand against her cheek. She sighs and goes limp.

He stays there for another few minutes, watching her, but when she doesn’t move or say anything else, he carefully gets back up and leaves, finding Andy in the kitchen making another cup of tea. “She all right?” he asks.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Okay,” Andy says. “Magpie and I are moving our things over to the house tomorrow, so if there’s anything you need to go, leave it by the door and I’ll grab it.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“You do realize that by Saturday night you’ll have two of your family back,” Andy comments.

“If all goes well,” Khan says.

“Yes,” Andy says. “Which it should. God knows we’ve spent enough time planning. The only thing we haven’t managed is a trial run, and we ruled that out.” She turns around to look at him. “Getting cold feet?”

“No,” Khan says although…

“You are,” Andy says without anger or malice. “You’re suddenly realizing what a huge, giant, possibly stupid thing this is and you don’t think Jill’s up for it and you’re trying to find ways to get out of it or go yourself without screwing everything up. You really, really don’t want to delegate to others and you hate that the first person your siblings see isn’t going to be you, and you’re absolutely terrified Jill’s going to break halfway through the op and it’ll all go to hell.”

“And what words of wisdom do you have to offer me about my mental state that you supposedly know intimately well?” Khan asks, more sharply than he wants to.

Andy turns off the kettle and pours his tea before he turns to look at Khan. “Get over yourself,” he says, again without malice. “You’re not the only person in the world, and you’re certainly not the only person in the world who can get your family out. If you were, you’d be going. You’re not and you’re not. Jill is more skilled in flat-out burglary than you are by virtue of one, being a lot smaller; two, not having wings; three, having more practice. She knows what she’s doing and she’s never frozen on a job, whether for us or with Starfleet, and she’s not going to screw this up. She doesn’t break under pressure. We have no reason to think there’s any issue with our plans for Saturday night and we have no reason to think we’ll encounter any issues. If—if we do, we have contingency plans. Our contingency plans have contingency plans. So get over yourself, stop being a catastrophist, and chill out.”

She walks over to Khan, slowly, telegraphing her moves and giving him a chance to move away. He doesn’t, although he does tense when she puts her hands on his shoulders. “I told you, a while back, that you’re not alone anymore and it terrifies you,” she says quietly. “It still does, doesn’t it? Especially now? You’ve relied on people before, but they were your family. Like you. We’re not like you. You relied on your soldiers, your captains and your advisors. We’re not them, either. But like it or not, we’re your family too, uncle. We don’t have your advantages, we don’t know you
from birth the way they do, and we’ve not fought wars under your command. That doesn’t mean we’re incapable and it doesn’t mean we’re undisciplined. You have to trust us, Khan. You have to trust our abilities and our own skills. And you don’t want to.”

Khan says nothing, but his wings ruffle and stretch and fold back and stretch again. Andy doesn’t move away, doesn’t take his eyes off Khan’s. “She would be so proud of you,” Khan says finally, a bare whisper.

Andy smiles a little. “I like to think she is,” she answers softly. She stretches up and kisses Khan’s forehead. “Do you know what else I think?”

“No, but I think you are going to tell me whether or not I do,” Khan says, finding some humor in it.

“I am,” Andy says serenely. “I think you are going to follow the same prescription I gave Jill earlier. Take a long, hot shower, have a cup of relaxing tea which I will make for you, and go to bed. She’ll be glad to have you there, even if she doesn’t know it, and I am more than capable of staying up on nightmare watch the rest of the night.”

“You need to sleep more than I do,” Khan says.

“I slept this afternoon,” Andy says. “My job in this is mostly done by now. I’ve got not much else to do until Saturday night except ferry things over to the house and resist the urge to tweak my creations.”

Khan nods; he understands the impulse. “Where is Magpie tonight?” he asks.

“At the house,” Andy says. “She wanted to do a test run of the network and some other things. I offered to go with her but she said she’d rather be alone for this one. We all have our quirks, and she’ll be safe. If something goes wrong, she’ll let us know.”

“She will,” Khan says. He looks at Andy, seeing the resemblance in more than appearance. “She used to manage me like this,” he says, smiling a little about it. “I would come into our quarters, and she would announce she wasn’t talking to me until I had bathed and changed and eaten something more than coffee. Then, of course, I had to prove her wrong, and it usually ended with water all over the floor.”

“I recommend not proving me wrong,” Andy says. “I’ll just dump tea on your head.”

“That would be a waste of tea,” Khan says.

“I didn’t say I’d dump good tea on your head,” Andy says. “I know you have some barely drinkable stuff, I saw it in your cabinet.”

“I see,” Khan says. “Well, as I would prefer to avoid tea all over my floor, I suppose I will go shower.”

“Wise decision,” Andy says. She kisses Khan’s cheek and steps back. “I’ll keep an eye on Jill until you get there.”

“Thank you.” Khan touches her shoulder with a wingtip before he goes to the bathroom. He intends to take a fast shower, but the hot water lulls him into staying longer, and he spends a while with his head bowed, letting the water beat down on his hair and the back of his neck.

Eventually he gets out, dries off, pulls on loose pants and walks into the bedroom. He sees Andy sitting on the edge of the bed, stroking Jill’s hair; Jill still has Bilbo clutched to her chest but hasn’t
moved. “Poor kitten,” Andy murmurs, getting up when Khan comes in.

“Why do you call her that?” Khan asks quietly.

Andy shrugs. “I don’t often, just sometimes it seems appropriate,” he says. “Why?”

“My sister, the one we want to free Saturday,” Khan says. “We call her Cat.”

“Is Jill like her?” Andy asks.

“Yes,” Khan says, looking down at the bed. “Very much.”

“Then it’s appropriate,” Andy says. She comes over to Khan and kisses his cheek. “Sleep well, uncle. I’ll wake you and Jill in the morning before you have to leave.”

It won’t be necessary, but Khan thanks her anyway. Once she leaves, closing the door behind her, he draws the covers back and slips into bed next to Jill, drawing her in against him. She sighs and snuggles into him, still holding Bilbo. Khan doesn’t want to risk waking her if he moves the bear, but he does shift her slightly so Bilbo isn’t shoved into his sternum.

For a long time, he lies there holding her, thinking about Andy’s words and wondering what Rani would think were she there. He smiles; he knows what she’d think. She’d have said the same thing with less patience and a few repetitions of “idiot” and “moron”, along with a sharp finger drilling into his chest.

He would never have depended on Rani for something like this; she wasn’t a fighter or a rogue. She’d have made the plans, but not carried them out herself. She was the truth speaker, the one who always told him what he needed to hear, not what he wanted. She gave him her opinion whether he wanted it or not and she never backed down even when her words drew blood.

God, he misses her; his chest aches with it and he swallows, wishing he could see her one more time, hold her, breathe in her scent and feel her hair through his fingers. He closes his eyes against the dark and sees her smile, the tiny mole by her right eyebrow.

She would be proud of Andy, he thinks again. Andy seems to have inherited Rani’s ability to speak truth to power and not back down from the results, along with her insight and perception. The words sting but Khan is privately grateful for them; Andy is right, was right.

No man is perfect and Khan least of all, but before Jill he had started to believe he could manage alone, that he would not need the “help” of anyone in this time, certainly no one as inferior as the men he knows.

He was wrong. Flat out, completely, wrong. He can’t do this alone, he never could, and trying to do it all alone would likely lead to disaster, war, and failure—not all separate outcomes.

He still doesn’t know if he can do it with the circle of people he has acquired, but they have a chance now, one he didn’t have three months ago.

Jill sighs against his chest and stretches, knocking Bilbo aside and cuddling closer. Khan smiles a little and kisses her hair. They don’t have long left before she will meet his sister and his brother. Her family, too, whether she knows it or not.

He doesn’t think she does yet.

She stirs again and Khan murmurs to her, the words of the lullabye Rani sang to Andy. He doesn’t
—quite—sing, not wanting to risk Andy overhearing or Jill waking, but there’s a ghost of melody in his words and Jill quiets in his arms.

Eventually, he sleeps, his dreams undisturbed by cities or battles, and when he wakes to sunlight he sees Jill’s sleepy smile. “Andy left twenty minutes ago,” she murmurs. “We have an hour and a half before we have to leave.”

“Do we,” Khan murmurs back, sliding his hands up her back. “How did you sleep?”

“Like a rock,” Jill says, arching into his hands. “Speaking of rocks and other hard things…” She grins and he laughs, and they barely make it out of the flat on time.

Chapter End Notes

I know I mentioned in the last chapter Marika would be coming to London for a bit but ended up revising that plan, so apologies if it was confusing or felt off.

Also, we have finally hit the section I wrote ages ago, so look for another chapter very very soon. (This bit was not previously written; the next chapter was mostly written a while back.)
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

You're going to trust me, and I'm going to do this, and I'll come back with them.

Chapter Notes

And here we are at the first op. Whew! Took longer than I thought to get here. Hopefully you've enjoyed the ride so far, and are still enjoying. As always, please let me know what works and what doesn't for you.

Saturday afternoon Jill goes for a run alone, saying she needs to clear her mind and loosen up her body. Khan understands her reasoning but it doesn’t make it easy to stay in the house while she disappears for two hours, returning with sweat darkening her tank top and her earbuds slung around her neck. “Down in a bit,” she says, clearly not wanting company as she heads up to the bath.

He tries to put her out of his mind and focus on the third transporter, but his concentration is not what it should be and after making his third minor mistake in as many minutes he puts the device down lest he break it. The parts are not easy to acquire and he cannot afford to waste them.

Magpie is sleeping upstairs, and Andy drifted out to the garden to meditate. When Jill comes downstairs, dressed in a black catsuit, Khan rises from his seat, walking over to her. “You look very professional,” he says, noting her hair braided back tightly, not a single strand escaping.

“I’ve done this before,” she says, smiling a bit. “It’s just a matter of fitting in all the tech I’ll need to wear and testing the earbuds and things. I’m heading out at dusk, so in an hour or so.”

No sign of nerves; her eyes are clear, her voice steady, and when she takes his hands her own are warm and dry. “You ready?” she asks him.

“Are you?” Khan counters.

“Oh, yeah.” Jill grins and squeezes his hands. “Should be a blast. I’m solid. I’m warmed up and relaxed, we’ve gone over the plan already and we’ll do one last check before I leave.”

He sees no sign that four nights ago she screamed herself awake and burst into hysterical sobs against his chest as soon as she opened her eyes. He sees absolutely no indication that she has any doubts, any concerns about the op tonight. He honestly doesn’t know whether to trust it or not, but acknowledges he doesn’t have a choice not to.

She stretches up and he leans down; their lips meet and her hands slide up his arms to his shoulders. “I can do this,” she whispers against his mouth. “You’re going to trust me, and I’m going to do this, and I’ll come back with them.”
“I believe you,” Khan murmurs back.

Jill smiles and kisses him again. “Then you can take me to bed,” she says. “I’ll have earned it.”

He smiles because he doesn’t trust his voice to say anything. A moment later Andy comes inside, hair slightly tousled and carrying a scent of rosemary from the garden. Two minutes after that Magpie stumbles downstairs, sleepy and disheveled, hair half-pinned back and dressed in a purple shirt that keeps sliding off one shoulder and threatening to expose her chest. Khan does note a striking dragon tattoo over her shoulder, similar to the one he saw on Andy except done in green and black. “This is my Andy dragon,” Magpie says when she sees him look at it. “You’ve seen my Jill dragon already. My other dragons have names you wouldn’t recognize, but one’s on my back above my tailbone, one climbs up my right leg, and the last is on my belly. I’ll show you later if you care.” She drops onto a floor pillow and shoves her hair back. “And I think now I need a you dragon. Gold and black, maybe some red. Not sure where I’d put him, although I think I could maybe get him to circle around the Jill dragon. That would work.”

“That’d be a pretty involved piece of ink, bird,” Jill says, stretching and falling into a handstand.

“Somewhat appropriate,” Magpie says. “We ready to fit you out and get going?”

“We are,” Jill says, walking a few steps on her hands and flipping back over. “Sunset’s coming up faster than I thought, so I need to get going soon.”

“Andy, your part,” Magpie says, opening up her computers.

“On it,” Andy says, opening a few boxes and taking out various things. She hands out the earbuds to everyone; the test works fine, and Khan sees Jill shake her head violently to try and dislodge it.

“I’m good, it’s solid,” she reports. “Not moving a millimeter.”

“Excellent,” Andy says. “Shield next, remember you can’t activate it until we give you the clear or we’ll lose our ability to see you.”

“I remember,” Jill says, fitting the small rectangle onto her belt.

Khan watches them run through the rest of it, testing what they can and confirming it all works. Finally, Andy steps back, nodding. “You’re as solid as I can make you,” he says. “Kick ass.”


“I’ve got your pulse, your breathing, your life sign and your voice in my ear,” Magpie says. “I’m logged in and logged on and we are good to go.”

Jill grins. “Then let’s do this.” She shakes herself all over and pulls on a loose blue jacket. “I’ll ditch this once I get out of the cab, but if I go out looking like this I’m going to raise alarms,” she tells Khan.

He nods. He can’t wish her good luck; the words stick in his throat. So he leans down and kisses her instead, hard and fast.

“See you in a few hours,” Jill says and slips out the door.

“Now, the hard part,” Andy says, opening up her own computer. “We wait.”

Magpie sighs. “Yeah. And she can hear us, so we can always tell her terrible jokes while she can’t
“The bartender says ‘We don’t serve time travelers in here.’ A time traveler walks into a bar,” Andy says deadpan.

“Three men walk into a bar, the fourth ducks,” Magpie says.

“What kind of underwear do clouds wear? Thunderpants,” Andy says.

Magpie throws a pen at her. “Okay, that was awful even by our standards and you should be ashamed.”

“You really should,” Jill mutters in Khan’s ear.


“Why did the chicken cross the road?” Magpie asks.

“The thinking went something like ‘Kabawk!’” Andy answers.

Jill snickers. “You guys are terrible and I hate you.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure the chicken crossed the road to escape my mother’s soup pot,” Andy says. “She didn’t always care if something was dead before she tried to boil it.”

“Well, you boil lobsters alive,” Magpie says.

“Yes, and they’re delicious,” Andy says. “Also, they scream, which is kind of satisfying if you like murder with your dinner.”

“Meat is murder. Tasty, tasty murder,” Magpie says cheerfully.

“Meat is murder. Quick, eat the evidence,” Andy offers.

“Now I’m hungry,” Magpie says. “Damnit. Do I have time to forage before we start?”

“You’ve got nine minutes until Jill gets out of the cab,” Andy says.

“That’s enough,” Magpie says, scrambling to her feet.

Khan shakes his head, knowing what they are doing with their use of humor and banter and yet unable to relax. His tension coils inside him, not easing when Magpie returns with a bowl of noodles and chopsticks, and tightening when Jill gets out of the cab five minutes from the building.

Magpie and Andy change modes almost immediately once she does, both settling in, completely focused on their work. Khan watches them, but cannot sit, cannot settle. His wings will not stay still, and although he tries not to pace, he fails. Fortunately they have room in the house for him to both pace and stretch his wings, and neither Magpie nor Andy comment as they guide Jill through the entrance to the building and the first set of guards. Magpie sits intent with her three computers in front of him, notching when Jill gets out of the cab five minutes from the building.

"Coming up on the second set of guards," Magpie says, studying her second computer. "Five. Four. Three. Two. Go." Khan hears Jill suck in a breath and the little dot representing her on Andy’s screen suddenly jumps around a corner. "Wait for a ten-count, then activate the shield and go. Ten."

And silence. "Shit," Andy curses, fingers flying over his keyboard. "I was afraid that might happen, didn't have sufficient time to test the shielding, fuck goddamn shit come back you useless piece of —" She lapses into Mandarin, cursing eloquently as she types, and a moment later Khan hears his earbud come back online.

"Bird, Andy," Jill murmurs, so quietly Khan barely hears her. "Am I there?"

"We've got you," Andy says, almost collapsing in relief. "Activating the shield knocked you temporarily offline. You're back, and you've got just the force-field to get under before you get to the tubes. We are going to lose you when you enter the room with the cryotubes, though, and we won't get you back until you're out of there. Once you get through the force-field, you'll have thirty seconds to hold before Magpie can disable the cameras, and you'll have no more than ten minutes in that room once you get in, so work fast."

"Roger," Jill says, sounding as calm as Magpie. "We planned for eight, ten should be enough time."

"Move," Magpie says. "Guards coming at your five o'clock, there's a corner at eleven, duck. Good. Hold for a moment, have to distract them." She switches computers, fingers flying faster than Andy's. "Okay, they're leaving, now move. Slow and steady."

Jill doesn't respond verbally, but Khan sees her dot move and then stop. "At the field," she murmurs.

"Coming down in five, four, three, two, one, go!" Magpie says and Jill's dot blanks out.

The next ten minutes take an eternity to pass. Andy's working on something, as is Magpie, but Khan sees them both look at the clock every thirty seconds. "She'll signal when she gets back outside the field," Magpie says. "She's got two minutes left before we run into trouble."

A minute goes by. Ten more seconds. Twenty.

"We're out," Jill reports into the earbud. "Just got through the force-field, shields activated. Guards?"

"You're clear," Magpie reports. "At least for the next thirty seconds."

Khan grits his teeth and listens to Magpie and Andy guide Jill and whoever she revived out of the facility, step by step, distracting guards and disabling cameras as they go. "We're at the window," Jill reports. "I'm going last. Let you know when we're on the ground."

"Roger that," Magpie says.

Khan hears silence, and then a soft thump. "All down and safe," Jill reports. "Are we clear?"

"Fly casual," Magpie says. "I don't see anyone coming after you but don't start running yet. Just walk away."

"No shit," Jill mutters and Khan smiles involuntarily.

Five minutes later, Magpie sighs in relief. "You're clear," she says. "Hop in a cab and we'll see you in fifteen."
"Roger," Jill says.

Khan has almost managed to stop pacing and fold his wings back when the front door to the house opens and Jill comes in. "Khan, incoming," she calls and a moment later Khan staggers back as Ekaterina throws herself into his arms, panting for breath. She hasn't let go of him when Konstantin simply wraps himself around them both, and Khan realizes with a small amount of alarm that Cat is actually crying.

"Cat, easy," he says, trying to breathe around her stranglehold on his neck. "It is all right. You are all right."

Ekaterina takes a shaky breath, then another, and finally lets go of him. "You look like shit," she says in Russian. "But oh, God, it is good to see you. Who are these people? What is going on?"

"Friends," Khan says. "This is Magpie, and this is Andy, and you already met Jill. You and Konstantin were the first ones we could get out, we are going back for more. There is...a lot to learn."

"Fortunately we learn quickly," Konstantin says, resting his hands on Ekaterina's shoulders. "You do not look like shit. You just look very tired. How long has it been for you? How long has it been for us?"

"We left Earth three centuries ago," Khan says. "I have been awake for a few months."

"Where did Jill go?" Ekaterina asks, looking around. "I wish to thank her."

"I...do not know," Khan says, realizing she seems to have vanished from the room. "I will go find her. Give me a moment."

He finds Jill in the kitchen, drinking a large bottle of water. "Jobs make me thirsty," she says when she pauses to breathe. "I don't drink as much before so I don't have to pee in the middle, and between that and the adrenalin I'm always dry as a bone by the time I get out. Anyway, I figured you could use some time with your family."

She looks almost embarrassed, Khan thinks, as if she did not want to see him. "I should get back to—I mean, you've got a lot of catching up to do, and I don't want to—" Jill stops mid-sentence when Khan simply picks her up, holding her close and burying his face in her shoulder. "Okay, not quite what I expected there," she says, but she wraps her arms and legs around him and holds on.

"Thank you," Khan whispers finally, all he can manage.

"Thank me when we're done," Jill says.

"Do you have any idea what you have done for me?" Khan asks softly. "Do you have any idea what it means that you would do this for me?"

"I love you," Jill says and immediately goes tense in his arms. "Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—I know you don't love me, it's fine, I don't care, I didn't mean to say that, it's just—I do and why else would I do all this for you? I don't—I don't expect anything and I don't expect you to need me around when this is over and it's fine, it's really all fine, just forget I said anything, please for the love of God."

Khan tips her chin up and kisses her. "No," he says. "No, I do not think I will."

"But you don't love me, and I don't expect you to," Jill says, sounding confused.
"Are you so certain of that?" Khan asks.

She studies his face. "We don't have time for this right now," she says. "You have family to introduce to this century and I have—I'm sure I have things to do and—"

"Do not be so quick to assume you know my feelings toward you, milaya moya," Khan says softly. Jill bites her lip. "We don't have time for this," she says, moving to get down, but he doesn't let her go.

"Why does this scare you?" he asks.

"I didn't say I was scared," Jill says. "I'm not. Why would I—that makes no sense."

"Does it not?" Khan asks. "Tell me what you are afraid of."

"Please," she says quietly. "Just let me go, let me go back to my flat and we'll plan the next outing tomorrow and—"

"Tell me why you are afraid," Khan says.

Jill closes her eyes. "Khan, please," she whispers.

"No," Khan says. "Tell me."

"Because no one ever stays," Jill blurs. "Because no one I've ever loved has loved me back the way I've wanted them to, not like this, because I'm just me and you are this amazing, beautiful, brilliant man and I don't understand why you want me beyond my ability to help you and my friends' ability to help you and I don't expect you to want me when this is over because how could you? You'll have your family, you could do anything, what would you want with one tiny normal human woman?"

"You are not "just" anything," Khan says because picking apart that tangle of neuroses and fears and insecurities will take more time than he has at the moment but it's at least a place to start.

Jill puts her forehead against his shoulder. "Can we not do this right now? Please?" she asks plaintively. "You have Ekaterina and Konstantin to talk to and I'm starting to crash and please, Khan, can we just table this for now?"

He kisses her hair. "One day you will believe me," he says.

"Maybe," Jill says wearily. "Right now I just want to go to bed."

Khan holds her a moment longer before setting her down gently; Jill sighs and leans into him for a moment. "It's Saturday night," she says. "Might as well crash here, since we're here already and no one has to be anywhere tomorrow."

"All right," Khan says. "Do you want company?"

"You have to talk to your brother and sister," Jill says. "I guess find me when you're done. I'll see if Magpie wants to snuggle for a bit." She turns to leave the kitchen and stops when she sees Ekaterina standing there. "Sorry, was I in your way?" she asks.

"No, not at all," Ekaterina says, moving forward to clasp Jill in her arms and kiss her cheeks. "Thank you," she says.
Jill looks uncomfortable. “I didn’t—you’re welcome.”

“You saved us,” Ekaterina says. “And now I am safely out of cryosleep and with the two people in the world I love the most, my brother and my mate.”

“The unholy trinity,” Khan murmurs in Russian and Cat smiles.

“Will you sit with us for a bit?” Ekaterina asks Jill. “Konstantin and I have many questions, and I know you must be tired, but I would like to talk with you and better understand our situation. I have already been informed by Magpie that we are not safe, but that you know more than she does.”

Over Jill’s head, Khan catches her eye and nods in appreciation.

“Oh, sure,” Jill says. “Let me just run to the bathroom first?”

“Of course,” Cat says, and Jill slips past her. Khan waits until he hears the bathroom door close to say anything.

“Well done, sister,” he says, moving to hug her again because he can, because she is here and alive and real in his arms.

“I heard part of your conversation,” she says, pulling back to look at his face. “Is she yours, Khan?” She uses Greek, which he appreciates; no one else in the house but Konstantin knows that particular language.

“She is,” he says. “But she does not quite understand everything I mean by it. She thinks I will tire of her, will let her go once all of us are together again.”

Ekaterina snorts. “Clearly she does not know you as well as she thinks.”

Khan shrugs. “She will.”

Cat tucks her head against his shoulder, and Khan folds his wings around her, holding her close. “How did you get her help?” she asks after a moment.

“She offered it,” Khan admits. He tells Cat a short version of the story of how he and Jill met, how she got the truth out of him and proceeded to offer him her help and drag her friends into it.

“Remarkable,” Ekaterina says when he finishes. “Truly remarkable. Maybe there is hope for humanity after all.”

“Perhaps. I am not convinced,” Khan says.

Again, she pulls back to look at him. “What happened to you? Why have you been awake for months without us?” she asks.

“Not right now,” Khan says. “I will tell you, I promise, but...tonight is not the right time. Just know that I am all right, and I have you now, and we are not alone in this, not anymore.”

Cat’s face softens and she cups his cheek in her palm. “You were alone,” she says.

“I was,” Khan says. “Now I am not.”

“Brother,” she murmurs. “All right. Let us go talk to Jill and the pretty Magpie and the curious Andy.” She stretches up to kiss his cheek and steps back.
The six of them gather in the living room; Magpie folds herself down on a cushion next to Andy, while Ekaterina and Konstantin take the couch, sitting close together. Khan takes a seat on the ottoman because it won’t stifle his wings, and when Jill comes into the room he simply holds out a hand for her. She bites her lip, but crosses to him, and he pulls her into his lap, where she sighs and tucks her head against his shoulder.

“So,” Konstantin says, resting a hand on Ekaterina’s thigh. “Where do we even begin?”

“Good question,” Magpie says with a grin. “What’s most important for you to know right now?”

“Current political and military situation,” Konstantin says. “After that, what our situation is in particular as it relates to the former.”

“Right,” Andy says. “So politically Earth has a unified government, the Federation, and it’s actually an interplanetary government that includes several alien races. We have faster-than-light travel, warp drive, so it’s not quite as insane as you might have thought it during your time. Militarily, we’re a world at peace, so there’s not quite a need for standing armies and things. The closest we get to a planetary military these days is Starfleet, which is a combined officer and science corps, does some policing and a lot of exploration. Technically Jill works for Starfleet, she’s a commander and until recently was the first officer aboard one of its ships.”

“Now I’m theoretically doing a research project for reasons related to your family,” Jill says. She blows out a breath. “A few years ago, there was a terrorist attack on a peaceful planet by a man who’d gotten dragged into this universe through a black hole. He, um, blew up the planet, killed billions of people. As a result, Starfleet began searching more aggressively for other anomalies or just whatever they might find, and came across your ship, brought it back to Earth. The admiral in charge of Starfleet, his name’s Alexander Marcus, he revived Khan to use him. Marcus...so Andy said we’re technically at peace, but not all the other alien species in the galaxy are quite as friendly. We have a state of armed truce with one species called the Klingons, and Marcus firmly believes we’re going to end up in a war with them. He wants the war, at pretty much any cost, and revived Khan to use his skills to build weapons and warships and help him militarize Starfleet. He didn’t revive anyone else because--”

“Because he needed a way to control my brother,” Ekaterina says. “Simple, but effective.”

“Pretty much,” Jill agrees. “So, anyway, I’m going back for more of you. We can’t get everyone out, the facility in which the cryotubes are being kept is pretty heavily shielded and I can only take two with me at most every time I go in, and every time I go we increase the risk of getting caught. That being said, given the smashing success of tonight’s op we’re going again tomorrow to try and get out two more, and if we’re incredibly lucky we’ll manage to get between four and six more total.”

“And what will we be doing in the meantime?” Ekaterina asks. “I presume there is need for us.”

“Well, for starters we need to get you acclimated to this century,” Magpie says, fiddling with a ring. “After that, it depends. Marcus is up to a lot of things he shouldn’t be, and we’re trying to get enough evidence to shut him down for good, so we might need your help with that.”

“All right,” Ekaterina says. She pushes her hands through her hair and leans into Konstantin, resting her head on his shoulder. “Is this fatigue normal?” she asks Khan.

“It is,” he says. “You should be back to normal after a solid night’s sleep, however.”

“I slept for three hundred years,” Ekaterina says irritably. “Was that not enough?”
“Apparently not,” Konstantin says, rubbing her thigh. “Besides, now you can sleep with me instead of next to me.”

Cat laughs at that. “True.” She reaches up to touch his face. “I did not know, when we left, if I would ever be able to do this again,” she murmurs in Russian.

Konstantin bends his forehead to hers. “And now here we are,” he says in the same language. “Together.”


“Yes,” Khan says. “And Anandi and possibly Maeve. In that order.”

She smiles. “I like that we were first, brother.”

“Who else?” Khan asks simply.

“Oh, do not make me cry,” Cat says, brushing a tear away from her eye. “I hate that. I am also very tired and think I will need some sleep and possibly some form of stimulant beverage before I can process much more about this current time and our situation. Does coffee still exist?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jill says. “We’re in London at the moment, so more with the tea than the coffee but I am not British and require coffee, so we’ve got it in the house. If you go upstairs, we made up a bedroom for you two, the first door on the right, and the bath is just next door. There’s towels and some toiletries in there, if you want a shower.”

“Spasiba,” Konstantin says. “Brother, it is good to see you again.” He rises to his feet, drawing Ekaterina with him, and before Khan can say or do anything Jill moves so he can get up. He touches her shoulder and moves to hug Konstantin, who all but lifts him off the ground with the force of it. Khan almost laughs; some things, apparently, never change, and Konstantin’s hugs are among them.

“Do not break him, Kostya,” Ekaterina says, but she laughs.

“Of course not,” Konstantin says, finally letting go. “Besides, he can best me in fighting. Speaking of, is there somewhere we can arrange to spar? We will need to exercise.”

“There is,” Jill says. “I have a friend—not here tonight, but you’ll meet him—who has a private gym space not far from here. Well, it’s not technically his, but he called in a favor and it’s ours for as long as we need it. We can go there maybe tomorrow during the day, if you want.”

“We will,” Ekaterina says. “Thank you.” But instead of hugging Khan, she moves over to Jill and leans down to hug her. Jill looks startled but hugs back, and Ekaterina kisses her cheek before pulling away. “Tomorrow, I should like to hear the story of how you met my brother and why you agreed to help him,” she says, her tone clear that she’s not asking.

“I’m sure he can tell you,” Jill says uncertainly.

“He can tell me his perspective, and I will hear that from him,” Ekaterina agrees. “But I should like to hear your tale as well. I already understand that my family and I owe you a great debt, Jill, and I would like to understand exactly how large that debt is and of what it consists.” She holds up a finger when Jill starts to protest and Jill subsides; Khan only wishes that trick would work for him. “I take my debts seriously,” Ekaterina says. “As does my Kostya. I am not a good woman, but I have a sense of honor, and of balance, and I pay what I owe.”
Ekaterina turns to Andy and Magpie. “You each have your own story to tell, and I should like to hear them as well,” she says. “I understand this would not have been possible without either of you, and thus we are in your debt as well.”

She wears plain black, a close-fitted tunic and pants with unadorned boots, and yet as Khan looks at her he does not see his sister as she is, but as she was three hundred years ago, in rich colors and fabrics, every inch a queen even though she never allowed herself to be called one. Never wanted to be one, either, but she accepted it because if not for her, it would have been Konstantin, and Ekaterina would have done anything to spare him the burden of rule.

Khan looks at Konstantin, smiling faintly, and Konstantin smiles back. “Katya,” he says, breaking the spell. “Come. It is time for bed.”

“Da,” Ekaterina says and just as simply as that, she seems smaller, less commanding. “Good night, Andy, Magpie, Jill. Brother.” She pauses on her way to the stairs to hug Khan tightly and then she disappears up them.

No one says anything for a moment. Then Magpie blows out a breath. “Are all of your siblings that scary?” she asks.

“That,” Khan says, “was Cat attempting to be diplomatic.”

“Oh,” Andy says.

“I did say attempting,” Khan says, finding humor in it even though none of the three other people in the room look all that amused. “ Mostly that is what she has Konstantin for, to play diplomat.”

“He’s practically twice her size,” Magpie points out. “Okay, not quite that big, but still, he’s a big man.”

“Yes, and remarkably gentle,” Khan says. “One of the gentlest of my brothers and sisters. That is not to say he will not kill, because we all will, but he prefers peace to war. When I learned about the current state of Earth’s government, one of my first thoughts was how much he would love to see it.”

“Okay, but we’re not talking about Konstantin, we’re talking about Ekaterina being kind of terrifying,” Magpie says. “Because that? Was scary. Anyone who can make Jill stop before she’s started just by raising a finger is not someone whose bad side I ever want to see.”

Jill snorts and sits back down on the ottoman. “You know, I’ll second that, and now I’m doubly glad she didn’t try to kill me when I woke her up. I don’t even know how she did it.”

“She ruled countries,” Khan says simply. “She is used to power and how to wield it.”

“And are all your family like that?” Andy asks warily.

Khan smiles and shakes his head. “No,” he says. “No, they are not. You will like Alona and Matthew, of that I am certain. Both of them have irrepressible and very irreverent senses of humor.”

“That I can work with,” Magpie says. “Why are they not next on the list?”

“Katsuro is a better fighter and Bishop a better tactician,” Khan says. “No one can best Katsuro in combat, not even Ekaterina, and almost no one can best her.”
“Can you?” Andy asks.

“Rarely,” Khan says. “If she is having a bad day.”

Jill whistles. “Shit,” she says. “Yeah, okay, fine, I’ll tell your terrifying sister anything she wants to know.”

Khan smiles again. “She will not eat you,” he says. “She does take her debts seriously, milaya moya, and she considers that she owes you a life debt. That is not something she will forget.”

“I kind of wish she would,” Jill admits. “I don’t...I didn’t do this because I wanted your family to owe me anything. I did it because it was the right thing to do.”

“Actions have consequences,” Khan says. “You made your choices, and Cat has made hers. One follows from the next, whether we can see it or not.”

Jill sighs again and tugs the band out of her braid, starting to dishevel it and fluff out her curls. “Right,” she says. “I’m starting to crash. Not sure I can sleep, but I think I should at least make the attempt.”

“Likewise,” Magpie says, covering a yawn. “If I leave my computers here, do I have to worry about them being touched? They’re all password protected, but I don’t know if either of them are hackers and I’ve got some stuff on here I don’t want interrupted.”

Khan shakes his head. “They will not touch your belongings,” he says. “We take hospitality seriously, and they are your guests.”

“Okay,” Magpie says. “Not sure how I feel about that one but at least my stuff’s safe.” She types in a few things on each computer before scrambling to her feet. Andy does the same, gathering his hair back into his hands and letting it fall down his back. “This was fun, let’s do it again tomorrow,” Magpie says. She gives Jill a hug and pats Khan’s cheek before heading upstairs.

“Something like that,” Andy says. She also gives Jill a hug and pauses to do the same for Khan before following Magpie.

Khan looks at Jill. “Come, milaya moya,” he says, holding out a hand. “Let us find our own bed.”

Jill groans and pushes to her feet, walking toward him. “Can I be horribly selfish and ask if you’d be willing to rub my back before I attempt to sleep? Climbing up the wall—it’s not all that difficult, but I had to hold just before I got in the window for a minute and some of my muscles are a little stiff.”

“Of course,” Khan says. After the success of tonight’s op, she could ask him for anything and he would find a way to give it to her, but he keeps quiet about that. She is uncomfortable enough knowing Ekaterina’s thoughts on the matter; he is not about to tell her he owes her as well.

The two of them have the bedroom on the other side of the bath from Ekaterina and Konstantin. Khan thinks it unlikely that either of them will wake during the night; he remembers the fatigue after being revived all too clearly. But in case they do, he would prefer to be close by.

They take turns in the bath, mostly because its size and Khan’s wings do not allow for a second person, and Jill sprawls out on the bed when Khan returns to the room, wearing plain black panties and nothing else. “I figure if Andy or Magpie walk in they’ve seen it before, and if Ekaterina or Konstantin walk in I’ve got bigger problems than them seeing my not-really-impressive tits,” she says, turning her head to look at him. “I’ve never really wanted bigger boobs—well, sometimes,
but not that often—but even I admit mine aren’t much to look at.”

“I like them,” Khan says mildly. “And they suit you.”

Jill laughs. “Thank you.” She stretches and rolls onto her stomach, gathering her hair back and twisting it into a clip. A few loose curls spiral out of it, but mostly she gets it bundled up at the back of her head, exposing her neck and back. Khan sits next to her and runs a hand over her back, feeling scars and skin, gauging the tension. Less than he expected, but Jill reaches back and nudges his hand to a different spot. “There,” she says, and when he presses down she hisses in a breath. “There and just above it.”

“Yes, I can tell,” Khan murmurs, following the line of muscle, figuring out what hurts the most and what is merely stiff. When he thinks he has a good sense of it, he moves to get the oil and straddles Jill’s hips, sliding his hands up her back before beginning to work on her muscles. “Tell me how it went from your perspective,” he says.

“Surprisingly crisis-free,” Jill says, voice slightly muffled by the pillow. “The scariest part was when I activated the shield and my earbud went dead. I almost had a heart attack, and froze. I didn’t know what I was going to do if I lost contact with you three, I had maybe a way of getting out safely but I didn’t know if I could trust it and there was absolutely no way I could have gotten to Ekaterina or Konstantin. The moment I heard Andy cursing in my ear I almost collapsed in relief.”

“Tell me about reviving them,” Khan says. “Please.”

“I found Konstantin first,” Jill says. “Punched in the sequencing, opened the tube, and just as he opened his eyes I gave him the code phrase you gave me and told him you’d sent me, in Russian. I repeated it twice more, until he gave me the counter that he understood. I had just enough time to help him get to his feet and steady him before I had to move on and do the same for Ekaterina. She grabbed my wrist before she processed my words, but didn’t actually hurt me. It was actually kind of neat because she had a very tight grip on me and then I almost saw her wake up and realize what I’d said, and immediately she let me go. I was able to give them each a minute to re-orient before we had to move out, and they were great on the way out. Didn’t ask questions, didn’t make noise, did exactly what I told them—I’m fairly certain that will be the last time that ever happens—and we all made it out safely.”

“I am glad she did not hurt you,” Khan says.

“As am I, because I’m fairly certain she could have broken my wrist had she really been trying and then we’d be in trouble,” Jill says. “It was more a warning than an actual intent to harm me, like “I will know who you are and what is going on here”. And then she clued in. She did all but tackle Konstantin once she was upright, though.”

“That does not surprise me,” Khan says. “Had we been capable of making a dual cryotube, they would have used it.”

“I’ve never asked this before, but how old are you, Khan?” Jill asks. “How old are they? How long have they been together?”

“Not counting cryosleep time, I am fifty-eight,” Khan says. “Konstantin is my age, about eight months younger, and Ekaterina is a year younger than he is. They have been together as a romantic couple since she was fourteen and he fifteen, but remember that we grew up together. We have always known each other. When Cat was a toddler, she would insist on following me around, me and Konstantin. The three of us were nearly inseparable until the wars began.”
“Fifty—you look my age,” Jill says.

“We age slowly,” Khan says. “Part of the engineering, I suppose.”

Jill blows out a breath. “Right,” she says. “Okay. But...that still means she and Konstantin have been together for over forty years.”

“And in that time they never spent a single night apart,” Khan says.

“It’s a shame they couldn’t have children,” Jill says.

“I am not sure they ever wanted any,” Khan says. “Cat is somewhat lacking in maternal instinct. Konstantin would have been a good parent, I think, but it was not something Cat ever wanted as far as I am aware.”

“Did you ever?” Jill asks.

“Rani did,” Khan says softly. “We talked about adopting, or about seeing if we could use then-modern science to create an embryo the way I had been created, but things were not settled, and then she died before we had time.”

“Could—could medical science today reverse what was done to you? Make you capable of having children?” Jill asks. “Wait, you told me you weren’t sure.”

“I am not certain, no,” Khan says. “I was never a keen student of medicine or biology, and I have not had time to even try and learn about current science in those fields. Bishop might be able to find out, once we revive him, if there is time. Possibly Maeve, if we are able to revive her. Both of them studied medicine. Anandi might also be able to help, she studied biochemistry, although her specialty was actually poison.”

“Remind me not to piss her off,” Jill murmurs. “If—if you could reverse it, hypothetically, would you want to?”

“Honestly, milaya moya, I do not know,” Khan says. “Things are very tangled at this point, and I do not see a clear path forward. It would depend on many things, not least of which would be what happens when this is all over, where we go.”

He means ‘we’ to refer to himself and Jill, but thinks she takes it as meaning him and his siblings, and does not clarify. “Do you want children?” he asks instead.

“I don’t know,” Jill says. “It’s a hellishly huge responsibility, and I don’t know if I’m mature enough for it. I don’t know if I want to settle down like that, be tied down like that. Medical science has advanced enough these days that even with my weird physiology, I have a bit of time before it’s put up or shut up, but I don’t know if motherhood’s for me. And this is going to sound terribly selfish, but I don’t know that even if I decide I want to be a parent that I want to be pregnant. I like my body the way it is. I’m small and light and flexible and I like having control over my body, I like being certain of what I can do and what I can’t do. Pregnancy changes all that, and it scares me, that I’d never get me back. So much of who I am, my concept of myself, is based on my dexterity, my athletic ability. I don’t want to lose that.”

“I do not think it selfish,” Khan says softly. “I think it honest of you, and I admire you for willing to be honest about it. How much time do you have before it becomes an urgent matter?”

“Maybe a decade,” Jill says. “Maybe a little less, it depends. I’d have to get my implant out and then it takes about six months for your body to settle and then they’d have to evaluate me and see
“Socially, in today’s society, are there ways to have children without going through pregnancy?” Khan asks.

“There are,” Jill says. “We haven’t created an artificial womb yet, but there are a few ways. Surrogacy’s the primary one, but there are still children to adopt if you want to go that route. Things aren’t perfect on Earth, and as Magpie and Andy are evidence, sometimes people fall through the cracks. Everyone’s supposed to have easy access to reliable birth control, so that no one has unwanted children, but sometimes things happen. I don’t know a whole lot about what it takes to adopt a child, but I’ve heard it is not a process for the faint of heart.”

“I see,” Khan says, sliding his hands down her back. “How do your muscles feel now?”

“Heavenly,” Jill says, stretching a little. “That was exactly what I needed. Thank you.” She stretches again and Khan moves off her to let her roll onto her back. “If I were a better woman I’d offer to suck you or something but I think I’d fall asleep halfway through,” she says, covering a yawn. “Also I don’t know how thick the walls are in this house and that would be really, really embarrassing.”

“It is fine,” Khan says, turning off the lights and moving to get under the covers. Jill wriggles under the comforter and tucks herself against him, her head on his shoulder and her hair not quite tickling his nose. Familiar, even after a matter of weeks, and Khan smiles a little into the darkness.

Jill mumbles something half-coherent that Khan doesn’t quite catch, but he doesn’t ask her to repeat it. In mere moments she’s sound asleep, breathing softly, warm and lax.

Khan lets her sleep for a while before gently easing out from under her and getting up. As silently as he can manage, he slips out of the room, leaving the door open just a crack, and walks down the hall to the bedroom on the other side of the bath. It does not surprise him to see that door open just a little, just shy of latching, and he smiles. Cat has always known him too well. Or maybe it was Konstantin.

He pushes the door open and it swings inward silently, not a creak to announce his presence. Only a hint of moonlight gets into the room through the blinds, but Khan has sharp eyes and good night vision, and he can see what he needs to. Two forms asleep in the bed, curled around each other, solid and real and breathing and here. His brother, his sister, alive and awake—if asleep at the moment--and here, close enough to touch.

His throat goes tight and he sinks to his knees next to the bed, not quite reaching out to touch in case he wakes them. They will need their sleep, for it will be a long day tomorrow and a long set of weeks after that, and all with an uncertain future, a doubtful outcome. But he has them now, the two people he loves more than almost anything else in the world, the ones closest to his heart and his soul. He has them, and he will not be separated from them again, whatever the cost.

“Brother,” Konstantin mumbles in Russian. “Get in here before you freeze.” He doesn’t move, and neither does Cat, but she snorts in agreement.

Khan laughs softly. He should have known better than to think he could avoid waking them. So he does as he’s told and crawls into bed on Cat’s other side, the three of them settling in a familiar tangle for all that it has been centuries, and decades before that, since they have shared a bed.

“Now I can sleep properly,” Ekaterina says in satisfaction. She pats Khan’s hip and sighs, falling asleep almost instantly the way she’s always been able to do. Konstantin reaches over her to touch
Khan’s shoulder, leaving his hand there even when he drifts off.

Khan closes his eyes, but does not sleep. He does not want to miss this, not one second of it.

Chapter End Notes

1. I blame my phone for the terrible jokes in this chapter--no, really, I do. I have a Windows phone, and part of its software is Cortana, the Windows answer to Apple's Siri. I happen to think Cortana is way more awesome (and I'm writing this note on a MacBook Pro, for the record). So when I was writing the bit with Magpie and Andy telling terrible jokes, I opened up Cortana and said "tell me a joke". Or I said "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

2. I also cannot take credit for the "meat is murder" lines. The first one I can't remember who came up with it but I've seen it on a t-shirt. The "quick, eat the evidence!" line is from the very talented John Kovalic, and you can get it on a t-shirt here.

3. If you've been reading my other wingfic-in-progress, you met Ekaterina a long time ago but for various reasons Konstantin did not survive in that story. Here, clearly he made it out alive. It will be interesting to see how different Cat is and isn't with him around.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Family is where you take care of each other no matter the circumstances.

Chapter Notes

In which things get more and less complicated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of quiet voices wakes him, but he keeps his body relaxed and his breath slow and even, listening closely. From the subtle twitch of Konstantin’s hand on Khan’s shoulder, he’s done the same thing, and Khan knows better than to think Cat is still asleep. But none of them move, none of them do anything to indicate they are awake. Perhaps unfair of them, but Khan has never played fair.

“It’s the world’s scariest puppy pile,” Magpie murmurs and Khan bites back a smile. He faces away from the door, and his mouth is hidden in Cat’s hair, but if he smiles he will laugh, and he wants to know which of the three are watching him and his siblings, what they will say when they think they will not be overheard.

“Come on,” Jill says softly. “Let’s let them sleep. God knows they’ll need it.”

“I wish I could sketch them like this,” Magpie says wistfully. “With the sunlight just coming through the blinds, it’d be gorgeous.”

“And they’d all kill you for it,” Jill says. “Come on, Bird, let’s go get coffee.”

They keep their voices low, and most normal humans probably wouldn’t be able to hear even if they were awake, although Khan has never closely studied how amplified his hearing is compared to an un-augmented human. He thinks Anandi did, or Bishop, but those days were long ago. Either way, it does not matter; he can hear them clearly, and he knows Cat and Konstantin can as well.

“In a minute,” Magpie says. “What happened last night? Why were you so off? Post-job nerves?”

“Kind of,” Jill says. “Can we not talk about it?”


He hears what must be Jill pushing her hands through her hair. “I told him I loved him,” she says finally, reluctantly. “Because I’m an idiot who doesn’t think before she speaks. Seriously, Magpie, coffee.”

“Tell me what he said and I’ll make it myself,” Magpie says. “And I’ll go out for bagels.”

Jill sighs. “He--he didn’t outright say that he loved me. He implied it. I told him he didn’t love me,
and he asked me if I was certain, told me not to be sure I knew how he felt. I really didn’t want to get into it then, so...that was kind of it.”

“Honey,” Magpie murmurs. “He loves you. I know he does.”

“No,” Jill says. “No, he needs me right now. In six months, if everything goes right, he won’t, and he’ll move on and that will be that. And I’ll survive, and someday I’ll find someone else who will love me back, and it’s all fine.”

Magpie’s turn to sigh. “You’re an idiot,” she says, not unsympathetically. “I know what men look like when they’re just using someone. I know what men look like when they need someone at the moment. And I am telling you, that man loves you and it scares the absolute shit out of you.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Jill whispers.

“Be happy,” Magpie says softly. “Hang on to what you’ve got as tight as you can because nothing’s certain in this world and even if you both die trying to achieve the almost impossible, at least you’ll have had this. Know that you’re not alone, that there is at least one person in this world who has seen you completely go to pieces and is willing to pick them up and put them back together as often as it takes. Jill, I love you, and I say this because I love you—you’re beautiful and smart and amazing and I think you have more scars and more scar tissue than I do, and some of those wounds still bleed. And it hasn’t scared him away.”

Jill breathes out slowly. “I can’t think about this right now,” she says finally. “And you’re making coffee.”

That seems to be it; Khan hears footsteps, then footsteps descending the stairs, and waits until he can no longer hear sounds before doing anything.

“Well,” Cat murmurs in Hindi. “Do you love her, brother?”

He inhales, exhales deliberately. “Yes,” he says in the same language.

“Good.” She reaches back and pats his hip. “She is...very different from Rani.”

“Different and yet similar,” Khan murmurs.

“Rani was not as...damaged,” Ekaterina says carefully.

“No,” Khan agrees. “But I think in some ways Jill is stronger, and...” He hesitates, almost embarrassed by the thought.

“Tell us,” Konstantin says softly.

“Shortly after I met Jill, after I told her about myself, I told her about Rani,” Khan says, feeling like he needs context. “She asked me what happened, and I told her. And she told me—reluctantly, I admit, but she told me she didn’t think Rani had loved me as much as I had loved her. That if she had loved me enough, trusted me enough, she would have told me the truth in time for me to save her.”

“Do you agree with her?” Ekaterina asks.

“It is not an unfamiliar thought,” Khan says.

She sighs. “No, it is not. To any of us. And I say this as someone who considered Rani her own
sister. I loved her dearly, Khan, and I wept at her funeral, but I believe Jill is correct.”

“You think Jill would have told you,” Konstantin says. “Were she in Rani’s place.”

“I think Jill loves as fiercely as she does anything,” Khan says. “I think she gives of herself more than she will ever ask of another, and she does with no expectation of return. She does not want you to owe her a debt, she wants it absolved. She offered me her help freely because she felt it was the right thing to do, and has never, not once, asked for anything in return. She lives with the intensity of a white-hot flame and my only fear for her is that she will burn herself out before I have enough time with her. And yes, she is damaged, she is broken in ways I may never be able to heal, but...I must try.”

“As must we,” Ekaterina says softly. “She is yours, brother, which makes her one of ours. Pain felt by one is felt by us all.”

“Yes, but let us be careful, Katya,” Konstantin says. “We do not want her to flee from us in terror. We must be gentle.”

“I am capable of gentleness,” Cat protests, but she laughs softly. “Yes, well, clearly I will be following your lead.”

“And I will follow Khan’s,” Konstantin says. “For now, let us get up and dress and meet the day.”

They do just that, taking turns in the bath. When they get downstairs he finds Jill sitting on the kitchen counter, barefoot in jeans and a loose blue sweater. She holds a mug in her lap and he doesn’t miss how she tenses, just for a moment, before she forces herself to relax and smiles. “There’s coffee,” she says, pointing at the pot. “Magpie went out for bagels, and Andy is I think still dead to the world. Milk’s in the fridge, sugar in the blue bowl next to the coffee pot, and mugs are in the cabinet above.”

“Spasiba,” Konstantin says, moving to get coffee for himself and Ekaterina. Khan lets him have first crack at the pot and moves over to Jill, who is almost eye to eye with him on the counter.

“I apologize for letting you wake alone,” he says softly, leaning his forehead against hers. “Did you have nightmares?”

“I did not,” Jill says. She touches his cheek, her fingers warm against his skin. “And it’s fine. When I woke up and you weren’t there I figured that’s where you’d gone. So I peeked in to make sure, and then I went and snuggled with Magpie for a bit.”

Khan nods and kisses her lightly. “We have not finished last night’s conversation, milaya moya,” he says.

“Yes, we have,” Jill says, dropping her hand.

“No,” Khan knows it’s not fair of him and doesn’t care; he uses his body and his wings to block her in, hold her where she is and keep her from getting away. “No, we have not, and you will listen to me.”

Jill hunches in on herself, looking down at the mug in her lap.

“Do you honestly think so little of me?” Khan asks, which clearly surprises her. Her eyes widen and she looks up at him, confused.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” she says.
"You think I am with you because I need you for the moment," Khan says. "That to me, you are nothing more than a temporary ally and a useful tool, one to be discarded and put away once I have reached my goal. What do you think of me, Jill, that you think I would use you like that? Why do you think so poorly of me?"

"It’s not that," she whispers. "It’s not."

"Then what is it?" Khan presses. "Tell me why you are so convinced I do not, can not love you."

"Because you scare me," Jill says in a rush. "Because you are so, so amazing and incredible and capable of so much, and I don’t ever want you to regret me, and how could you not? I’m not anything like you, I’m just--I’m nothing special and I don’t want you to look at me in a year, or five years, and wonder what you were ever thinking."

He touches her cheek, brushing his thumb over her cheekbone. "How could I ever?" he asks softly. "How could I do that? Jill, you gave me hope when I had none, you offered me your help when you had no reason to trust me or believe me. You gave me my family back, my brother and my sister, people I thought I might never see again. There is no circumstance under which I could look at you and regret you, not now, not in a year, not in five, not in fifty."

She colors, looking down and away from him. "You needed my help," she says, sounding embarrassed. "I had to—"

"I did," Khan says. "And ninety-nine out of a hundred people would not have offered given the same circumstances."

"I don’t think that’s true," Jill says, still not looking at him.

"Whether it is or not is beside the point," Khan says, curling his fingers under her chin and tipping her face up, forcing her to meet his eyes. "The point is you offered when very few would have. You trusted me long before you had any reason to and every reason not to. You rearranged your life for me, moved from San Francisco to London, gave up your position as a first officer to take on an academic project...need I go on?"

"I don’t want you to love me because you think you’re obligated to," Jill says quietly. "I don’t want you to love me because you think you owe me. That’s not why I did any of this."

"I don’t," Khan says. "I owe you a very large debt, one I may never be able to repay, but that is not why I love you."

He says it deliberately and Jill can’t hide her reaction, the flash of hope in her eyes and the way she leans toward him, just for a moment, before she forces herself to stillness. "You don’t believe me," he says, stroking her cheek, her hair. "That’s all right. We have time, and I am not going anywhere."

She swallows, leans into his hand. "I want to believe you," she says after a moment. "But I don’t understand why I should. I don’t...I’m nothing special."

"You are," Khan says softly. He kisses her forehead and then her lips. "And you are mine."

He hears footsteps and the sounds of someone deliberately trying to make noise, and kisses Jill one more time before stepping back. Magpie sets a large brown sack on the counter and begins rummaging through cupboards, not commenting on whatever she may have overheard. "Bagels and cream cheese," she says, finding a bread knife and butter knives. "Do we need another pot of coffee?"
“I’ll make it,” Jill says, jumping down from the counter and going to do that while Magpie sets out plates and knives. Ekaterina takes the knife before Magpie can even protest and begins slicing bagels efficiently, and in short order the five of them have breakfast.

Andy comes stumbling into the kitchen about halfway through the meal, hair tousled and barefoot. “Tea,” he mutters, looking for the kettle. “Tea is required.”

Khan’s amused to hear her speaking in Mandarin. “Tea leaves in that cabinet,” Jill says, apparently not needing translation. “Milk’s in the fridge, sugar in the blue bowl, kettle--yes, there it is.”

“Thank you,” Andy says around a yawn. “I did not sleep well.”

“Why not?” Magpie asks.

Andy rubs his eyes. “Nightmare, of all things.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Magpie asks.

“Or me?” Jill asks.

“Because I kept waking up, then closing my eyes, falling back into the nightmare, rinse and repeat,” Andy says. “I finally woke up for real when I died in the dream and got up.”

Jill frowns, as does Magpie. “What was it about?” Jill asks.

“What is it always about?” Andy asks, filling the kettle and turning it on. “I fell off the wagon, ended up on the streets, died because I overdosed.” She leans against the counter and looks at Ekaterina. “I was a junkie,” she says matter-of-factly. “I’ve been clean about twenty years now.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Ekaterina says, also matter-of-factly. “But I should think it has no bearing on your skills now.”

“On my skills, no,” Andy says. “On my life, yes. Once an addict, always an addict, and I’ll be fighting this battle the rest of my life. I’m good at it, and I win, but it’s still there.”

“May I ask why you started using?” Ekaterina asks.

“Magpie and I were street brats,” Andy says. “She grew up on the streets, I got kicked out of my house. We survived as best we could, but there are only so many ways to earn money as an underage kid on the streets. I started using coke to escape.”

Konstantin winces at that, and Ekaterina sighs. “So humanity has not improved in three hundred years?” she asks.

“In some ways yes, in most no,” Khan says. “They think of themselves as civilized these days. Whether or not that is actually true...” He shrugs. “I have seen things to indicate both that it is and that it isn’t.”

“Tell me more about this Federation,” Ekaterina says. “Andy said it was interplanetary. Is it a centralized government?”

“Not quite,” Khan says. “Each member planet has its own government, and is fairly autonomous. They are all democratic, but each planet varies in its structure. The Federation itself is headquartered on Earth.” He explains more about Earth’s governmental structure, slipping into Russian without even thinking about it.
“And Starfleet?” Konstantin asks, reverting to English. “Tell me more about this.”

Khan looks at Jill, who smiles a little and shrugs. “It’s not quite military and not quite science,” she says. “Officers go through the Academy, which is a four-year program, and end up in various tracks depending on interest and skill level. Gold is command, red is operations, blue is science and medical. All ships are equipped for combat however we try to avoid getting into battles if we can help it. The mission of Starfleet is basically to see what’s out there and try to make friends with it if possible, so long as it’s a species that’s already developed warp drive. Any species that hasn’t is one we avoid contact with.”

“Why is this?” Konstantin asks.

“It’s called the Prime Directive,” Jill says. “The reasoning behind it is that any species which has independently developed warp drive is sufficiently advanced enough technology and civilization wise to join the Federation if they want, but any species that hasn’t needs to develop more without interference.”

“Curious,” Konstantin says. “Somewhat rational, but an interesting boundary. And you are a commander?”

“I am, yeah,” Jill says, looking somewhat embarrassed by it. “I was the first officer on a ship called the Marshall, but now I’m taking six months to theoretically write a research paper on Starfleet Intelligence. In reality I’m pretending to do that but I’m actually working to expose some of the classified black ops projects and help get your people to safety. Admiral Marcus, he’s the head of Starfleet - he’s in charge of a classified department called section 31, which has a lot of programs that it shouldn’t have.”

“Tell me more,” Ekaterina says, leaning forward.

Khan keeps his body and his wings as relaxed as he can. “Everything from advanced weaponry and ship design to biochemical weapons to...enhanced interrogation,” he says. “And many other things I am certain you can think of on your own.”

“Da,” Cat says, looking grim. “Surely in a civilized society these things would be illegal.”

“They are,” Jill says. “Which is the problem. Marcus is the one holding the rest of your people hostage, so we’re trying to find a way to expose him and bring down his programs, but the immediate goal was to get at least some of you out of his hands.”

“I see, yes,” Ekaterina says. She sits back and takes a drink of coffee. “Clearly there is much we need to learn, and more we need to accomplish. What are the odds of reviving six more of us?”

“The odds decrease with every trip,” Khan says. “We are not foolish enough to think we can continue this indefinitely without being caught. We believe we can safely pull three more trips but the last is still an indefinite plan.”

Ekaterina nods. “Will any of us be needed to physically enter the facility where the rest are?”

“No,” Jill says when Khan looks at her. She looks down at her mug, but answers quietly. “I have a history of burglary and covert operations, and we’ve been planning this for a while now. I have no doubt you could pick it up quickly, but we’ve already made the plans based on me being the one to go in and get your people.”

“I presume you have files for us to review,” Konstantin says to Khan. “Things we will need to learn to move through society and pass ourselves off as regular citizens.”
“I do,” Khan says. “I thought that today we could go to the gym and spar, and then I would spend the afternoon catching you up on everything you need to know. There is...quite a bit of information.”

“It has been three centuries,” Konstantin says mildly. “I would expect as much.”

“We will need weapons,” Ekaterina says. “We have some clothes—whoever was responsible for that, I thank you—but we will need weapons, armor if it is utilized in this century.”

“We have some weapons,” Khan says. “And Jake, who will be showing up next week, will have knives and holsters for you. I believe you will be pleased with them.”

“Have you been designing weapons?” Konstantin asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Among other things. And we have standard-issue weapons for now, until I can build more of the ones I designed.”


“You and your knives,” Khan says, smiling.

“Knives cannot misfire and blow off your hand,” Ekaterina says.

“No, but they can cut off your fingers,” Khan says, more pleased than he should be by the old, familiar argument.

“Only if you don’t know how to use them properly. Which you never did. I do hope that in your time since being awakened you have not lost your combat skills, brother, or we are in sorry shape indeed,” Cat says.

“I have not,” Khan says mildly. “But I would not want to challenge you to a true spar this soon after revival. It would be unfair to you.”

“Brother, even one day out of cryosleep and I could best you with a hand tied behind my back,” Cat says, smiling. “Shall we wager on it?”

“We have nothing to wager in this time yet, Katya,” Konstantin points out.

She sighs. “True. Still, I believe my brother has grown arrogant in his time without us.” Ekaterina looks at Khan, considering. “Except not,” she says softly in Hindi. “And I will hear this from you, Khan. I will know what happened to you, why you are awake before us, why it is so dangerous to save us. This man, this Marcus. He is yours to kill?”

“Yes,” Khan says flatly.

“I see.” Ekaterina takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “Then I think you should show us to the gymnasium, where we may spar and talk,” she says in English.

Khan knows better than to think he can change her mind or even mildly alter it. He nods, conceding the conversation, and gets up from the table to clear away the dishes.

“We’ve got those,” Andy says, taking a plate from him. “Magpie and I have a couple things to do today and we’re not fighters anyway, so we’re going to stay here and clear up and make sure things are ready for the next two tonight. You take care of your family.”

“Thank you,” Khan says quietly.
“Before you go, though,” Magpie says, getting up. “I have things you’ll need. Give me a minute.” She runs out of the kitchen and a moment later Khan hears her footsteps on the stairs.

“I should—” Jill hesitates, clearly not sure what she “should” do.

“I would recommend changing,” Ekaterina says matter-of-factly. “As I would not want your clothes to be ruined by sparring, and while I am sure you can move in your current attire something else might be more comfortable.”

Jill smiles a little, ducking her head. “I wasn’t sure you’d want me to go to the gym,” she admits.

“And why would we not?” Ekaterina asks. “I give you my word, I will not injure you, but I should like to see your skills. As well, there are conversations we need to have, as I mentioned last night.”

“I’ll go change,” Jill says after a moment. She gets up, heading for the stairs.

“What happened?” Andy asks Khan in Mandarin. “Why is she so skittish this morning, uncle?”

“Uncle?” Konstantin asks.

Khan turns to Konstantin first. “If you trace the bloodline back, Andy is a descendant of Rani’s brother Hitesh,” he says quietly.


“Yes, and beside the point,” Andy says to Khan. “What did you do?”

“Why do you think I did something?” Khan asks.

Andy sets the plates down on the counter and pokes him in the chest. “Tell me what happened,” she says. “Or I will dump tea on your head.”

Cat snorts. “I see the resemblance.”

Khan glances at her and looks back at Andy. “We had a conversation,” he says, sticking to Mandarin. “Last night, she told me she loved me, by accident.”

“And she doesn’t believe…right,” Andy says with a sigh. “Well, that explains that. Maybe I should dump tea on her head.”

Magpie hurries back into the kitchen holding two slim wallets. She hands one to Ekaterina and one to Konstantin. “ID and official things,” she says. “Well, unofficial official things, but it’ll pass any official check it has to. Your last name is now Andropov because I liked the sound of it, you are officially married, and I have short bios that you can read later and modify as you like. You shouldn’t need anything but the ID card and the credit cards—and yes, they have access to money so if you need to buy things be my guest. But you’ve got some other stuff just in case.”

“Spasiba,” Konstantin says, looking at his. “You have gone to quite a bit of trouble for us.”

“Jill asked for our help,” Magpie says simply. “When she asks, I answer.” She smiles a little. “And I have no love for Starfleet.”

“Family,” Andy says softly. “Family is where you take care of each other no matter the circumstances. Jill’s mine, and now Khan.”

Ekaterina doesn’t show it, but Khan knows she’s pleased. “I should like to speak with both of you
later,” she says, rising to her feet. “I would know what has been involved in this plan to retrieve us.”

Andy nods, tucking a lock of hair back. “When you come back from the gym, we’ll have time.”

Jill comes back into the kitchen dressed in workout clothes and a loose purple hoodie, a bag over her shoulder. “Are we ready?” she asks.

“Da, I think so,” Ekaterina says. “Kostya?”

“Yes,” Konstantin says. “How do we get to the gym?”

“From here, it’s easiest to take a cab,” Jill says. “We’re not really on the Tube or the train line out here, and it’d be about an hour’s walk. Doable, but we don’t have unlimited time.”

Andy moves over to Jill, leaning down to give her a hug and murmur something in her ear. Khan doesn’t catch whatever Andy says, but Jill snorts and lightly punches her shoulder. “Just fix the shielding so I don’t lose you again tonight, okay?” Jill asks, stepping back.

“I will,” Andy promises. “See you later.”

The four of them head out to the main street; Khan knows the cab stand a block east and they have little trouble getting one, even at this hour. The back ends up being a bit crowded, but Jill perches on Khan’s lap and they manage.

“Who arranged for this?” Ekaterina asks as they get out of the cab and walk up to the gym. Khan inputs the access codes and swipes the card, and the door opens silently.

“My brother Jake,” Jill says, stepping inside. The lights come on as she does. “He—a friend of his, or an acquaintance, or something—owns it and just finished renovating it, so said friend is renting it to us until we no longer need it. We didn’t think a public exercise space was a good idea.”

“No, I would agree,” Cat says, looking around. “Your brother has interesting connections.”

“Jake knows a lot of people who do a lot of things,” Jill says. “He’s Starfleet Intelligence, has been since we graduated the Academy, and he has a lot of contacts in and outside Starfleet. Handy to have around.”

“And yet he and you are contravening Starfleet’s orders,” Ekaterina observes. “Why is this? Why would you risk court-martial for people you do not know?”

Jill tugs on a curl. “Let’s sit down and we can talk about it.”

The four of them end up sitting on the floor of one of the sparring rooms for lack of anywhere else comfortable. Ekaterina folds herself down cross-legged, reaching over for Konstantin’s hand absently. “Tell me how this came about,” she says. “I have time to learn what happened in the last three centuries. At the moment I would know what happened to bring us back, and why my family are still hostages.”

Jill licks her lips, absently fidgeting with the cuffs of her hoodie. “I was in London for a combination business and vacation trip,” she says. “I was walking down the street, back to my hotel, and I saw Khan, and—I didn’t know him, I didn’t know anything about him, but he…he looked so unhappy, so lost in thought, and that—it didn’t seem right. It didn’t seem right that he was so oblivious to everyone around him, and I wanted to know why. So I contrived to trip into him, and then I talked him into joining me for dinner even when it was obvious he didn’t want to
spend time with me. But I’m persistent and persuasive and I got him to agree, and then the next night I found out what was going on.”

“You trusted her quickly,” Konstantin murmurs.

“Had it gone wrong I would have killed her myself,” Khan says quietly.

“But what of the rest?” Ekaterina asks. “Why are you in London? What have you done to bring your friends, your family into this?”

Jill sighs, looking at Ekaterina. “Magpie has no love for Starfleet. When Khan told me some of what Marcus was doing, I knew I could get her to start digging. She and Andy and I used to steal things together, so we knew that we could probably sneak into the facility in London and get out at least a few people. As for why I’m in London—it’s…it’s complicated. I didn’t want to promise Khan my help and then disappear for weeks or months. Intelligence has wanted me for years, in part due to Jake, and I’d had the proposal for an academic study mostly written for a long time. It seemed kind of like fate, the way things lined up. Khan’s cover is working at an archive—it’s classified ops, but on the surface it’s an archive of data. I’m using the cover and working on the research project, and since Intelligence already knows I’m prone to sneaking around I think it’s kind of a question of whether I’ll expose them or they’ll get caught first.”

“But you barely knew him when you agreed to this,” Konstantin says. “Why did you rearrange your entire life and those of your friends?”

“He needed me,” Jill says softly. She glances at Khan and looks away. “There are other reasons—I don’t like what Marcus is doing and I want it stopped. I don’t like the idea of keeping six dozen people helpless and hostage to guarantee one person’s behavior. This isn’t the Starfleet I signed on for. But—he needed me, and I was uniquely positioned to help him, to have contacts who could help him and would.”

Khan touches Jill’s cheek, brushing his thumb over her cheekbone. She leans into it for a bare moment before she pulls away.

“You are right, brother,” Ekaterina says to Khan in Greek. “She loves you more than Rani did.”

“I know,” Khan says quietly. “Rani would not have done all this.”

“No,” Cat agrees.

“But…” Khan hesitates, not sure Cat and Konstantin will believe him, not entirely sure what he can say about it.

“Tell us,” Konstantin says in English.

“We discovered that Andy is a descendant of Rani’s brother,” Khan says slowly, reverting to Russian because he finds it easier than expressing this in English. “We also think…Andy believes that when she was on the streets, a ghost, a spirit saved her life. She does not remember what the spirit looked like, but she remembers the scent of jasmine, and…and a lullabye the spirit sang her. It was a favorite of Rani’s.”

Cat inhales sharply, her grip tightening on Konstantin’s hand. “Is this even possible?” she asks.

“I do not know,” Khan says. “I find it unlikely, but at the same time…what explanation is there?”

“There’s more,” Konstantin says, studying Khan. “Tell us.”
“For the last few weeks, we have all been having…dreams,” Khan says. “Dreams with similar themes yet not the same.” He gives them a brief description of Andy’s dreams, Jake’s, the sketch Magpie drew and his own dreams. He doesn’t mention Marika, not wanting to bring her up.

“And you?” Ekaterina asks Jill.

She shakes her head. “I don’t remember mine,” she says. “I get—I get nightmares fairly regularly, and usually I remember something about them, but these I don’t remember. I just wake with the feeling that whatever happened it was apocalyptic and disastrous.”

Cat curses and gets to her feet fluidly, beginning to pace. She mutters under her breath, a polyglot of languages that Khan doesn’t bother trying to interpret. After a minute or so, she stops and looks at them. “I need to spar,” she says. “This makes no sense and I cannot make it make sense. My mind is slow and my body stiff. I need to spar and clear my head. Then perhaps I can make sense of this…nebulous situation.”

“It seems to me that perhaps there is something larger than ourselves at stake here,” Konstantin says quietly as the three of them get up. “That perhaps we are being used for something greater we cannot comprehend.”

“I dislike the idea of being used, whether it is by an officer or a higher power,” Cat says irritably. “And that presumes there is a higher power, a concept in which I have never quite believed.”

“What other explanation is there?” Konstantin asks.

“I lack data,” Ekaterina says, scowling. “I am certain Alona or Katsuro could theorize from the limited information we have, but I am not an anthropologist nor am I a spiritual person. I believe in things that can be empirically validated and proven, and in the cases presented to me the only thing quantifiable is that multiple people are having dreams with similar topics. This is not unheard of.”

“It is not,” Khan says. “But at the same time, there does seem to be more here than we can quantify scientifically.”

Ekaterina growls. “Yes, and I like it not,” she says. She bends to pull off her boots and socks, setting them aside as the others do the same. “Did anyone have dreams last night?”

“No,” Jill says. “Did you?”


“I do not remember it clearly,” Konstantin says slowly. “But I thought I dreamed of a city, one I had never seen before, with a dark sky. It was not well-maintained, nor did it appear to be inhabited. I heard thunder, and I tasted something metallic.”

“Were you alone?” Khan asks, feeling his skin prickle.

“Nyet,” Konstantin says. “No, you were there, and Katya of course, but more than that I do not remember.”

“This is getting ridiculous,” Jill mutters under her breath.

Ekaterina redoes her ponytail, smoothing her hands over her hair. “Are there any other omens from the universe with which we should be aware?” she asks.
Khan looks at Jill, who sighs. “One of Jake’s teammates,” she says reluctantly. “She’s not fully human—I’m not sure she’s even part human, but that’s another matter. She’s somewhat psychic, and she’s had a few visions along the same lines as our dreams, but what they mean she doesn’t know.”

“Well, then, what use are her visions?” Cat asks, scowling. “I need to move. Jill, I would ask that you not join the spar until Kostya and I are more warmed up. I would not want to injure you accidentally and my body is not completely settled into this time yet.”

“Not a problem,” Jill says, moving out of the way.

Ekaterina nods in satisfaction and looks at Khan. “Show me what you have learned,” she says, challenging him.

He smiles, showing teeth, and settles into a defensive position. “Konstantin, call it,” he says.

“As Khan expected, Ekaterina attacks immediately; Konstantin, as always, stays back at first, watching and assessing. But the three of them know this dance intimately, muscle memory and reflexes taking over from rational thought. Cat may possibly move a bit more slowly than usual, and Konstantin with slightly less grace, but Khan sees them relax into the spar as it continues.

Still. He has had more practice in this time, more chance to remember his body and its abilities, and feels a fierce surge of satisfaction when he manages to flip Cat over his shoulder and land her on the mat, dropping down to press an arm over her throat. She goes still; Khan eases his arm to allow her to speak. “Yield,” he says.

Ekaterina growls at him, but slaps the mat. “Pax,” she says grudgingly.

“Pax,” Khan says, pushing to his feet and offering her a hand up. She takes it, letting him pull her up easily.

“Well,” she says, tugging her tunic straight. “You have not lost what skills you once possessed. Acceptable, brother.”

From Cat, that’s high praise indeed, but Khan doesn’t let on how much it pleases him to hear it. Even had he lost—a usual occurrence with her, truthfully—the spar felt right in a way nothing much has since awakening in this time. These are his people, his family. Puzzle pieces fitting into the empty gaps of the image.

But still, there are images to maintain and attitudes that cannot change too much right now, not without Ekaterina and Konstantin asking questions Khan does not want to answer. Not even Jill knows the full story of those weeks after revival, and while Khan knows full well he will have to tell them at some point, nothing says he has to be eager to do so.

So rather than thank her, Khan smiles faintly. “I trust you will not remain so out of practice,” he says, automatically blocking the punch she throws and grateful she doesn’t have knives yet.

“Pax,” Konstantin says, taking Ekaterina’s wrist. “We have work to do.”

She sighs. “We do. Jill, will you spar?”

“Against which one of you?” Jill asks; Khan looks over to see her leaning against the wall, having braided her hair back.
“For now, I think Khan,” Ekaterina says. “Much as I am loathe to admit it, I need to reacquaint myself with my body more before I think I can be a suitable opponent for a regular human. Kostya?” She glances up at him.

“Da,” Konstantin says. “And I should not like Khan’s wrath if I injure you. Not when we have work to do tonight.”

“Her wrath would be worse,” Khan says mildly, nodding at Jill.

“Would it, now?” Ekaterina all but purrs, moving over to the wall. “Has your kitten a temper, brother?” She asks the last in Greek.

Again, Khan wonders about the nickname; he’ll ask Cat about it later. “She has always reminded me of you,” he says instead, sticking to Greek. “And Alona, and Anandi, and…she would have been one of us without question. Fearless and fierce.”


Khan smiles slightly and looks at Jill, who pushes away from the wall and comes over to the mat, rolling her head around on her neck. “Count, please,” Khan says to Ekaterina.


Jill grins, quick and bright, and ducks out of the way of Khan’s first punch; he expected she would. He expects to win the spar, and knows she does as well, but it doesn’t stop her from making him work for it. She doesn’t hold back and at one point he hits the mat, breath knocked out of him from a solid kick to his solar plexus. He doesn’t let her get a kill out of it, but it’s a close thing.

It ends when he pins her, when he traps her wrists above her head and his weight settles on her hips, keeping her on her stomach. He can see beads of sweat along her hairline, feel her breath come quick in her throat, and he leans down, ignoring Cat and Konstantin for the moment. “Had we time, I would keep you like this for hours,” he murmurs in her ear, in Russian. He bites her earlobe, sharp and quick and enough to make her shudder.

“We—we don’t have time,” Jill whispers shakily. “And your sister and your brother—let me up, Khan.”

“What will you give me if I do?” he asks softly.

“I already promised you one day,” she says, pulling at his hold on her wrists even though she has to know it will get her nowhere; he simply tightens his grip and she catches her breath, going pliant under him. “We don’t have time for anything else. We don’t even have time for that.”

“We will find time,” Khan says. He eases his hold on her, kisses the spot behind her ear. “But you are correct. We haven’t time now.”

He honestly doesn’t know which of them is more disappointed by that fact. When he releases her and gets to his feet, Jill stays on the mat for another thirty seconds before she sighs and pushes up gracefully. She walks over to him, and Cat looks about to say something when Jill punches him in the stomach, hard enough he loses his breath. “You,” Jill says, glaring at him, “are a bastard.”


Jill glances at Ekaterina, clearly surprised by the name, but says nothing. Instead, she goes to her
bag, pulling out multiple water bottles and tossing them to each person, keeping one for herself. “There’s more we should talk about,” she says.

“Da,” Konstantin says. “Where would you like to begin?”

At this, Jill looks at Khan. “I’m not even sure,” she admits. “What do you think?”

The four of them take seats on the mat again, sipping water. Khan finds himself grimly amused by the question; he should have figured this out weeks ago, or even days ago. But an almost superstitious fear of causing failure kept him from determining what his siblings need to know most, and now he has to figure it out.

Konstantin studies him for a moment. “There is threat of war,” he says finally. “Tell us about that. Tell us about these…Klingons. Why are they a threat? What does their culture believe?”

“Their culture is founded on battle,” Khan says. “They are, to a one, warriors. They consider it honorable to die in battle. Their biology is really quite interesting, it seems to have been designed for redundancy at the cost of efficiency, but it does make them difficult to kill.” He tells them more, what he knows about Klingon culture and society, with Jill filling in a few gaps.

“So they are very similar to samurai,” Konstantin says finally. “Katsuro would be pleased.”

“He will be,” Jill says quietly.

“Do you speak their language?” Ekaterina asks.

Khan nods. “I do, although I have not yet had a chance to test it in practice with an actual Klingon. I believe Jake is also proficient.” He looks at Jill. “Are you?”

She grimaces. “I can understand a fair amount if it’s spoken clearly and somewhat slowly, and I can say some important phrases, but I wouldn’t call myself fluent or even really proficient. Jake is, though. The hardest part is that their language involves some sounds that human throats don’t make very well. Reading is easier, though.”

“I will need to learn,” Cat says firmly.

“I thought you would say that,” Khan says, smiling faintly.

“Why have they not yet attacked?” Konstantin asks.

“I have a myriad of theories and no conclusions,” Khan says. “While I think that in an all-out war between the Klingons and the Federation the Klingons would eventually win, it would be a costly war and not without tremendous losses to both sides. The Klingons may be waiting for the Federation to provoke them in hope of winning over galactic approval, rather than be seen as the instigators of a war no one really wants. I am sure they would rather win a war than negotiate peace, but not all species in the galaxy would agree, and their leadership are savvy enough to understand the need for public approval.”

“But you believe eventually there will be war,” Konstantin says.

“Unless we can prevent it, yes,” Khan says. It sounds ridiculous; the four of them, plus Andy, Magpie, and Jake stopping an interstellar war? But they have faced longer odds. Not much longer, but this is not the worst predicament they have ever found themselves in.

“Well,” Ekaterina says. “Then I suppose that is now our goal. We must revive the rest of our
family, expose the corruption within this Starfleet, and prevent an interplanetary war with an alien species.” She shrugs and takes a sip of water. “It could be worse. Stopping a war once begun would be more difficult than preventing it.”

“Agreed,” Khan says. He looks at Jill. “What do you think, pyara?”

“I think I want to get back to the house so I can shower and get ready for tonight’s op,” Jill says. “And that we’re all fucking crazy.”

Konstantin laughs. “In this I believe you are correct.”

“Perhaps you most of all, da?” Cat asks, smiling.

Jill laughs at that and gets to her feet. “Probably. I’ve never claimed to be anything but insane.”

“Well,” Ekaterina says, also getting up. “Then you will not have any difficulties with our family. None of us have ever claimed to be sane either.” She tilts her head. “Except perhaps Anandi.”

“No, Anandi claims to be logical and scientific,” Khan says.

“True.” Ekaterina shrugs. “I look forward to seeing what she thinks of this time. But tonight is Katsuro and Bishop, yes?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Good.” Cat smooths a hand over her ponytail. “And when are Alona and Matthew?”

“Next Saturday,” Jill says. “And Anandi and Maeve are next Sunday if we can pull it off. We’re…it’ll depend on how the next two ops go.”

“Da, of course,” Cat says. “Well, let us take ourselves and our madness back to the house.” She drapes an arm over Jill’s shoulders, giving her a quick one-armed hug. “I may not understand why you chose to help my brother, but I am glad for it,” she says. “And I am glad to have you in my family.”

Jill almost trips over her own feet; Khan sees color rise in her cheeks. “You don’t even—” she starts and Ekaterina makes an impatient sound that cuts her off.

“I trust my brother’s judgment,” she says. Khan does not comment on that one; Cat has never done anything but question him and his motives, even when she agrees with him. “He has generally shown good taste in his partners, although we will not discuss Richa.”

“We won’t,” Khan murmurs.

“But,” Ekaterina continues. “You are not Richa. Nor are you Rani.” She puts her hands on Jill’s shoulders, forcing Jill to face her. “You are a woman who chose willingly to help a very dangerous man, who continues to help him even though it risks your career and possibly your life. This much I know absolutely. I understand what he sees in you, sestrenka, and I approve. You may not be one of our family through genetics, but you are one of us nonetheless, and I am glad of it.”

Jill says nothing and doesn’t meet Cat’s eyes. She takes a breath, then another, and finally nods. “All right.”

“Now,” Ekaterina says, letting go of her. “Let us find a taxi back to this house so you may prepare for tonight’s mission and Khan may tell us more of this time. I should also like to talk with Andy
and Magpie before the mission tonight, if they have the time.”

“They will,” Jill says quietly, pushing the door open.

Khan locks up behind them and joins the other three on the sidewalk. “If we walk a block east, we can catch a cab easily enough,” he says. As they head toward the street, he rests a hand on the nape of Jill’s neck, gently rubbing the taut muscles. She glances at him and smiles a little.

Two of his family back. Six more, if they are lucky, and then...then the real work begins.

Chapter End Notes

Language note - sestrenka is the Russian transliteration of "little sister".

Oh, Jill. I love you, but good grief are you fucked up.

Author will be curious to see how Jake reacts to Cat and Konstantin...are you?
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

I think rather you do not want to believe what I want.

Chapter Notes

In which there is a lot of talking, and some things get revealed.

As always, I adore hearing from you, even if you don't like what I'm writing. Feel free to drop me a note either way!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back at the house, they find Magpie sprawled on her stomach in the living room, a computer in front of her and a sketchpad at her elbow. Andy sits cross-legged on the ottoman, working with a very small screwdriver and a device no bigger than her palm. Neither Andy nor Magpie look up from their work when the other four come in, although Magpie waves absently before typing something.

“It’s—yeah,” Andy says, examining the device. “Yeah, your turn, bird.”

“Which code version is it?” Magpie asks.

“Twelve point six,” Andy says.

“Thanks.” Magpie frowns, considering something, then types a few commands into her computer. A moment later the device in Andy’s hands buzzes, a light flashing green.

“And we have a winner,” Andy says, grinning. “I thought that would do it.”

“So it’s just not compatible with twelve point eight?” Magpie asks, pushing up to her knees and then shifting to sit.

“The program you’re using isn’t compatible with twelve point eight,” Andy says. “The jammer will work regardless, but if you want remote access to it you have to be running 12.6 or under. It’s a bug in the processor, something I can’t fix. Supposedly the next batch of processor chips will have solved this issue but I have my doubts.”

“We no longer have issues with backward compatibility,” Magpie says, sighing. “Now we have issues with current compatibility. Twelve eight is so much easier than twelve six.”

“For you, yes,” Andy says. “For me, no.” He sets the device down and pushes his hair back. “And we’re likely boring everyone else in the room. Hi.”

“What are you discussing?” Khan asks.
“We’re working on personal jammers,” Andy says. “Our goal is to make enough that each person in your family can take one with him or her so we can ensure you’re not being bugged. But the program we use to access the jammers remotely wasn’t working with the one I built, so we’ve been testing it.”

“Speaking of bugs and things, did you fix the shield-and-earbud problem?” Jill asks, setting her bag down.

“I did,” Andy says. “First thing I did this morning after I had my tea. It’s solid, we won’t have any more issues like we did last night.”

“So we’ll have a different issue we haven’t discovered yet,” Jill says.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Magpie says. “Come upstairs with me, love, I have something for you and I know you need to duck into the shower.”

By “something” Khan thinks she means conversation. So does Jill, from the way she sighs. “Okay,” she says after a moment. “Let’s go upstairs.”

Jill and Magpie leave the room and Ekaterina moves to take a seat on the couch, Konstantin next to her. Khan elects to stand. “So,” Andy says, looking at Khan. “Is she still freaked out?”

“We appear to be in a state of denial,” Khan says honestly.

“Color me surprised,” Andy says with a sigh.

“Tell me,” Cat says, leaning forward. “Why is she upset about this?”

“Because she’s insecure and neurotic and the two relationships she tried to have ended badly,” Andy says. “One of them couldn’t take that she likes danger and she said he was stifling her. He didn’t want her, he wanted what he thought she was. The other…she fell hard for him, and he just—he wasn’t the right guy for her, but she thought they could make it work. And then he fell in love with someone else and dumped her flat. So she’s convincing herself nothing will last because that way if Khan leaves she won’t be quite as crushed.”

He pushes his hair back. “I love Jill dearly but she’s screwed up, and she has issues.”

“I see,” Ekaterina says.

“I’m not sure you do,” Andy says frankly. “But you’ll learn. It’s not my place to analyze her for you, but she won’t talk about a lot of this stuff, so if you want to know you have to keep digging. But I wouldn’t advise doing it now, not when she has to get back into the facility tonight and bring home two more of your people.”

“No, we would not,” Ekaterina says. “How did you meet her?”

“Through Magpie,” Andy says. “Jill used to be a thief, Magpie met her on a job, and later brought me into it. The three of us stole things for a couple years until Jill started at Starfleet Academy.”

“Why were you and Magpie on the streets?” Konstantin asks quietly. “You had said she grew up there?”

“Two kinds of people end up as street brats,” Andy says. “Those who start there, like Magpie did, and those who end up there because they’ve nowhere else to go. My parents kicked me out of the house when I was fifteen and I ended up with the brats because I had no other options. Magpie’s
mother was another street brat. There’s no way to get reliable birth control or medical treatment on
the streets, and since most of us resorted to prostitution to get by…” She trails off. “Her mother
died of some virus when Magpie was six. Likely treatable if she’d had access to proper medical
resources, but she didn’t.”

Konstantin sighs, shaking his head. “So humanity has not improved,” he says sadly.

“In some ways it has,” Khan says. “But the type of change you want to see takes more than a few
centuries.”

“Da, true,” Konstantin says. “Andy, why did your parents throw you out of your home?”

“Look at me,” Andy says simply. “I won’t identify as male or female and my parents didn’t like it.
They didn’t like that I had to keep changing schools to find one that would accept me without
forcing me into a binary gender system. Never did find that, but they kicked me out so I stopped
caring about it.”

This time Cat sighs. “But how did you get off the streets?” she asks.

“Luck and hard work,” Andy says. “Magpie and I started building up a body of work, her with
software and me with hardware. We didn’t have a lot, but we started getting small jobs, things
that’d pay for a night here, a week there. Magpie started working with Jill, and then I did too, and
we were able to get more expensive things we could fence. And then we got the job that…it took
us a month to coordinate everything, took all our resources and then some, and was a huge gamble.
We risked everything, and…and it worked out, and we’ve built names and reputations for ourselves
ever since. The moment we realized we never had to go back, we never had to sell our bodies
again—“ Andy takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “That still stays with me.”

“Tell me,” Konstantin says. “What is the government’s response to this situation?”

“There isn’t one,” Andy says. “The street brats are really good at staying off the radar, and either
the Federation doesn’t know enough about them to help them or they just don’t care. It’s—if
you’re in the Federation’s safety net, they do a fairly good job of making sure your needs are met.
But if you’re a street brat, odds are no one’s looking for you and if you’re like Magpie you never
got into the net in the first place. My parents never filed a missing persons report on me since they
were the ones to cause me to go missing, so no one ever looked.”

“I am…less than impressed with this government already,” Ekaterina says grimly.

“It’s not all bad,” Andy says. “If you’re a registered citizen, they do take good care of you. But
they don’t have endless resources, it’s just how life goes.”

“Any society that includes children forced into prostitution—and does not actively work to remedy
this—should be changed,” Cat says. “Brought down by force, if necessary.”

“Let’s not plan to overthrow the Federation,” Andy says. “Not yet, anyway. Starfleet’s another
matter.”

“How corrupt is Starfleet?” Konstantin asks Khan.

He grimaces. “On the whole, it is not,” he says. “Its leader, however, will die by my hand—and
no, I will not share the kill. There are some officers who should be terminated, and some of its
prejudices are remarkably outdated. It does use people, but name me a military that does not. I
believe it is possible to salvage the organization by cutting out the corrupted areas.”
“What did he do to you?” Ekaterina asks quietly in Greek.

“Later,” Khan says in the same language. “It is not a conversation I wish to have before tonight’s mission.”

Cat doesn’t look happy but nods.

The sound of footsteps causes them to look up and a moment later Magpie enters the room. “Jill’s in the shower,” she says. “She’ll be down in a bit. I need more coffee, would anyone else like some?”

“I would,” Cat says. “Spasiba.”

“Anyone else?” Magpie asks. “Andy, do you want me to put the kettle on for tea?”

“Please,” Andy says. Khan and Konstantin decline coffee and Magpie heads for the kitchen.

“Have we other allies or enemies?” Konstantin asks.

“We have other allies, in a sense,” Khan says. “Jill’s brother Jake has been assisting us. He is a Starfleet officer in their Intelligence department and has some very useful connections. There is a person on his team, Marika, who I would consider a reluctant ally. She did assist me when asked by Jake, but I do not trust her and she has some liabilities that I would prefer to avoid dealing with.”

“She and Jill also don’t get along very well,” Andy says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Also true. That is as many allies as we have, although Jake and Jill both have other connections they may be able to utilize at some point, especially if we need to leave Earth quickly.”

“And enemies?” Cat asks.

“We have them,” Khan says as matter-of-factly as he can. “Unfortunately we have not identified all of them.” He tells them about the explosion and the lack of clarity regarding its origin. “Cruz is dead, so we cannot ask him, and Smythe has yet to provide me with any useful data. Jake’s connections have come up empty, and since the base itself is classified Jill cannot ask questions about it.”

Ekaterina growls softly and Konstantin tightens his grip on her hand. “Well,” Cat says after a moment. “This will be…interesting.”

“Somewhat,” Khan agrees.

“And Marcus?” Ekaterina asks. “Is he an open enemy?”

“No, not yet,” Khan says. “He needs me too much to risk my turning on him, and he is intelligent enough to know I would do so at the slightest provocation. He thinks he has the upper hand because of the rest of us in stasis, and there is some truth to that, but it will not prevent me from killing him if I think it immediately necessary.”

“Our family would understand,” Konstantin says. “They will understand.”

“Yes, I think so,” Khan says.

Ekaterina looks at Andy. “How do you feel about the idea of Marcus’s death?”
“He’s not me or one of my people, so I don’t really care,” Andy says, shrugging. “And for the record, he’s a Starfleet admiral so Magpie would love to see him exit the planet permanently. Jill and Jake are the only two officers she’ll even talk to willingly.”

“Why is this?” Konstantin asks.

“That’s her story to tell,” Andy says.

“Are we telling stories?” Magpie asks, coming into the room with two mugs. “Andy, the water’s just about to boil and you make better tea than I do.”

“I do,” Andy says, getting up. “I’ll be back.”

“Coffee for you,” Magpie says, handing a mug to Ekaterina. “Black, right?”


“Not a problem,” Magpie says. “So what are we talking about?”

“Marcus’s inevitable death,” Khan says.

“Can’t come soon enough for me,” Magpie says cheerfully.

“I see you have allied yourself with pacifistic people,” Konstantin observes.

Khan smiles a little. “Clearly.”

“Are all humans in this time eager to kill?” Ekaterina asks.

“No, most of us aren’t,” Magpie says. “We like to think we’re civilized these days. I think it’s bullshit, but I don’t make the rules.”

“I should like to know why you became involved in this,” Ekaterina says, changing the subject. “Why did you agree to help someone you did not know?”

“I didn’t,” Magpie says. “I agreed to help Jill because I love her, and she never asks me for anything so I knew this was important when she called and asked for my help. She said she had a friend in trouble with Starfleet, and did I want to help her make public some things Starfleet had under the radar, and since I have no love for Starfleet I got on a shuttle to London. Now I’m in it both because what Starfleet is doing under Marcus turns my stomach and I want him dead, but also because Khan needs our help and he’s one of Jill’s people, which means he’s one of mine.” She takes a sip of her coffee. “Also, this is fun.”

“You have interesting definitions of fun,” Ekaterina observes.

“I really do, but Jill’s the one who jumps out of planes willingly,” Magpie says.

“Never again,” Andy mutters, coming back into the room and taking her seat on the ottoman. “Never, ever again.”

“I take it you went with her,” Konstantin says.

“Once,” Andy says. “Never again. Magpie can jump out of the plane next time.”

“Fuck no,” Magpie says immediately. She looks at Khan. “You can jump out of the plane with her. If it goes wrong at least you can fly away. Me, I’d go splat on the ground and I do not want to be a
“Most people would prefer not to crash into the ground,” Konstantin says. “Does Jill jump out of planes often?”

“Jill is an adrenalin junkie,” Magpie says. “Every year on her birthday she jumps out of a plane. Or a shuttle, if she can get clearance to do a space jump. If it’s an extreme sport odds are she’s at least thought about trying it or actually tried it at least once. I think she’s batshit crazy, but so far she’s only really gotten injured once and it wasn’t her fault.”

“What happened?” Khan asks.

“She went rock climbing, and a piece of her equipment was faulty,” Magpie says. “Gave way at the wrong moment, she landed hard and broke her back. Spent four days paralyzed from the shoulders down until they fixed it, and it took her another few weeks to fully recover since bone regen doesn’t work well on her.”

“Has she gone climbing again?” Ekaterina asks.

“No, but only because there are other things she’s wanted to do,” Andy says. “She intends to go back someday, though, just to prove she can.”

“She and Alona have much in common,” Konstantin says, smiling a bit.

“Yes, I thought so,” Khan says.

“Be careful or Matthew will try to steal her away,” Cat says in Russian.

“He may try,” Khan says.

She laughs at that, taking a sip of coffee. “If he steps out of line we will hit him in the head with heavy objects. It should not damage anything vital.”

“One would hope,” Khan says. He looks over as Jill comes into the room, tying a band around the end of her braid and dressed in jeans and a soft purple shirt.

“I’ve got time before I need to change for tonight’s op and if I get dressed too soon I’ll get lint or whatever on my clothes and it’d show up,” she says. “What did I miss? Is there coffee?”

“No coffee for you,” Magpie says solemnly.

“Bird, don’t make me kill you,” Jill says.

“You can’t kill me, you need me,” Magpie says.

“Don’t make me injure your legs in ways that would not prevent you from using your computers,” Jill says.

“She would, too,” Andy says, laughing.

Magpie makes a face at both of them. “Coffee’s in the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” Jill says, ducking into it.

“So,” Ekaterina says, looking at Khan. “What is current society like? What must we know to pass successfully?”
“It is…” Khan considers and discards several words. “Passive. The current citizens of Earth are used to being provided for. Technology has made meeting daily needs a minimal task at best. There is a sense of exploration, of curiosity, in some, especially those who join Starfleet. But on the other hand, the destruction of Vulcan years ago has turned many into agoraphobes and isolationists. Isolation is not possible, yet some would prefer Starfleet no longer explore space and focus on issues within its borders.”

“Which defeats the entire purpose of Starfleet, so it shows you how stupid some people are,” Jill says, emerging with a mug. “And actually, Starfleet’s preparing to send some ship on a five-year mission to see what’s out there, but that’s not actually public knowledge yet. It’s not even an open secret within Starfleet.”

“How do you know about it?” Konstantin asks.

“I have connections and got asked hypothetically if I’d sign on,” Jill says. “Which at the time I said yes to, but now I don’t know. I don’t think it’ll be my ship, though. We’re too small. For a five-year-mission you need a bigger class of ship, just because you’ll inevitably lose personnel and need to take on more supplies than you would normally. The Enterprise is the flagship, so that would make sense but their captain’s kind of a dick.”

Khan looks at her. “Have you met him?”

“Kind of,” Jill says. “He came through the Academy a few years after I did, so we weren’t there at the same time. I’m not saying he’s not brilliant, because he is, but personally he’s an asshole who thinks he can charm his way through any situation. He hasn’t lost a crew member yet, but he will, and I don’t want it to happen but at the same time I want him to grow up.”

“You say this like you dated him,” Magpie observes.

“I didn’t,” Jill says. “I know four women who did. But, anyway. The thing is that he’d make a good choice if Starfleet wanted him out of its hair for five years, not a good choice if they want someone with a few more brain cells to rub together and a habit of thinking critically about situations.” She shrugs. “Depends on who’s in charge.”

“But have you met him personally?” Magpie asks. “Because you’ve got the attitude of ‘I met him and he’s an asshole’.”

Jill sighs. “Yes, I met him,” she says. “We were in an advanced combat class together when our ships both had downtime. He fell into the same trap almost all my opponents have, which is that he thought I wasn’t a threat because of my size. I wiped the floor with him twice, he didn’t speak to me after that.”

Khan isn’t surprised in the least.

“Does Jake know him?” Magpie asks.

“Jake was teaching the class,” Jill says. “Sadly, despite my best efforts they’re still somewhat friendly. Jake often has questionable taste in people.” She sits down on the ottoman next to Andy. “Like Marika.”

“You really don’t like her,” Andy says. “I can’t remember the last person you disliked this much.”

“Her name was April, and she fucked Samuel over but good and the last I heard I still wasn’t allowed to get within a hundred meters of her,” Jill says. “Long story short, she was psychotic and somewhat of a stalker and when Samuel broke up with her she started stalking him and then tried
to claim he’d raped her. He took the evidence of her stalking him to the authorities, of which he was one, they threatened to press charges against her for false witness, she shut up, but she didn’t go away and I finally punched her and broke her nose when we were out in public and she came by.”

“You did not get reprimanded for this?” Ekaterina asks.

“I did, but only verbally and it didn’t go in my file,” Jill says. “Samuel’s Starfleet, and while sometimes I don’t like it we take care of our own. And Jake wasn’t going to hit her because he has issues with hitting women. So I did it, and after her nose healed she moved off-planet. But I think I’m still not allowed to get near her.”

“I see,” Ekaterina says, sounding pleased. “And who is Samuel?”

“Jake’s younger brother,” Jill says. “He works in planetary security in New York. He does not know what we’re doing here nor is he involved, he has a wife and a young kid. We’re trying to avoid collateral damage and I trust Marcus about as far as I can throw Earth.”

“Yes,” Ekaterina says. “Tell me more of this Marcus.”

“Think of Nikolai,” Khan says. “Like him, but with fewer curbs on his appetite for power.”

Both Cat and Konstantin grimace. “That does not speak well of Starfleet,” Cat says. “I am not sorry to have left him behind.”

“You are not sorry you killed him,” Konstantin murmurs.

“I only wish it had taken longer,” Ekaterina answers in Russian. “If there is a Nikolai, is there also a Shurik?” she asks in English. “Every coin must have its opposite.”

“I have not yet met one,” Khan says.

“What is a Shurik like?” Jill asks.

“Intelligent,” Ekaterina says. “Not corrupted nor willing to be corrupted. In a position of power but not always in agreement with his superiors.”

Jill tilts her head, thinking. “I’d argue for Admiral Pike,” she says slowly. “I don’t know all the admirals that well, and I don’t know Pike at all—I met him once at a formal event, but I’ve never really had any dealings with him on a personal level. But he’s done some impressive things, and he hasn’t broken ever—and he had experiences where no one would have blamed him if he did. I get the impression from my captain and other folks that he wishes he wasn’t behind a desk these days, but he was badly injured in the aftermath of Nero and he wasn’t physically capable of captaining a ship. He might try and get back out into space at some point, though.”

“Has Starfleet had many opportunities for its officers to break?” Ekaterina asks.

“Short version, yes,” Jill says and doesn’t elaborate.

Cat leans forward. “What dangers are there in this galaxy? Other than the Klingons?”

“Black holes dropping homicidal Romulans in our midst,” Jill says. “Random terrorists—there are always terrorists, doesn’t matter the century or the location, someone’s always going to want to blow shit up. The black market can be extremely volatile and unforgiving. Jake can tell you more about the bad guys than I can, he’s studied them more.”
Her hand curls into a fist at her side and she looks down, not saying anything. “Cat,” Khan says quietly. “Pax.”

“If there is an enemy we—“

“There isn’t,” Jill interrupts. “The only enemies we have right now are Marcus and the Klingons, and I’m not sure which is worse. The—that’s it. We’re not actively at war or threatening war with anyone else. There was one species but they withdrew to their own solar system to blow each other up and no one goes that way anymore, and so we don’t have to deal with them.” Jill pushes up from the ottoman, rubbing her arms. “I need more coffee.”

She leaves her mug behind when she ducks into the kitchen. Andy and Magpie look at each other, Magpie jerks her head, and Andy gets up to follow Jill.


“An enemy species captured her and her party,” Khan says in the same language. “It ended before it became physical, but…”

Cat breathes out slowly. “So,” she says. “Have we a third enemy once we dispatch the first two?”

“Yes, but no,” Khan says. “We cannot declare war on an entire species for the behavior of a few of its adult males.”

“Well,” Ekaterina says. “If this ever changes, I trust you will let me know.”

Khan inclines his head.

“You said the populace is somewhat passive,” Konstantin says after a moment, changing the subject and the language to English. “Tell us more about this.”

“Until recently, they had not faced war or terrorism in many years,” Khan says, unsurprised at the question and the redirection of conversation. “Most—a vast majority of citizens no longer need to work to provide for their daily needs. They believe in the Federation, or most do, and they believe this is an…enlightened time, that war is behind them. As a result, they are more likely to allow themselves to be led. Public belief in the Federation and in Starfleet is high, so the populace as a whole I think is likely to let its leaders control more than you or I would have expected.” He looks at Magpie. “Your thoughts?”

“Yes but no,” Magpie says. “I mean, you’re right on some of the major points. Most people in the Federation’s safety net don’t need to worry about housing, food, clothing. They work because they want to, not because they need to earn a living. But—so, Nero actually attacked twice. He first took out a ship called the Kelvin a couple decades ago, roughly, and then he kind of disappeared off the radar for a while. Then he came back and attacked Vulcan and destroyed the planet. There was a big shift in public opinion at that point, and I’m not sure it’s changed back. There is definitely a strong approval of Starfleet and the Federation. They lost a lot of officers at Vulcan, and it left everyone changed. Everyday citizens are pretty likely to believe in Starfleet. But I think there’s more a sense of caution these days, that people are more aware of just how dangerous a galaxy it is out there. Vulcans were the first aliens who came to Earth, the ones who helped Earth start the Federation in the first place. For their planet to be gone, for their species to be all but extinct, that’s huge.”

“One does not exclude the other,” Konstantin says thoughtfully. “It is perhaps possible that both are true, that because citizens are more likely to recognize danger they are willing to trust in their
leaders to pursue the correct course of action.”

Magpie shrugs. “That’s plausible, yeah. I don’t deal much with everyday regular citizens, so I don’t take public opinion polls. I get all the data I can, but it’s not the same as actually talking to people.”

“Who’s talking to people?” Andy asks, returning with Jill.

“No one, we’re discussing what the average citizen thinks of Starfleet,” Magpie says.

“Haven’t you heard? They love us,” Jill says, folding herself down on the ottoman again. “It’s the rally-round-the-flag effect. Threaten the existing government and military structure and public opinion of said organizations soars.”

“Where did you learn about that?” Andy asks.

“Academy,” Jill says. “We all took some basic classes in social sciences. I took a few more in psychology. But yeah, ask the average citizen about Starfleet and you’ll get a very positive if slightly incoherent answer.”

“How long does that last?” Magpie asks.

“No idea,” Jill says. “But it’s still going on as far as the last public opinion polling I saw.”

“Do you review polling often?” Konstantin asks.

“I read the public data that’s available, yeah,” Jill says. “Sometimes the classified info, if I can get it. It’s interesting sometimes. Sometimes it’s stupid but you never know.”

“How often do they publish data or poll?” Ekaterina asks.

“They publish data every other week,” Jill says. “They poll constantly, but the subjects change a lot. Starfleet officers get polled about upcoming missions or new regs or whatever. Civilians get polled about all sorts of crap. The public civilian reports are available to anyone who cares to look for them. The public Starfleet reports are available to any officer who bothers to look at them. The classified reports are available to anyone who bothers to hack the security.”

“You never asked me to do it, though,” Magpie says.

“This security’s weak enough I can do it on my own,” Jill says.

Magpie snickers. “That’s pretty pathetic.”

Jill makes a face at her. “I have learned a trick or two from you, birdbrain.”


“Past it, and I need to eat if I’m going to have time to digest before tonight’s op,” Jill says. “What do we have?”

“I have no idea but I’ll go forage,” Magpie says, getting up.

“I’ll help,” Andy says, following her.

Khan looks at Cat, who looks at Jill. “I apologize for my words before,” Cat says carefully in Russian. “I did not realize.”
“You wouldn’t have,” Jill says, fidgeting a bit. “It’s fine. You didn’t know and there’s no reason you would have. It’s fine.”

It isn’t, but this time Cat doesn’t push and Konstantin stays quiet. Khan, however, extends a hand. “Come with me,” he says, not making it a question.

Jill bites her lip, but gets up and crosses to him. She doesn’t take his hand, but he takes her arm instead and she doesn’t pull away as they climb the stairs. Khan shuts the bedroom door behind them and turns to her. “Are you going to avoid me from now on?” he asks, keeping his tone mild.

“No,” she says but she doesn’t look at him.

“I told you once,” Khan says quietly, taking her chin in one hand, forcing her to look up at him. “Don’t lie to me, Jill. I have not lied to you. I have had every opportunity to do so and I have not. Afford me the same courtesy.”

“I don’t know what you want,” Jill whispers, pulling away but only to press her forehead against his chest.

“Don’t you?” Khan asks. “I think rather you do not want to believe what I want.”

“You want your family back,” she says, muffled by his shirt.

“Among other things,” Khan says.

“You want Marcus dead. You want to get the hell off this planet, somewhere you and your family can live freely and you can plan the eventual takeover of the Federation. Don’t even try to tell me you wouldn’t, I know you.” Jill glances up at him. “I’m not even trying to tell you it’d be a bad idea or impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” Khan says. “Some things are more difficult.” Frankly, anything involving Jill other than sex falls into the latter category.

She sighs and thumps her head against his shirt. “I love you,” she says but it sounds more like a complaint than an affirmation. “I do, and I shouldn’t, and I know all the reasons I shouldn’t and I don’t care. You’re a bastard and you’re cold and you’re arrogant as hell and you’re ruthless and you kill about as easily as I put on my boots. You’re dangerous for me to know, I’m jeopardizing my entire career—okay, let’s be honest, I’ve essentially torpedoed my career by throwing in with you, there’s no way I’ll make it to captain after this even if I stay in Starfleet. But.” She takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “I don’t care. I don’t. I just…I love you and I’m stupid for doing it and here we are anyway.”

“Yes,” Khan says softly. “Here we are, indeed.” He folds his wings around her, slips a hand around the back of her neck, rubbing gently.

Jill sighs again, relaxing a bit against him. “I want to go for a run in a bit,” she says. “It always clears my head and I need that today, especially before tonight.”

Khan resists the urge to tell her not to overwork herself. She knows her own limitations, at least physically. The rest of it…is another matter.

He doesn’t argue her out of it, though, and when she finally pulls away he lets her go. She smooths her hands over her braid, steps toward the dresser, and stops. “I don’t think running is going to help me,” she admits. “Let’s go have lunch. In this mood I’ll run myself to exhaustion and that won’t do anything for anyone.”
It won’t, and Khan appreciates her intelligence. He does stop her before they leave the room, though, tipping her chin up to make her look at him. “You are mine,” he says softly, brushing his knuckles over her cheekbone. “Remember that.”

“I do,” she murmurs.

“You do but you don’t want to understand what it means.” Khan leans down and kisses her lightly. “You will.”

Jill ducks her head and says nothing.

Downstairs, they find grilled sandwiches and a cold noodle salad. No one comments on their late arrival to the table, which Khan appreciates. “Konstantin and I will be venturing out after the meal,” Ekaterina says briskly, not making it open for debate. “We should like to see what London is like in this time.”

“Do you want company?” Andy asks uncertainly.

“Thank you, but no,” Ekaterina says. “We will see this for ourselves, to form our own opinions. The IDs you have provided us, they will suffice?”

“They’ll get you through anything you need, including official scanners,” Magpie says. “And there’s no credit limit on either of the cards I gave you, so feel free to buy what you want.”

“Spasiba,” Konstantin says. “We may then purchase some clothing and personal items. Is there any sort of official curfew?”

“No,” Khan says. “London is considered a relatively safe city, but there are no areas of Earth under curfew law at this time. I would however recommend you be back at the house by dusk, as we would prefer to avoid multiplecomings and goings into the night once Jill leaves.”

“Of course,” Konstantin says. “How long does the mission take?”

“About two hours from start to finish,” Jill says. “It might go a bit faster tonight but I’m not counting on it.”

Ekaterina nods, idly twirling noodles around her fork. “What are the highest areas of risk in the mission?”

“Honestly? It’s what happens if one of your people wakes up either violent or doesn’t wake up well at all,” Jill says. “We don’t have much time in the room with the cryotubes, and if someone injures me on reflex, we’re fucked. If someone doesn’t come back to consciousness easily or at all, we’re also fucked. I don’t have the strength to carry someone out of there, and it’d slow us down enough that we might get caught. Khan said there was a risk in revival, that it’s…it’s conceivable some might not survive it.”

“Da,” Ekaterina says matter-of-factly. “I think…” She trails off, clearly thinking. “Had we Bishop, or Anandi, or even Maeve, I should think we could synthesize a stimulant that would aid in this process. But Kostya and I do not have the chemistry or medical knowledge of one that would work.”

“Nor do I,” Khan says. “And our group is lacking in a biological scientist or doctor. If we get Bishop back successfully tonight, we can set him to work on it. There will be another week to two weeks before the next set of missions.”
“And what will you have Katsuro doing?” Ekaterina asks.

“Building technology, of course,” Khan says. “I have several projects in progress that he will be interested in. Not the weapons, of course, but there are others.”

“Why not the weapons?” Magpie asks.

“Katsuro’s belief is that the best weapon is a trained human,” Khan says. “He is skilled with most weapons, but he prefers not to use them at all given a choice. He is our most skilled fighter, and I have never seen anyone best him in combat.”

“Twice I fought him to a draw,” Ekaterina says.

“Once I did,” Khan says, remembering that fight. He thinks the total broken bone count had been around seven between the two of them.

“Yes, and you cursed for a week because he cracked your wing bone and you could not fold it back properly,” Ekaterina says, laughing.

“Yes, and you called him Munin so he would remember to avoid that next time,” Konstantin says.

“I’m missing the reference,” Magpie admits.

“The Norse god Odin,” Ekaterina says matter-of-factly. “He had two ravens, Hugin and Munin. Thought and Memory.”

“Got it,” Magpie says. “And…huh. Okay. That…” She trails off, taking a small tablet and a stylus out of her pocket and scribbling down a note to herself, something Khan’s seen her do before. “Andy, we have an Eric hit,” she says, glancing up. “Could be nothing, could be something. I’ll log in after lunch and poke around.”

“What is an Eric hit?” Khan asks.

“Eric is a sort of friend sort of fuck buddy of mine,” Magpie says. “He maintains a really, really comprehensive database of all sorts of unexplained phenomena, things that have no current scientific explanation. Sometimes we can correlate things to explainable things, sometimes we can’t, but I have a few long-running searches with him and I added a couple more recently. Something sparked a hit off an entry, and I’ll dig into it after lunch and find out what did. Could have nothing to do with us.”

“Do you think that likely?” Ekaterina asks.

“Honestly I’ve got no idea,” Magpie says. “Until I see what pinged, I don’t have any kind of idea what it is. He’s got everything from psychic phenomena to ghost hauntings to unexplained alien sightings to things he swears are demonic possessions.”

“I think demonic possession unlikely,” Ekaterina says. “There is enough devil in an ordinary human that they do not need possession by an outside force to do evil.”

“Yeah, I’m with you on that one,” Magpie says quietly. “But I don’t question it, I just use the data.”

“A true scientist,” Konstantin murmurs.

“Me?” Magpie laughs. “No. I’m just a data junkie. A self-taught hacker who most people don’t
know exists even if they try looking. Andy and I stay off the radar as much as we can.”

“Interesting friends for a Starfleet commander,” Ekaterina comments.

“You’re not the first to say that,” Jill says. “I never claimed to be a by the book officer. And odds are I won’t be an officer much longer anyway so it doesn’t much matter.”

No one says anything to that, but Khan’s comm-link chirps a moment later. He answers, not bothering to set privacy mode. “Yes,” he says briefly.

“Harrison,” Smythe says. “We need to talk.”

Khan grits his teeth. “What do you have?”

“Not over a link,” Smythe says. “Is your flat safe?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But I am not there. One hour.”

“Deal,” Smythe says. “See you then.” He hangs up and Khan suppresses a growl.

“Who was that?” Konstantin asks.

“Smythe,” Khan says. “Like as not he will not have anything useful, but I must find out.”

“Then let us go,” Cat says. “We will travel with you part of the way to your flat and then find our own path through the city.”

“We’ll clean up,” Andy says. “Kitten, you going out too?”

Jill shakes her head. “No, I’ll clean up and stretch out. I don’t want to risk going out and getting held up until it’s too late.”

The five of them get up, clearing dishes and gathering things for the afternoon. Khan gathers up a bag with some of his clothes and some of Jill’s, intending to drop them off for cleaning and get fresh, and takes her aside in the front hallway. “Are you all right?” he asks quietly, cupping her cheek in one hand.

She leans into his hand and turns her head to kiss his palm. “I am,” she says, meeting his eyes. “I’m okay. Come back before the mission.”

“I will,” Khan says. He leans down as she stretches up, their lips meeting in the middle and her hand curling around the one he still has on her cheek.

“Go,” Jill says, stepping back finally. “I’ll see you in a few hours. Find out whatever Smythe knows.”

“Yes,” Khan says and turns to find Konstantin and Ekaterina waiting for him. He smiles and opens the door, and the three of them walk out into the sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

1. The Kirk’s never lost a crew member is from a point in STID at the beginning, post-Nibiru, where he argues to Pike that he's never lost a crew member and wasn't about to
start with Spock, or something to that effect. I did discuss this with my other half, who argued that Kirk did actually lose a lot of people in the Narada attack, but I'm basing the comment here off his quote in the movie. If I am incorrect, please let me know.

2. I was essentially a political science major in college. The "rally round the flag" effect is actually very real and documented; for an example, you can look at the way George W. Bush's approval ratings spiked after 9/11. (Let's leave personal opinions out of this, please, or I will get on a soapbox and not get off.)
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

You might want to lay low for a bit.

Chapter Notes

See author. See author write. See author write things that leave her saying "what the hell did I do THAT for?"

aka, plot. Have some more, conveniently twisted like a pretzel.

Both Cat and Konstantin relax as they walk, choosing silently to walk rather than take a taxi or public transit. They have time, and if Khan is a few minutes late so be it. Ekaterina slips her hand into Konstantin's arm and they look like newlyweds on a honeymoon, relaxed and happy. Khan honestly can't remember the last time he saw them like this, with no immediate battles to fight and no demands on their time. "I have not been to London in…a long time," Cat says, looking around. "It is different, da, but so much remains. I always did like that about London, that it kept its history. The Americans never learned that."

"No," Khan says. "Nor do I think they have in this time." They use Russian, easy enough for all of them and unlikely to be understood by the few passers-by they see.

"Tell us more about this time," Konstantin says. "What is the technology level?"

"Far beyond anything we had, not beyond what we conceived was possible," Khan says. He gives them a quick rundown of current technologies, and by the time he finishes they have reached a more populated area of London.

"So many possibilities," Ekaterina muses, looking around. "How settled is the Federation? What would it take to…destabilize it?" She uses Mandarin, keeping her voice quiet.

"Fairly and less than it would seem," Khan says. "But to be frank, we have so many opportunities beyond Earth I think it almost unnecessary."

"Mm." She nods. "I understand."

"My flat is three blocks east and four north of here," Khan says, gesturing quickly. "I will leave you and see you back at the house in some hours." He doesn't bother asking if they know how to get back; all of them have perfect recall, and finding their way back to a location easy.

"Dosvidanya," Cat says, pausing to give him a quick hug. Konstantin does the same, leaving Khan slightly breathless, and they head west. Khan watches them melt into the crowd and heads for his own building.

As he walks into the lobby, he sees Smythe sitting on a bench, disheveled and unshaven.
Interesting. Khan has never seen him quite this rumpled before, and it does not bode well for whatever news Smythe has for him. He jerks his head toward the lifts and Smythe nods, getting up. They enter Khan's flat without a word; Khan says nothing until he checks both jammers Andy has left him and the non-technical tells he left in place.

Finally, he nods, and he and Smythe take seats at the small dining table. "Tell me," Khan says.

Smythe sighs, rubs his hands over his face. "There's a group of people," he says. "About seven of them, they're based out of London with one or two people in San Francisco. They...they want you dead, and they're not kidding around about it."

"Why?" Khan asks.

Smythe shakes his head. "I don't know. I know the who and I know the what but I don't know the why or the how. I do know that they haven't targeted your lady, they don't know about her, but she might want to be careful anyway. And if you've got other close friends or family—your nephew?"

Khan shakes his head. "Unlikely to be targeted, if indeed anyone even knows about him."

"Still," Smythe says. "You might want to lay low for a bit."

"I need their names," Khan says, not answering Smythe's suggestion.

"Do I want to know what you'll do with them?" Smythe asks.

"I do not know, do you?" Khan asks calmly.

Smythe chews his lip, looks down, looks up at Khan again. "You're a cold bastard," he says. "I don't want to know. I shouldn't give you the names. If I do I'm pretty much sanctioning you killing them."

"Then why tell me they exist?" Khan asks impatiently. "I should think I know enough to guard my back without ambiguous warnings about people that do me no good."

"You have a point." Smythe rubs his hands over his face. "I was up all night wrestling with it. Alice finally told me to get it together and tell you what was going on. They tried to kill you at least once, they're probably working on the second attempt." He takes a breath, pulls a memory chip out of his pocket and slides it across the table. "Names, files, everything I know."

"How did you find out this information?" Khan asks, not touching the chip just yet.

"I've worked for section 31 a long time," Smythe says. "I know who to talk to."

He doesn't want to reveal his sources and Khan can't really argue against it; he understands the value of informants. If he needs to determine who knows what, he will. First he has to validate the data Smythe gave him.

"Do you have anything else for me?" he asks instead.

Smythe shakes his head. "If I do, I'll pass it on, but right now no, you've got everything I know."

"Thank you," Khan says.

"Just...yeah," Smythe says, getting up. "Watch your back, watch your lady's back. I like her, I'd rather not read about her in the news."
“No,” Khan says, also rising to his feet. He takes the chip and slips it into his pocket. “If you hear anything else.”

“Yeah,” Smythe says. “Yeah, I’ll let you know. And since life does go on, any chance I can pick your brain at some point around pre-warp ships? You know something about them, don’t you?”

“I do,” Khan says. “Why do you want the information?”

“I’m not sure I do but the admiral wants me to study some of those ship designs, see if they used anything we could incorporate into modern ship design,” Smythe says. “Off the top of your head, can you think of anything?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “The bridge on the ship should be its most defensible location, not on top of the ship with a window to space. One accident and the bridge crew are dead.”

“You’re making an argument I’ve made before,” Smythe says. “But I doubt it’ll get anywhere. I’ll make note of it, though. Thanks. Let me know when you’ll be around and we’ll figure out a time to talk.”

Khan nods, walking him to the door. He doesn’t say goodbye, but Smythe leaves quietly anyway. Khan allows himself five seconds to feel the rage before he locks it down. He knew he had enemies; now at least he has names for some of them.

Quickly, he unpacks his bag, tossing clothes into the laundry and gathering clean items. He hesitates, then adds the box of Rani’s things to his bag; should anyone attack his apartment, he does not want them to be found or destroyed. For once, he is glad the journals remain safe on the ship.

He takes the stairs up to Jill’s flat and does much the same with her clothing, adding in a few toiletries he thinks she will want—and the box of cuffs she left on her side of the bed. A few moments more to leave some non-electronic tells in her apartment and in his, and he’s out the door, taking the stairs down three at a time and feeling a prickle on the back of his neck that he attributes to paranoia.

That doesn’t, however, stop him from having all his senses on alert as he leaves the city, nor does it stop him from moving quickly enough almost no one would be able to keep up with him. He considers taking to the air, decides against it, but keeps his head down and his awareness extended.

No one stops him or tries to stop him; he doesn’t know whether to be relieved or annoyed. A good fight would suit his mood right about now. On the other hand, the last thing he wants is to draw attention to himself, and were he not careful the fight would end with someone dead.

Khan has to admit that one of the reasons he looks forward to seeing Katsuro again is that he knows he cannot win a fight with his brother. Even just out of cryosleep, Khan doubts he can best Katsuro, and he wants the physical reminder that he is neither infallible nor invulnerable.

He needs both their skills and their intelligence; while he doubts they will have quite as energetic a response to this century as Alona and Matthew likely will, he does still wonder what they will think of it.

As he approaches the house, he feels a tingle down his spine, the sense that someone is watching him. He does nothing to indicate he’s aware of an observer, but does pause to take out his comm-link and pretend to make a call, turning around in a slow circle. He sees nothing out of the ordinary, no indications that anyone else is there or watching him. Still, the uneasy feeling persists and he
puts his link away, resuming his walk toward the house.

He gets there with no interruption and lets himself inside. He sees Andy in lotus on the ottoman, wrapped in her green kimono. Magpie sprawls over the couch, arms and legs dangling off the side and arms. “We’re taking a mental health break,” Andy says. “We’ve spent the last however long it’s been building jammers and remotes and we’re tapped out for the moment.”

“Where did Jill go?” Khan asks.

“She’s taking a nap upstairs,” Magpie says without moving or opening her eyes. “Everything go okay?”

“Somewhat,” Khan says. “I have some data to review but need a clean machine.”

“I have one upstairs, nothing down here’s clean,” Magpie says. “Give me ten and I’ll get it for you. Unless it’s urgent.”

“Not immediately so,” Khan says.

“Then give me a couple,” Magpie says.

“Has the exterior security system pinged anything in the last two hours?” Khan asks.

“No,” Andy says, shaking his hair back. “No, we ran a system check half an hour ago and it was all clean. Did you see something?”

“No, not exactly,” Khan says. “Can we increase the sensitivity of the system? Or increase its range?”

Magpie groans and Andy sighs. “Yes,” Magpie says. “Yes, we can, but it’s a pain in the ass to do because Andy has to manually calibrate every sensor. We’ve already turned it up about eight-tenths of the way. If we put it on maximum, we might eventually run into power consumption issues and the odds of us getting noise are a lot higher. We can run a manual scan at higher sensitivity, though, it’ll take a bit longer but that doesn’t have to manually recalibrate everything. Do you want us to do that?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I would appreciate it.”

“Okay.” Magpie sighs and stretches before she squirms up into a sitting position and reaches for one of the computers on the floor. “Let’s see what we’ve got. Andy, can you—“

“Yeah, I’m on it,” Andy says, unfolding and reaching for her own computer. “This is going to take about twenty,” she says, looking up at Khan. “I’d suggest checking on Jill and then by the time you come back we’ll have something for you.”

Khan reflects that the more time he spends with Andy, the more Andy reminds him of Rani. They have very similar ways of giving orders phrased as suggestions. His response would normally be anger, but he finds it almost impossible to be angry with Andy. He is, after all, the only living link Khan has to her. As well, he understands the concern underlying Andy’s suggestions.

So rather than snap at Andy, Khan merely nods and heads for the stairs.

He finds Jill where he expected her, sprawled on the bed in a t-shirt and panties with her headphones on. He sits down on the edge of the bed and she opens her eyes. “Hi,” she says, slightly louder than usual. “One sec.” She pulls off the headphones and sits up. “How’d it go with
Smythe?”

“I may have data I can use,” Khan says, telling her briefly what Smythe gave him.

She grimaces, absently reaching for his hand. “That’s…not good,” she says. “Sounds like we have seven people to find.”

“We do,” Khan says. “What do you want to do with them?”

“Neutralize them,” Jill says matter-of-factly. “If you’re looking for me to be upset about killing them, you won’t find it. You seem to keep thinking I’m a lot less deadly than I am, Khan. They tried to kill you. Frankly, I want to take some of them out myself.”

“No,” Khan says. “No, I do not think you are anything but deadly, pyara. But we should probably leave one or two alive for questioning.”

“Yeah, okay, point,” Jill says. She makes a face. “I don’t want to, I want them all dead, but we should. Let’s look through the files and see who’s likely to be the ringleader, but if it can wait I’d rather do it tomorrow than tonight. If we do it tonight I’ll get distracted before the op.”

Khan nods. “I can look through the files tonight while you are out,” he says.

“You can, but will you concentrate?” Jill asks, laughing. “God knows I wouldn’t be able to, although you’re not me.”

“We shall see,” Khan says. “I may end up spending the time telling my siblings about this century.”

“Not a bad idea,” Jill says. “You know, we didn’t give them comm-links or anything. If they run into trouble, we won’t know about it.”

“That did occur to me,” Khan says. “But I think they will be fine. We will remedy it before they go out again.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Andy or Magpie to not have put trackers in their wallets or something, either,” Jill says. “We’ll ask later.”

“Yes,” Khan says. He brushes a curl back from her cheek, laying his palm against her skin for a moment, pleased when she leans into his touch. “Are you ready for tonight’s mission?” he asks.

“I am,” Jill says. “I know where the danger zones are, more from seeing them last night, and we’ll be okay. Andy fixed the issue we had last night—we’ll likely have something else go wrong tonight, but we can handle it.”

“We can,” Khan says, not sure whether he completely believes her or not.

She smiles and shifts to her knees. “We’ll be okay,” she says softly and leans up to kiss him. “We got Ekaterina and Konstantin, didn’t we? We can get the rest.”

“Our odds—“ Khan starts and Jill puts her fingers over his mouth.

“Don’t,” she says. “I know it as well as you do. Don’t. Just—we got two of them, two more tonight, right now it’s just you and me in here and unless you have other things to deal with in the next hour, I’d really like to have sex with you.”

He kisses her fingers, caught between duty—the files, the security scan—and breaking the moment.
with her. Jill smiles a little and takes her hand away. “What do you need to do first?” she asks.

“I thought I sensed someone watching me on the walk here,” Khan says. “I asked Magpie and Andy to run a higher level security scan of the property.”

“Let’s go see if they’ve found anything,” Jill says.

“They said it would take twenty minutes,” Khan says, sliding a hand into her hair. “We have some time.”

“Which means we have time for you to drive me out of my mind and leave me hanging,” Jill says, but she shivers when he pulls her head back and moans when he touches her with his other hand, fingers slipping under her panties.

“Would I be so cruel?” Khan murmurs, idly toying with her clit.

“Absolutely,” Jill whispers, rolling her hips against his hand.

“You’re always so wet for me,” he says, stroking her, pushing a finger into her. “So wet, so ready for me. I could find you anytime, anywhere, and you’d spread your legs for me, wouldn’t you? You’d take my cock, my hand, anything I wanted to give you. Take it and beg me for more and beg me to let you come.”

She whimpers, trying to squirm against him until he pushes her back on the bed, shifting his grip to hold her there. “Next Sunday,” he says softly, pushing a second finger into her. “Next Sunday I want the day you promised me. Anything I want, for the entire day. For that day, pyara, I will own you. Anything you need will come only from me. I will be your master, your entire world. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” Jill breathes, growing wetter as he talks. “Please—Khan, please—“

“No,” Khan murmurs, even as he presses his thumb against her clit. “You are not to touch yourself until then. You are not to come without my permission. Your body belongs to me, for my pleasure. If I wish to have you in the bathroom at work, I will. You will not ask me for permission to come. I will decide whether you have earned it or not. You may, if I allow it, ask to please me. If I want you filled with one of your toys, I will. If I leave you like this, empty and wet and desperate, you will thank me for it.

Jill whines, squirming under him, spreading her legs wider. Khan continues talking to her, detailing all the ways in which he will have her, will train her to his hand even as he teases her clit and strokes three fingers in and out of her. He lets her come, because he needs her to focus for the mission tonight, and licks his fingers clean after she stops shuddering.

“Fuck,” Jill says finally, catching her breath. “I’d hate you if I didn’t want you so damn much.” She pokes his leg. “And yes, next Sunday if we do two weeks between ops. If we do one week then no, it’ll wait until we’ve finished all four.”


“God, you’re a bastard,” Jill says with a groan, pushing to sit up. “And we should go check in with Andy and Magpie about the security scan. I’ll be down once I can trust my legs to hold me and put on some jeans.”

“Take your time,” Khan says, leaning over to kiss her. “It is still some hours to dusk.”
“Only about two,” Jill says. “I’ll be down soon.”

Khan kisses her again and gets up, going to the bath to wash his hands before he heads downstairs. “We have a ghost,” Magpie says when he enters the living room.

“What is a ghost?” Khan asks.

“It’s an echo in the security system,” Magpie explains. “It means I’m getting a bounce from something but we can’t see it and we can’t quite hear it, either. It’s there but not there, like a ghost. It could just be a system echo, sometimes that happens at full sensitivity. It could be just noise. It could be something’s out there. I don’t know.”

“How do we find out?” Khan asks. “Where is it coming from?”

“Half a block north,” Andy says. “Whatever it is, it’s not alive, so our theory is that it’s a stray camera or sensor someone left behind. We scouted on the camera and through the heat sensors and there’s nothing but some trees. I don’t see anything that would indicate a shield, and I only know two people on the planet who can make ones like I do that block heat sensors and sight cameras. You want to take a look?”


“We think it’s about a meter to two meters off the ground,” Magpie says. “Might be in a tree or something.”

Khan nods. “I will go look.” He leaves the house, walking north carefully, but he doesn’t get any kind of sense that someone is watching him or even in the area. Half a block away he sees a tree on his left and stops to study it. Nothing obvious, but just over his head he sees a branch that might hide something. He looks at the branch, judges it sturdy enough to hold his weight, and reaches up, grabbing the branch and hoisting himself onto it. Easy enough for him, even if his hands do sting from the bark. He ignores that and looks at where the branch meets the trunk, finding a small hole that might have been a squirrel’s burrow once. Inside he thinks he can hear something almost inaudible, and when he reaches in carefully he feels something clearly manmade and not part of the tree.

What he pulls out turns out to be a black oblong with three lights and two silver buttons. The middle light blinks green, the other two solid yellow. Interesting. Khan presumes it to be some kind of recording device or monitor, considers smashing it before deciding to bring it back to Andy and see what she can make of it.

He drops out of the tree, landing lightly, and takes it back to the house.

“What the—“Andy turns it over in her hands, studying it. “This…huh. I’m not actually sure what this is.”

“It’s—“ Magpie scrambles over to the ottoman, looking at it. “It’s a recorder,” she says after a moment. “It’s not transmitting, that would be this light, but it’s recording. I think if you open it up, you’ll find its hard drive. My guess is it’ll record until it gets full and then send a signal to home base asking someone to come get the data.”

“How the hell did you know that and I didn’t?” Andy asks.

“Because this is really clunky technology, and even on your worst days you’d have put something together that was more elegant and easier,” Magpie says. “This actually reminds me of Casey’s work.”
Andy winces. “Okay, that makes sense. And now that I know what it is, I can play with it.” He reaches down into his tool bag, taking out a flat-headed screwdriver and something else, and turns the device over. “Okay, you, let’s find out what you’ve got,” he murmurs, starting to work the device open.

Jill comes downstairs then, barefoot but hair braided back. “What’s up?” she asks.

“Found a recorder half a block north,” Magpie says. “Not sure if it was meant for us or just randomly there.”

“No idea,” Jill says, walking over to Andy to peer at it. “Huh. I haven’t seen something like that before.”

“Neither have I,” Andy says absently. “But…there we go.” She lifts up the back panel. “Good grief this is badly made,” she says, looking at the inside of the device. “I mean, this is tech from…six years ago? Seven? I’m not even sure I have anything here that can read this hard drive.”

“If it’s six years ago I probably do,” Magpie says. “Let me see it when you take it out.”

“Yeah,” Andy says, carefully examining it. “It’s like technology from a decade ago combined with someone trying to be the next Rube Goldberg or something. I can’t—I’m not entirely certain this works at all, that it’s not just a decoy. Like this wire just sits there and doesn’t connect, and—“

Khan barely hears the whine, the frequency too high for normal humans to catch. He realizes in a split second what the device actually is, grabs it from Andy’s hands and gets it out the door, hurling it down the street away from the house. “What the—” Andy starts, about to chase after it. Khan blocks him with an arm, waiting. Three. Two. One.

A small fireball erupts in the middle of the street. Andy goes pale and stumbles back a step. “Someone knows you’re here,” Jill says quietly, looking at Khan. “We have to move.”

“Where?” Magpie asks. “We can’t leave London just yet, not without the rest of Khan’s people, and we’ve got nowhere else in London or the immediate area we can go.”

Jill chews her lip, thinking. Khan watches her start to pace, unwinding her braid and wrapping a curl around her finger. “We need Jake,” she says after a minute. “Between Magpie, Andy, and him we’ve got enough safe houses and safe rooms around the globe to hold as many people as we need. Bird, you’re right that we can’t leave just yet, but we’re also not as safe here as we thought we were. So…okay. Thinking out loud here. I get Katsuro and Bishop tonight, we give them a day or two to acclimate, then we leave this as our supposed base and start moving people around the globe. How are the transporters coming?”

“Two are complete, locked to the four of us,” Khan says. “The third I can finish tonight, now that Cat and Konstantin are here. Once I can explain to Katsuro what I am doing, I expect he will be able to build them, and we can get the rest done in short order. We will need four more, I think. One for Katsuro and Bishop, one for Jake, and two more for my brothers and sisters if we can revive them.”

“And Andy and Jake have access to transporter technology anyway, so in a pinch we could use it,” Jill says. “Okay. Okay. This isn’t as dire as it looks like, but it means we have a more immediate goal. Two, really.”

“Two?” Magpie asks.

“The clean machine I need,” Khan says. “Smythe gave me information on seven people he says
want to kill me. Likely the ones behind the bomb.”

Magpie groans and Andy mutters a few curses in Mandarin. “Okay,” Magpie says after a moment. “Okay, so. Plan for tonight, get two more of your people. Plan for tomorrow, figure out how to find these seven people and plan to neutralize them. Plan for the week, Andy and I work on finding a new place or places for everyone while you and your brother work on the transporters so we can get from one place to another without problems. Meanwhile, you and Jill carry on as usual and I’m guessing Ekaterina and Konstantin will want to take point on finding these seven.”

“That about sums it up,” Jill says. “And we’ll loop Jake in once he gets back, because he’ll have safe houses we don’t and might be able to shed some insight on the seven assholes we’re looking for.”

“We can hope,” Andy says. “My…okay. Wait.” He looks at Khan. “I need to run a full-body scan of you. They had to have found you somehow. Come upstairs with me, I’d rather not do this down here.”

“I am not bugged,” Khan says. “I would know.”

“I want to run the scan,” Andy says firmly. “Come on. It’ll take five minutes.”

Khan sighs inwardly but follows Andy up the stairs to her room. “I need you to strip, completely,” she says, rummaging through a bag for something. “We’ll scan your clothes and shoes later, but right now I need you naked. Believe me, I don’t want to see you naked any more than you want to see me naked, so humor me, please.”

He thinks it more than a bit ridiculous, but does as Andy asked. Nudity has never bothered him, although he’s glad Magpie isn’t in the room.

“Thank you,” Andy says, standing up with a wand in her hand. “Stand over there, arms stretched out to the sides.” She has a bit of color in her cheeks when she looks at him and she keeps her eyes trained on his face.

Slowly, she circles him with the wand, holding it a few centimeters above his skin. She sweeps it back and forth, scanning every bit of his skin. Khan has no idea what she hopes to find, but doubts she will get answers.

A shrill beep startles him and he looks at Andy. “What was that?”

“You’re bugged,” Andy says grimly. “My guess is it’s a subcutaneous transmitter buried right about here.” He touches a spot on Khan’s left shoulder, just above his wings. “I should have thought before. Stupid. Stupid.”

Khan says nothing, reining in his temper. He’s not angry with Andy nor does he want to snap at her, but he wants to know how in hell all of them missed this—including himself. When he thinks he can trust his voice again, he takes a breath. “Can you disable it?”

“Maybe,” Andy says slowly. “Maybe. I’m not sure. I need a different scanner to identify what it is first—it could be a number of options—and I don’t have that here because I wasn’t expecting internal bugs. If we can get it out of you, I can disable it no problem, but while it’s still in your shoulder I’m limited in what I can do.”

“When Cat gets back,” Khan says, moving to pull on his clothes. “She can cut it out of me if you tell her where.”
Andy grimaces but nods. “Okay,” he says. “But if—hm. I have an idea but it’ll depend on what we find when we get it out of you.”

“Let us go tell the others,” Khan says.

“After you,” Andy says, gesturing to the door.

When Khan tells Magpie and Jill about the bug, Magpie swears violently and Jill kicks the wall hard enough Khan thinks she dented it. “I have a laser scalpel in my medkit,” she says. “And bandages and things. We can get it out of you, but I’d rather someone else did the cutting.”

“Ekaterina will,” Khan says. “Or Konstantin. Why do you have a laser scalpel?”

“Because you never know when you might need one,” Jill says. “I have a much more thorough medkit than your basic stuff. Jake helped me put it together, and his is more extensive than mine but it needs to be.” She glances at the chrono and at the window, judging the time and the sun. “I’m going to go get changed.”

Khan pulls her in for a kiss first, his hand around her wrist. She shivers and leans into him, taking a moment to breathe when he lets her go. Magpie snickers but says nothing; Jill flips her off before heading upstairs.

The door opens a moment later and Ekaterina and Konstantin come in, both carrying multiple bags. Khan notes they have both changed clothes; it doesn’t surprise him to see the knee-high boots Ekaterina now wears. “We bought for ourselves and Katsuro and Bishop as well,” Cat says, setting down her bags by the couch. “I rather like fashion in this century, it is quite practical.”

“We have a problem,” Khan says and Cat immediately sobers.

“Tell me,” she says.

He does, laying out everything they know. Cat growls under her breath and Konstantin looks grim. “How did they implant you with a tracker?” Ekaterina asks. “When did this happen?”

“Likely shortly after I was revived,” Khan says. “I was…not in a situation to notice.”

“Tell me what happened to you,” Cat demands.

“What do you think happened?” Khan snaps at her. “I was revived alone, in a secure location with a cohort of scientists and the equivalent of Nikolai. They had me for six weeks.”

If she had knives, one of them would either be in the wall or in his shoulder right now. She does slap him, in fact, hard enough his head snaps to the side and he feels heat on his skin. “Whoa, wait a minute,” Magpie says. “Why the fuck are you hitting him?”

“You did not tell me,” Ekaterina says in Russian, ignoring Magpie or likely just not hearing her.

“And when did I have time?” Khan argues back. “You know now.”

“No,” Ekaterina says. “No, I do not. I do not know what they did and I will know, brother. You will tell me what they did to you.”

“Why? Why should I relive those memories?” Khan asks. “For your knowledge?”

Cat snarls and shoves him against the wall, her hands fisted in his shirt. “You will tell me,” she says evenly. “You will tell me so we can ensure that when they die, they do so having suffered the
“way they made you suffer.”

“Their deaths are not possible at this time,” Khan says.

“They will not be allowed to live,” Ekaterina says.

“Right now we do not have the option to kill them,” Khan says steadily. “I will not have this argument with you, sister. Not now. Not when we have more pressing matters to attend to tonight. If—if I tell you what happened in those six weeks, I will only do it once, and I will not do so without Jill. And this is not the time to have that discussion, not when she has work to do.”

Cat growls again, but after a moment she lets go of him and steps back. “Pax,” she says, taking a deep breath.

“Pax,” Khan says, stretching his wings a bit to relax them from being shoved against the wall.

“Oh, in English please, what the fuck was that all about?” Magpie asks after a moment.

“After I was revived,” Khan says, taking a breath. “I was held in section 31 for six weeks. They have an…extensive medical and scientific department.”

He says nothing else. “Right,” Magpie says. “Okay, so, many more people to kill, good to know.”

“Who are we killing now?” Jill asks, walking into the living room in her catsuit, hair braided back and wrapped around her head.

“A lot of people from section 31,” Andy says.

“Works for me,” Jill says. “You can start making the list tonight. Start with the seven immediate threats. Speaking of, Ekaterina, how handy are you with a scalpel?”

“I should think I can get the tracker out of him,” Cat says dryly.

“I figured,” Jill says. She hands Ekaterina a white box. “This has everything you’ll need. Antiseptic, scalpel, dermal glue, anything else. Pain meds in the brown bottle, if you need any. I’d rather just not be around when you get it out of him, I hate watching other people bleed.”

“We will wait,” Konstantin says. “Thank you for the medkit.”

“Sure,” Jill says. “We have enough time for Andy to mark the spot before we have to get me going, so let’s do this.”

“The kitchen’s probably best,” Andy says.

“While you do that I’ll grab you the clean machine,” Magpie says, heading for the stairs.

In the kitchen, Khan takes off his shirt and straddles one of the chairs. Andy stands behind him, scanning with the wand. It beeps again, loud and then soft; Khan feels her draw a square on his skin, following the beeps of the wand. “Okay,” she says finally, moving away. “It’s under that. It’s probably no bigger than a centimeter or two square.”

“Spasiba,” Ekaterina says. “We will wait to remove it until after Jill has left.”

“Jill appreciates that,” Jill says. “Although she also appreciates Khan without a shirt.” She leans in and bites his shoulder, completely un-self conscious about everyone else in the room. Cat laughs, though, and Khan smiles to himself.
“Clean—oh, pretty, pretty man,” Magpie says, coming into the kitchen. “Ahem. As I was saying, clean machine is on the ottoman, and it’s time for us to get Jill kitted out.”

Khan doesn’t bother putting his shirt back on as they go back to the living room and he watches Magpie and Andy run their checks and set up their systems. He doesn’t leave his earbud in just yet, wanting to wait until after they remove the tracker, but he does test it.

“Oh, yeah,” Jill says, stretching her arms over her head before she does a handstand, walking a few steps before flipping over. “I’m all set.” She shakes herself all over and pulls on the loose blue jacket from the previous day. “I’ll be back in a couple hours.”

She pauses to kiss Khan, nipping his lower lip sharply. “Catch you later,” she says and ducks out the door.

“Well,” Ekaterina says after she leaves. “Let us go perform minor surgery.”

Khan nods and they head back to the kitchen, where he shows Cat how to use the scalpel before straddling the chair again. She gives him no warning, which he expected, but the first pain from the scalpel makes him swear in Russian and his hand clenches around the back of the chair. Cat ignores him and continues cutting carefully; Khan feels blood drip down his back and Konstantin swab it away with a towel.

After a few minutes, Ekaterina stops with the scalpel. “Tweezers,” she murmurs. “Spasiba.” Konstantin must have handed them to her. “And…there it is,” she says absently. Khan feels the tweezers in his back and suppresses a wince. He will heal, of course, but that never meant he doesn’t feel pain.

“There we are,” Cat says, laying the tweezers down on the table with the small tracker. “Kostya, can you bandage him up?”

“Da, of course,” Konstantin says. Khan feels him wipe away blood with the towel before swabbing the whole area with an alcohol wipe. It stings, but he ignores it. Konstantin seals the cuts with dermal glue, wipes the whole patch down again with antiseptic, and pronounces Khan fixed.

“Thank you,” Khan says, getting up from the chair. The skin has already started itching; this won’t take long to heal. “We will figure out what to do with it later, when Andy and Magpie are not busy.”

“Da,” Cat says. “For now, let us use this clean machine, whatever that means, and study the files of the seven people we need to kill.”

“A clean machine is a secure computer that has no connections that can be hacked,” Khan says. “Useful for analyzing sensitive data.”

“I see,” she says. “Then yes, let us look at these files.”

Khan slips his earbud in as they go to the living room to get the machine. He doesn’t hear words, just Jill’s quiet, steady breathing. “Okay, steady,” Magpie says, studying her second computer. “Guards around the corner—hold for five, four, three, two—up the wall, get on the ceiling.”

On Andy’s holo projection, the little dot moves up the wall onto the ceiling; Khan hears Jill take a slow, deep breath as she continues moving. “How does she climb the wall?” Konstantin murmurs.
“Gloves and boots that help her stick to it,” Andy murmurs back without looking up from his screen. “She moves a bit more slowly, but she won’t fall.”

“You’ve got ten meters then you can come down,” Magpie says. “No more guards for another seven minutes. When you hit the T-junction, come down and go left.”

“Roger,” Jill says, so quietly Khan barely hears her.

They should be analyzing the files, but neither Khan nor his siblings move to get the computer and do so. “Activate the shield in five,” Magpie says. “Four. Three. Two. One. Go.”

Khan tenses, but all he hears is a low hum for a moment. “We’ve got you,” Andy says, sounding satisfied with herself. “Keep going.”

Meter by meter, Jill makes her way to the shielded room. “Force field coming down in ten,” Magpie says. She counts it down. “And go. See you in ten.”

Jill doesn’t answer but a second later, her dot blinks out.

“And now we wait,” Andy says, pushing his hands through his hair. “Did you get the tracker out?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “It is in the kitchen.”

“I’ll look after Jill gets in the cab,” Andy says. “I don’t want to get distracted now.”

Magpie seems lost in her own world, but as with the previous night, she glances at the chrono every thirty seconds or so. After eight minutes, both she and Andy look tense, and after nine, Khan grits his teeth. “She’s got forty seconds left,” Magpie says, chewing her lip.

With ten seconds to spare, Jill’s dot blinks back onto the map, but Khan hears her breathe harder than usual. “We need the fastest way out,” she says, voice low. “We have a small problem. Just get us out as fast as you can.”

“Right,” Magpie says. “Let’s create a few diversions, shall we?”

Khan’s wings stretch and mantle and ruffle and he cannot stop them any more than he can relax his muscles. What the devil does ‘small problem’ mean, and why does Jill need the fastest way out? He can’t ask, not without distracting her, but the tension in his stomach coils tighter and tighter. They have one close call, but finally, after what seems an eternity, they get to the window. Khan hears Jill jump down, the soft thump when she lands. “Are we clear?” she asks, sounding out of breath and a bit ragged, like she’s dealing with something awkward.

“So far so good,” Magpie says. “If you get around the corner and turn off the shields we can beam you here.”

“Yeah,” Jill says, still breathless. “Have that ready to go.”

Three minutes later Jill says the shields are down. Andy taps a few things into her tablet and Khan hears the sound of the transporter.

A moment later three people materialize in the middle of the room. Jill, braid starting to come undone; Katsuro, as calm and unflappable as ever; and between them, a very pale and unsteady Bishop. As soon as they finish materializing Jill and Katsuro lower Bishop to the floor; he clearly can’t stand on his own, and he seems barely conscious. “What happened?” Khan asks immediately.
“He didn’t wake up well,” Jill says, breathing hard. “Katsuro and I had to essentially carry him out. Since I am my size, Katsuro is Magpie’s height, and Bishop is taller than Khan, you see the problem.”

Khan kneels next to Bishop, laying a hand on his forehead. Cool, clammy skin, paler than it should be, and when Khan takes his pulse it’s too fast. “Is there anything we can do for him?” Magpie asks.

“He likely needs to sleep it off,” Khan says, hoping he’s right. “He hasn’t died, so he will recover, but for now he likely just needs to sleep.”

“I am not carrying him up the stairs,” Jill says.

“What bedroom did you set for him and Katsuro?” Khan asks.

“First one on the left, across from Ekaterina and Konstantin,” Magpie says.

“Thank you,” Khan says. He looks at Konstantin, who nods and crouches on Bishop’s other side. Between the two of them they lift him easily; Konstantin takes Bishop once they get to their feet. Khan heads upstairs to get the door, Konstantin following. Once inside the bedroom Konstantin lays Bishop down on the bed, taking off his boots.

“He will be fine hopefully tomorrow,” Konstantin says, looking at him.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

We're in a Gordian knot of problems.

Chapter Notes

As always, many thanks to those of you along for the journey with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Downstairs, they find Katsuro barefoot and sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding a cup of tea. He rises when Khan and Konstantin come down, though, giving them each a quick hug. It touches Khan; Katsuro is not usually physically demonstrative. “So,” he says, folding himself down on the floor again. “I hear we have landed in a bit of trouble.”

“A bit,” Khan says, smiling. He has missed Katsuro’s calm unflappability. “There are multiple people trying to kill me, the admiral in charge of the planetary military hopes to provoke a war with a very aggressive alien species, and the rest of our people are in danger so long as they are still in cryosleep.”

“Ah,” Katsuro says placidly. He takes a sip of tea. “Well, then. Do we begin with the immediate threat to your safety or the longer-term goal of averting a war? Or rather, do we intend to prevent the war or push for it to happen?”

“Prevent it,” Khan says, sitting down on the ottoman, next to Jill. “The Federation—current governmental structure—would not survive intact, and while I dislike the organization, I dislike it less than the idea of the Klingons taking over.”

Katsuro nods. “I see. I have many questions, as I am sure you know, but I am also very fatigued and think I would best be served by resting for now. Tomorrow, you can tell Bishop and me what we need to know and where our skills will be best utilized.”

“Of course,” Khan says.

“Thank you for the tea, Andy,” Katsuro says, getting up gracefully. “Am I to share a room with Bishop?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I think it unlikely he will wake during the night, but if he does, we will be right across the hall.”

“Hai.” Katsuro turns to Jill. “Thank you for your efforts tonight.”

“It’s fine,” she says, smiling a little sheepishly. “Sorry it didn’t go quite as planned.”

“We left without being followed, and we arrived here safely,” Katsuro says. “That is all I could have expected.”
“Yeah, true,” Jill says, ducking her head. “Sleep well.” She glances up at Katsuro before taking a sip of her water.

Katsuro inclines his head to her and Andy and leaves the room quietly. “I did not expect one of your siblings to be that Zen,” Magpie admits once he’s gone. “He’s...different.”

“He is,” Khan agrees. “Bishop is similar, although not quite as much so.”

“Bishop is a gentleman,” Cat says. “A rarity even in our time.”

“More so in ours,” Andy says.

“Possibly,” Cat says. “Jill, are you well?”

Jill nods. “I’m okay. Tired. Bishop is not the lightest person in the world. Katsuro’s strong but he was groggy himself, and it was just a lot of physical effort to get them out of the building without setting off any alarms. I think I’m going to go take a hot shower and go to bed.”

“It could have been worse,” Magpie says. “You could have had to carry Konstantin.”

Khan hides a laugh at the look on Jill’s face. Ekaterina doesn’t bother hiding it. But she quiets quickly. “So,” she says. “We have seven people to study, do we not?”

“We do,” Khan says. “Shall we begin?”

“Da,” Ekaterina says. “Any objections?”

No one raises any. Khan takes the clean machine and inserts the memory chip, calling up the files. He skims through them at first, studying the pictures to see if he recognizes anyone. It doesn’t surprise him to know four of the seven people, although their names are new information.

“Here,” Magpie says, moving a couple computers out of the way. “If you hit the top center blue button and the K key, it’ll project—there.” The first file shimmers into holographic life, the woman’s head looking strangely alien for all that she is human.

“Huh,” Jill says, shifting to kneel on the floor by the table so she can better study it. “I’d swear I’ve seen her before, somewhere.”

“Verity Stewart,” Magpie says, reading the hologram. “From England, London actually. Love the hair color, the red’s a gorgeous contrast to her skintone, but I digress. She...I have no idea what half these acronyms mean. Jill-Bear?”

“Covert ops,” Jill says, studying the file. “Advanced unarmed combat, multiple styles, marksmanship. I...okay, this one I’ve never seen before. I have no idea what it means. Khan? What would a mark of ‘TI’ mean with a note next to it of 6-8 months? It’s—I see several medical codes on here, but I don’t know what they mean.”

“Terminal illness,” Khan says when he puts it together. “She’s dying.”

“And she wants to kill you because—“ Andy trails off.

“Because I could likely save her life,” Khan says. “Or because somehow I caused her illness. Virology is a difficult subject, and they certainly took enough blood from me to replicate or create multiple diseases, but I wouldn’t know what my blood did to her without more information.”

Jill grimaces. “Let’s see if any of the others have similar coding.”
Two of them do, as it turns out; Maria Garcia, with a code of 3-4 months, and Simon Campbell, with a note of 8-10 months. Khan doesn’t recognize either of them. The ones he knows turn out to be Verity; a man with the sole name of Ikan and the distinguishing characteristic of being completely unmemorable; Gavin Keroack, a biologist; and Malcom Baker, another covert ops person like Verity.

“I think…” Khan considers the files, reading through the data given and comparing it to his own memories and knowledge. “Ikan is likely to be the ringleader. I often saw him in a supervisory role at section 31. Verity was often with him, but deferred to him. But both of them are ruthless and without morals, and if Verity is truly dying, she has nothing to lose.”

“You don’t think Marcus knows about this,” Jill says. “Do you?”

Khan shakes his head. “Unlikely. Marcus still wants me alive and useful to him at this point. We have one biologist, one biochemist, two medical personnel and three covert ops.”

“Who is not based in London?” Ekaterina asks.

“Garcia and Keroack,” Khan says. “One is in San Francisco, one is on leave of absence somewhere unknown.”

“Then I think perhaps our best option is to track down those in London, gather the information we need, and eliminate them,” Ekaterina says.

“Works for me,” Magpie says. “I’ll start tracking them down tonight, although I’m starting to fade and I won’t be able to get much data until at least tomorrow.”

“Did the files Smythe gave you contain any location data?” Konstantin asks.

Khan shakes his head. “No. Still, if they want me dead, they cannot be that far away.”

“Yeah, which isn’t really a plus,” Jill says. “And we need to figure out where we’re going to scatter to. Khan and I have to stay in London, but I think keeping use of this house for extended periods of time would be a really, really bad idea unless we’re willing to pay Trevor for the property if someone blows it up.”

“I doubt he’d care, but his family might,” Andy says. “So yeah. Okay. Off the top of my head…I have an apartment in San Francisco that can house two. Magpie’s place in San Francisco can hold one, two if they’re really, really friendly and don’t mind close quarters. I would prefer to avoid using my loft in New York or Magpie’s nest just in case of collateral damage.”

After so long without a home base, Khan isn’t surprised by Andy’s wish to keep his home out of the line of fire. “Let us try to find places to stay that do not belong to anyone in this group, just in case we have problems,” he says.

“Yeah, about that,” Jill says, tugging on a curl.

“What is it?” Khan asks.

Jill licks her lips and sighs. “Jake’s family is huge,” she says. “Tons of cousins and nieces and nephews and grandkids. They mostly stay in New York, Brooklyn area, and they have a lot of empty rooms and things just by virtue of people being at school or shipped out or whatever. We could, if we wanted to hide people in plain sight, send two or three to stay with them. I’m not…I don’t know if it’s a good idea or not. I think the odds of anyone finding, say, Ekaterina in a mass of people with similar coloring are pretty low. But at the same time, if they do find out…”
“We should run that by Jake first,” Andy says carefully. “And maybe his family.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jill says. “Jake also has a lot of safe houses around the globe, but I don’t want to take advantage of too many of those. What I think it’ll come down to is whether or not our gang of seven knows about the other augments, not just Khan. If they don’t, we can put Khan’s people anywhere and they’ll be safe. If they do, we need to take them out fast before they tell Marcus.”

Slightly mixed pronouns but Khan takes her meaning. “We’re in a fucking Gordian knot of problems,” Andy says. “Anyone have a sword?”

“That one,” Jill says. “Let’s lay out what we’ve got. We have four of Khan’s people back and relatively safe. We want four more, either next weekend or the weekend after. Khan and I are needed in London for covers and work. So at the moment we have six people that need to scatter sooner rather than later, but hopefully that’ll go up to ten in the near future. Jake will be back Wednesday or Thursday, I forget, and we’ll talk to him about our options then. I think we should be safe until then.”

“We have to be,” Andy says. “We don’t have time to put together a disappearance plan for everyone before then. We’ve got one for the four of us, five with Jake, and we have IDs for the other four, but we didn’t have time to put together a plan B for all of us needing to disappear.”

“So,” Ekaterina says. “Here is what I propose. Tomorrow is Monday, da? Magpie, you will look for these five people, and once we have located one or more of them, Konstantin and I will go find them and…deal with them. Katsuro and Bishop will likely need to rest most of the day, and by the time we all return here tomorrow night, we can re-evaluate and assess the situation. Khan, you have gadgets that Katsuro can assist you with, so you will show him what needs to be done once you return. We will remain in this house until either we have a plan for finding other safe locations or the house is attacked and we are no longer safe in it.”

“I can stay here tomorrow,” Khan says. “Marcus has stopped checking over my shoulder every day. As long as I make progress he cares not what I do with the rest of my time.”

“I can’t,” Jill says. “I have to be at the archive by nine hundred tomorrow, which means I need to be out of here by seven hundred so I can run back to my flat and change into a uniform. Which means…I need to shower and head to bed.”

“I think it’s bedtime for all of us,” Magpie says. “I’m wiped.”

“Magpie, is one of these computers safe to use?” Ekaterina asks. “Konstantin and I would like to do some reading and catch up on history and planetary events.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Magpie says. “Let me…” She studies her options. “This one,” she says, picking up a blue computer and handing it to Ekaterina. “It’s pretty intuitive to use. There’s a bunch of libraries online that have historical sections, I think I have two of them bookmarked and credentials to log in.”

“Spasiba,” Cat says, taking the computer.

Jill pushes up, covering a yawn. “Night, everyone,” she says. “I’ll see you either in the morning or tomorrow night.”

Khan rises to his feet as well and says goodnight, following Jill up the stairs. “You won’t fit in the shower with me,” she says, rubbing the back of her neck. “And you don’t need to sleep.”

“True and true,” Khan says. He doesn’t say anything else, but continues into the bedroom with Jill.
She huffs out a laugh and turns to look at him. “You really don’t have to be here,” she says.

“I am aware of that,” Khan says, walking over to stand toe-to-toe with her. “And yet here I am.”

“You’re impossible,” Jill says, but her mouth quirks in an almost-smile and she leans forward, resting her head against his chest. “I can hear your heartbeat,” she murmurs, splaying a hand over his shirt.

Khan slips a hand under her hair, rubbing the back of her neck. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “For Katsuro and Bishop.”

“You’re welcome,” Jill says. “I wish you’d stop thanking me, though. I said I would do this, I’m doing it, that’s not anything more than keeping my word.”

“It is,” Khan says. “So much more.”

She sighs and wraps her arms around his waist. “I don’t really want a shower,” she admits after a moment. “I just kind of want to have you hold me and relax a bit. Adrenalin crash after the clusterfuck that was getting out of the building with a mostly unconscious Bishop. I’m wiped and my head hurts.”

“Undress and lie down for me,” Khan says, kissing her hair. “Have you blockers or other pain medication?”

“Yeah,” Jill says. “Red bottle in my toiletry case in the bathroom. Two should be enough.”

“I will go get them,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jill says.

He kisses her hair again and goes to find the pills. When he returns Jill has stripped down to her panties and bundled her hair into a clip. Khan hands her the pills and a cup of water and she downs them before moving to sprawl over the bed on her stomach.

“I think we may do better to have two weeks before the next op,” Khan says, getting the oil. “Although we will see if they notice any problems starting tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Jill says. “But I’m mostly in agreement with you on this one. Especially if we can ask Bishop to figure out a stimulant that’ll allow your people to wake more easily and coherently. That will make things a lot easier on me.”

“Yes, I am sure,” Khan says. He pauses to strip out of his own clothes and crawls onto the bed over Jill, leaning down to brush a kiss over the nape of her neck. “Tell me about what happened,” he says, sliding his hands over her back before he pours a little oil into his hands.

“It went about the same as yesterday, minus the problem with the shield and the earbud,” Jill says. “Except Bishop didn’t wake up well at all. Katsuro was fine, if clearly tired and not functioning on all cylinders, but the two of us had to pretty much pull Bishop out of the cryotube and close it behind him, and then we had a very, very careful dance to get him out of there. We got him out through the window because I went first, and then Katsuro slung Bishop over his shoulder and came down after me. I think he twisted something when he landed, because he was limping a bit, but he was okay by the time Andy beamed us here.” She sighs. “The whole time we were getting out I was afraid Bishop was going to come back to consciousness and make noise. But he didn’t.”

Khan says nothing, considering what he wants to say. He has four of them now; would more be too
much? Are they pushing their luck past what they can conceivably expect to hold? He doesn’t know, to be honest, but at the same time he doesn’t know if he can pull back now, if he can say no more.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Jill says when he keeps quiet.

“I…am concerned for our ability to complete the next two ops successfully,” Khan says.

“Answer me this one,” Jill says. “Of the four we want to get next, are any of them as big as Bishop?”

“No,” Khan says. “Alona is not much taller than you. Anandi is slightly shorter than Magpie, Maeve just a bit taller, and Matthew is my height but more leanly built.”

“Then we should be okay unless something else goes wrong,” Jill says. “We said six to eight. We’ve only got four. Unless they start raising all kinds of alarms tomorrow or whatever, we’re going back at least once more.”

“This is your decision, is it?” Khan asks, caught between amusement and a bit of irritation. He thinks she may be letting emotion cloud her better judgment, and it may be the smarter course to stop now.

On the other hand, is he being too cautious? Is he too concerned for what could be that it is blinding him to what likely will be?

“It is,” Jill says cheerfully. “And you can’t stop me, not without locking me up. And you won’t do that.”

“No, I would not,” Khan says, leaning down to kiss the spot behind her ear. “Not like that, at any rate.”

“That implies there would be a time when you would,” Jill says, but she shivers a tiny bit when she says it.

Khan reaches down and closes his hands around her wrists, pushing her arms over her head. “I would,” he murmurs, shifting to lie on top of her, his weight pressing her into the bed. “I would bind you, make you completely mine, and you would thank me for it and beg for more.”

Jill’s breath catches and she shudders all over.

“Two weeks between missions,” he says softly, against her throat. “And next Sunday, you’ll give me everything and anything I want.”

She shivers under him, pulling at his hold to test it and making a soft sound when he simply tightens his grip. “Anything,” Khan says again, biting her earlobe. “Won’t you?”

“Yes,” she breathes, tilting her head to the side for him. “Anything you want. Please.”

“Beautiful,” Khan murmurs to himself, kissing the pulse that beats strong and fast in her throat. “Tell me what you want now, pyara.”

“In me,” she says, shaky around the edges. “Please. I want—I want you inside me.”

“Yes,” he says.

She comes three times before Khan sets his teeth in her skin and lets himself fall over the edge, his
hands still locked around her wrists and her body damp with sweat against his. He holds her after, keeps her close while she trembles. It takes a long time before she tries to speak, and when she does nothing comes out. “Easy,” Khan says, smoothing her hair back. “I have you.”

Jill sighs and burrows closer. She mumbles something in Russian, but Khan doesn’t quite catch the words.

In the morning, she ducks into the shower early enough that she’ll still be able to get to her flat and change before she is due at the archive. “I’ll see you tonight,” she says, pulling on clothes after and wrestling her hair into a braid before she coils it at the base of her neck. “If you don’t see me by nineteen hundred, call me.”

“I will,” Khan says, intending to shower once she leaves. The bruise he left peeks out of the collar of her shirt, and before he thinks better of it he curls his hand around her shoulder, thumb pressing against the bruise. Jill makes a choked sound and bends at the knees before she catches herself and pulls back.

“Don’t,” she says, taking a deep breath. “Don’t. I have to focus today.”

“Consider it incentive,” Khan says, brushing his fingers down her cheek.

“For what?” Jill asks, kissing his palm.

“Later,” Khan says.

“Oh, I hate it when you do this,” Jill complains. “You are such a bastard.” She glares at him as she pulls on her boots. “One of these days I’m going to say no.”

“You could,” Khan says. “But you would not.”

She zips up her boots and walks over to him. “Just so long as we’re clear I have the right to do so,” she says evenly. “That I may be yours, and I may love you, but whatever we do together is with my consent, that if I choose not to play, you don’t force me into it.”

“Of course,” Khan says, frowning slightly. “Why would you think I would?”

Jill looks away. “No reason,” she says.

He curls his hand around the back of her neck. “Don’t lie to me,” he says.

“I don’t have time to get into it now,” Jill says, sounding defensive. “We don’t have time for this right now.”

“Later, then,” Khan says, not letting go of her.

“It’s not—we don’t—”

“Later, we will discuss this,” Khan says, not leaving it open for debate.

He won’t let go of her until she agrees, and from the glare she gives him, she knows it. “Fine,” she says after a moment, annoyed. “Later.”

Khan releases her and she glares at him again before grabbing her purse. “Bastard,” she mutters.

“Yes,” Khan agrees amiably.
She punches him in the stomach on her way out the door. Khan waits until she’s gone before he lets himself smile about it.

He takes a fast shower, pulls on clothes, and heads downstairs, where he finds Magpie slumped at the kitchen table with her tablet, Ekaterina with her head bent over a different computer, and Konstantin making breakfast. “Andy’s still asleep, we’ll maybe see her in an hour,” Magpie says. “Also, what did you say to piss Jill off?”

“Nothing important,” Khan says.

“I don’t buy it,” Magpie says. “But I’m also more interested in finding Verity Stewart. I fed her file picture into facial recognition software and I’m running a query against the last four days of London surveillance camera footage to see if I can find her. It’s going to take a while, there’s a lot of footage. I prioritized areas around this house, the facility, and section 31 itself, but that’ll only get me so far, and if she’s laying low…” Magpie shrugs. “We’ll find her eventually.”

“Try medical facilities,” Khan says. “If she is terminally ill.”

“Good point,” Magpie says. “I’ll go add that to the priority list.” She gets up, hurrying into the other room.

“Personal problems, brother?” Cat asks in Russian.

“Not exactly,” Khan says, getting himself coffee.

She looks at him expectantly but he says nothing. After a minute, she makes a face at him. “Will you tell me or no?” she asks impatiently.

“No,” Khan says calmly. “Not until I know the details.”

“That is reasonable,” Konstantin says as Ekaterina looks ready to snap at him. “Besides, I think we have more things to do today than interrogate Khan over a disagreement with his Jill.”

“True,” Ekaterina says but she doesn’t look happy about it.

Khan takes his coffee over to the table and straddles the chair next to her. “It is nothing of importance,” he says quietly, knowing Konstantin will still hear him. “A question about past experience.”

“Past experience is rarely nothing of importance,” Ekaterina says, closing her computer and setting it aside as Konstantin brings plates over to the table.

“True,” Khan acknowledges. “But I will find out more before I decide.”

Magpie comes back in working on her tablet and almost walks into the kitchen table before she takes her seat. “Okay, added the medical parameters,” she says. “Thank you for breakfast, Konstantin.”

“Of course,” Konstantin says.

“I can set up one more search to run the same way I’m running the one for Verity, but more than that and I’ll tax my computers too much,” Magpie says. “And I need their resources for some other things.”

Andy stumbles into the kitchen in her kimono, hair clipped back and a crease on her cheek from
her pillow. She says nothing as she sets up the kettle and her tea infuser, and drops gracelessly into a chair once she has her mug. “Andy never wakes up well,” Magpie says. “Although he looks a bit rougher around the edges than usual this morning.”

“Dreams,” Andy mumbles into his tea mug. “More decrepit arenas and skeletons in armor.”

“Skeletons are new,” Magpie says.

“Yeah, wish they weren’t,” Andy says, rubbing her forehead. “These were fucking creepy. Purple lights in the eye sockets and weird bone structure.”

“ Weird how?” Magpie asks.

Andy shakes his head. “I don’t remember exactly, just that it was weird. Not a dream I want to have again, in case anyone’s listening.” The last he says looking up at the ceiling.

“You think someone is?” Ekaterina asks, looking around as if she can spot cameras.

“Not…exactly,” Andy says, taking a sip of tea. “It’s more…sometimes I wonder if Rani’s done with us yet. I really do think she saved my life years ago, and…sometimes I think she might still be around, but I’ve got nothing to prove it.”

Ekaterina smiles a little. “If anyone were to find a way, she would,” she says. “She always was convinced that Khan would be incapable of handling his own life without her guidance.”

“I would not put it quite that way,” Konstantin says. “Rather, that without her to speak truth to power he would think himself invincible and invulnerable.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive,” Ekaterina points out.

“Wow, sounds like she didn’t have a lot of faith in you,” Magpie says, looking mildly surprised. “I mean…”

Khan smiles a little. “She did, actually,” he says, studying his coffee mug. “But she felt that as a…a side effect from how we were raised, we were too likely to forget that in the end, we were as human as those we sought to rule. That if we lost our ability to connect with every day citizens, we would lose far more than that. So she sought to make sure I remembered those facts.” He shrugs a little. “She saw me—and my siblings—as far more human than anyone else ever did.”

“Does Jill see you as human in the same way?” Cat asks in Russian.

“In a sense,” Khan says, keeping the same language. “She...” He takes a sip of coffee, collecting his thoughts. “She has more faith in my abilities to accomplish the impossible than she should, but at the same time she does not hesitate to tell me if she thinks I am in the wrong.”

“Good,” Cat says, pleased. “As it should be.”

Footsteps make all of them look toward the door; a moment later, Katsuro and Bishop appear, Bishop still somewhat pale and with a hand on Katsuro’s shoulder. They wear the same plain black clothes as the previous night, but both are barefoot.

“Sit,” Konstantin says immediately, getting up to give Bishop his chair. Bishop drops into it gracelessly, taking a breath.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Ekaterina says, getting up to get him coffee. “How do
Bishop coughs, takes another breath and lets it out slowly. “Somewhat lightheaded,” he admits. “Fatigued, some mild bodily aches. But I should be recovered in a day or so, I think.” He looks around the room. “Clearly there is a story here Katsuro and I need to hear.”

“There is,” Khan says. “I will give you the basic outline now. More granularity can wait until you have recovered.” He introduces Andy and Magpie, explains in brief the current planetary governmental structure and what purpose Starfleet serves, and gives them both a ten-second overview of Marcus and the Klingons.

By the time he finishes, Bishop has coffee, Katsuro tea, and Bishop has more color in his face. “I see,” Bishop murmurs, hands wrapped around his mug. “Well. At least we will not be bored.”

“Hai,” Katsuro says. “I believe I am recovered as of this morning, but I would like to exercise, test my body’s capabilities.”

“We have a place to go,” Khan says. “Bishop, I would recommend you not try today.”

“Non, I would not disagree,” Bishop says. “Are there things I might do around this house?”

“I’m sure we’ll find something,” Magpie says. “If nothing else I can hand you a computer and have you catch up on everything in the last few centuries.”

“I would be interested in medicine and politics,” Bishop says.

“We can arrange that,” Magpie says.

“Merci.” Bishop takes another sip of coffee. “How many more of us do you expect to smuggle out?”

“Four at most,” Khan says. “Once you are recovered, I would appreciate you working on a stimulant that would prevent others from having the same trouble you did upon revival.”

“Bien sur,” Bishop says. “I will need to do some research, but that should not be terribly difficult given access to the right materials.”

“We’ll get you what you need,” Magpie says. “Andy and I are better at acquiring technology than medical supplies, but we’ll figure it out, and whatever we can’t get Jake likely can.”

“Jake?” Bishop asks.

“Jill’s brother by choice,” Khan says.

“And Jill is?” Bishop asks.

“Mine,” Khan says. “And the person who broke into the facility last night to get you and Katsuro.”


“Truth,” Khan says in the same language. “She…is complicated, to say the least, but she is mine the same way Rani was.”

“Do you love her?” Bishop asks.

Khan nods. “Oui.”
“Bien,” Bishop says. “Then I look forward to meeting our new sister now that I am conscious and able to think for myself.” He takes a sip of coffee and switches back to English. “I have many, many questions, but perhaps now is not the best time for them. I know Katsuro wishes to spar, and I am sure Cat does as well.”

“Always,” Ekaterina says, laughing. “And yes. Let us go, and by the time we return to nurse our injuries perhaps you will be feeling better and we may discuss strategy.”

Bishop nods. “I would like that.”

“I will go find shoes,” Katsuro says. “Is there anything else I need?”

“I’ve got a wallet for you with ID and cards,” Magpie says. “I’ll go grab it.” She gets up, hurrying to the stairs. Katsuro follows her, moving slightly more slowly.

“One more thing you should know,” Khan says to Bishop. “We discovered that Andy is a descendant of Rani’s brother Hitesh.”

“Really,” Bishop says, surprised. “Were there reasons to investigate? Or was this just knowledge that had been handed down?”

“We had cause to think there might be a connection,” Khan says, looking at Andy.

Andy grins a little and ducks his head. “I’ll explain later,” he says.

“All right,” Bishop says. “Is there food I might prepare? I think I am well enough to construct a meal, and I do think I need one.”

“The contents of the kitchen are at your disposal,” Andy says. “We have eggs, bread, milk, some fruit, cheese, and whatever else I forgot. Along with meal bars and protein drinks because they’re quick and easy and sometimes the only thing I can get Magpie to eat. Or Jill, for that matter, if she’s on stims.”

“Merci.” Bishop takes another drink of coffee and gets to his feet. Both Khan and Ekaterina watch him carefully, and Konstantin steps forward, but Bishop stays steady as he moves to look in the fridge. “I am not about to fall over, my friends,” he says, glancing back at Konstantin. “I am not fully recovered, but neither am I an invalid.”

“I would never say you were,” Khan says. But he does get up and go to Bishop, giving him a hard hug and not letting go for a moment. Bishop hugs back, bending his head to Khan’s, and while he doesn’t smell like he should he feels like he should, tall and solid and warm.

One more piece back in the puzzle. So many more to go.

“Brother,” Bishop murmurs in his ear. “Has it been that bad?”

Khan closes his eyes. “Yes.”

Bishop’s arms tighten around him for a moment longer before he lets go. “You will tell me later,” he says.


He doesn’t specify a time and Bishop doesn’t push for one. Khan knows full well that if Cat gets it into her head to demand answers, the other three will support her and he will have no choice but to
tell them everything, but for now it lies unspoken between them.

Magpie comes back into the room with a wallet, followed by Katsuro, now wearing shoes. “This is for you,” she says, handing it to Bishop. “It’s got your unofficial official ID card, some credit cards, a bit of backstory that you can edit or change as you see fit, some other stuff. Everything but the official stats can be changed.”

“Merci,” Bishop says.

“We will be back in a few hours,” Khan says. “Thank you, Magpie.”

“All part of the service,” Magpie says, dropping back into her chair. “If I talk to Jill, do you want me to pass on a message?”

Khan shakes his head. “No.”

“Probably just as well, I don’t need her yelling at me for half an hour,” Magpie says. “Whatever that was about, fix it yesterday. If she’s cranky at you, it’ll translate to her being cranky at everyone else and that’s bullshit we don’t need.”

“Did she have nightmares last night?” Andy asks quietly in Mandarin.

“She did not,” Khan says. “But—“ He hesitates, looks at his siblings. “Five minutes,” he says in English.

Cat nods. “We will see you outside.” All of them, including Bishop, leave the room and a moment later Khan hears the front door open and close.

“Okay, what happened?” Magpie asks immediately.

“I know what happened with the Ventraxans,” Khan says even though the name makes him want to snarl. “I want to know if there was ever another time when she felt…pressured into something sexual.”

Magpie groans and Andy drops her head to the table. “Answer’s yes,” Andy says without raising his head. “And it wasn’t just one time. There was the asshole at the Academy, the one who hit her and she hit back—she swears he didn’t force her but if you read between the lines it’s pretty obvious he kept pushing and she gave in because it was easier than arguing.”

“Then there was this guy she hooked up with for a couple months maybe…six years ago?” Magpie hazards. “Like the asshole at the Academy, this one was a controlling prick. She stayed with him for a bit because he was a halfway decent Dom and she hadn’t played in a while, but it was all about him, not her, and she told me once—while half-drunk—that she didn’t really like scening with him, but it was better than nothing. It ended when she shipped out and she never contacted him again. Have we mentioned Jill has crap taste in men and—present company included—a trend toward control freaks?”

“I would not do anything she did not want,” Khan says, very quietly.

“I know that,” Magpie says. “But you’re also exactly the type of guy she usually falls for hard. Tall, gorgeous, intelligent, high-maintenance and controlling. The problem is that she likes subbing but then she has trouble separating that from the rest of her life so when guys push her around sometimes she forgets that she doesn’t have to put up with that bullshit.”

“This? This is why sex is stupid,” Andy says, raising her head.
“No,” Magpie says. “This is why Jill is clueless. You don’t think sex is stupid, you think sex is scary. You’re not asexual, you’re celibate by choice.”

“And we’re not talking about my neuroses,” Andy says. “But yes, Jill is clueless.” He pushes his hair back. “And completely in love with you, so if you break her heart we will have to kill you, uncle or no.”

“Understood,” Khan says mildly.

“She’ll let you push her around,” Magpie says after a pause. “She’ll let you do pretty much whatever you want with her. Don’t abuse that.”

“I would not,” Khan says. “I should think she knows that.”

“Intellectually I’m sure she does,” Andy says. “Emotionally…” She shrugs. “Anyway, you have to go beat up your siblings and we have work to do here. We’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Yes,” Khan says. He touches Andy’s shoulder and heads out to the porch.

“Should we know anything?” Ekaterina asks when he joins the four of them.

“There is nothing to know,” Khan says. “Jill…is complicated.”

“Ah,” Cat says. “Then let us spar and exercise some frustration.”

“Yes, I would like that,” Khan says. “Bishop, be well.”

“I will,” Bishop says. “Do try not to break too many bones.” He clasps Khan’s shoulder and goes back inside.

Khan smiles a little. “Let us go,” he says, and the four of them head out.

Chapter End Notes

Jake? Jake is not going to be thrilled about Jill's idea. Jake's family...well, that's a whole other ball of wax we'll deal with if they show up.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much for being on this journey with me. Speaking of journeys, I have a note about the other epic wingfic, the one that sparked this idea. Flying Free is FINISHED, so if you were waiting on that one or haven't read it or anything, by all means, go forth and enjoy a completed work.

My confidence that I can finish this one has grown quite a bit in the last week, on a related note.

Also as always, please tell me anything you liked or didn't, what worked for you and what didn't. I accept criticism of all kinds (although flames will be used to toast marshmallows).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As he did for Konstantin and Cat previously, Khan gives Katsuro a quiet briefing of technology and politics on their way to the gym. Katsuro asks some questions; Khan knows there will be more later, but likely Katsuro intends to wait for Bishop so Khan only has to answer them once. Practical and thoughtful of him, but Katsuro has never been anything but.

“I feel rather as though I have woken into a dream,” Katsuro admits. “Things have changed so much in such a relatively short amount of time. I would almost not believe it, but here we are.”

“Da,” Cat says. “Here we are indeed, with most of us helpless hostages, an interstellar war looming on the horizon, a Nikolai in power and seven people attempting to kill Khan.” She laughs. “It could be worse.”

“It has been worse,” Konstantin says.

“That it has,” Ekaterina says. “But we have our wits and ourselves, and we have Jill and her family to assist us.” She looks at Khan, and while he knows she has a question she does not speak.

“Ask,” Khan says.

Cat licks her lips, a visible and unusual sign of nerves. “You believe that Rani—that Rani’s spirit, or ghost, or whatever, saved Andy’s life,” she says. “Do you also think—is it possible that Rani guided things for Jill to meet Andy, so that later when Jill met you…” She trails off. “How much arranging do you think Rani could have done, would have done?”

“I do not know,” Khan says, falling into Hindi because it’s easier. “I think…I do believe she saved Andy, and I believe she did so not only because Andy was her descendant but also because she knew I would need Andy’s help one day. Where and how Jill fits into the equation I honestly have no idea. I do not think that Jill meeting Magpie and then Andy was coincidental, but how much of it Rani could have or would have set up…” He shrugs, his wings ruffling. “I haven’t any idea.”

“Does it bother you, to know she might still be out there?” Konstantin asks quietly. “That even now she is trying to help you?”
“Does it bother me? No,” Khan says. He smiles a little. “No, that isn’t the right word. It—it amuses me, if nothing else, and there is part of me that feels…” He stops. “I will always love her,” he says softly. “And to know that she might still be out there, that she might be trying to help me…I find it a comfort.”

Ekaterina squeezes his hand briefly. “To change from past to present, tell us about Jill,” she says. “Why did she do all this? Why has she taken on so much risk to help you?”

By this point they’ve reached the gym. Khan lets them inside and they go to the room they used previously, taking off shoes and socks and sitting down in a circle. “Why she did it, I don’t know,” Khan says. “She is impulsive, to say the least, and cares very little for her own safety except as it threatens others. She saw me on the street, decided she wanted to know why I looked…unhappy…and arranged to trip into me. The second night I saw her, she asked me to tell her two truths and a lie, and she caught the lie.”

There’s more, and if Khan cannot be honest with these three people he cannot be honest with anyone. But he still looks at the mat rather than meet their eyes. “I was tired,” he says after a moment. “I was tired when I met her. Being alone in a hostile environment, with no allies or even colleagues, forced to acclimate to a time hundreds of years from our own—it is exhausting, has been exhausting. Knowing that Marcus could have ordered your deaths with no warning, that my cooperation was the only thing keeping you relatively safe…” He breathes out slowly. “Even when we were separated by thousands of miles, we had each other, we had allies. Here I had none, and I was desperate. Jill caught me in a lie I didn’t want to maintain. I promised myself I would kill her quickly if I needed to, and I was…I was desperate enough to tell her the truth, to have one person on this planet other than Marcus know who I was.”

None of the other three say a word but Konstantin takes one of Khan’s hands, Cat the other; they hold on tight and Khan closes his eyes for a moment. “We went to her hotel,” he says, taking another breath to steady himself. “I told her the truth. And…and she asked me how she could help. She did not hesitate, she did not disbelieve me, she simply asked me how she could help. She did not hesitate, she did not disbelieve me, she simply asked me how she could help me.”

Khan smiles faintly. “The next night when I saw her, she told me she was arranging things to take a leave of absence from her ship to study in London so she could be here to help with whatever plans we made. Magpie came into it a day later, then Jake, then Andy. All three of them were willing to help however Jill asked it of them.”

“She would have been one of us,” Konstantin says.

“She is one of us,” Ekaterina says crisply. “She is Khan’s, which makes her ours.”

“Yes,” Katsuro agrees. “Why do you say she is complicated?”

“Four nights out of seven she wakes from nightmares, regularly bad enough to wake herself up when she screams,” Khan says. “She has a plethora of triggers and she does not always realize when one of them gets pushed until it is too late. She loves me but wishes she hadn’t told me, and she refuses to believe her feelings are returned. She insists that when this is over, when we are all revived, I will leave her for all of you. She covers very well, but as soon as you take a closer look it becomes obvious how…damaged she is, how very fragile in some aspects.”

“And yet she is the keystone to our hopes of accomplishing our goals,” Katsuro says. “Is this wise?”

“Wise or not it is our only option at this point,” Ekaterina says. “From my own short time of interacting with her I do think she is strong enough to take on the weight she has picked up. And I
believe very strongly that we will help her, that hopefully we can mend some of her injuries.”

Katsuro nods. “If she is ours, we must make the effort.”

“I already said that,” Cat says, laughing. “Khan, there is more you have not told us. Those first six weeks.”

“I know,” Khan says. “And I will tell you. But I will not do so without Bishop.”

“That is acceptable,” Konstantin says.

Cat nods. “Da. And now I believe we have sufficiently interrogated Khan. Let us spar.”

“Spasiba,” Khan says dryly, getting to his feet as the others do the same.

As he expected, even with Katsuro not fully recovered from cryosleep Khan still cannot best his brother in unarmed combat. Ekaterina fights Katsuro to a draw, and Khan gets a kill on Konstantin; by the end of the bouts, they have eight cracked ribs, one fractured collarbone, and a plethora of bruises between the lot of them.

“Khan,” Ekaterina says as they catch their breath and wait for bones to mend. “I need knives.”

“And you will have them,” Khan says. “Jake is arranging for you to have them. They are stronger and more well-balanced than anything I have ever used. He will be back on Friday, and I believe the knives will be delivered Saturday.”

She nods, satisfied. “Good.”

Konstantin touches his collarbone gently. “I believe my bones have knitted,” he says. “Still somewhat fragile but that will pass.”

“Let us go back to the house,” Ekaterina says. “We can continue questioning Khan about this time and what we need to know while Magpie and Andy search for our seven targets.”

They do stop for coffee and tea on the way back, both to give themselves more time to heal and also just to give Ekaterina, Konstantin, and Katsuro more familiarity with daily life. On a whim, Khan picks up a canister of leaves he thinks Andy will like and a bag of ground coffee he thinks Jill will also like. Cat gives him an amused look, but says nothing.

Upon returning to the house they find Magpie at the kitchen table with one laptop, Andy on the ottoman with a basket of parts next to her and two in her lap, and Bishop at the kitchen table with a tablet. “Welcome back,” Magpie says when they come in. “We’ve been having a history lesson, and now Bishop’s moved on to advances in medicine.”

“Quite remarkable, actually,” Bishop says, glancing up. “Mapping the human genome and subsequent analysis has evolved medicine to a science that can often be specifically tailored for an individual. And the evolution of medication has made incredible progress. Regeneration alone is brilliant.”

“If it works,” Magpie says. “It doesn’t always.”

“No?” Bishop looks at her. “Why is that?”

Magpie shakes her head. “I don’t know,” she says. “But it doesn’t work on Jill. It helps, but if you cut her she’s going to scar instead of heal without a mark. If she breaks a bone, it takes her two to
three times as long to heal it. I don’t know how common that is, though.”

“Interesting,” Bishop says thoughtfully. “I should like to look into this further. But before I do that—Khan, you had a request of me, and that will of course be my first priority. I can certainly theorize based on the information I have now, but without access to a chemistry or medical lab I am not certain how much I can accomplish.”

“I’m not entirely certain I know anyone with a scientific research lab,” Magpie admits. “Andy might.” She raises her voice. “Andy, needed in here please.”

A moment later Andy walks into the kitchen. “What’s up?” he asks.

“Bishop needs access to a scientific research lab,” Magpie says. “You know of any?”

Andy blows out a breath and drops into the empty chair between Bishop and Magpie. “Maybe,” he says after a moment. “I’m not…certain. I…hm.” He tips his head back, thinking. “Okay,” he says slowly. “I know two doctors who have a lab at Berkeley in California; they had me build them a security system for their research. I don’t know what they’re working on and I don’t know whether they’d agree to let someone else use the facility, but I can at least ask.”

“What about just access to specific medications or chemicals?” Konstantin asks.

“That’s easier,” Andy says immediately. “Black market is alive and well and you can get all kinds of drugs that way. If you give me or Magpie a list of what you need and in what quantities, we can arrange that easily.”

“We can also talk to Jake when he gets back,” Magpie says.

Bishop nods. “Oui. I believe, then, that I shall spend the rest of my time today researching stimulant medication so that I may give you a list by tonight. However, I should like to speak with Khan more about this time and his experiences in it.”

“Then let us go to the porch,” Khan says, resigned to having this conversation.

Magpie and Andy stay in the house; the rest of them move out to the porch, where Khan takes a seat on the railing, Cat and Konstantin take the porch swing, Katsuro sits on the floor and Bishop sits next to Khan.

Khan says nothing at first, gathering his thoughts. His siblings wait patiently; Bishop takes his hand and squeezes it gently. “Jill asked me once, after a nightmare, whether I had them,” Khan says finally. “I told her I did. She asked me what nightmares I had in this time.” He closes his eyes.

“I told her I was not always certain what was nightmare and what was real, in this time.”

“Brother,” Bishop murmurs. “What happened to you?”

“Few records exist from our time,” Khan says briskly, focusing on fact and data. “The knowledge of what we were remains, but the records the scientists had on us, the…tests…those no longer exist. We destroyed many of them ourselves, and what we did not destroy was lost to other wars or time or…it matters not. Marcus, when he had our ship brought in, knew enough to recognize its origin and thus its crew. From the information he had, he chose to revive me first.”

He takes a breath to steady himself. “Section 31, the classified group Marcus oversees, has a large scientific staff. Biology, medicine, chemistry and so on. They are not overly burdened with ethics and they have the advantage of a leader who cares little for ethics or methods, so long as he gets results. I was in the…custody of the science department for six weeks.”
Cat growls softly and Bishop’s hand tightens on Khan’s. “Had I not been what I am, what we are, I would have died multiple times,” Khan says, looking steadily at the pale blue floorboards. “And to be truthful, there were times in those six weeks where I wished I could die.”

This time Konstantin growls and Bishop does the same. “I believe, but do not have proof, that they used my blood to develop biological weapons,” Khan says, aware he’s gripping Bishop’s hand as tightly as Bishop holds his. “The seven people who want me dead—three of them, we think, have terminal illnesses and I would lay odds that whatever the source of their illnesses, my blood was involved somehow.”

“Did they infect you with any diseases?” Bishop asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “What those specifically were, I don’t know.”

“Given time to study and access to a fully equipped medical laboratory I might be able to find out, but I doubt we will have the luxury of either of those,” Bishop says.

“I agree,” Khan says.

He sees an odd look on Ekaterina’s face. “What is it?” he asks her.

She licks her lips again. “Did they…did they violate you?” she asks very quietly.

“No,” Khan says immediately. “They did not try and even had they tried they would not have succeeded.” He does wonder if the scientists had considered using something like Dante on him, but either they had had one line they would not cross or simply thought the idea useless.

Or they had been smart enough to realize Khan would have killed them all had they even tried.

All four of his siblings relax a little at that answer. “They will still die,” Cat says matter-of-factly. “We cannot allow this to pass.”

“Oui,” Bishop agrees. “But it is not an immediate necessity.”

“The list of people we need to kill in this time is rather long,” Katsuro observes. “And continuing to grow.”

“Da,” Cat says. “We must prioritize.”

“Then we will start with the immediate threat,” Khan says. He looks at Bishop. “Were Magpie and Andy successful at all in determining the location of any of those seven?”

“Not conclusively,” Bishop says. “I believe Magpie found evidence leading to two of them, but she wanted to confirm some things. I am not entirely certain what Andy was working on.” He hesitates for a moment. “Brother, a question,” he says. “Does Andy prefer male or female pronouns?”

“Both,” Khan says. “She does not care what words you use to describe her, and he rather enjoys throwing people off-balance. Jill and Magpie tend to alternate, and I have picked up the habit.”

“I think Matthew would like her quite a lot,” Konstantin says.

“I have thought that as well,” Khan says. “Hopefully we will find out in two weeks.”

“Matthew and Alona, then…Anandi?” Bishop asks.

“Anandi and Maeve if we are fortunate enough to get two more,” Khan says. “However, we have a
more immediate problem than simply locating the seven people trying to kill me. We are no longer convinced this house is safe or unknown, although I doubt Marcus knows of its existence or that we have revived the four of you. Thus we may need to split up and go into hiding for a short while. I must stay in London unless we are ready to take Marcus on as an enemy, and I do not think we are yet. Jill, too, must stay in London. Everyone else can be flexible as needed, but we need to identify safe places before we can move.”

“How do you expect us to stay in contact with each other?” Katsuro asks pragmatically.

“Video communication, comm-links, and…these,” Khan says, taking the transporter out of his pocket. “For all intents and purposes, it is a portable teleportation device, capable of beaming two people almost anywhere in the known galaxy if you have the coordinates. I have three made so far; they are locked to biometrics. The first is for myself and Jill, the second is for Magpie and Andy, and the third is for Cat and Konstantin. We will need to make more, but they are not difficult to assemble. Katsuro, I believe you will have no trouble with them.”

Katsuro’s eyes widen and he murmurs something under his breath Khan doesn’t catch. “That is…incredible,” he says slowly. “How much of this did you have to invent out of whole cloth?”

“Less than you would think,” Khan says. He explains the basics of transporter technology and how he came up with the idea, then gives his siblings a quick explanation of what he modified and why.

"Incredible," Katsuro says again, taking the device when Khan hands it to him. “And you have locked it so that only the people encoded will be able to use it?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “If someone else tries, it will not do anything, and if they try to tamper with it it will self-destruct.”

“Excellent,” Katsuro says. “You will need to teach me how to make these. We will need more.”

“We need seven in total,” Khan says. “Four more to make.”

Katsuro nods. “Then we shall make four. What else do you need, Khan?”

Khan’s throat tightens and he says nothing for a moment. So many things he needs right now, and so many of them are impossible. And he knows Katsuro means it in a practical sense…but that doesn’t stop Khan from curling his fingers around the railing, holding on tight enough the wood creaks.

“Brother,” Bishop says. “What do you need?” His voice deepens a bit as he asks and he takes Khan’s hand again, rubbing out clenched fingers.

“I don’t know,” Khan says finally. “I am…I am tired.”

“You do not have to guard your back if we are here,” Konstantin says quietly. “Nor do you have to guard Jill’s.”

“I know,” Khan says, taking a breath. “I have to admit, I did not think we would succeed two nights in a row. To have all four of you here…” He shakes his head. “I will never repay the debt I owe Jill.”

“It is all of ours to pay,” Ekaterina says. “And we may never be able to do it, but we must try.”

“Of course,” Katsuro says. “Is the next mission this coming weekend or a week after?”
“The week after,” Khan says. “We did not want to risk four visits in that close succession. We do not expect anyone has noticed the break-ins from this past weekend but we are not counting on that, either. Jill was going to do some checking when she went to the archive today, and Magpie was also going to run some searches.”

“Then we should talk to Magpie and see what she has learned, if anything,” Ekaterina says.

"Yes," Khan says, but none of them move to get up.

“This is not the worst situation in which we have ever found ourselves,” Cat says after a moment. “If nothing else, we have each other now. We have Jill and her family. Those are not insignificant facts.”

“They are not,” Khan agrees. “And yes, we have been in worse situations.”

A thought occurs to him and he stays quiet for a moment, considering what he wants to say. “If any of you have odd dreams,” he says slowly, “please tell me about them. Many of us—most of us, really—have had similar dreams in the last few weeks. Images of battles, of ancient armor and dilapidated surroundings, storms and skeletons and the like. I have had dreams of walking through a run-down city I knew in the dream but had never seen before upon waking. We do not know where these dreams originate or if they signify anything at all, but it seems a bit too much to be coincidence.”

“So not only do we have potential ghosts interfering in our lives but we also have ominous dreams that may or may not be a portent of the future,” Cat says. “At least this time is not boring.”

“Given what lies ahead of us, some boredom might not be a terrible thing,” Bishop says.

“It might not,” Katsuro says. “But for now I think we have quite enough to do that we will not be bored.”

Khan smiles a little. “Yes,” he agrees. “Let us go talk to Magpie and see what she has discovered.”

Inside, they find Magpie with her head on the table and Andy apparently ignoring her while she fits two pieces of something together. “Magpie’s taking a minute to keep from doing terrible things to Starfleet security,” Andy says, glancing up.

“Why would she want to do that?” Katsuro asks.

“Because they’re Starfleet and I hate Starfleet,” Magpie says, not raising her head. “And because they’re so completely blind to stuff going on in the universe that they didn’t notice anything from the weekend, even the one tell we left them. Nothing. No reaction, no awareness, nothing at all. If I were their boss, I’d fire them all for incompetency.”

“Why did you leave a tell?” Bishop asks.

“Because they’re Starfleet and I hate Starfleet,” Magpie says, not raising her head. “And because they’re so completely blind to stuff going on in the universe that they didn’t notice anything from the weekend, even the one tell we left them. Nothing. No reaction, no awareness, nothing at all. If I were their boss, I’d fire them all for incompetency.”

“Why did you leave a tell?” Bishop asks.

Magpie sighs and sits up, pushing her hair back. “We had a couple things we wanted to leave behind as very subtle indications to who might have been there and where they would have gone,” she says. “Total misdirection from start to finish, but we thought they might have picked up on it and if so, we’d have more data about what they wanted to do or at least what they were capable of. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Stupid.”

“Magpie takes stupidity personally,” Andy says, carefully fitting in a third piece to whatever he’s working on.
“I do,” Magpie says. “Especially when they’re this stupid. I mean, I know we’re good, and we were good enough no one noticed we’d gotten in and out twice, but even so, you’d think they’d have noticed something about this past weekend.”

“But surely we should be glad they did not,” Katsuro says. “If they did notice, we would have quite a bit of trouble.”

“Yes, true,” Magpie says. “But there’s no point in my leaving clues for a false trail if they don’t notice them.” She scowls at her computer. “I hate doing extra work when it’s not even appreciated.”

“Says the girl who makes half the planet believe she doesn’t exist,” Andy says.

“But the ones who do find me appreciate me all the more,” Magpie says. “And it’s not half the planet. Most of the planet has no idea who I am and cares less. Of the people who might know who I am, about two-thirds think I’m a myth or made to sound more impressive than I am. The remaining one-third—most of them have tried to find me, but only half actually succeeded at it. The more elusive I remain, the higher prices I can charge.”

“Pardon my rudeness, but what do you charge prices for?” Katsuro asks.

“Whatever people want to hire me for,” Magpie says, looking up at him. “I’m a hacker, possibly the best out there, certainly in the top five. If it’s out there I can hack it and make it do my bidding. If I can’t hack it remotely Andy can build something that will allow me to get in and make it do my bidding. If we can’t get it that way we get Jill to go in and physically steal it for us. We make a good team, even if Jill rarely steals things for us anymore.”

“She is a Starfleet commander,” Katsuro says.

“It’s not mutually exclusive with being a cat burglar,” Magpie says. “Besides, if she weren’t a thief you’d still be in cryosleep.”

Katsuro smiles a bit. "True," he says. "And I did not mean to imply there was anything objectionable to Jill being a thief. Just that I find the juxtaposition a bit surprising.”

“Yeah, welcome to Jill’s life,” Magpie says. “She should be back here in an hour or two, I think. Maybe less.”

“Are you hungry?” Andy asks. “We had sandwiches for lunch, there’s plenty leftover.”

Honestly Khan isn’t, but he knows they need to eat and replace the calories lost during the spar, if nothing else. Cat gives him a warning look and he says nothing as she moves to take food out and make sandwiches.

“What are you building?” Katsuro asks Andy as they take seats at the table.

“A jammer,” Andy says, studying the device for a moment before reaching into the basket. He picks up a piece, looks at it, puts it back and picks up another piece. “There we are,” he murmurs, fitting it in carefully. “I’m making enough for everyone to carry one so we don’t have to worry about bugs. Since we got the one out of Khan I’m less worried about it but caution is always good. I’ve made four so far, this is five. I’ve got a bunch to go but they’re not that difficult, and the pieces are ridiculously easy to come by. You can buy half of them in a local store.”

“Show me what you are doing, please,” Katsuro says.
“Sure,” Andy says. She starts explaining what she has already built and what is left to assemble, taking pieces apart as she needs to refer to them. Katsuro’s attention does not waver from her, even as Ekaterina sets a plate in front of him.

“We theorized things like this could work, but had not the technological advances to create them ourselves,” Katsuro says. “How much of this existed already, opposed to how much of it was created by you, Andy?”

“Jammer technology has been around for centuries,” Andy says. “You did have some, I know about it. As for what I’m doing here—personal, portable jammers aren’t things that most people make because they’re a bit finicky. If you get the frequency wrong, you block people’s portable electronics on one end and on the other you allow communications that you don’t want to allow. It’s much, much easier to build a jammer that works for a defined physical space. The personal jammer field was pretty sparse until about fifteen years ago, and while most of what I’m building here is based on existing tech the actual shielding and portability of it is my design. I don’t know anyone else who does it like me and I only know two other companies who do it at all.”

“Where did you learn this?” Katsuro asks.

Andy smiles a little. “I’m mostly self-taught,” he says. “Magpie and I got our hands on what we could when we were on the streets, and since we didn’t know any better we started taking things apart to see how they worked. We went from there. I’d taken some classes when I was still in school, but not much more than the basics, so most of it I just picked up on my own.”

“Remarkable,” Katsuro says. “Truly remarkable. I have much to learn. I hope you do not object to teaching.”

“I don’t mind it at all but I don’t know how good I am at it,” Andy says. “I’ve never had to do it much and I’m not used to explaining what I do as I do it. So if you’re willing to put up with me, I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Hai,” Katsuro says. “I would like that.”

“Matthew, I think, will want to work with you,” Cat says to Magpie. “He has always been more interested in software.”

“Send him my way, especially if he’s cute,” Magpie says cheerfully.

Ekaterina laughs. “He will very much like you.”

“Awesome.” Magpie sighs and picks up her tablet when it chimes. “Message from Jill,” she says. “She says…she says today had better have a bottle of vodka waiting for her when she gets here tonight, and she’s about to go beat up a lieutenant who asked her to spar with him which will hopefully make her feel better.”

“Then we should get vodka,” Ekaterina says.

“Yeah, I don’t think we actually have that,” Andy says. “Magpie doesn’t usually drink and I don’t generally drink vodka. There’s a liquor store half a kilometer west, though.”

“Konstantin and I will go out later and acquire some,” Ekaterina says. “I should like to do a general food shopping as well, although if we are not to be here long perhaps that would not be ideal.”

“We’re not going anywhere for at least a few days,” Magpie says. “Probably not until the end of the week, if then. It’ll take a little bit for us to find places for everyone and set it up, and Jill
doesn’t want to move without talking to Jake and finding out what he’s got for us.”

“Then I shall do some food shopping,” Ekaterina says. “Bishop, how are you feeling?”

“Human, more or less,” Bishop says. “I dislike admitting it, but I think I need to rest this afternoon. By tomorrow I should be back to normal.”

“Good,” Konstantin says. “You can spar with us then. Perhaps Khan can kill someone who is not me.”

“You did fight me to a draw the second bout we had,” Khan says mildly.

“Yes, but only because Katya dislocated your shoulder,” Konstantin says.

“Nyet,” Cat says. “That would have ended in a draw regardless. You might have won had you followed through on the kick to his knee.”

“Da, but dislocated kneecaps hurt greatly and I chose the option that did not have him on the ground in agony while it healed,” Konstantin says.

“An enemy would not be so forgiving,” Cat says, giving Konstantin an annoyed look.

“Had it been an enemy I would have taken the kick,” Konstantin says mildly.

Ekaterina doesn’t look happy about it but they have had this argument for half a century. Khan almost finds himself comforted by its familiarity.

“If you’re done talking about killing people,” Magpie says, “I think I’ve pinpointed Verity’s location, or at least I have the five places she’s been most in the last week. I don’t have a tracker on her, but Andy built one earlier, so if you do find her, you can bug her and then we’ll find her. I am guessing you won’t want to kill her outright since we need more information, but I could be wrong and I don’t generally try to tell people their business about committing murder.”

“No, you are not wrong,” Bishop says before Ekaterina can say anything. “Before we neutralize any of these seven, we need to learn everything we can from them.”

“Well, I can give you five places to start looking,” Magpie says.

“Beautiful,” Ekaterina says. “If you tell me the list and the addresses, Kostya and I can visit them before we go to the market, assuming they are not too far apart.”

“One is, but the other four are fairly close together,” Magpie says. “The outlier is a building that’s supposedly owned by a historical preservation society, but if you do any digging it’s Starfleet intelligence. It’d take an hour to get there from here, and that’s in a cab. Walking would take a lot longer.”

She studies her screen for a moment, taps a few keys, and a thin sheet of some flexible material slides out the side of her computer. “Addresses and cross streets,” she says, handing it to Ekaterina.

“Spasiba,” Cat says, studying the list. “What are these places?”

“One’s a coffeeshop, one is a gym, one is an office building but I couldn’t tell you which suite she was in, and one is Starfleet Medical,” Magpie says. “If she’s staying in London I couldn’t actually track down her apartment, but if you bug her we might be able to get that.”

Andy picks up a box about the size of her thumbnail and hands it to Konstantin. “Ideally you’ll
stick it on her, but even if it gets on her clothes she won’t notice it unless she’s in a full-body scanner. If you can get it on her skin, it’ll sink in and stay subcutaneous. Again, the only way to show it would be a full-body scanner specifically looking for transdermal bugs. A regular scanner wouldn’t find it.”

“Did you design this?” Katsuro asks.

“In part,” Andy says. “I designed the part that transmits information and acts as a bug. A friend with medical training designed it to be subcutaneous. It was a joint project about three years ago.”

“What would one of these normally cost?” Katsuro asks.

“That depends on whether I like you or not,” Andy says, smiling. “If I like you, it’ll cost maybe ten to twenty thousand credits. If I don’t like you—well, if I don’t like you odds are you won’t get it in the first place, but if I don’t like you and decide to help you anyway you’re looking at a price about ten times that.”

“And you are giving this to us for free,” Katsuro says.

“Jill’s my family,” Andy says. “As is Khan. Family gets whatever they need, no questions asked—okay, questions asked but they still get whatever they need if it’s in my power to provide it.”

“I see,” Katsuro murmurs.

“Jill saved my life,” Andy says.

“How did she do that?” Konstantin asks quietly.

Andy takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. Magpie reaches over and takes his hand. “I was a junkie,” he says. “By the time Jill met me I’d gotten clean, but a year after we met I fell off the wagon. Only once, but…I was terrified I’d fucked everything up, that I’d given up everything I’d worked so hard to get and I’d end up back on the streets, dead with a needle in my arm. Jill stayed with me for over a week, helped me come down and stay clean and kept me from doing anything stupid. I’ve come close since then but I haven’t used.”

“I apologize for bringing up a difficult topic,” Konstantin says, wincing.

“It’s fine,” Andy says. “It’s not really—it was a tough time, but it’s a long time ago at this point. But the point is that Jill means a lot to me, and to Magpie. And Khan’s my many generations removed uncle, and while that doesn’t have to mean anything I think it does. So yeah, you’ll get my best work, and Magpie’s, and there’s no conversation about payment or favors owed. This is just how it is.”

“And we thank you for it,” Bishop says. He looks at Khan. “Whatever debt we owe, I doubt we will ever pay it in full,” he says in French.

“I do not think we can,” Khan says in the same language. “And I think they will all resist our attempts to do so.”

“Still,” Cat says. “We must attempt it.”

“Do you guys slip into other languages this often normally?” Magpie asks. “Or just when you don’t want to be understood?”

“Habit,” Bishop says. “I apologize. French was my first language and many of us revert when we
are not thinking about it.”

Khan doesn’t think Magpie believes it but she also doesn’t push. Andy returns to building her jammer, explaining quietly to Katsuro what she is doing. Ekaterina and Konstantin get up to rummage through cupboards and the fridge to make a grocery list, and Magpie returns her attention to her tablet.

“Brother, a word,” Bishop says, getting up from the table. Khan nods, following him into the living room, but Bishop says nothing, studying him for a long moment.

“Tell me,” Khan says finally.

“Do you love her because she offered you her assistance, or because of who she is?” Bishop asks softly in Hindi.

“They are similar,” Khan says in the same language. “Were she not who she is, she would not have offered her help. She…she gives of herself more than she will ever ask of another, without thought for consequence or imbalance. She became my ally in a time where I had none.” He takes a breath, his wings stretching for a moment. “Shortly after we met, there was a situation. Jill was drugged with something called Dante, an inhibition lowering aphrodisiac. She responded very strongly to it, due to a combination of factors, and asked me to leave. Not because she did not want me, but because she did, and was afraid that if I touched her, I would consider it coercion. And I realized that—despite only having known her a short while—that I could not do anything but stay with her, help her through the drug. She was, is, mine, Bishop. I knew it with Rani the day I met her, and I knew it with Jill not long after I met her. I think you will understand when you meet her.”

“I look forward to it,” Bishop says. He puts his hands on Khan’s shoulders, meeting his eyes. “Are you all right?”

“I am,” Khan says, covering Bishop’s hands with his own. “I am.”

Bishop kisses his forehead and leans his head against Khan’s. “You will tell me if you are troubled,” he says, tightening his hands on Khan’s shoulders.

Khan smiles. He may be the older, but Bishop has never treated him like an older brother, rather a younger one still in need of occasional supervision. “I will,” he says. “I give you my word.”

“Bien.” Bishop shifts to hug him, holding him close for a long moment. Khan hugs back, wrapping his wings around Bishop and relaxing into the indulgence.

They separate and before either of them says a word, Konstantin wraps Khan in a tight hug, literally lifting him off the floor. Khan laughs with what little breath he has, discreetly rubbing his ribs when Konstantin sets him down.

“Be careful,” he says to Konstantin and Ekaterina.

“Of course,” Cat says, giving him an amused look. “When are we anything but?”

“If I started to list the times we would be here until next year,” Khan says. She punches him in the stomach and he allows it, but Bishop and Konstantin both laugh.

“Andy gave us a comm-link,” Konstantin says, taking it out of his pocket. “If we run into difficulty, we will call you.”

“Good hunting,” Bishop says, hugging Konstantin and bending to kiss Cat’s cheek.
“Spasiba.” Cat gives Khan a quick hug and she and Konstantin leave.

Khan follows Bishop back into the kitchen. “Have you a spare computer I might use?” he asks Magpie.

“The blue one on the coffee table in the living room is available and set up to log into the Starfleet domain, or at least the Starfleet San Francisco or London domains,” Magpie says, looking up from her own machine. “But before you log in to either, run the script marked SD two on the desktop.”

“What does that do?” Khan asks.

“It stops the computer from uploading a virus to the network,” Magpie says. “I was annoyed when I wrote it and I haven’t taken it out completely yet because I like having options.”

“May I ask why you dislike Starfleet so much?” Bishop asks after a moment.

Magpie sighs, slumps in her chair. “I grew up on the streets,” she says. “I sold my body until I could start selling my skills instead. There are some officers in Starfleet who like underage whores, enough that there’s an underground market for it. When I was fourteen, I was kidnapped and brought to a brothel for Starfleet officers. I was there for six months until Andy and my friends got me out.”

Bishop says nothing but Khan sees the rage in his clenched jaw, the way his hand curls into a fist against the table.

“Marcus wasn’t one of them,” Magpie says. “But I know his type.”

“Oui,” Bishop says, his voice tight. “Cat did say he was like Nikolai.”

“She did,” Khan says. He touches Bishop’s shoulder, gripping hard enough to send a message, before he goes to get the computer. When he returns, Bishop is pretending to study something on his screen, Andy and Katsuro are discussing jammer technology, and Magpie is scribbling notes on her tablet with a stylus.

Khan takes a chair and straddles it, logging into the computer. Like it or not, he has work to do for Marcus, and while his presence at the facility may not be required every day, there are other things Marcus expects of him. At the moment, Khan does not wish to openly antagonize Marcus.

So he grits his teeth and gets to work.

Chapter End Notes

One of the things that really made me start thinking hard about this fic was that Khan was so, so incredibly alone in the movie. I started wondering, in my initial frenzy of post-movie writing...what would happen if one person, just one person, had stepped up and offered their help? What would that have changed, to have one ally?

That wasn't the entire reason I started this story, but it was one of the main ones. And the answer to my question turned out to be everything. One person...and everything changes. Talk about the butterfly effect.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

I don't want to fight this war anymore.

Chapter Notes

Conflicts and troubles and not-quite drama, oh my.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shortly before 1900 hours, Jill walks into the house, out of uniform and with her hair tumbling down her back. She visibly relaxes as soon as the door locks behind her and collapses on the ottoman, sprawling out with her arms and legs dangling off the sides. "I hate everything," she mutters.

"There's vodka," Magpie says, snickering. "I'll go get you a glass."

"I hate everything slightly less," Jill says.

"What happened, kitten?" Andy asks. He sits cross-legged on the floor on one side of the coffee table. Katsuro faces him, and various electronic parts lie scattered on the table itself.

"Stupid people being stupid," Jill says. "Incompetence pisses me off and I've seen so many fucking examples of it in the last nine hours I want to scream. I'd swear some of it was deliberate and designed to see who would do things with it, but it doesn't have that feel to it." She sighs and pushes herself up to sitting. "Just general computer security precautions that people weren't taking, and then the security precautions they did take were random and made no sense. On the one hand, it's good and as far as I can tell no one ever twigged to what happened over the weekend. On the other, this is an organization I've served for fifteen years and to find them capable of this much sheer incompetence makes me want to cry. Or scream. Or both."

"Vodka," Magpie says, handing Jill a glass. "Drink and be less cranky."

"L'Chaim," Jill says and takes a drink. "So what did I miss while I was off playing academic?"

"We found Verity Stewart," Magpie says in satisfaction. "We narrowed down her location, Ekaterina and Konstantin went out to see if they could find her, a bit of luck later and they found her in the flesh. We didn't do anything to her but we did get a subcutaneous bug on her, so now we can track her anywhere and maybe find her friends."


Khan walks over to the ottoman, taking a seat next to Jill and brushing a curl off her face. "Bishop thinks he can create a stimulant that will allow my people to wake up more quickly and be more coherent," he says. He lays his palm against her cheek for a moment, pleased when she leans into
his touch. "But to create it requires access to a few different drugs, so we are looking into our best sources for those."

"Jake probably has some good ones," Jill says. "I wish he were back on-planet. The list of things we need from him keeps growing." She takes another sip of her drink, leaning into Khan. "I might have some contacts who can get drugs or chemicals, but I'd have to do some checking first. Is anything on the list Bishop needs seriously restricted?"

"One," Bishop says. "Two of them are easily obtained in any drugstore or pharmacy. One, Stexim, is by prescription only and I believe it is not easily prescribed."

"How much of it do you need?" Jill asks.

"Perhaps one gram," Bishop says.

"And normal dose on that is a hundred and fifty milligrams, right?" Jill asks.

"Oui," Bishop says.

"I can get it for you," Jill says. "Give me a day or so and I'll get it."

"How can you get it?" Bishop asks.

"It's really easy to get stims if you're a Starfleet officer," Jill says. "They don't want us falling asleep on shift. Stexim is considered safe because it's not physically addictive and you don't get tolerant to it over time, plus it has fewer side effects than some of the older stims. I have a scrip for it now, but it doesn't have enough and I want to keep some for my own use, obviously. But I can stop by Medical tomorrow and request a new scrip, and they won't give me trouble about it."

"Is it psychologically addictive?" Bishop asks.

Jill shakes her head. "I don't think so, no. The problem with it is that when it wears off, you crash hard, like it stops and you fall over. Then you wake up with a migraine if you're unlucky and have taken too many doses in the last few days."

"I see," Bishop says.

"The more you take, the harder the crash," Jill says. "And the harder the crash, the worse the migraine. But it'll get you through almost anything while it's working."

"Why do you take them so often?" Bishop asks.

Jill takes a sip of her drink. "Because I'm fucked up," she says. "I get nightmares more nights than I don't, and I don't sleep well at the best of times. I hate taking sleeping pills because they usually leave me in a drugged stupor where I still have the nightmares but I can't wake up from them, so I use the stims to keep me going on days after I woke myself up screaming."

She takes another drink and pushes to her feet. "Anyway. Have you all had dinner yet?"

"We have not," Khan says. "Cat is in the kitchen with Konstantin preparing a meal. I believe it will be ready in perhaps fifteen minutes." He also gets up, resting a hand on Jill's shoulder. "I would like to speak with you," he murmurs in Russian. "Upstairs."

Jill looks unhappy about it but nods. Khan follows her upstairs into their room, closing the door and activating the privacy seal behind them. "What happened today?" he asks quietly.
"I told you," she says, tugging on a curl.

"No," Khan says. "What happened, pyara?" He tips her chin up, meeting her eyes, and waits. It takes about half a minute before Jill sighs and slumps, leaning into him.

"Stupid shit," she mutters into his shirt. "Just—the creepy head librarian keeps being creepy and hitting on me, and I can't really avoid him without making twice as much work for myself. And the stupidity and carelessness about computer security in this place, of all places, is just painful. And just—I get that people don't take me all that seriously sometimes, but I'm so tired of fighting this battle within Starfleet itself. No one notices the rank insignia on my uniform and even if they do, they don't take it seriously. I got asked to spar by a young lieutenant this afternoon, I think he thought he was doing me a favor or some bullshit. He offered to teach me some moves before we even started. Needless to say, I wiped the floor with him twice, he called me a frigid bitch and a cunt and a few other things I can't remember and stormed out. And that was fun, mostly, but I'm just…I don't want to fight this war anymore."

"You should not have to," Khan says, holding her close with arms and wings, rubbing the back of her neck. "You never should have had to."

"I know," Jill mumbles. "I know. I'm so tired of it. I thought Starfleet was better than this. I thought…even leaving stupid misogyny out of it, I thought it was better than what I'm seeing. I thought it was an organization I could believe in, I was proud to serve. I graduated from the Academy and I was so, so happy on my first ship and…and yeah, I lost some of that new shiny idealism along the way, but I thought I could still be proud of it. And now I'm just…sad. I don't know when it all changed or if it's been this way all along and I never knew, but…it hurts, Khan. It hurts to know that an organization I devoted my adult life to would use people like this, would go against everything it swore to uphold."

"What do you want to do about it?" Khan asks.

"Give my notice," Jill says. "But that's quitting, and I don't want to quit. I want to make this right, I want Starfleet to be what it should be and not what it is now. But I don't know if I can, and I don't know if I should try."

"Why do you not know if you should try?" Khan asks.

"Because of you," she murmurs. "Because you won't stay in Starfleet any longer than you have to, and your family won't sign on. And…and I'd choose you over Starfleet, if I had to make that choice. Fifteen years of my life to them and only a handful of weeks with you and I'd still choose you."

"What would we gain if you submitted your resignation today?" Khan asks, avoiding the minefield of her last few sentences.

"Not much," Jill says. "I'd have more flexibility but less access to things, and a lot of people would probably come looking for me. I think it's just a matter of time as to when I resign my commission, but it doesn't have to be now."

"I think perhaps now would not be the best time," Khan says.

"Why do you think that?" Jill asks, pulling back slightly to look at him.

"There is no tactical advantage to gain from it," Khan says. "As you are now, you have access to the archive's computer systems and can transmit data to the rest of us. You may be able to find
things the rest of us miss. As a commander, you have a certain amount of respect and deference owed you, and those are never things to give up lightly.”

“Not that anyone takes me seriously at first, but yeah, I get what you’re saying,” Jill says. “But I do think it’s a when, not an if.”

“I would agree,” Khan says. He brushes a curl back from her face, watching her close her eyes and lean into his touch. “Do you wish it was otherwise?”

“No,” she says softly. “I don’t.”

“Why not?” Khan asks.

“Because I love you,” Jill says simply. “And you’re worth it.”

He smiles a little, brushing his thumb over her lips. She won’t believe him if he returns the sentiment so he refrains, but he holds her close and rubs her neck, convincing her to relax in his arms.

A brisk knock at the door jolts them both and Jill pulls away, going to answer it. “Dinner is ready,” Ekaterina says briskly. “Come eat before the food gets cold.”

“Thank you,” Jill says. Cat nods and leaves; Jill looks at Khan and smiles before holding out a hand. “Let’s go eat.”

“I might have stuff for you in about five minutes,” Magpie says when they go downstairs. “I think —okay, yeah, that might…” She trails off, studying her computer. “Huh. Give me a few.”

“Five minutes,” Andy says. “Then you need to eat.”

“I’ll eat,” Magpie says, distracted. “Just—I don’t want to lose this. I think I may have found Malcolm Baker. I’m not a hundred percent certain but—give me a few.”

Khan watches her for a moment, completely intent on what she’s doing. Andy sighs, getting to his feet. “We’ll make her a plate later,” he says. “If we drag her away now she’ll be cranky for a week, and for all we know this is stuff we absolutely need.”

Jill makes a face at the back of Magpie’s head. “It could be,” she admits. “Or she could just be her usual food-avoidance self.”

“Why is she food avoidant?” Konstantin asks as they go into the kitchen.

“Too many years on the streets without regular food,” Andy says. “She never knows when she’s hungry and she forgets to eat unless you remind her.”

“Why does the Federation allow this?” Cat asks irritably.

“No government is perfect,” Jill says, taking a seat. “The street brats fly under the radar and the Federation either doesn’t know about them or just pretends it doesn’t.”

Ekaterina scowls, bringing plates over to the table. “So far I am not seeing many things to recommend this government as an adequate organization,” she says.

“There are some good things about it,” Jill says. “Right now I can’t think of many but I had a depressing day.”
Andy touches Jill’s shoulder. “You want to talk about it, kitten?” she asks.

Jill shakes her head. “Not right now. It’s just the usual bullshit and then some, and I’m just…” She sighs, picking up her fork. “I’m about ready to turn in my commission and I know I can’t, not right now. I’m just having a bad day, it’ll be better tomorrow. Or the day after.”

Khan is less convinced, and from the look Cat gives him she agrees. But—surprisingly for Cat—she says nothing, and no one else comments.

“Anyway, what’d I miss today?” Jill asks.

“Katsuro and I built a bunch of jammers,” Andy says. “We have almost enough for everyone, we need to build I think three or four more. What’s the word at the archive?”

“There isn’t really one,” Jill says. “I did some poking around, the kind of thing Intelligence would expect of me, but I made sure I didn’t hack into anything that would make them want to bring me in for questioning. I did—so, the one thing I did get was a list of personnel assigned to the medical and scientific labs at the archive, because it wasn’t that hard to access and I was able to do so without leaving traces. I figure we can research them, see if anyone has leverage we can use.”

“Is it possible Marcus is already using that against them?” Bishop asks. “Surely Khan is not the only person Marcus has leverage over.”

Jill nods. “It’s probable, yeah. My guess on section 31 personnel is that they fall into two camps. The first are people who knew what they were getting into and are morally gray enough to not care about the work. The second are people who don’t want to be there but are being coerced by Marcus or whoever.”

“So,” Ekaterina says. “We must determine which is which and deal with them appropriately. How many personnel are there in section 31?”

“From the research I’ve done and what Magpie’s found, I think about three hundred all told, but they’re not all based in London,” Jill says. “A bunch are stationed by Jupiter, where the Vengeance is being constructed, and others are scattered around. And I don’t know how many people are covert and assigned to ships or other locations and aren’t on any list I found.”

“Clearly this will be a long-term project,” Bishop says. “Or at least, longer-term than our immediate priorities.”

“Yeah, and it’s possible that once we take care of some of the immediate problems this will sort itself out,” Jill says. “If we take Marcus down, we can see who runs for cover and who doesn’t.”

“The situation continues to get more complicated,” Konstantin observes.

“Not really,” Jill says. “I mean, yes, but it’s not that much worse than we already knew. We have to take down Marcus and expose section 31, get your people back, and if we get ambitious stop a potential war between the Federation and the Klingons. But some of these might go together. I have…I have a thought about some of it, but it’s not—I want to think about it some more before I share it.”

Khan looks at Jill curiously, but she shakes her head. “It’s not ready for discussion yet,” she says.

She’s said that before, and it makes Khan wonder what is going on in her head, what idea she has that she clearly isn’t certain will get agreement from them.
Magpie comes into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes. “Okay,” she says, leaning against the counter. “I think I’ve pinpointed Baker’s location, or at least a three-block radius of where he likely is for the night. Andy, do we have another subcutaneous bug?”

“We do but if you need more than one I have to make them,” Andy says. “Is he likely to be in a place where we can bug him?”

“Tonight, I’m not sure,” Magpie says. “I think he’s at his flat, or wherever he’s spending the night. But I also think I’ve found a fairly stable routine for him, so tomorrow morning I think we can tag him on his way to work or wherever. He doesn’t work at the archive itself but he’s not that far away from it, either.”

“Then tomorrow Konstantin and I will find him and plant the bug,” Ekaterina says. “And now, you shall eat dinner.”

Magpie looks like she wants to protest but Cat raises an eyebrow and Magpie meekly takes a seat at the table. Khan hides a smile, but Jill openly giggles and Andy laughs. “Oh, shut up,” Magpie says, making a face at them. “Thank you.” That one is for Ekaterina, who sets a plate in front of Magpie.

“You are welcome,” Ekaterina says calmly.

“I’ll start cleaning up,” Jill says, getting up and gathering plates. “I can’t cook to save my life but I’m good at loading dishwashers and putting away leftovers.”

“Have you ever tried to learn?” Ekaterina asks.

“Yes, and it didn’t go well,” Jill says. “I’m not interested in it and I’m not good at it and I’m perfectly okay with my inability to prepare food that requires more than heating it up.”

“Don’t try to teach her,” Magpie says. “It’s just a bad idea all around.”

“I see,” Cat says.

“I’m not all that good at things involving domesticity,” Jill says. “Cooking, sewing, cleaning, whatever, I’m usually crappy at it. I’m good at dishes, that’s about all I can manage.”

“Not everyone can be domestic,” Magpie says. “God knows I’m not. Andy is, though, or can be.”

Andy shrugs. “I like having my loft the way I want it,” she says. “It’s my sanctuary, my private space, and it means a lot to me that I can keep it just as I want it, that everything in there is where it is because I put it there, and I can change it if I want it without anyone arguing about it.”

“Everyone needs a safe space to call his own,” Katsuro says. “Jill, what is yours?”

She shrugs. “I guess normally it’d be my apartment in San Francisco,” she says. “I’m less—I’m shipped out most of the time, so I don’t have a home base that’s really special to me. I mean, I like my apartment there, and I’ve set it up so it’s my space, but really as long as I have Bilbo I’m okay.”

“What is Bilbo?” Konstantin asks.

Jill blushes a little, turning away to load the washer. “He’s my teddy bear,” she admits sheepishly. “I’ve had him since I was six. He means a lot to me.”

“Of course he does,” Konstantin says. “Sometimes one’s safe space is less a location and more tied
"I have my nest," Magpie says. "It's not quite as...whatever Andy's is, because I always have people over and I change the colors every month or two, and it's messy and cluttered and has a gazillion computers. But I love it. I have an apartment in San Francisco for when I need to be there but it's not as much home the way my nest is. Right now the walls are blue and the floor is pale purple, and I have small twinkly lights strung up around the ceiling."

"If it's shiny, she wants it," Jill says.

"She is named appropriately," Andy agrees.

"Is data actually shiny?" Magpie asks.

"For you, yes," Jill says. "Also, see your jewelry cabinet." She closes the washer and goes to wash her hands. "I should maybe head back to my flat for a couple days so I don't trip any red flags."

"Tomorrow," Khan says, mostly because he knows he needs to go with her and he is not quite ready to leave his siblings yet. A weakness, a strong one...but hopefully not one that will come into play just yet.

Jill nods. "Okay."

Khan holds out a hand for her when she comes back to the table; she hesitates, but takes it, and he tugs her in against him, amused that she is barely taller than he is even sitting. "I want to go for a run," she says, even though she leans into him. "Just...clear my head."

"Do you want company?" Khan asks.

She shakes her head. "Not right now." She looks at him uncertainly, as if worried he will argue, but Khan holds his tongue. After a moment, Jill kisses his temple, leaning into him for a bit longer, then goes to head out.

Magpie, however, gives Khan a very impatient look. He raises an eyebrow at her and she snorts in disgust. "If you actually believe she wants to be left alone right now you're an idiot," Magpie says bluntly. "So go after her before she runs herself into a neurotic depressive spiral that culminates in a panic attack and a night of screaming nightmares."

"She could have phrased that better but she's right," Andy says. "Go after her, uncle."

Rather than have anyone else join in the chorus, Khan gets up and leaves, looking for Jill as he exits the house. He sees her most of the way down the block and starts running, catching up to her easily. She looks at him when he matches pace with her and snorts. "Okay, fine," she says, putting on speed. "Catch me."

Khan lets her run from him for a while, keeping a few lengths back from her but close enough she can see and hear him. Every so often she glances over her shoulder, as if making sure he's still there; he doesn't know whether she wants to see him or not, but she doesn't try to lose him.

After about seven or eight kilometers, she starts slowing down; Khan isn't sure if she's tired or just ready for the game to end. Either way, they're heading back to the house, and when he catches up to her she lets him take her, burying her face in his shoulder. "This is a shitty day," she says, muffled by his shirt.

"I know," Khan says, holding her and folding his wings around her. "Did you learn anything
"The personnel list," Jill says, wrapping her legs around his waist. "And a couple other things, maybe. I'll have to go through it all. Just…I want a shower and a painkiller for this stupid headache I can't shake and to sleep for about nine hours."

Khan slides his hand under her hair, rubbing the back of her neck. She sighs, relaxing more against him. "Sometimes I think I hate you about as much as I love you," she admits. "You turned my life upside down and inside out and you didn't ask for it, but you needed me, and…and it's not your fault that you've made me rethink my career and Starfleet and all but my brain doesn't play fair. But I know it's not your fault, and I do love you, even if I shouldn't, but I never cared much about should either."

While he could say something, Khan isn't sure what would be best with Jill in this mood. He may be brilliant but one small human woman keeps confounding him, making him uncertain what is best to say, to do. To be fair, Rani did the same thing, but she was easier to read and more straightforward in her needs and wants. Jill…is a labyrinth.

She says nothing for the next two kilometers, but as they approach the house she squirms to get down and Khan lets her land on the sidewalk. "Share the shower with me?" she asks, looking up at him.

"Yes," Khan says, even though they'll barely fit.

When they get back to the house, they find all four of Khan's siblings studying PADDs or books in the living room, Magpie sprawled on the floor with a tablet, and Andy sitting on the ottoman cross-legged working with pieces about the size of her thumbnail. "We're the boring crowd," Andy says, looking up. "You okay, Jill-Bear?"

"Yeah," Jill says. "Yeah, I'm okay, I just need a shower and a painkiller or three."

"Do you have them or do we need to get them?" Andy asks.

Jill shakes her head. "I've got them," she says. "I need more than a standard blocker, and the stuff in your medkits won't work on me. But I've got it covered."

"You usually do," Magpie says, looking up. "Except when you totally don't."

"Bite me," Jill says.

"Later," Magpie says, waving a hand at her. "Go shower and take your drugs."

"Yes, Mom," Jill says, making a face at Magpie.

"No, if we were doing that I'd sic Andy on you," Magpie says.

Jill winces. "Point made. Going to shower now. See you all later." She all but runs for the stairs.

Khan looks at Andy, raising an eyebrow. Andy laughs. "I had to nurse Jill through a bout of pneumonia once," he says. "I knew she was getting better when she dumped a bowl of soup on my head."

"She's a terrible patient," Magpie says. "Which is why when she needs taking care of I make Andy do it."
“How did she get pneumonia?” Bishop asks.

“We haven’t cured everything,” Andy says. “She was on a very wet and cold planet, got caught outside for two nights, came back with a cough that turned into pneumonia, and by the time it was full blown she was on leave. Magpie and I dragged her to Medical, they gave her drugs but it was far enough advanced it still took her a week to recover. She scared us, frankly.”

“I should think her ship’s doctor would have noticed,” Ekaterina says, frowning.

“He noticed she had a bit of a cough, thought it was a cold, gave her something for it,” Andy says. “She didn’t see him again before she was hacking up a lung. It happens.”

“Why did she join Starfleet?” Ekaterina asks. “She seems remarkably ill-suited for it.”

“Because the easiest way to get into space is through Starfleet,” Magpie says. “I don’t like it either, and I agree with you, but she wanted to get out there, she always has. She wants to fly. She was a pilot before she moved up the command ranks.”

Khan actually hadn’t known that. Interesting, although not surprising.

“I think some of it, too, was just proving she could do it,” Andy says. “Even now, Starfleet has its biases, and she’s female and tiny, and if you tell her she can’t or shouldn’t do something she’ll do it just to spite you.”

“Your love her,” Konstantin observes.

“Of course I do,” Andy says. “Was that even a question?”

“No, I suppose not,” Konstantin says.

“I should go find her,” Khan says. He says goodnight and heads up the stairs, expecting to find Jill in the shower and finding exactly that.

“Don’t bother coming in, we’ll never fit and the floor will get wet and that way leads to someone falling and wrenching a muscle, and if it’s me I’m going to be pissed,” she says when he steps into the bathroom. “Not that I wouldn’t love to have you scrub my back but not here.”

“All right,” Khan says, amused. “How is your head?”

“It’s not a migraine but I think at this point that’s a matter of semantics,” Jill admits; he sees her washing her hair through the shower curtain. “I took two painkillers before I got into the shower and I’m hoping if I stay in here long enough it’ll help the rest.”

‘There are acupressure techniques I know,” Khan says, stepping slightly back from the shower.

“Yeah, maybe,” Jill says. “Okay, probably. I really should chop my hair off one of these days, it’s getting too long. I say that every four months or so.”

“Will you do it?” Khan asks.

“Probably not but I’ll likely ask Magpie to take scissors to it later and hack off an inch or three,” Jill says. “She’s good at cutting hair, or at least she does a good enough job for me.” She tips her head back, rinsing it; Khan sees the outline of her body through the curtain and gives serious thought to getting in with her despite the cramped quarters.

“We have to figure out where everyone’s going,” she says, startling him out of his thoughts. “When
we leave here. If we leave here. There hasn’t been anything except the recorder bomb. Do you think that was a fluke?”

“No,” Khan says, looking away from the shower. “No, I do not. A message, perhaps? A warning? If they know anything about me, they would know I would be likely to recognize it and deal with it before it harmed anyone.”

“So…maybe a ‘we know you’re here’ thing,” Jill says. “A ‘we know what you’re up to’? But if they knew that they’d have sent me a message too, I’d think, and I’ve gotten nothing. No hits on my mail, my comm-link, no special packages, and my flat is safe. I checked when I went back tonight. The jammer’s still working and my non-tech tells were in place.”

“Perhaps they do not know about you,” Khan says. “I am somewhat noticeable. You…are less so.”

“It’s possible,” Jill says. “We haven’t done the best job of hiding any connection between us—my fault, I know—but it’s possible I’ve once again just been overlooked. I…huh.”

“What does ‘huh’ mean?” Khan asks patiently.

“I wonder if it wasn’t meant for you at all,” Jill says. “If it was a warning for Magpie or Andy. They have enemies just like you do, although most of theirs don’t actually want them dead. Anyone who knows anything about Andy knows she’d be likely to recognize tech that wasn’t actually tech. Whether or not he’d have caught it was a bomb…that I don’t know.”

“Possible,” Khan says. “Do you think Trevor would have been—“

“No,” Jill interrupts him. “No, I don’t. Magpie saved Trevor’s life, and he’s not all that bright but he’s loyal and he knows which way his bread is buttered. He’d never do anything to put her in danger, and he knows that Magpie and Andy are a package deal. So Andy is safe by proxy.” She stops, clearly thinking about something. “That…doesn’t mean that someone didn’t use Trevor to get information on them,” she says slowly. “Which—which could be possible. Trevor, as I said, is not always the brightest bulb in the chandelier.”

“We should ask them to review their lists of known enemies and their location,” Khan says.

“Yeah,” Jill says. “Yeah, we should. Do we have to do it tonight?”

Sooner would be better but on the other hand, both Magpie and Andy have things already requiring most of their attention and no one has made any gestures, covert or otherwise, toward the safety of the house. “No,” Khan says, calculating the risk. “Not tonight.”

“Good, because I really don’t want to go back down there,” Jill says, shutting off the water. Khan looks back in time to see her wring out her hair and hands her a towel when she pushes the curtain back, stretching out a hand. “Thank you.”

She wraps her hair in that one, her body in another Khan hands her, and stretches up to kiss him before heading back to their bedroom. Sandalwood, always, and spicy-sweet from her hair; more intimately familiar than jasmine, these days.

That should hurt. But it doesn’t. Then again, Khan had years to grow used to not having Rani. The loss aches; it always will, but he no longer feels as though he is walking around with a gaping wound where his heart used to be.

Romantic of him, really, and Khan has been many things but a romantic has rarely been one of them. He and Rani had not even had a honeymoon; no time with the wars and the eternal crises.
He doesn’t let himself compare things to now and think of what might be. Jill doesn’t believe him and Khan cannot think of a future without at least that baseline of trust. He will convince her. The how and when…those, he doesn’t know yet.

He walks into the bedroom, finding Jill sprawled on the bed with one towel draped over her pillow, the other still wrapped around her body. “I should deal with lotion and moisturizer and hair stuff but ugh, effort.” She sighs. “Five minutes.”

In five minutes she’ll be asleep if Khan has anything to say about it, but he says nothing, sitting down on the edge of the bed and brushing his knuckles over her cheek. She smiles a little and turns to kiss his hand. “What’s your plan for tomorrow?” she asks.

“I will leave shortly after you and head to the torpedoes,” Khan says. “I have work to do, but if I am good enough I can come back here after lunch. Marcus will never know.”

“He has to know you have downtime,” Jill says. “He’s not stupid enough to think you actually take as long as you tell him.”

“No, he isn’t,” Khan agrees. “But neither does he ask me what I do with my time. I think, honestly, he thinks I have a sideline in various sorts of crime, although I do not think he believes I have killed.”

“Do you and have you?” Jill asks.

“Not as such although I have made a few investments,” Khan says. “And yes.”

Her eyebrows go up but she doesn’t ask. “I figured you’d acquired a source of income,” she says. “You’ve been ordering too many things from Jake not to, and you’re too smart not to figure out a way to have independence from Marcus if—when—you need it.”

“Are you going to ask about the person I killed?” Khan asks when she says nothing else.

To his amusement, she shrugs. “Was it just one?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Did he or she deserve to die?” Jill asks.

“In my opinion, yes,” Khan says.

“Then no, I don’t care,” Jill says. "Just so long as you're not about to get caught."

"I am not," Khan says, brushing his fingers over her cheek again. She smiles a little and reaches up for him, pulling him down into a kiss.

"You know," she murmurs against his lips, "I've been told orgasm is a great way to get rid of a headache."

"I have heard that," Khan says, moving to stretch out on top of her. Jill laughs and drapes her arms around his neck, leaning up for another kiss.

"As so often happens with us, you have too many clothes on," she says, dropping her head back when he bites her throat.

"No," Khan says, biting under her jaw. "No, I do not think I do."
"Why do you always have to be in control?" Jill mock-complains.

"Because you want me to be," Khan says simply.

"Do you ever not want to be?" she asks. "Wait, let me sit up if we're going to have this conversation." She pushes at him and Khan kneels up on the bed, letting her wriggle out from under him and sit up. "Seriously, Khan. Do you ever want to not be in control? Because, yes, I sub, but I also switch, and I know I'm like half your size but it's not about physical presence, it's about control, and I'm a pretty decent Domme when I want to be."

"Occasionally," Khan admits. "Sometimes."

"You need to tell me these things," Jill says, frowning at him. "I can't—" She pushes her hair back. "I can't be your partner if you don't tell me what you're thinking, and I told you a long time ago, Khan, I won't be anything less than your equal where I can be."

"But we are not equals now," Khan says. "You don't trust me."

"I do," Jill says. "Why the fuck do you think I don't?"

"You do not believe me," Khan says quietly. "You refuse to acknowledge that I have feelings for you that are more than necessity, more than convenience."

She swallows hard. "Is this a really bad time to say 'it's not you, it's me'?"

Khan says nothing, watching her steadily. Jill swallows again, then looks down. "I want to believe you," she says softly. "Just… I don't…"

She doesn't finish. Khan stays silent a bit longer, waiting to see if she'll continue, but after a few minutes she gets up, moving to deal with her various lotions and body products. A stalling technique, but he lets her have it.

"When you trust me," he says finally, watching her wipe her hands on her towel. "Then we can discuss the idea of switching."

Jill doesn't look at him, but after a moment, she nods. "Okay."

"Come to bed," Khan says quietly.

It takes her a moment, but she comes back over to the bed, kneeling on it to face him. Khan lays his palm against her cheek, pleased when she leans into it and covers his hand with her own. "How is your headache?" he asks.

"Still there, still obnoxious," Jill admits. "I think I ruined the mood, so is there anything else you can do for it?"

"Yes," Khan says. "Lie down on your stomach."

She does, sweeping her hair over one shoulder. Khan moves to kneel between her legs, considering his options. He slides his hands up her back, heavy enough that she groans in pleasure, and brushes a kiss over the back of her neck before moving his hands to her throat. He hasn't used these techniques in a while, but he remembers them clearly. There, and there, and there, and Jill sighs and goes lax under him, not quite asleep but clearly not awake.

It's tempting—more than tempting—to take her like this, bring her pleasure, soft and slow. She
would let him, and in fact when he brushes his fingers down her back she murmurs, stretching
sleepily under his touch.

He wants to. But the simmer of anger—of hurt—coils in his stomach and he takes a breath, pulling
away. He understands her hesitation. He does not have to like it.

The comparison to Rani rises unbidden in his mind and he pushes it away, but not before he
remembers, stark and clear, the night she finally let him come to her bed. Lying there after, her
head on his chest and her hair spilling over him…he started to speak, to tell her he loved her.

She put her fingers over his lips. “Don’t,” she said. “Don’t. I know.”

Knew, and believed, and trusted. And Jill…

Khan gets up quietly, leaving the room. He turns off the light and closes the door most of the way,
heading back downstairs. As soon as he walks into the room, Cat looks up from her PADD. “You
are upset,” she says in Russian.

“I need a run and a spar,” Khan says in the same language.

Her teeth flash and she gets up fluidly. “Then let us go.”

Khan does look at Andy. “She is asleep, mostly,” he says in Mandarin. “Please keep an eye on her
in case she has nightmares.”

Andy nods and doesn’t ask questions.

“Bishop,” Khan says, turning to him. “Come with us, please.”

“Why, so I can set your bones after?” Bishop smiles, but is already on his feet.

“Keep an eye out,” Khan says to Konstantin and Katsuro. “I think we are not in danger tonight
but…”

“We will,” Konstantin says. “Be well, brother.”

Well may be a bit too much to ask right now. Khan nods instead, following Ekaterina out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Jill really doesn't make things easy for herself, does she? She doesn't make them easy
for me, either.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

So many coincidences and tangled threads.

Chapter Notes

This chapter did not want to end, for some reason. *eyes it* I would have had it posted sooner but it didn't want to finish and I was out of town in a training class this past week.

As always, many and sincere thanks to those of you on this journey with me.

They end up taking longer to recover than they did to get there and spar—mostly because Ekaterina breaks Khan’s femur, and those always take longer to heal. He judges it an injury well earned, given he gave her a concussion and broke both her collarbone and her right forearm. Bishop sets all broken bones, including Khan’s ankle (broken when he crashed to the floor) and Ekaterina’s nose (from the blow that gave her the concussion). The two of them lie on the floor, bruised and bloodied, breathing hard.

“I trust you got what you needed,” Cat says finally, when the pain has subsided into lingering soreness that Khan can tell will last a while.

“Yes,” he says, touching his thigh. “Spasiba.”

“Pazhalsta,” she says. “Now, tell me what angered you.”

Khan sighs, not having the energy for anger anymore. “She does not believe me,” he says in Russian. “She says she wants to. She says she loves me. She will not listen to me if I tell her the same. She says it is not me, it is her. But…”

“But it hurts,” Bishop says, sitting against the wall.

“Yes,” Khan says honestly. “And I do not know what to do. If I walk away, I prove her fears correct. If I stay, the hurt remains.”

“Could you even walk away?” Cat asks, slowly sitting up. “Also, are there showers in this place?”

“There are,” Khan says. It takes him a moment to get to his feet, and Bishop takes his arm to steady him once he does. “I am all right,” he says, taking a few steps. Bishop nods and lets go of him, and they head for the showers.

Their clothes, fortunately, are not too terribly trashed. Khan leaves his in a pile and ducks into one of the shower stalls, Cat taking the one next to him. Bishop, who avoided the fight, leans against the wall outside.
“So,” Cat says over the water. “Could you walk away?”

“That depends on how you mean it,” Khan says. “Could I walk away from her help and involvement in this? No. Could I walk away from her personally? Romantically?”

“You can’t, can you,” Cat says when he falls silent. “Nor should you. You love her, brother, and she you. If you walk away from her you hurt both of you.”

"I did not ask for this," Khan says in frustration, scrubbing at dried blood on his skin. "I did not want this. I had plans of my own, and then she tripped and fell against me and…” He slams a hand against the shower wall, hard enough it shivers. “I resent being in yet another situation where I am at the mercy of someone inferior.”

A moment later, the curtain to his stall gets shoved open and Cat slaps him across the face. “Now you are just being stupid,” she growls. “She is not inferior and you know that. You would not love her if she was. You would not trust her if she was. No, she is not one of us, but she is one of us, and you will remember that.”

Khan growls back, stepping closer to her until Bishop gets between them and shoves them apart, pushing Khan back against the wall of the shower stall and Cat out into the room. “Enough,” he says firmly. “Khan, she is right and you know it. Ekaterina, he is hurting, and you will remember that.”

Ekaterina takes a deep breath, water running down her skin. She hasn’t finished washing her hair, Khan notes, seeing suds still in it. “Pax,” she says after another breath.

“Pax,” Khan agrees, taking a breath of his own.

She goes back to finish her shower and Khan continues his own. “Brother,” Bishop says. “I ask not because I wish to hurt you but because we need to know. How fragile is she? How much weight can we ask her to bear?”

Khan closes his eyes, taking a moment. “I do not think any of you could break her,” he says carefully. “I do not think her family could. I do not think anything we are attempting to accomplish —this, she can handle, and is handling well.”

“What would it take to break her?” Bishop asks quietly.

“Me,” Khan says as steadily as he can. “If she lost me, I cannot…I do not know what would happen. If something happened that caused her to think I no longer trusted her. If she lost one of her family, I am not certain she would come out the other side sane.”

“If I lost you, I am not sure I would either,” Ekaterina says softly. “And frankly, Khan, had I been in your place…the body count would be much higher, and I doubt I would be alive. Without you, without my Kostya, I have nothing to hold to. I would not have cared enough to try and save you, not without at least one of you near me. I cannot fault Jill if losing Andy, or Magpie, would break her.”

“No, neither can I,” Bishop says. “I think, to be honest, that only Khan among us could have survived these past months without breaking.”

“Katsuro,” Ekaterina says. “He would survive.”

“Oui, he would,” Bishop concedes. “But anyone else and we would be in a very different place right now, if we were awake at all.”
“We are not meant to be alone,” Cat says. “No human is.”

Khan shuts off the water and steps out, taking the towel Bishop hands him and rubbing his hair dry. Ekaterina does the same, but wraps her arms around Khan’s waist before he can dry the rest of himself. “You are the strongest man I know, Khan,” she says quietly in Russian. “Stronger than me, stronger than my Kostya. But no man can be wholly reliant, and no man can be without connections. I am not surprised that you formed such a strong one with Jill so quickly, and I am not surprised you love her. I am…gratified…that of all the people you could have found, she has proven to be so useful, so essential. That she does not believe you love her—it hurts. I know it does. But she will, Khan. And you must remember that.”

Khan lowers his forehead to Ekaterina’s and closes his eyes, wrapping his own arms and wings around her and not caring that both of them are naked and dripping with water. “Rani never questioned me,” he says finally in Hindi.

“But Jill loves you more,” Cat answers.

“Yes,” Khan admits.

She kisses his forehead. “When did life ever run smoothly for any of us?” she asks.

“When we were four,” Khan says. “Before we knew better.”

“Da, but we learned,” she says. “And now…this is what it is, and we will make it what we want.” Cat kisses his forehead again and steps back, taking the towel Bishop hands her. “But first we will dry off and go back to the house.”

They do just that, heading back to the house at a pace fast enough normal humans would not be able to keep up. Khan feels pleasantly sore by the time they return, between the healed injuries and the run. His mood, as he had hoped, has lightened considerably and he feels overall more grounded when he walks in the house than he has in days.

“Welcome back,” Andy says, looking up from the chessboard. She’s playing Katsuro; studying the board, Khan sees that it’s a fairly even match, although he thinks Andy has the edge. Then again, Katsuro always preferred Go to chess. He and Anandi used to play, when they had time.

Konstantin is reading on the couch, although he does look up when they enter. Khan does not see Magpie, and asks Andy about her.

“She went upstairs,” Andy says. “Jill was being restless and Magpie said she couldn’t stare at a screen any more tonight, so she went to snuggle and keep Jill company. Feeling better?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I should go see how they are doing.”

“Probably,” Andy says. He studies the board, then moves one of his bishops. Khan actually had not anticipated that move, and instead of going upstairs steps closer, curious what Katsuro will do next.

He watches the game for another fifteen minutes, pleased with its progress. Andy definitely has the edge but Katsuro does not make it easy for her, and they are still fairly matched by the time Khan decides to leave them to it. He says goodnight to his siblings and Andy and heads upstairs quietly.

The door to his room stands slightly ajar; Khan hears quiet voices and stops before he will be overheard or seen.
“It’s completely crazy,” Jill says. “It’s—I don’t even know if it stands a snowflake’s chance in hell of being possible, and the odds of succeeding…” She sighs. “I don’t know, bird. I really…on the one hand, it might be our only chance of getting what we want and having the upper hand in negotiating. On the other…”

“On the other, we could all die,” Magpie says dryly.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jill says. “What do you think?”

“I think I don’t know,” Magpie says. “I don’t have enough data to make an educated hypothesis. Off the top of my head, it’s completely batshit and we should all die if we attempt it. However, this is you, and your completely batshit ideas often work. Somehow. So…I don’t know. I think I need to do some research, you need to do some research, and we need to get four more augments before we can even consider it. Five wouldn’t be enough.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Jill agrees. “Hell, I’m not sure nine would be.”

“I guess we might find out,” Magpie says.

Jill sighs again. “Do you have any other ideas?”

“Burn it all,” Magpie says.

“We can’t,” Jill says. “You know we can’t. Not everyone is—they’re not all like that, Magpie. Marcus, yes, I will gladly see his head on a platter served with roasted vegetables, but not…not everyone. My captain—he’s not one of those, and I don’t want him…” She stops. “I don’t want him hurt because of me.”

“You’re the one saying you take on risk when you sign up for Starfleet,” Maggie says.

“Yeah, but…this is different,” Jill says. “And—if we do take down Starfleet, you realize what kind of power vacuum that creates. Do you really want the Klingons to take over here?”

“Okay, point,” Magpie admits grudgingly.

"I usually have one,” Jill says. “Somewhere.”

“You have two, one on each horn on top of your head,” Magpie says.

“Are you calling me a demon?” Jill asks, laughing.

“If the boot fits,” Magpie says. “You’re certainly not an angel.”

“No, I’m really not,” Jill says.

“Then again,” Magpie says, “you’ve got one hell of a demon lover. Black wings and all.”

“He’d need horns and a tail,” Jill says. “But yeah, demon lover about sums him up.”

“I’m pretty sure he doesn’t need horns or a tail to be considered evil,” Magpie says. “I’m not saying he is evil, just that he’d be considered such by some people.”

“Not disagreeing,” Jill says and groans. “And I love him so much it makes me stupid.”

“Not entirely disagreeing,” Magpie says.
“Are you calling me stupid?” Jill asks with a snicker.

“Where he’s concerned, absolutely,” Magpie says. “You love him. That’s not stupid. You’re doing a ton of crazy shit for him. That’s kind of stupid but it’s also you so I’m not giving you grief over it. You refuse to believe he loves you. That, my dear, is so boneheaded and obviously idiotic that I want to smack you over the head with a clue by four.”

“Don’t, bird,” Jill says defensively. “Just…just don’t.”

“He’s not Brad, he’s not Todd, he’s not any of the idiots you dated before,” Magpie says. “He’s not going to leave you, Jill.”

“It’s not about leaving,” Jill says. “It’s…I know he wouldn’t leave. I know he’d stay with me. I don’t want him to feel obligated to do so. He’s…Magpie, he’s millions of kilometers above where I am in so many ways. He’s brilliant and he’s beautiful and he’s just…how could I not love him? How could I not help him? But I’m just…I’m me, bird. I’m crazy and I’m a freak and I’m— I’m broken, Magpie. In some really important ways, I’m just…broken, and I don’t want him to stay because he thinks he has to, because he thinks he has to take care of me and put me back together.”

“Do you honestly think that man does anything out of obligation unless it’s to one of his family?” Magpie asks. “Better question, do you think he’s so self-sacrificing he’d compromise his own interests by staying with someone he doesn’t want?”

“No,” Jill admits reluctantly. “He’s not that altruistic.”

“I don’t think altruism is part of his world view,” Magpie says. “Neither is martyrdom. He’s got too much self-interest and survival instinct. Neither of which are bad things. Dying for a cause is just stupid. If you care about it that deeply, care enough to keep yourself alive.”

“The needs of the many,” Jill says.

“Are bullshit,” Magpie says. “The many can survive. They always have.”

Khan swallows a laugh. He rather appreciates Magpie’s take on things.

“Besides, the galaxy’s overpopulated,” Magpie says. “A few people dying here and there isn’t a bad thing. There was a story I read once, about what happened when people stopped dying. It was kind of horrifying.”

“Entropy is the natural result of things,” Jill says. “You ever wonder what’ll happen when it all just…ends? When the stars burn out and there’s nothing left?”

“Now you’re just getting morbid,” Magpie says. “Quit it, you.”

“I’m not, really,” Jill protests. “Just—we’re so consumed with what is now, what will be in the next day, month, year? What happens in the next millennia, in millions or billions of years from now? What happens when it all ends?”

“We won’t be around to find out,” Magpie says. “And frankly, we’ve got enough to handle in the next week that the next month seems impossible.”

“Yeah, true,” Jill says.

“Think you can sleep, Jill-Bear?” Magpie asks. “I’m starting to wind down.”

“Always,” Magpie promises and Khan hears rustling sounds. “If I see your demon, I’ll send him up.”

“Okay,” Jill says. “If he wants to.”

Khan steps back, moving to the wall. A moment later Magpie slips out of Jill’s room, closing the door behind her. She looks at Khan, snorts softly, and jerks her head to the stairs. Quietly, he follows her down them and onto the front porch.

“How much of that did you overhear?” she asks, folding her arms over her chest.

“Enough,” Khan says. “Who were Brad and Todd?”

“Brad was the asshole from Academy who hit her,” Magpie says. “Todd was the idiot who wanted to put her in bubble wrap.”

“I see,” Khan says.

“Do you?” Magpie asks. She sighs and leans against the railing. “Just tell me one thing.”

“What do you want to know?” Khan asks.

“Are you going to walk away if she doesn’t get past this?” Magpie asks.

“No,” Khan says. “Because she will, eventually.”

Magpie smiles. “All right, demon, I’ll take that.”

“Do you truly see me as a demon?” Khan asks curiously. “They are evil, are they not?”

“I think you’ve got evil in you,” Magpie says. “I think you are capable of a hell of a lot of cruelty and ruthlessness, and I think that I never, ever want to be your enemy, because you won’t just kill an enemy, you’ll make him suffer as much as you possibly can first.” She tilts her head to the side. “However, having said that, my general rule of thumb for whether people are decent or not is whether they’d have bought me when I was a street brat. And you wouldn’t have.”

“No,” Khan says quietly.

“It’s not perfect, but it works for me,” Magpie says. She smiles and shrugs. “Besides, I want Marcus to suffer before he dies.”

“You are not alone in that sentiment,” Khan says.

“Also, as a note, I think demons are sexy,” Magpie says. “And I am totally going to draw you with horns and red eyes and a tail.”

“As you like,” Khan says.

“I do like,” Magpie says. “Did you get what you needed from your siblings?”

Khan nods. “I did.”

“There’s nothing in the universe like a sister or a brother,” Magpie says. “Drive you crazy and at the same time you can’t imagine them not being there. Andy’s mine, and Jill. I don’t know what
I’d do without either of them.”

“Nor they you,” Khan says.

“Seeing you with yours, though.” Magpie tucks a lock of hair back. “I don’t know how you survived without them.”

“It was…difficult,” Khan admits, his wings ruffling a bit. He lets them stretch and fold around him, recognizing an ache in the left and thinking Cat cracked a bone.

“Yeah,” Magpie says quietly. “Yeah, I think it was. You’re…” She stops. “I don’t know how to put it in words, but before we got them back, it was like I saw you in my head but you were…jumbled. Kind of like a Khan-kaleidoscope. Things weren’t where they should be and it was disorienting. Now that we have four of them, it’s like you’re…more in order. It’s not perfect, but you’re less jumbled.”

“Interesting,” Khan says, meaning it. “Did you sketch me?”

“I did,” Magpie says. “Do you want to see it?”

“I think I do,” Khan says.

“Come inside,” Magpie says. She takes him back upstairs, to the room she shares with Andy. It amuses Khan to see half the room organized and neat but the other half cluttered and messy. The odd couple, he thinks.

Magpie sits down on the edge of the messy side of the bed, leaning over and rummaging in a tote bag. She takes out a sketchpad, then another one, flipping through the first one until she comes to a page. “Here,” she says, handing it to Khan.

He looks at the page and wonders at her insight. She sketched his face as a set of black-outlined pieces, jumbled in no apparent order. One eye looks at him from the upper left hand corner of the page, his mouth doesn’t quite smirk on the right side, and his other eye is mostly closed and on the bottom of the page.

Curious, he turns the page, and sees himself again, shirtless and drawn from the waist up. She sketched his back, wings fully extended, his hands spread out at his sides. It’s a remarkably good sketch, he thinks. “You’re quite talented,” he says, handing the book back to her.

“Thank you,” Magpie says. “This is something else I thought you should see.” She hands him the other sketchbook.

He looks at the image on the page, seeing Jill asleep, one arm firmly wrapped around Bilbo, her hair sprawling everywhere and shadows under her eyes. What gets to him isn’t the fragility of her face, although he admires Magpie’s skill at capturing that. But looming over the bed is a shadowed figure, ominous and large, and the only color on the page comes from its red eyes. Looking more closely, he sees that the figure spins out of her head, that her hair gives way to shadows.

“Her worst enemies are the ones in her head,” Magpie says when he says nothing.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Yes, they are.”

“I don’t understand it, honestly,” Magpie says, taking the book back. “She…she had a good background, you know? She had parents who loved her even if they didn’t understand her. She did things. She went to the fucking Olympics and medaled. And she has nightmares almost every other
night and she always has. She doesn’t trust her own judgment in personal matters and she doesn’t trust herself enough to understand why she should. I don’t get what in her background did this. I don’t understand why she’s so neurotic. I love her, don’t get me wrong, but she’s…I don’t get it. I grew up on the streets and I have less problems than she does.”

“You grew up in a world of honesty,” Khan says. “You grew up where you had nothing, but you knew you had nothing. No one tried to pretend to you that things were fine. No one tried to tell you it was all in your head. No one—” He stops, takes a slow breath. “No one gave you a teddy bear to ward off your nightmares and told you you were too grown up to bother your parents about it. Her parents may love her, but they certainly did not meet her needs.”

“No, they didn’t,” Magpie says. “You think she didn’t grow up with honesty?”

“I think she grew up alone,” Khan says. “And isolated. I believe she internalized that, that she thought it was her fault she could not make lasting connections or find the ones she needed. She still does.”

“Say what you want about the street brats, at least we look out for each other,” Magpie says.

“But you didn’t go back for yours,” Khan says, not-quite asking.

“I tried,” Magpie says. “But the rule on the streets is that if you get out, you do it and you don’t look back. I help where I can, but most of the brats I ran with, they’re dead now. Most of the brats I try to help now don’t know me, and they don’t know why they should trust me.”

“How did the brats start?” Khan asks. “How did this even happen?”

“I don’t know,” Magpie says. “We didn’t exactly do history class.”

Point taken. “Thank you for showing me the sketches,” Khan says.

“Sure,” Magpie says. “I have more, if you ever get curious just ask me.”

“I will,” Khan says. “I should go look in on Jill.”

“You should, and I want to get a shower and some sleep,” Magpie says. “Good luck with her. You’re going to need it.”

“Yes, I think I am,” Khan says. He smiles a little and leaves Magpie’s room, going to his own.

Jill sprawls on her back, taking up most of the bed. Bilbo snuggles in the crook of one arm and the other hand fists above her head. She doesn’t move but she doesn’t look peaceful, either.

Khan slips out of his clothes and his shoes, moving to get into bed and draw her in against him. She mumbles something incoherent and burrows in against him, shoving her head into his throat and letting Bilbo fall back against the bed. Khan holds her, drapes a wing over her, and slowly she relaxes, warm and soft in his arms.

He closes his eyes, feeling the soreness still in his body, but the simmer of anger has dissipated and his mind is as quiet as it ever gets.

Acrid smoke in the back of his throat even though he doesn’t see fire; his breath rasps in his chest and he crouches down, trying to see the situation. Thick, dark clouds hang low in the sky, obscuring what little light comes from the stars, and the only illumination comes from flickering, eerie orange lights spaced irregularly along the street.
Cat kneels next to him on the rooftop, a sniper’s rifle in her hands, a sight so unusual he just stares at her for a moment. “Needs must,” she says, laying her cheek against the weapon to line up her shot.

“Da,” Konstantin says from her other side, a gash in his cheek that has not healed yet and a two-bladed axe in his hand, looking almost like a child’s toy.

Khan takes a breath, tasting the smoke and swallowing a cough. He sees Bishop on his left, scrapes on his hands and dirt on his clothes, a bruise on the cheek Khan can see. Bishop holds a sword, and next to him Katsuro has knives in his hands.

“Only one chance at this,” Bishop murmurs, almost to himself.

Ekaterina says nothing, just breathes steadily, studying her target; whatever she sees through the scope, Khan cannot make out. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, and her finger slowly pulls the trigger and—there.

Light, blinding and white, erupts from the other side of the street. Khan hears shouts, feels the rumble of something collapsing; he averts his eyes from the glare and sees dark shapes running away from the explosion. “Let’s move,” he says, pushing to his feet and vaulting over the edge of the building to drop to the street. His siblings follow him, all of them landing easily, and they start running.

He wakes before they reach their destination, and it takes him a moment to swallow and realize he doesn’t actually taste smoke, that while the room may be dark it does not have flickering orange lights.

Jill frowns in her sleep, her hand fisting against Khan’s shoulder. “Nyet,” she mumbles. “No.”

Khan rubs the back of her neck, soothes her back into peaceful sleep before she wakes. She sighs and her hand relaxes, breath slowing and evening out. Khan lowers his forehead to her hair, closes his eyes.

If he dreams again, he doesn’t remember it when he wakes to find Jill hiding under the covers, pillow pulled over her head. Her breathing indicates she’s awake, but when Khan touches her shoulder she groans. “I have a migraine,” she mumbles without moving the pillow. “Everything hurts and is too loud and too bright.”

“Do you have medication for it?” Khan asks, keeping his voice low.


Khan nods and goes to get the pills and the hypo. Jill downs the pills with the cup of water he gives her and lies back against the pillow, tipping her head to the side to let him get her with the hypospray. “What did I give you?” he asks.

“The hypo had anti-nausea meds, a low-dose stimulant, and something that theoretically aborts migraines,” she says, putting a hand over her eyes. “The pills are opiates, because the abortive never works that well for me. Can you finish closing the shades?”

“I can,” Khan says, getting up to do that. It doesn’t completely darken the room but it does help, and Jill looks a bit easier once he does. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, just some sleep,” Jill says. “I’ll take more pain meds in a few hours if I need them. I don’t
think I’m going to make it to the archive or even my flat today. Actually, can you give me my link so I can call in sick?”

“Yes,” Khan says, finding it and handing it to her.

“Thank you,” she says, flipping it open and dialing. She gets a recording and looks pleased by that. “This is Commander Calastinova,” she says after the beep. “I have a migraine and won’t be in today. You can call me or message me if there’s something urgent, but I’ll likely be out of pocket.” She hangs up and tosses the link down on the nightstand.

“I will need to go take care of things,” Khan says, brushing a curl back from her face.

“I know,” Jill says, curling onto her side. “I don’t need you to stay here and take care of me. I have a migraine, I get them sometimes, I’ll be okay.” She closes her eyes, but leans her cheek into his palm. “They also make me cranky and I’m sorry.”

“It is fine,” Khan says, gently rubbing the back of her neck. “Just relax, milaya moya.”

“I’m trying,” Jill says, sighing. “I’m trying.”

“I know,” he says quietly. “Turn onto your stomach.”

“Acupressure?” Jill asks, doing that.

“Yes,” Khan says. “It won’t kill the migraine, but it might help.” He moves her hair out of the way and presses the spots he needs. There and there, and Jill sighs again, a bit of tension easing out of her.


“Sleep, pyara,” he says, touching her shoulder. “I will let the others know you are ill.”

“Spasiba,” Jill mumbles.

Khan dresses quickly and heads downstairs, finding about what he expected with his siblings in the kitchen drinking coffee or tea and Ekaterina making omelets. “Where is Jill?” she asks, turning one onto a plate for Bishop and making the next. “And her siblings?”

“Likely still asleep,” Khan says, answering the second question first. “And Jill has a migraine and is in bed to sleep it off.”

Cat grimaces. “I am sorry to hear that. Sit, I will make you breakfast.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, getting himself coffee and taking a seat.

“You look tired,” Bishop observes over his tea.

“I had…odd dreams,” Khan says.

“That seems to be a running theme,” Bishop says. “I did, as well. There was a city, one I did not know but yet I did. Falling apart, or at least not in good repair. I could smell scorched metal, and there was a battle in the distance, but growing closer every step I took.”

“Were you armed?” Khan asks. “Were we there?”

“Oui, to both,” Bishop says. “I had a sword, as I recall.”
“Did any of you have similar dreams?” Khan asks, looking at his brothers and his sister.

“I did not.” Ekaterina says, setting a plate in front of him.

“I did,” Katsuro says, hands wrapped around his mug of tea. “Similarly to Bishop, but it was not a city, it was an arena, an amphiitheatre of sorts. No one was in the stands, and the sky was dark and clouded. We stood on the field, in antique armor and weapons, waiting for an unknown enemy. I woke before I saw who we would be fighting.”

Konstantin shakes his head. “Not last night.”

“What were yours, brother?” Bishop asks.

Khan sets his fork down. “A street,” he says, giving them a brief synopsis of the dream. Cat snorts when he tells her about the sniper rifle.

“Well, in an emergency,” she says, taking her own seat.

“Human psychic talents have never been quantified, have they?” Bishop asks.

“Not as far as I know,” Khan says. “I…” He stops. “Bishop, Katsuro, I think you were not around for this conversation, but we know someone who says she is half human and possesses psychic abilities. Jill and I have our doubts as to her human DNA, but it is possible. But regardless of that, she is precognitive and empathic, and may be able to help us somewhat. Unfortunately, she and Jill do not get along very well and she is somewhat afraid of me.”

“Then she is somewhat intelligent,” Cat says, taking a drink of coffee. “Can she be useful?”

“I think so, possibly,” Khan says.

“Then we will use her for what assistance she can provide,” Cat says briskly. “Have you a way to contact her?”

“I do,” Khan says. He doesn’t think Marika will appreciate hearing from him, but he doesn’t really care, either. He takes out his link and sends her a quick message, requesting she come to London for a consultation.

As he’s finishing, Magpie and Andy walk into the kitchen, Magpie with damp hair and Andy with his hair uncharacteristically braided back. He has small gold hoops in his ears and looking at him, Khan sees Rani in the line of his face. He tightens his hand around his coffee mug and looks away.

Andy says nothing as she goes to make tea. Magpie pours herself coffee, dumps in quite a bit of sugar, and starts drinking it as she makes another pot. “Where’s the Jill-Bear?” she asks once the new pot has been set to brew.

“She has a migraine,” Khan says.

Magpie winces. “Well, shit.”

“Does she get those often?” Konstantin asks.

“No, not really,” Magpie says, leaning against the counter. “Maybe once every few months, sometimes less. But they usually lay her out flat for a couple days.”

“I have some herbs that might help her,” Andy says. “Wait. No. I have herbs that might help her but they’re in New York. I’ll see if I can get there after tea and grab them.”
“What herbs?” Bishop asks.

“I don’t remember the English names,” Andy says. “They’re these tiny little pills, and they don’t cure her migraines but sometimes they make the sensory stuff easier to handle.”

“You do have the transporter,” Khan says. “This would be as good a time as any to test it out.”

“Have you, personally, tested yours out?” Andy asks.

“Yes, but only for a few kilometers,” Khan says.

Andy takes a drink of tea. “Well, I guess we’ll find out if I don’t come back,” he says. “But not until I finish my tea. If I don’t survive, I hate to think I’d leave perfectly good tea behind.”

“Priorities, Andy has them,” Magpie says.

“I do,” Andy says cheerfully. “Hey, tea is important.”

“Is there any British in your ancestry?” Cat asks, smiling.

“Probably somewhere,” Andy says. “I don’t know all of my biological history. I mean, I traced my biological father back to, um, Rani, but I didn’t study all of the twists and turns. It did look like a fairly straight patrilineal line, though, like Hitesh’s son had a son who had a son and so on. I don’t know where the name got lost. There might have been a couple daughters in there. I don’t remember everyone.”

Cat studies her coffee for a moment. Khan, watching her, knows she has a question but does not quite feel ready to ask it yet. “Will you tell me what you remember of this ghost that saved your life?” she asks finally, looking at Andy. “The one we think may have been Rani?”

“I don’t remember much,” Andy says. “I was high or coming down off being high most of the time she was around. I remember she told me I had to beat this, I had to get clean, because Magpie needed me and someday someone else would. I asked her who, but…I don’t remember the answer I got. I remember the scent of jasmine, and I told Khan, I remember her singing to me. Apparently whatever she sang to me was an old Indian lullabye.”

“Did you ever see her?” Ekaterina asks.

Andy shakes her head. “If I did, I don’t remember what she looked like.”

Khan wonders if Rani—if it was Rani—tampered with Andy’s memories, intentionally leaving behind few traces. He doesn’t know why she would have, but it can’t be any stranger than her saving Andy’s life in the first place.

So many coincidences and tangled threads. Rani’s connection to Andy, saving Andy’s life so that Andy could help Magpie, so that Magpie could meet Jill, so…it seems impossible, that Rani knew twenty years ago what would happen now. It seems beyond the realm of plausibility that she would set things in motion so long ago, waiting decades until the pieces fell into place.

Then again, the idea of the ghost of his deceased wife saving Andy’s life in the first place is so incredible Khan would not believe it had he any other explanation.

“Okay,” Andy says, setting his mug down. “I’ve finished my tea, time to go risk my cells and see if this thing works.” He smiles, looking at Khan. “It’s not that I doubt your skills, I just hate being the first to really test something.”
“If it works, can you stop by my nest?” Magpie asks. “I need the red bag by the big bay window.”

“Yeah, sure,” Andy says, pushing to her feet. “What’d you forget?”

“I didn’t forget anything, I just want my charcoal pencils,” Magpie says. “And my travel watercolors.”

“Yes, okay,” Andy says. “If this works, I’ll be back within half an hour.” He leaves the room to get the transporter, returning a moment later. “Coordinates locked, and here we go,” he says. He hits the button and shimmers out of sight, faster than a normal transporter beam.

“ Incredible,” Katsuro murmurs. “So many technological advances.”

“The technology means little without the advancement in human civilization,” Ekaterina says, scowling. “And I have neither seen nor heard anything to indicate that has happened.”

“You haven’t seen the Federation at its best,” Magpie says. “Although to be fair, I’m not exactly that much of a supporter. Jill is more than me, but that’s not really surprising. She’s more of an optimist than I am to begin with, though. And Andy’s more of an optimist than Jill is about some things. Me, I’m the cynical one.”

“Given your history, I am not surprised,” Ekaterina says.

Magpie shrugs. “It was hard, but it was honest,” she says, looking at Khan. “No one ever tried to pretend our lives didn’t suck.”

“Honesty is important,” Katsuro says. “I am glad you had that, even if you had little else.”

“So am I,” Magpie says. She gets up to make herself another mug of coffee.

Konstantin gets up to begin clearing away plates and load the washer. “When are you likely to hear from your psychic resource?” he asks.

Magpie looks at Khan. “You contacted Marika?”

“I did,” Khan says. “And I do not know when she will respond.”

Magpie shrugs. “I’ve never met her, I have no idea. I just know Andy said Jill can’t stand her. Might be better if she comes by when Jill’s non-functional, then they won’t get into it.”

“It might,” Khan says. He looks at his link, because it would be amusing timing for Marika to respond, but it stays silent.

“Why do they not get along?” Ekaterina asks.

“A multitude of reasons,” Khan says. “To be honest, I am not entirely certain Marika will agree to help us.”

“I am certain we can find some way to incentivize her,” Ekaterina says.

Magpie shrugs. “Everyone has a weak spot.”

“Indeed,” Bishop murmurs.

Andy shimmers back into existence, carrying a red tote bag and a small black case. “Okay, that was brilliant,” she says once she’s materialized. “Worked like a charm and didn’t make me
nauseated the way regular transporting sometimes can. Brilliant work, uncle.” She hands the tote bag to Magpie.

“Thank you,” Khan says, somewhat amused.

“I’ll go take these to Jill, see how she’s doing,” Andy says.

“I will go with you,” Khan says, getting up from the table. He follows Andy up the stairs; Andy knocks softly on the bedroom door before entering the room.

“No,” Jill mumbles, huddled under the covers. “Everything’s broken and it all hurts.”

“I know, love,” Andy says softly, moving to sit next to her. “I have some herbs for you. Can you take them?”

Jill groans. “Yeah, if you get me water,” she says without raising her head or opening her eyes. Andy looks at Khan, who has already headed for the bathroom. He returns in a moment and hands the cup to Andy.

“Sit up, kitten,” Andy says. Jill slowly pushes up, keeping her eyes closed. Andy hands her the cup of water and puts the herbal pills in her other hand; Jill knocks them back and lies down again. “Do you want a cold pack?” Andy asks, keeping his voice quiet.

“No,” Jill says. “Maybe. I don’t know. Would it help?”

“Couldn’t hurt to try,” Andy says. “I’ll go get you one.”

“Spasiba,” Jill says into the pillow.

Andy goes to get the cold pack and Khan moves to her vacated spot, brushing a couple curls back from Jill’s cheek. “Do you have any idea what triggered the migraine?” he asks quietly.

“No,” Jill says. “Maybe. I had weird dreams last night. I don’t really remember them though. Dreams don’t usually trigger migraines for me but I never know what does.”

Khan nods, gently rubbing the back of her neck. “I’ll be okay,” Jill mumbles. “Just…not right now.”

“I know,” Khan says.

“You should get to work, or whatever you’re doing,” she says after a moment. “Before you do that can you get me two more pills from the red bottle? I promise I’m not overdosing.”

“I know you are not,” Khan says. He gets up to get her the pills, which she knocks back without opening her eyes. “Will you be all right here?”

“Yeah,” Jill says, burying her head in the pillow. “Andy and Magpie know how to deal with me when I get a migraine.”

Andy returns then, carrying a blue cold pack. Khan gets up so he can put it on Jill’s head. “That’s a bit better,” Jill murmurs. “Thank you, Andy.”

“I’ll be right downstairs if you need anything,” Andy promises.

“Kay,” Jill says around a yawn.
Khan touches Jill’s shoulder. “I will see you later,” he says.

“I’ll be here,” she says sleepily.

On the way downstairs, Khan’s link chirps. “Yes,” he says, answering.

“I don’t want to help you,” Marika says.

“I know,” Khan says. “But you will.”

“Why?” Marika asks.

“Because you don’t like leaving things unfinished, and you know that whatever your visions include about me, this is not a resolved situation,” Khan says. “Because you want to prove to yourself that I don’t terrify you, that you can meet me on my ground and not cave.’

She mutters something Khan doesn’t understand but which he doubts needs a translation. “Fine,” she says. “Fine. I’ll be in London in two hours. Meet me at Jake’s safe house.”

“Acceptable,” Khan says.

Marika sighs. “I haven’t had any visions of you lately, for whatever it’s worth, but I have the sinking non-psychic feeling whatever you want from me is going to trigger at least one.”

“We shall see,” Khan says.

“Yeah, we will,” Marika says. She hangs up without saying goodbye. Khan smiles a little, putting his link away, and goes to tell his siblings about her call.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

We went so far, only to end up back where we started.

Chapter Notes

I meant to get this chapter out a while ago but the last thousand words or so kept eluding me, so apologies for the delay. There may likely be another delay this coming week; I'll be traveling from 9/9 to 9/16 and my writing access will be limited. I'll do what I can, though!

As he expected, Cat insists on going to the safe house with him, as does Konstantin. Katsuro elects to stay at the house and work on the transporters, and Bishop decides to go into London and start learning the city again. He walks with them most of the way to the safe house before bidding them adieu and heading east. Khan watches him go for a moment, irrationally concerned he won’t see his brother again, but dismisses the momentary twinge and turns back to Ekaterina and Konstantin.

“He will be fine,” Cat says, reading his mind as always. “He has a comm-link, his wallet, and even now he can best anyone in a fight. Is there a species capable of besting us?”

“The Klingons, perhaps,” Khan says, falling into Russian out of habit. “The Vulcans are stronger than normal humans but too bound by their code of logic to make acceptable fighters. The remaining species I have either encountered or learned about fall about on par with the humans, but I have not yet met every alien species out there.”

“Well,” Ekaterina says. “We shall see what we shall see. What species is this Marika?”

“I don’t actually know,” Khan says. “She says she is half human but never explained her father’s species, and Jake did not know either. Whatever she is, I have not encountered another one similar to her. She says that some of her genetic quirks, such as her psychic abilities, are because she is a cross-breed, but I have my doubts as to that.”

“Interesting,” Konstantin murmurs. “And her file at Starfleet?”

“Lists her as wholly human,” Khan says. “Then again, mine says I am aged thirty-six and a British male named John Harrison.”

"Of course it does," Cat says.

Khan shrugs. "I did not choose it."

"You did not choose anything about this time," Konstantin says. "Not until you met Jill."

"Essentially," Khan admits.
"Strange, is it not? We went so far, only to end up back where we started and under someone else's control." Konstantin's mouth quirks in a half smile. "The more things change."

"We took back control as adolescents," Ekaterina says. "We will do so again."

"We will," Khan says. "We are not adolescents anymore."

"I certainly hope not," Ekaterina says with a snort. "That was not the most enjoyable period of our lives."

"Did we have one of those?" Khan asks.

"It was not wholly terrible, our time," Konstantin says. "There were good things, regardless of the wars."

"True," Khan concedes.

"Tell us more of this Marika," Cat says. "Would she be any use in a fight?"

"Jill says not and I agree," Khan says. "With her empathy, she could easily be incapacitated by touching the wrong person. Combat is not her strong suit. However, she is skilled at sneaking around. She has an ability to make herself blend in with surroundings, so she cannot easily be seen or heard."

"Useful," Ekaterina says. "Part of her psychic talents?"

"Yes, I believe so," Khan says. "And here we are." He lets them into the building and takes them up to the safe room, expecting to see Marika there already and mildly surprised when he does not. However, he does find a folded piece of paper on the bed with “Harrison” scrawled over it in neat, angled writing. Curious, he picks it up.

*If you’re reading this then I’m either still on a stupid planet with stupid people or I’ve died. Either way, the goods you wanted are in a black case under the bed. It’s DNA-locked to you and me, and it’s got everything including a couple things you didn’t ask for but I thought might come in handy. The case is fucking heavy but I’m sure you can handle it. See you when I get back or in the afterlife, whichever happens first. AJ.*

Under the bed sits a solid black case; Khan pulls it out easily enough, although he judges the size will make it awkward to carry for too long. He presses his thumb to the lock, feels the prickle of the DNA scanner, and the lid folds back a moment later. "Well, now," Ekaterina says, looking into the case. "What on Earth did you order?"

"Most of it is not from Earth," Khan says, kneeling next to the case. He takes out a slim black box and opens it, finding one of the knives. "I believe you will like these," he says, handing it to Cat hilt first.

She takes it, bouncing it lightly in her hand to judge its weight before testing the grip and balance. "I rather do," she says before touching the blade to the back of her hand to test the sharpness. Khan sees her eyebrows raise at that. "What material is this?" she asks. "And how many did you get for me?"

"It is called adamantium," Khan says. "I ordered a total of thirty to be shared among us, but most of us will only want one or two. I should think twelve would be enough for you."

"Da, I think so," Cat says. "Are there holsters to go with these?"
Khan looks back into the case and takes out two forearm sheaths, handing them and another knife to her. She fastens the holsters around her forearms, slips the knives into them, and tugs her sleeves down over them. “Oh, this is much better,” she says in relief. “I will need to modify clothing and equip myself with the rest of them, but I no longer feel as though I am walking around naked.”

Khan avoids the obvious bait and looks in the case to see what else Jake included. He has time to do a quick inventory before he hears footsteps outside and closes it swiftly, rising to his feet as the door opens.

Marika walks in, hair chin-length and dark brown, eyes a similar shade; she wears jeans and a black leather jacket, black leather gloves on her hands. The door closes quietly behind her and she stays near it. “Well,” she says, folding her hands at her waist. “I’m here.”

“You are,” Khan says calmly. He doesn’t introduce Konstantin or Ekaterina, and Marika doesn’t ask about them.

“What do you need?” she asks.

“What do you know of precognitive dreams?” Khan asks.

Marika frowns at that, looking thoughtful. “Not… much,” she says slowly. “I know it’s possible, and I know—some of my father’s people have them, I think, although I’ve never met anyone who did. It—“ She stops, tugging off her gloves and running her fingers through her hair. “There are stories,” she says, tilting her head back as if to remember. “Something about groups of people having them, like the barrier to psychic abilities is lessened during sleep and so people who are close emotionally or physically would be more likely to share dreams, or at least thematic elements. But this is like—this is stuff the elders said they knew someone who knew someone who had had them, it’s almost myth rather than historical fact. I don’t personally know anyone who’s had precognitive dreams or shared them.” She looks at Khan, tugging on the sleeves of her jacket. “But you’re not asking hypothetically.”

“I am not,” Khan says, reluctant to admit it to her but unfortunately she is the only psychic resource he knows.

“How many of you are having similar dreams?” Marika asks. “Is it every night?”

“Nine of us, but not all of us dream each night,” Khan says.

“Are you all human?” Marika asks.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Which makes zero sense.” Marika sighs and moves over to the small table, dropping into a chair. “I’ve never met or heard of another human with quantifiable psychic talents. So for nine of you to have similar dreams—how long has this been going on?”

“A few weeks,” Khan says.

“Okay, so, here’s a weird question,” Marika says. “Did the dreams start before or after we met?”

“After,” Khan says, moving over to the table. He takes another chair and turns it around to straddle it. “You think you triggered something latent in me that might have then triggered others?”

“It’s the only thing I can think of.” Marika says. “It’s not unheard of for an active psychic to trigger latent abilities in others, but what I’ve been told is that it has to be a deliberate action on the active
psychic’s part. But you’re not quite a normal human, and I’m only part human, and maybe… maybe something happened. Are you biologically related to anyone with whom you’re sharing dreams?”

“Not biologically, no,” Khan says. “And none of them are biologically related to each other.”

Marika pushes her hands through her hair again. “Will you—will you let me touch you, try to read you?” she asks. “It might—and I do mean might—give me some kind of clue.”

“I will,” Khan says, pushing up his right sleeve and resting his arm on the table. Marika takes a breath and lays her hand over the inside of his forearm. She closes her eyes; Khan thinks he sees her skin tinge with blue, and he feels a similar prickle of energy to when she was hiding in plain sight.

A solid minute later, she pulls back her hand, but it takes a few deep breaths before she opens her eyes, and her skin still has a blue tint when she does. “I…” she starts and stops, shaking her head. “I need a minute.”

Khan nods, letting her compose herself. Marika looks down at the table, breathing steadily and deeply. Slowly, the blue fades from her skin and he no longer feels the prickle of energy. “Okay,” she says finally. “Okay. Here’s what I know. When I touch another psychic, like one of my father’s people, I can recognize the ability. It’s not exactly a color and it’s not exactly—I can’t really explain it, but I can tell another psychic when I touch one. You’re not like that. I don’t have a similar feeling from you. But—but there is something there that a regular human wouldn’t have, and it’s not something I got from you the first time I touched you. I don’t know what it is, and I don’t really know how to explain it. It’s like—” Marika stops, blows out a breath. “It’s like there’s an almost psychic talent in you, like there’s something going on but it’s not at a level I can really understand or analyze. Which…might explain why you’re having dreams. If it’s not at a level where you’re consciously aware of it, it might be something that can only be accessed when you’re asleep.”

She rubs the palm of the hand that touched Khan, flexing it and stretching her fingers. “I have one other option to try,” she says, looking at Ekaterina and Konstantin. “I’m guessing that since you’re here with him you’re also having dreams. I can try to read one or both of you and see what I get. I’m an empath only, I won’t be able to read your thoughts, and you won’t get any impressions from me, I’m strictly receptive.”

Ekaterina looks at Konstantin, who shrugs one shoulder. Cat nods and moves over to the table, sitting down and pushing up her sleeve. She slips off the forearm holster and extends her arm.

Marika rubs her hands together, takes a breath, and lays her fingers over the inside of Ekaterina’s wrist. Khan feels the prickle of energy, but stronger this time, and after five seconds Marika collapses without a word, falling out of her chair and landing crumpled on the floor.

“What did you feel?” Khan asks as Konstantin picks up Marika and brings her over to the bed.

“Something odd,” Cat says, frowning. “A tingle in my mind, and I saw an image of a stadium, an arena with a packed dirt floor and purple clouds in the dark sky. And then she fell over.”

“Curious,” Konstantin says, looking at Marika. “Very curious.”

“Yes,” Khan says, getting up. “Very curious indeed.”

“Is she likely to wake soon?” Ekaterina asks.
“I’ve no idea,” Khan says. “She never did this when I saw her previously.”

“We always did say Katya was the strongest personality among us,” Konstantin says, smiling a little. “Perhaps I should have been the one to let her touch me.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. He moves over to the bed, taking Marika’s pulse and watching her chest rise and fall. “As far as I can tell she is fine, just unconscious,” he says. “We will wait for her to wake up.”

Cat nods. “I want to know what she saw.”

“As do we,” Konstantin says.

About a minute later, Marika groans and opens her eyes, blinking several times. She says something in her father’s language, pinching the bridge of her nose, then seems to realize where she is. “Never, ever, ever doing that again,” she says, slowly sitting up. “Fuck me.”

“What did you feel?” Khan asks.

“It wasn’t what I felt, it was what I saw,” Marika says. “Well, no, it was both. You are...incredibly strong emotions wise, and the depth of some of what I caught—it almost pulled me into your mind and I don’t know if I could have gotten out.” She looks at Ekaterina. “I thought he was intense, but you’re even more so. And you triggered a vision. I saw a sky, dark and clouded, lightning flashing between the clouds, and I saw it strike land, in an abandoned area full of old equipment and buildings. I saw all three of you, and people I don’t know, when the light flashed, and you weren’t fighting anyone but you had been and there was a feeling of imminent peril, like the battle was going to start again.”

She rubs her hands over her face. “My head is killing me.”

“Did you get the same sense from her as you did from me?” Khan asks. “That not-quite psychic talent?”

“Yeah, right before she triggered a vision,” Marika says. “It...I think it may have been stronger in her, and I saw something, a connection to someone or multiple someones. I think. It’s not all that clear because my head is splitting and I barely had a chance to read anything more than surface impressions. And no, I’m not trying again.” She licks her lips and looks at Konstantin. “My head can’t possibly hurt any more than it already does,” she says. “So if you want me to try reading you, I will. But decide fast before I change my mind.”

Konstantin says nothing but walks over to the bed and extends his arm. Marika takes two deep, slow breaths, rubs her hands together, and touches the inside of his forearm. Khan feels the energy prickle and sees Marika’s skin turn faintly blue, but she doesn’t fall over. She pulls her hand back about thirty seconds later, taking a few more slow breaths and letting her skin return to its normal color before she opens her eyes. “That was almost pleasant,” she says, looking at Konstantin. “You’re still intense emotions wise, but not in a way that makes my head want to split open. I did see that same almost-psychic thing, and you have a very definite and solid connection to her. I couldn’t tell where any other connections went, although I think one of them went back to him. But you two are almost as solidly linked as some of the psychic marriages I know.”

“That is not surprising,” Ekaterina says, giving Konstantin a fond look.

Marika gets up, going back to the table and rummaging in her purse for something. She pulls out a bottle and tips a few pills into her hand, swallowing them dry. “So...my best guess, based on all
this, is that I triggered something in you that’s causing you to have either precognitive dreams or something along those lines, and it rippled out from there, to the people you’re closely connected to and spend time with, and maybe from those people to others, but I don’t know how far out it would go. I’d figure not more than two levels, though, the emotional or physical connection needs to be really strong.”

“Tell me something,” Ekaterina says, taking a seat at the table. “What do you think of ghosts, or spirits?”

“I think they exist, but I’ve never met one,” Marika says. “I can’t speak with the dead. I know people who say they can, but I’ve never seen it happen. Why?”

“Do you think a spirit could influence dreams?” Ekaterina asks.

“Probably, yes,” Marika says. “I don’t know why one would want to, but it’s a plausible idea. Do you think you have a spirit giving you precognitive dreams?”

“It is one possible explanation,” Ekaterina says. “And I find it curious that your visions have similar themes to our dreams.”

“Believe me, I’m not giving them to you,” Marika says. “I can’t project either empathically or precognitively.”

“What species is your father?” Cat asks.

“One you’ve never heard of,” Marika says.

More true than she knows, Khan thinks.

“Is there a reason for that?” Ekaterina asks.

“There is,” Marika says. “But I’m not here for an anthropology class.”

Cat’s eyebrows go up at that, but she doesn’t push further.

“Do you know anyone who does speak with spirits?” Konstantin asks.

Marika shakes her head. “I don’t. Well—maybe. I know a couple people who say they do, but I don’t know if it’s true, and they’re not on Earth and not somewhere I can contact them easily.” She licks her lips, looking down at the table. “I can—I’ll make some calls, see if I can find anyone who knows more about shared psychic dreams. If I learn anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“And if I have any more visions, I’ll tell you,” Marika says reluctantly. “I haven’t had any in the last couple weeks, which is fine with me, but I never know when one will come. I don’t get a pre- vision aura or anything. I wish I did.”

“How often do you normally get them?” Konstantin asks.

“It’s random,” Marika says. “Sometimes I get three in a week, sometimes I get one in two months. Some of it’s environmental, like if I’m in a stressful situation I’ll get more of them. Or if I’m really focused on something, like a work assignment, I’ll get some. I’m not trying to have more visions about you and whatever the hell you’re going to get into, but I’m not going to be surprised if I get them anyway.”
Khan won’t be either, and from the slight quirk of Cat’s mouth she agrees. Marika sighs, slumping in her chair. “No offense intended, but I wish I’d never met you,” she says.

“I am sure,” Khan says, amused instead of insulted.

“I’m heading off-planet in three weeks,” Marika says. “I’m not sure when I’ll be back, and I likely won’t be able to receive or send messages. I’ll see what I can find out before I leave, but I don’t have any guarantees I’ll learn anything worth passing on.”

“Will Jake be able to reach you once you ship out?” Khan asks.

“In an absolute dire emergency, yes,” Marika says. “For anything else, no.”

“I understand,” Khan says.

Marika nods, pulling her gloves on. “Do you need anything else?”

“No,” Khan says. “Thank you for your time.”

“You’re welcome,” she says. She gets to her feet, picking up her bag, and leaves quickly.

“Interesting,” Cat says once she is gone and none of them hear any sounds indicating she is still around. “I think I understand why Jill does not like her very much.”

“What is that?” Khan asks.

“She is remarkably self-focused,” Ekaterina says. “She helps because she knows Jake will be displeased if she does not, but she has no interest in whatever her visions indicate will happen. Despite the themes of battle, war, injury, she wishes to believe none of it has anything to do with her or will affect her. She resents you for causing her visions, and she is afraid of you because of what she felt from you even though none of it was aimed at her.”

“Da,” Konstantin says. “Whereas Jill cares little for her own protection and would do almost anything to help others. Jill has never feared you, nor resented you despite the upheaval you brought to her life, and she is insulted on your behalf that Marika distrusts you.”

“There is more to it than that, although I acknowledge your points,” Khan says. “Marika goes out of her way to avoid Jill, has done for as long as they have known each other. She dislikes anything that causes her discomfort or pain, and she says that Jill’s emotions are strong enough and chaotic enough to upset her. Jill does not like being pushed away because of who she is.”

“Few people would,” Cat says with a snort.

“Indeed,” Khan says. “Marika does have her uses, but only in some specific cases, and I trust her not. We can talk to Jake about her and whether we want to continue utilizing her when he returns.”

“Although if she is leaving Earth in three weeks,” Konstantin says. “It may be a moot point.”

“It may,” Khan says. “She could potentially be useful, but given her flaws I would prefer to avoid needing much from her.”

“Would that we knew another psychic,” Ekaterina says. “Are there psychic species in the galaxy?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “The problem is that they are Vulcans, who live by logic and suppress emotion. They are also very bound by rules and ethics. Asking one of them for assistance would be…not a wise move. They are also primarily touch telepaths, and I do not believe they have precognition.”
“Any others?” Konstantin asks.

“Not that we have met,” Khan says. “There may be several out there, but as far as I am aware the only psychic species officially part of the Federation are Vulcans. And not only are they pedantic to a fault, but they are also an endangered species. Nero’s attack blew up their planet.”

“Well, that is of no use to us, then,” Cat says briskly. “And human psychic talent is still unquantifiable.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “It appears we will have to figure this one out ourselves.”

“Well, at least that is nothing new,” Konstantin says. Ekaterina laughs at that, and Khan smiles. Konstantin smiles back, but he clearly has something on his mind; Khan gestures for him to speak. “Given everything the scientists attempted to do with us, I would not be surprised if they attempted to give us psychic talents.” Konstantin says, taking a seat at the table. “However, since that was not something they could prove existed, the odds of it succeeding were incredibly small. I am sure it could have been done had they known the gene sequencing for it—after all, they did succeed in your wings. But psychic talents are more nebulous.”

He drums his fingers on the table. “But it is plausible that they gave us dormant abilities, that while they could not give us active talents they did encode something into us. And given what Marika said about active psychics triggering latent abilities… I think the scenario she proposed could be valid. She read you with her empathy and she had visions of you with her precognition. Add to that the precognition about the bomb, and I would not be entirely surprised had she activated whatever latent ability you had or have. Once yours became active, it would make sense for yours to trigger those around you.”

“But this doesn’t explain Jill, or Andy, or Magpie, or Jake if I understand correctly,” Ekaterina says, frowning.

“No, not entirely,” Konstantin agrees. “But it is also possible that their dreams are being influenced by Rani, or what we think may be Rani.”

“I wonder what Anandi would make of all this,” Ekaterina says, surprising Khan. “She was always the most scientific of us, determined to quantify everything she could. We cannot quantify this, we cannot prove it actually exists, and yet there is enough evidence to indicate that something is influencing our dreams.”

“Well, perhaps in a few weeks we can ask her,” Konstantin says. “The next mission is a week from Saturday, da?”

“Da,” Khan says. “Alona and Matthew. And if— if—we are not caught and do not raise suspicion, we will go back Sunday night for Anandi and Maeve. But that is the last. We cannot risk more ops.”

“Agreed,” Ekaterina says. “But have there been any indications so far we have raised suspicions?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, not that I have seen or that Jill has heard of. Magpie had hacked into the security communications but did not see anything there, either.”

“Good.” Cat pushes up from her chair and flexes her fingers, making a sharp gesture with her wrist and smiling when a knife drops from its sheath into her hand. “Quite nice,” she says, slipping the knife back into its holster. “I will have to thank Jake. However, I will need to practice
with these, as they are not familiar. Is there a space in the gym for knife work?"

“We can likely set it up,” Khan says.

Cat nods. “Good. What shall we do now?”

“I need to bring this back to the house,” Khan says, moving to the case. “It would be easiest to just transport it and myself, but I cannot take you with me.”

“I should think Kostya and I can manage returning to the house on our own,” Ekaterina says with a snort. “Although I should like to explore London some more. It is both exceedingly similar to our time and incredibly unfamiliar.” She looks almost wistful for a moment. “I would like to see Russia again, at some point,” she says. “Perhaps we will have time when all this is dealt with.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “I see no reason why we would not.”

“Would you go back?” Cat asks him.

Khan shakes his head. “India has nothing for me anymore.”

“Perhaps when this is all done, we can find a new place for ourselves, not on Earth,” Konstantin says. “Somewhere without centuries of memories weighing us down.”

“I would like that, I think,” Ekaterina says. “A new start, a place to build lives that will not constantly be overshadowed by the past.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I would like that, as well.”

“I think all of us would,” Konstantin says. “But would Jill, or her family?”

“I do not know,” Khan says. He hopes so, but he doesn’t know for certain. “We will undoubtedly discuss it.”

“I am certain,” Cat says. She absently drops the other knife into her hand and puts it back, nodding in satisfaction. “For now, Kostya and I will go walkabout for a bit, and you will go back to the house and inventory the items Jake acquired for you.”

She will never stop telling him what to do, Khan thinks, amused by it. “Be careful,” he says instead. “I would not want you to draw attention we do not need at the moment.”

“I think we are capable of that,” Ekaterina says, giving him a mock-irritated look. “We will be back at the house within six hours.”

Khan nods and sees them out so he can lock up behind them. Back in the safe room, he inputs the coordinates to the house and activates his transporter. A few moments later, he materializes in the living room, the case settling solidly next to him.

“Welcome back,” Magpie says, looking up from her sketchpad. “Where’d everyone else go?”

“Bishop left us to explore the city, and Cat and Konstantin did the same after we talked with Marika,” Khan says. “How is Jill?”

“Still in migraine hell,” Andy says without looking up from the electronics in her hands. “I got her to drink some water and she kept it down, so at least there’s that, but I doubt she’ll be up for anything other than sleep until at least tomorrow.”
Khan grimaces, but it doesn’t surprise him. “What are you working on?” he asks.

“More subcutaneous bugs,” Andy says. “Katsuro finished building the next transporter, but neither one of us were sure how to lock it to specific DNA, so we left it for you. We didn’t want to risk screwing it up.”

“It is not difficult,” Khan says. “I will show you when Bishop returns, as I need a DNA sample from the people who will use the transporter. It is functional without the DNA lock in the meantime.”

“If you told me this earlier I forgot the answer, but what is the range on the thing?” Andy asks.

“Earth to Qo’noS,” Khan says.

Andy whistles. “That’s insane. That’s…that’s insane.”

“Transporting that far would likely deplete the transporter of its power,” Khan says. “And recharging it would take about three hours, depending on the source. But it is doable.”

“How far is this place?” Katsuro asks.

“Mm…I’m not sure exactly, but it takes a while even at warp drive,” Andy says. “Regular transporters can’t go nearly that far.”

“The ones I built utilize transwarp technology, which allows one to transport longer distances,” Khan says. “Current design is also limited by the need to have one person manning the controls, based near the transporter itself. Since these are portable, they carry the power source with themselves and do not need to have the signal relayed.”

“Where did you come up with the idea for these?” Katsuro asks.

“It is rather remarkable what one can theorize when needing a way to move around unseen and unobserved,” Khan says. “As well, you know that when one does not know the conventional wisdom of what should be possible and what is not, it is much easier to create something that conventional wisdom would argue against.”

“Hai,” Katsuro says. “Although I look forward to learning what conventional wisdom says is possible, so we may prove it wrong.”

Andy laughs. “I like the way you think. I do the same thing.”

Magpie’s computer chimes and she frowns, picking it up. Her fingers dance over the screen for a moment and she frowns more. “Okay, that’s interesting,” she says, looking at it. “That’s…really interesting.”

“What is and why?” Andy asks.

“The second subcutaneous bug just came online,” Magpie says, glancing up. “It’s within a meter of the first one. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“What data can you get from them?” Khan asks.

“Location,” Magpie says. “I can’t get audio, and while I could get visual the odds of the tracker having been planted somewhere useful for that are slim. But I can bounce the location off London’s camera network and hack those to see what our two targets are up to. We still wouldn’t get audio,
though.”

“Where are they now?” Khan asks.

“Near the Kelvin archive,” Magpie says. “Hang on.” Her fingers fly over the screen as she frowns in concentration. “Andy, is it six point five or seven?”

“Seven,” Andy says.

‘Thanks.” Magpie adds a few more lines and points her stylus at the wall, where a moment later Khan sees an image of the area just in front of the archive, its manicured lawn and shrubs. Two people stand in front of a bench; Khan recognizes them as Verity and Malcolm from their files.

“They don’t look thrilled,” Andy says after a moment, watching what looks to be an increasingly heated discussion. Verity gestures sharply with her hands, leaning forward to argue her points; Malcolm draws himself up, taller than Verity and clearly trying to intimidate her physically.

“I wish we had audio,” Magpie mutters.

Katsuro frowns, looking more closely at the silent video projected onto the wall. “She says…she is not going to sit around and wait to die,” he says slowly. “She may have less than a year left but she will accomplish something with that time.”

Khan moves a bit closer, studying Malcolm’s face. “He says she doesn’t have to die,” he says. “That whatever the freak did to her, he can undo it, and he doesn’t have to be alive to fix it.”

Katsuro’s jaw tightens at that one. “She says she doubts anyone can take him down individually and if they joined forces Marcus would know about it.”

“So…” Khan frowns as Malcolm looks away for a moment. “Something—more of a liability than an asset.”

“He wants to convince Marcus you’re the former,” Andy says. “That’s my guess.”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Charming,” Magpie mutters.

Malcolm and Verity continue their argument, with him arguing they need to push now to neutralize Khan and Verity arguing that Khan isn’t worth the effort it would take, especially since doing so would turn Marcus against them.

After about twenty minutes, Verity agrees to let Malcolm try once on his own, but if he fails—which she makes clear she expects—they will move on to other tactics that don’t involve trying to kill Khan. He seems satisfied enough and they head in separate directions.

“Well, that was fun,” Magpie says, making a face at the wall.

“I am curious what Verity wants to accomplish that does not involve killing me,” Khan says.

“I am as well,” Katsuro says. “Magpie, can you get into her mail and her phone?”

“Can and will,” Magpie says. “I’ll need a bit of time to hack it properly, but should have it up and running in about four hours at the outside.”

“That long?” Andy asks.
“I read her file again while you guys were translating the conversation,” Magpie says. “She’s covert ops but there’s a lot of tech stuff in her file, and given what she does I’m betting her security’s decent and contains things like self-destructs and stuff. It’ll take me a bit longer to avoid those. I mean, I can do it, but I’d rather her mail not try to eat my computer because it’s a pain to clean up after those and also it might give her our location. We’re already worried about that, so…” She shrugs.

“Point taken,” Andy says.

“Here’s a question, though,” Magpie says. “Where did Ekaterina and Konstantin go? Since they were the ones with the bug. Wouldn’t they have had to activate it?”

Andy shakes his head. “It’s self-activating,” he says. “But there’s a delay of five minutes from when it sinks into someone’s skin and when it starts transmitting data. My guess would be they tagged Baker and left.”

“I’ve got no idea and we didn’t tag them, so I can’t find them,” Magpie says.

“You can’t look them up by link location?” Andy asks, surprised.

“No, because I turned that feature off on the links I gave them,” Magpie says. “Because if I can use it to find them, so can someone else, and color me paranoid but I don’t want anyone finding anyone in this house they shouldn’t.”

“Then we will ask them later what happened,” Katsuro says. “Andy, when will you have more of the trackers completed?”

“I’ll have these two done in about half an hour,” Andy says, glancing up. “But after that I need more of the biological base, and to get that I have to contact the person who helped me create them. It’ll take me a day or two to get them, depending on where he is.”

“Is it something Bishop could make?” Katsuro asks.

“Probably,” Andy says. “The problem is I don’t know how to do it myself, so I can’t teach you. Ted has tried to teach me but my expertise is limited to non-organic hardware parts. Something about how he made the base just refuses to stick in my head. Fortunately he likes me and never minds giving me more of it.”

“How did you meet him?” Konstantin asks.

“He’s friends with Trevor,” Andy says. “Who is another friend, the one who owns this house actually. Ted travels a lot for work, he’s a xeno-virologist I think, or whatever they call it these days. He happened to be in town the same time Trevor and I were, and we met up. Ted is always into new projects, and when I mentioned I wanted to try and build an untraceable body bug, he signed on to try it with me.”

“He’s also madly in love with Andy but she refuses to believe it,” Magpie says, looking up from her computer.

“Because he isn’t,” Andy says. “He likes my brain, he doesn’t want to have sex with me.”

“Oh, but he does,” Magpie says, snickering. “But you won’t have sex with him so it doesn’t matter, and he’s a gentleman enough not to push.”

“No,” Andy says, setting down the tool in his hand. “No, he doesn’t. He wants to have sex with me
as a man, because he’s gay. He has no interest in the female side of me, and I have no interest in someone who only wants half of me.”


“It’s okay,” Andy says, picking up the tool again. “It’s just—I know how things are with Ted. It’s the same way they are with Brian, only reversed. I have about four people who want to have sex with me as one gender or another, but no one wants me as I actually am, and I’m not interested in settling.”

“You have not chosen an easy path for yourself,” Katsuro says quietly.

“I’ve chosen the only one that’s honest,” Andy says. “Being a junkie involves a lot of lying to yourself. When I got clean I promised myself I was done with lying.”

“Why did you choose to stop using?” Katsuro asks.

“Because I was going to die if I didn’t,” Andy says frankly. “And I knew it. And I didn’t want to die, amazingly enough. I thought I did, but I didn’t, not when push came to shove. It was hard, it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but I wanted to live. I wanted to try and get off the streets with Magpie, make something of ourselves, and maybe Rani—if it was her, maybe she left me with some kind of subconscious belief we could, I don’t know. But we decided to try, we had nothing to lose.”

Magpie reaches over and squeezes Andy’s hand. “And now here we are,” she says. “Planning to take down the admiral in charge of Starfleet, most of his black ops programs, and maybe prevent a war, with our group of currently nine people, hopefully soon to be eleven and then thirteen.”


“It’s certainly not impossible,” Magpie says.

“We have faced worse odds,” Katsuro says calmly.

Khan smiles, but says nothing to that. “I am going to check on Jill,” he says instead.

“She shouldn’t be due for any more medication that I know of,” Andy says. “But I could be wrong.”

“I will check,” Khan says. He heads upstairs and enters the room quietly, closing the door behind him. With the shades drawn and the lights off, it takes his eyes a second to adjust to the darkness.

“Hi,” Jill mumbles, facing away from him and curled up under the covers. “I want to die. I feel too awful to sleep.”

“Do you need more medication?” Khan asks quietly, walking over to her.

“No, I’ve taken all I can for another, uh, two hours,” Jill says, squinting at the chrono. “It’s mostly working but ugh. When my migraines hit they hit hard. How was Marika?”

“Potentially useful, immediately less helpful,” Khan says, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“So par for the course.” Jill sighs and reaches for his hand. “How are you?”

“Better than you,” Khan says, taking her hand, not surprised that her fingers feel warmer than usual.
“That doesn’t take much right now,” Jill says. “I’ll be okay in a day or so. You should maybe go back to your flat, or work for Marcus, or…”

“I am fine,” Khan says, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. “I sent Marcus a message earlier telling him I am working on a new project. I gave him a few details and he will leave me alone until I provide more information.”

“What project did you tell him about?” Jill asks, slurring her words a bit.

“I will tell you later,” Khan says, letting go of her hand and brushing her hair back from her face. “You are not in any shape to listen right now.”

“I hate it that you’re right,” she mumbles, sighing. “But you’re right. Where’s everyone else?”

“Downstairs or in the city,” Khan says. “We will see them eventually. You should rest, pyara.”

“I know.” Jill sighs again and turns her face into his hand, kissing his palm. “Love you. Can you wake me in two hours so I can take more pain meds?”

“I can,” Khan says, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “Sleep, milaya moya.”

“Trying.” Jill closes her eyes and snuggles down under the covers. Khan rises quietly and spends a moment looking down at her before he leaves the room.

Nine of them now. Hopefully thirteen when they are done. Not many people, to accomplish their goals, yet a larger group might work against them. Whether they will have enough...he doesn’t know. But there’s nothing for it except to go on and—a rare thing for him—hope.
Jake shows up on Khan’s doorstep Thursday evening with a tan, a buzz cut, and a splint around his left forearm. “I am so completely done with dealing with stupid people,” he says. “Please tell me you have alcohol.”


“Is she in her flat? I tried calling but she didn’t answer, which was why I came here. She messaged me and said the house wasn’t safe, and I don’t know where it is anyway so here I am.” Jake groans and rolls his head around on his neck. “I have a broken wrist—well, regen works on me so the bones are knitted but still not fully healed. Two cracked ribs, same deal, and a raging case of ‘take this job and shove it somewhere unpleasant’. I did avoid the skull fracture, at least, so that’s something, although if the highlight of your week is avoiding one of those it’s a sad, sad thing.”

“What happened?” Khan asks, making sure he has his access card and his comm-link before he locks the door to his flat and follows Jake to the stairs.

“I really, really don’t want to talk about it,” Jake says. “I was stuck on an uninhabited, undeveloped planet for a week with a bunch of mouth-breathing imbeciles whose lineage had to involve donkeys and sea slugs. That’s probably not fair to donkeys, though. Fuck, sometimes I hate my job. At least, I fucking hate the teaching part of it. I sound like a cranky old man but Jesus fuck we weren’t this stupid when I was at the Academy. I did this class at the Academy and we didn’t fuck up this badly.” He growls in frustration and rubs at the splint on his hand. “Please tell me you have people that need killing.”

“Not here,” Khan says.

“Yeah, okay, point,” Jake says. He says nothing else until Khan knocks on Jill’s door; he could just let them in but because of Jake decides not to.

A moment later, the door opens and Jill stands there wrapped in two towels, one around her body and one around her hair. “Oh, fuck, you’re here,” she says, looking at Jake. “Well, come in, but I just got out of the shower so you’re going to have to give me a minute to get dressed.”

"Why do you always do this to me?” Jake complains. "This week sucks beyond the telling.”
There’s vodka in the freezer,” Jill says, letting them in and walking to the bedroom. “And I think beer in the fridge.”

“This week needs vodka,” Jake says, making a beeline for the freezer. “You want?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jill says, closing the bedroom door behind her.

“You want?” Jake asks Khan, pulling the bottle out of the freezer.

“Thank you,” Khan says.

Jake grins. “Don’t thank me, it’s Jill’s vodka.” He pours three healthy glasses and hands one to Khan. “May next week be better,” he says, taking a slug. “Speaking of, how much shit have we landed in?”

“Less than it could be,” Khan says, taking a smaller sip of his own drink. “More than I would like.”

“Tell me about it,” Jake says, coming over to the couch and moving a boot aside to sit on it.

“No one has noticed we broke into the facility holding my siblings,” Khan says. “We have four of them. A week from Saturday we will retrieve two more. And hopefully the last two the following night.”

“Right,” Jake says. “So what’s the bad news?”

“Seven people from section 31 are trying to kill me,” Khan says. “We know who they are, have located three, but have not yet dealt with them. We want to know more about their goals and who is bankrolling them first.”

“Right,” Jake says again. “And they know about the house?”

“No actual attack or assault has been made on it directly,” Khan says, choosing to stand because the couch cramps his wings. “However.” He tells Jake about the pseudo-recorder bomb.

As he finishes, Jill walks out of the bedroom in a red tank and soft black pants, barefoot, her damp hair curling down her back. “One of those glasses better be for me,” she says, climbing over the back of the couch and dropping down next to Jake.

He hands her the third. “L’Chaim,” she says, clinking glasses with him and taking a drink. “I have an absolutely terrible idea that you’re going to hate.”

“I can’t hate it any more than I hated this past week,” Jake says morosely.

“We need to hide four people,” Jill says. “You have safe houses, but more than that, you have a giant network of extended family with some similar ethnic backgrounds to two of the people we need to hide.”

Jake looks at her, sets his glass down on the coffee table, and drops his head back against the back of the couch. “I’m wrong, I do,” he says. “Shorty, it’d work and it’s the worst idea I’ve heard since three days ago which almost ended with a depressed skull fracture for me.”

“I know and I know,” Jill says. “But. It’d involve Eema and Abba, and I’m…hesitant to get them involved in something this dangerous. Not to mention Samuel and the baby and everything.”

Jake groans. “Let me think about it,” he says. “I mean…yeah, it’d work, but—one, there’s the
whole thing of getting my parents and cousins and everyone involved, which we probably don’t want. And two, wouldn’t whoever ends up with them need more freedom to come and go than they’d get living with my family?”

“Probably on both points,” Jill says, folding her legs under her. “It was more an idea of hiding in plain sight. How many of your safe houses around the globe are unknown by your superior officers?”

“Um,” Jake says. “Off the top of my head, I’d say about half to two-thirds. If you needed me to go through and actually identify a few that could be used by people without causing problems or alerting people, the number goes down and I’d have to do some research. Tell me the names and ethnic backgrounds of whoever we need and I might be able to have better options, though.”

“Two Russians, one Japanese, one French but the last two stick together, three Irish and one Spanish,” Jill says. “The last four are hopefuls but we don’t have them yet. The thing is, though, we need them to be able to come and go freely. We’ve got the transporters to let them do that but we need them to not be noticed by the locals.”

“Random question that has nothing to do with anything but did you have any Americans—sorry, United States people?” Jake asks curiously.

Khan shakes his head. “They elected not to participate in the program.”

“Huh,” Jake says. “That’s a bit weird.”

“Not as much as you would think,” Khan says. “They did not control the program, so they chose to not be part of it.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Jake says, making a face. “There’s a reason the Federation’s headquartered in San Francisco, of all places. Because it makes total sense to headquarter an interplanetary government on a planet way the fuck out on the outer rim of the galaxy.”

“To be fair, the idea for the Federation did start on Earth,” Jill says, sipping her vodka.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to be fair, I want to be cranky,” Jake says.

“Keep it up and I’ll wipe the floor with you,” Jill says. “Broken wrist or no.”

Jake sighs and slumps, picking up his glass. “I had a shitty week,” he says. “We’re talking on the level of Eema being diagnosed with Andorian flu shitty.” He pauses. “No. Not that bad. But close.”

“On the level of David’s wife miscarrying?” Jill asks, voice more gentle than Khan would have expected.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Jake says after a moment.

“What is Andorian flu?” Khan asks, both changing the subject and giving Jake a moment to settle.

“It’s something that’s very minor and not a problem if you’re Andorian,” Jill says. “If you’re human, it’s a disease that can kill you, and recovery takes weeks to months, if you recover at all. Some people end up disabled because of it. Eema was diagnosed when Jake was fifteen, and it took about six months for her to recover. We still don’t have a good treatment for it.”

“How is it transmitted?” Khan asks.
“We don’t know,” Jake says. “It’s not airborne except it might be. It’s not skin to skin contact, and it might be transmitted through bodily fluids except half the cases they find aren’t situations where that was likely. Eema certainly wasn’t. The current theory is that it’s airborne but you have to have a specific genetic susceptibility to it, and we just haven’t figured out what that is yet. Once we figure that out we’ll likely be able to treat it, but so far that’s not happening. And it’s not that common, so funding and research for it are less prioritized than some other things. Human medicine is relatively advanced, but not every species is the same way. Klingon medicine, actually, is really limited because their philosophy mostly equates to either you survive the battle or you kill yourself, not a whole lot in between. The downside to that is that they’re really fucking hard to kill.”


“Have you actually killed or fought one?” Jake asks.

“I have,” Khan says. “A few weeks after I was released from section 31, Marcus had me run a covert mission to one of their satellite outposts to sabotage it. I succeeded, but not without casualties.”


“It was,” Khan says.

“Nice work,” Jake says approvingly. “So, okay, you know what it takes to kill a Klingon, that’s good and you can teach your sibs. And moving back to the main subject, how urgent is the need to relocate?”

Jill licks her lips. “We’re not entirely certain,” she admits. “We had a bomb placed nearby but there’s been no other kind of threat or attack. We know that at least two people actively want Khan dead, but Marcus still sees him as an asset and as far as we know no one’s twigged to my involvement yet or that we’ve revived four of his siblings. We can’t tell if the house is under surveillance—Magpie and Andy say nothing’s come across their security scans, and Katsuro was working with them to upgrade some of it. But we don’t think it’ll stay that way, and we want op*/9tions before we absolutely need them.”

“Right, okay,” Jake says. He scratches the back of his neck and takes a sip of his vodka. “Okay. Off the top of my head, I know a safe house in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan that only two other people know about, neither of whom are in the chain of command. Of those two people, one is on a long-term undercover mission to another planet, and one is preparing for an open-ended mission off-planet. The house in Brooklyn will hold two people, the one in Manhattan up to three. Both are in areas that get a lot of foot and vehicle traffic, although the Manhattan building is relatively near some government offices. I need to do some more research before I can give you more options than that, though. We have at least one safe house in every country on Earth large enough to hold one, but a lot of them aren’t designed to be more than a bolthole for a few days. And some may not be useable anymore, a lot of them were set up a long time ago and since my team mostly operates off-planet we don’t maintain every single safe house.”

“Is the one in Brooklyn anywhere near your family?” Jill asks.

“About a fifteen minute walk,” Jake says.

“Okay,” Jill says. “If we needed to get off-planet in a hurry, what options do we have?”

“More,” Jake says. “But I’d need about two days’ advance notice and I’d need to know the size of
our party first. And we’d need to wrangle transportation to said off-planet because I don’t own a ship.”

“We have the personal transporters,” Jill says. “We’re good on that front so long as we have coordinates.”

“That’s easy enough,” Jake says. “Okay. I’ll start putting a list together, on and off planet. I’ve told my CO that I’m refusing to be on duty until I’m completely healed and no longer considering killing cadets, so I’ve got a few weeks of official downtime and I’ll probably use some of my seriously accumulated leave to pad it out.”

“How much leave have you banked?” Jill asks.

“Uh,” Jake says. “Eight months, I think?”

At Starfleet’s general rate of accrual, Khan finds that both impressive and a bit disturbing. “Don’t look at me like that,” Jake says, laughing. “You accrue leave a lot faster when you’re on undercover missions, it’s basically equivalent to combat or so they tell me. Same with pay, you get paid a lot more for undercover work because there’s the risk your family will never find out how you died or even get a body back. So my bank account’s healthy and my personal leave time is ridiculous and I’m probably going to take some of it.”

“Your bank account is also healthy because you don’t report everything people pay you,” Jill says.

“Of course I don’t,” Jake says. He looks at Khan. “My undercover persona is basically a merc,” he explains. “I get paid for all kinds of jobs, some of which Starfleet arranges and some of which they don’t. I report most of what I get paid, but I always keep some back. They’re not stupid, I’m sure they know I do, but no one’s tried to audit me or force the issue.”

Khan nods. “They likely won’t,” he says. “Intelligence operatives get more leeway than regular officers, and so long as they do not have a reason to believe you’re playing both sides…”

“Which I’m not except I am now,” Jake says. “But whatever, that’s different, and speaking of it, how soon do we need a plan B for moving people around?”

“How soon can you get one together?” Jill asks.

Jake scratches at the stubble on his jaw. “Give me forty-eight hours,” he says. “I might not need that much but give me two days to put together options, and another day for off-planet options since that’s probably lower on the priority list until we really need it.”

“We can manage that,” Jill says.

“Tell me about these seven people?” Jake asks. “I might know some of them.”

“The three we have found are Verity Stewart, Malcolm Baker, and Simon Campbell,” Khan says. “All three are based in London and we tagged each of them with subcutaneous trackers that none of them appear to have noticed.”


“Verity has really dark skin and bright red hair,” Jill says. “Medium height, lots of curves. Malcolm is taller, kind of stocky, balding and watery blue eyes. Simon’s about your height and build, sandy hair, a scar by his right eye, like a comma.”
“Verity might be someone I’ve met,” Jake says. “Not sure about the other two, but appearance is easy to change. Who else have you found out about?”

Khan gives him a brief rundown of the other four people. Jake grimaces when Khan mentions Ikan. “Him, I know,” he says. “He’s ruthless, arrogant, and a complete asshole. He’s also unfortunately good at what he does. I’ve fortunately only run into him a few times and haven’t had to work with him, but I don’t like him and if he’s out for you, we could have trouble.”

“We have not been able to tag him yet,” Khan says. “Ekaterina says she has seen him twice, but not in a situation where she could plant the bug. We were fortunate with the first three. Ikan is more… paranoid about his personal space.”

“I’m not going to be surprised if you can’t bug him, period,” Jake says. “It’d be like getting a bug on me, and I like to think I’d notice.”

“If we got you with one of the bugs Andy’s made you wouldn’t find it,” Jill says. “But you probably wouldn’t let anyone get close enough to stick it on you.”

“Like I said,” Jake says. He finishes his vodka and sets the glass down. “Can I crash either here or at Khan’s place tonight? I’m wiped and I was hoping to have another drink and sleep somewhere safe.”

Jill looks at Khan, who shrugs one shoulder. “You can sleep at Khan’s place,” she says. “Unless you just want the couch here. It’s comfortable.”

“Honestly I don’t care,” Jake says. “I just…it was a really, really shitty week and I was hoping maybe you’d take pity on me and rub my neck.”

“I can do that,” Jill says, finishing her own drink. “Let me grab the unscented oil. Meanwhile, you take your shirt off and sit on the floor.”

Jake nods and does that, wincing slightly as he moves to the floor, while Jill climbs over the back of the couch and ducks into her bedroom. “What else went wrong on the mission?” Khan asks, looking at Jake and noticing the bruises scattered over his torso.

“One of my cadets died,” Jake says after a moment. “Long story, it was part of everything else that went wrong, and we didn’t have the medical care to save his life. We knew it was a dangerous trip, but we didn’t expect it to go quite so balls-up quite so fast, and it wasn’t helped by the incompetence of most of the other people. I told my CO that if I ever teach that class again I get to observe the potential students for a week first and I get final say over who actually attends.”

“My sympathies,” Khan says. “How close did you come to dying?”

“That depressed skull fracture I didn’t quite get would likely have done me in,” Jake says. “I lucked the hell out and got a severe concussion but avoided bleeding inside my skull. Eema always said I had a hard head and a thick skull, turns out she was right.”

“She usually is,” Jill says, returning with a small bottle of clear liquid. “The cadet who died, are you getting reprimanded for it?”

“No, I’m not,” Jake says. “I filed my report, two cadets filed supporting reports on my behalf, and the official word is that it was unfortunate but not due to negligence on my part. But it’s…it sucks. It’s not like I’ve never lost a man before, but it’s worse when they’re cadets. Although in this case it’s tempered by the fact that he was just…incompetent. I still don’t know how he made it into the Academy in the first place.”
“There are always a few like that,” Jill says, sitting behind Jake on the couch and pouring a little oil into her hands. She rubs them together briskly and starts working on his neck. “And the recruiting standards for the Academy got relaxed a bit after the battle of Vulcan. Starfleet lost too many personnel.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t relaxed, this is like comatose,” Jake says, dropping his head forward. “Okay, so, enough about my shitty week and my stupid cadets. What have I missed here?”

“You know we got four back,” Jill says. “And there are seven people sort of working together. I say sort of because Malcolm wants to take Khan out but Verity’s arguing against it, and we’re not sure of other people’s stances. They’re definitely up to something together but I’m not sure what the overall goal is, and neither is anyone else. We’ve built—rather, Andy and Katsuro built a bunch of personal jammers we’ve taken to carrying when we can, and Khan, Katsuro, and Andy have built most of the transporters we need. We’re giving one to every two people but there’s an odd number so you get your own, Khan will need a DNA sample from you to lock yours.”

“Can do,” Jake says. “Have we gotten any kind of hard evidence on Marcus we can take to whoever?”

“No, not yet,” Jill says. “Well, we have a lot but nothing that can’t be argued somehow.”

“Okay,” Jake says. “Ow, not—ow.”

“Take a breath,” Jill says. “And—exhale.” Jake does and she presses down firmly; Khan almost hears the muscle release and definitely sees the relief on Jake’s face.

“Okay,” Jake says after a moment. “So tell me what your crazy plan is to eliminate Marcus, get Khan’s people back, and prevent a war.”

“Why do you think I have one?” Jill asks.

“Because I know you, shorty,” Jake says. “And you’ve got something. You always do. It’s not always workable but you’ve got something.”

“I’m not…I’m not sure I’m ready to share this one yet,” Jill says, hedging. Khan says nothing; he knows she has something on her mind from the conversation with Magpie he overheard, but Jill has remained steadfastly silent on the subject.

“Spill it,” Jake says. “Jill, it’s me and Khan here. You can tell us. If we think it’s completely idiotic, we’ll tell you.”

Jill chews her lip. “Okay,” she says finally. “Okay. Here’s the thing. The Klingons believe in honor and trial by combat. If we defeat them fairly in battle, they’ll negotiate for peace. I don’t know why they haven’t provoked a battle with us, but I’m glad of it because I’m not sure the Federation would win. But if—if we provoke a battle with them, if we win, we can negotiate a true peace treaty, and if we do that, we can set our terms with the Federation, including them giving us Marcus.”

“How the fuck do you expect us to win a battle with the Klingons?” Jake asks. “They’ve got a fucking empire, shorty.”

“Trial by combat,” Jill repeats. “We take Khan’s people, pit them against the Klingon’s best warriors, and winner sets the peace terms.”

Khan says nothing because Jill caught him completely off-guard. This idea had never even
occurred to him, and while there are holes in it large enough for the Vengeance he also thinks it might--*might*--be plausible enough to work.

“Shit,” Jake says after a moment of resounding silence. “That’s…fuck me. That’s the most insane idea you’ve ever had.”

“I know,” Jill says. “And I don’t know if it’d work, and they’d have a million reasons *not* to negotiate with us, and even if we do win they might not—you see what I’m getting at?”

“I do,” Jake says. “On the other hand, if we pull it off…”

“Yeah,” Jill says. “If we pull it off, we have an insane upper hand, and we can set our own terms and write our own ticket.”

Jake blows out a breath. “I can honestly say I’m not in any shape to think about this right now,” he admits. He looks at Khan. “What do you think?”

“I…am not certain,” Khan says slowly. “I think…it is *possible*. How plausible it is, though…” He shakes his head, his wings ruffling a bit. “We would need to discuss in much more detail before I can commit to an opinion one way or the other.”

“Yeah, obviously,” Jake says. “Jill?”

“It’s insane,” she says. “It’s utterly completely insane, and it shouldn’t work, but when you realize how much we need to accomplish and how little we have with which to do it, you start looking for any way you can to increase the odds. This could get us all killed, yes, and if we fail we could provoke a war with the Klingon Empire that the Federation might not survive. But if we win…”

“Okay, so, before we even get into the hows of this,” Jake says. “Khan? Can your people take down the Klingons’ best?”

“Yes,” Khan says without hesitation. “Yes, we can. They are a more worthy opponent than a regular human, and it would not necessarily be an easy battle depending on logistics, but we would have a strong advantage.”

“Well, that’s something at least,” Jake says. “But Jill and I couldn’t. We might—and I do mean might—be able to take down one or two of them together, but more than that and we’d be fucked. Shorty, I know you hate me pointing this out but you’re just not big enough to handle a bunch of Klingons. You could sneak around them and stab them in whatever vulnerable spot they have, but…”

“I know,” Jill says, grimacing. “I know. I think…we could work around it. I’m still mulling over some of this in my head. But I think…right now I think I want another drink and I want you to take a hot shower and go to bed, either on my couch or in Khan’s bed. This insanity will still be there in the morning and I want to talk to Khan.”

“Okay,” Jake says. “Works for me. If I ask you to walk on my back tomorrow would you say yes?”

“Maybe but maybe not since you have two cracked ribs,” Jill says. “I’m small but I’d rather not risk cracking your ribs again.”

“They’re knitted, just not fully healed,” Jake says. “Please?”

“I’ll think about it,” Jill says. She wipes her hands on her pants and gets up. “Put on your shirt and Khan will let you into his flat so you can shower and sleep.”
“I will?” Khan asks, amused.

“Unless you’d rather he stayed here,” Jill says, smiling sweetly.

Khan laughs. “I see.”

He takes Jake downstairs to his flat and lets him in, checks the jammer and the tells, and gives him a towel. “Thanks,” Jake says, taking it. “It’s—yeah. I’m okay, I just need a bit of downtime in a safe space.”

“I understand,” Khan says quietly. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you need.”

“Thank you,” Jake says. “I—thank you. That means a lot.”

“You are Jill’s brother,” Khan says. “That makes you family.”

“How are things with you and her?” Jake asks. “Just—I don’t really want to know but I kind of do.”

“We are fine,” Khan says. He hesitates, then figures everyone else already knows and Jake might have perspective. “She told me she loves me,” he says. “But she will not believe her feelings are returned.”

“Please tell me you’re not surprised,” Jake says.

“No, not entirely,” Khan says. “Frustrated is more accurate. Do you have any ideas how I can convince her otherwise?”

Jake blows out a breath. “Honestly, I think it’s just going to take time,” he says. “Either that or some insane thing that involves you risking your own life to save hers or some shit. I don’t know. I love my sister but have I mentioned she’s fucked up?”

“A few times,” Khan says dryly.

“Yeah,” Jake says. “So…yeah. Not really sure what to tell you on that front, just…eventually she’ll clue in. She always does. It just takes a while. Also, meeting my mom might help.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because Jill loves my mom, which is smart because everyone does,” Jake says. “And if Eema approves of you and your relationship with her daughter, it’ll make Jill feel better about everything. She’s never really had a boyfriend Eema approved of. Eema’s only met one of them, even, and she didn’t like him, so if you meet her, and she likes you, it’s a huge indication that you’re not an asshole about to dump my sister.”

“I see,” Khan says. “However, I am not entirely certain I have the time or the low profile needed to meet your mother.”

"Right now, probably not," Jake says. "Although I can have her come to you, that’s easy enough. I’m not saying this week is a good time, or even this month, but if you want Jill to feel easier about you and your commitment to her, it would be a really good idea.”

He doesn’t have the time, he doesn’t want more civilians involved at all, and the idea of needing a parent’s approval to confirm his relationship with Jill frankly baffles him. On the other hand, it continues to bother him that she will not believe him. It hurts, if he is to be completely honest, and
he thinks that hurt may grow into resentment if he is not careful about it.

Not for the first time, Khan thinks his life would be so much simpler without her in it. But that isn’t an option, nor does he want it to be.

He lets his wings stretch a bit and fold back. “When can you bring her here?” he asks finally, aware this is a terrible idea but also acknowledging the truth in Jake’s words.

“Either tomorrow or Tuesday,” Jake says. “Which would you prefer?”

“Neither, but tomorrow will suffice,” Khan says.

Jake laughs. “It won’t be that terrible, I promise,” he says. “Eema’s…she’s amazing. She’s kind of terrifying, but she’s one of the best people I know, and I’m not just saying that because she’s my mother. And Jill means a lot to her, always has. Eema has…opinions on Jill’s biological parents, and I think she decided a long time ago to do what she could to make up for their neglect.”

“Her opinions sound similar to mine,” Khan says.

“And mine,” Jake says. “And anyone else who knows Jill.” He rubs the back of his neck with his good hand. “It’d probably be best if you didn’t tell Jill I was arranging for you to meet Eema,” he says. “At least, not until after you’ve met her.”

Khan nods. “I understand.”

“I’ll message you in the morning when I know a time and we’ll set up a meeting point,” Jake says. “Probably my flat, not the safe room but a place I’m subletting from a colleague.”

“Jill will be at the archive starting around 0700 hours,” Khan says. “I have some flexibility in my day.”

“Cool,” Jake says. “Then we’ll figure this out. I realize the timing on this is completely shitty and the last thing you want to do right now is meet the parents, because no one ever wants to do that and also given what we’re trying to accomplish this is a terrible time to involve more people. But… it’s Jill.”

“It is,” Khan says simply. “And I need her to believe me.”

Jake nods. “Yeah, you do. Okay. I’m going to avail myself of your shower and get clean. What time do you need me to be out of here in the morning?”

“By seven hundred,” Khan says.

“Easy enough,” Jake says. “Thanks for the crash space.”

“You are welcome,” Khan says. He clasps Jake’s shoulder, brushing the other one with a wingtip. “We will be right upstairs if you need anything.”

Jake smiles a little sheepishly. “Thanks.”

Khan nods and leaves, taking the stairs two at a time back to Jill’s flat. He finds her sitting cross-legged on the couch, studying a tablet. “Everything okay?” she asks, looking up when he comes over to her.

“Yes,” Khan says, sitting on the arm of the couch to spare his wings. “Jake just needed to talk for a bit.”
“Yeah, I can get that,” Jill says. “He hates losing people. I was looking up the report of the class, and honestly I’m surprised they only lost one. Everything that could have gone wrong did, and a lot of it was preventable.”

“Does Starfleet not teach basic survival skills?” Khan asks.

“They do but anything more than the serious basics is optional and a lot of people don’t bother,” Jill says. “This was two levels above the mandatory basics but I have no idea how some of these people made it there. They shouldn’t have.”

“Did you take advanced survival?” Khan asks.

“I took one level up, but then I didn’t bother because Jake taught me what I needed to know,” Jill says. “I only had room for so many electives and I was more interested in advanced combat, piloting, and psychology. But Jake studied a lot of wilderness skills growing up, so he knew a lot about it. Kind of funny, for a boy from Brooklyn, but he likes that sort of thing.”

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Khan asks, changing the subject.

“I took a brief nap this afternoon when I came back here,” Jill says, tugging on a curl. “I had a dream. It wasn’t a nightmare, but it was…weird. I only remember bits and pieces, but some of the imagery really burned itself into my mind. There was a set of scales, like the ones you see on the statues of Justice, and on one side was a Federation starship and on the other side was a Klingon bat’leth. And there was some kind of ceremony, and I saw a cup, a chalice almost, and in the cup was blood, but it wasn’t the color of human blood. It wasn’t the color of Klingon blood either, or Vulcan, just…almost a mix of colors. I don’t remember much else, just…it was weird. And I’m not sure it was caused by anything but my subconscious trying to tell me this crazy idea of mine is completely unworkable or if someone was trying to send me a message.”

“I do not know which to believe,” Khan admits. “How long have you been thinking about this?”

“A while,” Jill says. “I realized that if we want to accomplish everything we want to accomplish, we have to have an advantage big enough it can’t be bargained away or dismissed. The only way to really get that advantage is to pull off something big enough we’ve got Starfleet brass and the Federation politicians right where we want them. And the only way to do that is to put a full stop to any hostilities between the Federation and the Klingon empire.”

She sighs. “But the Klingons might refuse to negotiate. We’re not officially representing the Federation, so they might not think it was worth their time to bargain with us. They might set conditions for the tournament that we couldn’t meet. If they insist Jake and I have to join the fight, we’re in trouble. I thought the way around that would be for us to be witnesses, and the Klingons would have two of their own as well to witness, but I’m not sure it’d work. We’d have to find a way to get off-planet and have somewhere to hole up because I don’t want to transport right from Earth to Qo’noS. Andy and Magpie couldn’t go with us at all, but we need them. There’s a lot of ifs and maybes and things to figure out, and I still don’t know if we could pull it off.”

“It would be a gamble,” Khan admits. “A rather large one. If we fail, the Klingons would likely declare all-out war.”

“Yes, but we wouldn’t be around to see it, since they’d likely kill us all,” Jill says with a glimmer of humor.

Khan smiles a bit. “Let us think on this for a bit,” he says. “I would like input from Konstantin and Bishop, and once we revive them Alona as well. Bishop is a tactician, and Konstantin and Alona
studied social sciences. They may be able to extrapolate from existing data and determine what would raise our chances of success against the Klingons.”

“Let’s hold off on saying anything until after the ops are finished,” Jill says. “That way we know all the people we have to work with.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Yes, that would be a good idea.”

Jill smiles a little and sets the tablet aside. “Are—are we still on for Sunday?” she asks tentatively. “I didn’t know if—if you wanted—“

“I do want,” Khan says softly, moving to sit on the couch next to her, his wings folded back and mostly out of the way. “You promised me one day, and I want it. I will have it.”

Color rises in her cheeks and Jill ducks her head. “Okay,” she says, a bare whisper. “You can have it.”

“I need you to answer me one question first,” Khan says, tipping her chin up. “Do you want the right to safeword on Sunday or not?”

She takes a breath, licks her lips. “I…” Jill stops, takes another breath. “No.”

“Are you certain?” Khan asks, smoothing a thumb over her cheek.

“I probably wouldn’t remember I could anyway,” she says, leaning her head into his hand. “And you’d stop if you thought I needed it. So, yes, I’m sure.” Jill bites her lip, hesitating, then blows out a breath. “I don’t need my safeword with you,” she says. “At all. I trust you to stop if I need it, or if you need it, and I trust you to not push me past what I can handle. So I’m giving it up.”

“That isn’t a promise to make lightly, pyara,” Khan says quietly.

“I know,” Jill says. “But I’m making it. I—I want the right to say no before we get started, if I just don’t want to play or have sex or whatever, but…but I don’t need my safeword once we’re in a scene.”

Khan curls his hand around the back of her neck, gripping her tightly enough she whimpers. “Mine,” he says evenly. “You belong to me, milaya moya. I will take care of you, I promise you that, but you are mine.”

“Yes,” Jill whispers. She closes her eyes, swallowing hard; Khan sees her pulse quicken in the hollow of her throat. He releases her neck and slides his hand into her hair instead, fisting his hand in her curls and pulling her head back. Jill whimpers and her lips part as she shifts on the couch. “Please,” she manages, shuddering when Khan tightens the hand in her hair and pulls more, forcing her to arch her body against his hold.

“What would you let me do, milaya moya?” he asks, getting to his feet and drawing her up with him. Jill stumbles, legs wobbly, and lands against his chest. Khan keeps his hand in her hair, but wraps his wings around her, holding her close with his other arm. “What would you let me do with you?”
“Anything,” she whispers. “You know that.”

“I do,” Khan says, shifting his hold on her to pick her up. She wraps her legs around his waist and her hands link behind his neck; he holds her close and starts walking to the bedroom. “Just as I know you won’t touch yourself without my permission, that you won’t come unless I let you.”


He lays her down on the bed, kissing her hard and fast before he pulls away. “Undress for me,” he says, beginning to do the same.

It takes Jill all of thirty seconds to strip out of her shirt and pants, tossing them in the general direction of the hamper. Khan takes his time, deliberately so, watching her pupils dilate and her teeth sink into her lower lip as she watches him. He makes no comment on it. When he rests a knee on the bed and crawls over her she tips her head back, shivering as his skin brushes hers.

"Do you know what I enjoy most about this game?" he asks, nuzzling her throat. "Do you know what pleases me more than almost anything?"

"No," Jill murmurs, reaching for him. Khan pins her wrists over her head, smiling a bit when she shudders.

"The anticipation," he says, almost purring it. "The build up, the tease of it. Watching you as you spiral down, as you get out of your head and into the space where only I matter to you. Watching you want it more and more, until you think you will die if I don't touch you, until you beg me for anything I want to give you."

"Please," she says, breathless and aroused. "I will, but please, don't—"

"You know it will be worth it," Khan says softly. "You know I will take care of you, milaya moya."

She whimpers, but doesn't ask again, which pleases him. He kisses her, slow and deep, easing his hold on her wrists and pleased when she doesn't move her hands. "Good girl," he says, brushing a curl back from her face. "Very good."

"You're going to kill me," Jill mutters, taking a breath.

Khan laughs softly. "Only two days, milaya moya. You will survive."

He kisses her lightly and moves off her, brushing his fingers down her cheek. "I promise it will be worth it," he says.

"You'd better be right or I'm going to be pissed," Jill says, giving him a mock glare.

"Be good for me," Khan says, meeting her eyes. "That is all I am asking, Jill."

She sighs and slumps. "I'm trying. I'm—I'm trying."

"I know," he says. "You are doing very well."

"If we're not going to have sex, I think I just want to go to sleep," Jill says after a moment. "I know
you don't need it, but—"

"I will stay with you," Khan says simply.

Color rises in her cheeks and she looks down. "Thank you."

Jill pulls on a sleepshirt and crawls under the covers, settling against Khan with his arm around her waist and a wing draped over her. "You're a bastard, but I love you anyway," she says, smiling a little.

"I know," Khan says, kissing her hair. Jill huffs out a laugh and sighs, closing her eyes.

He holds her long after she's fallen asleep, looking at the faint light coming in through the window, the way it casts shadows on Jill's skin. He remembers the sketch Magpie showed him and wonders what Jill dreams tonight, whether she will remember any more images or scenes or whether she will remember nothing at all.

He'll ask in the morning. For now, she sleeps quietly, and that is all Khan can ask for tonight.

Chapter End Notes

So...yes, Jill's somewhat crazy and impulsive, but the idea has logic behind it. Kind of. Maybe. In an alternate universe somewhere. What do you think of it?
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

We'll see.

Chapter Notes

Not much plot this chapter, but a lot of character stuff that I rather enjoyed writing. I hope you enjoy reading it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jill barely gets out the door on time in the morning; Khan, the reason for her tardiness, doesn't much care about it. He's far more amused by the color in Jill's cheeks and the way she deliberately doesn't look at him as she pulls on her uniform and braids her hair back.

She does kiss him before she leaves, leaning up as he bends down. "I still don't like you very much right now," she says, making a face at him.

"I know," Khan says, brushing his knuckles down her cheek. "You do not have to."

"Thanks," Jill says dryly. "I'll see you later. Message me with where, whether we'll meet here or at the house or whatever."

"I will," Khan says. He kisses her one last time, lingering just a bit, before he pulls back. Jill takes a couple deep, slow breaths, then grabs her purse and runs out the door.

Khan smiles, moving to make himself a cup of coffee. She's remarkably easy to ruffle, at least in that regard, and he appreciates it. The game wouldn't be nearly as much fun if she wasn't.

As he finishes his coffee, he's considering what he wants to work on for the day and whether it would be worth it for him to give Marcus an update on the weapon he's been hinting about. Marcus clearly wants to know more about it, and Khan does have a prototype to show him, but he hasn't decided whether he wants to admit that to Marcus. He will not be showing Marcus the actual weapon instead of the prototype, especially as the prototype has flaws he later corrected.

He's still musing over it when his link chirps and startles him out of his thoughts. "Harrison," he says, answering briefly.

"Hi," Jake says. "Meet me at this address in three hours." He reads it off to Khan, giving him the cross-streets and the nearest Tube stop. "Good luck," he adds.

"Do I need it?" Khan asks.

"Um," Jake says. "I'm not entirely certain but it couldn't hurt."

"I see," Khan says. "I will see you in three hours, then."
To be perfectly honest, Khan is rethinking the entire idea of meeting Jake's mother—whose name he doesn't even know, he realizes. This could complicate matters significantly, and that would be the last thing either he or Jill need. Khan has no intention of telling Jake's mother the entire truth about what they are doing, but he also doesn't particularly want to lie to her.

He mutters a few curses under his breath in Hindi, frustrated with the whole situation and recognizing a fair amount of his aggravation is aimed at Jill. If she would just trust him, if she would believe him, none of this would be necessary. Or, rather, it might be necessary but it might not be necessary right now.

But she doesn't and it is and Khan acknowledges that while he is frustrated with Jill, he also loves her enough that he can't walk away. He will make this right between them, and if meeting her mother is a path to that end result, then he will do so.

For now, he meets his siblings for their usual morning run, although he begs off from the spar due to lack of time and fresh clothes. All four of them give him varying looks of surprise and sympathy when he explains the meeting; none of them have ever had to deal with parents in this regard before. Khan had had Rani's father, but that was a different situation entirely.

"Well," Cat says. "I suppose the appropriate thing to do is wish you luck."

"Thank you," Khan says, amused by it. "Killing her is not an option, for the record."

"Then you had best hope she does not hurt you or damage your relationship with Jill," Cat says briskly.

"She will not," Khan says although he wonders, just a bit. He has no idea what Jill has told this woman, if anything, or what Jake himself has. He has no idea what she might be thinking, or her attitude toward him.

Apparently he is about to find out, a thought that does not fill him with great joy.

He washes up and takes a taxi to a spot half a kilometer from the address Jake gave him, choosing to walk the rest of the way. Not an area of London he knows with any great familiarity, but the surroundings look fairly inconspicuous; older buildings of flats interspersed with a few small shops. The address turns out to be a building with a cleaners’ on the ground floor and flats above, and Jake had told him 2B on the address, so Khan takes the stairs.

2B turns out to be a faded blue door with what Khan thinks is a mezzuzah on the doorframe. He knocks, two quick firm raps on the door, and a few seconds later Jake opens the door, surprisingly not scruffy and wearing a button-down shirt, albeit with the sleeves rolled up and the tails untucked over jeans. “Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant,” he murmurs.

Khan swallows a laugh. “I rather think that should be my line,” he says.

“Maybe,” Jake says, grinning. “Come on in.” He steps back and lets Khan enter the small flat. On the shabby side, Khan notes, but impeccably clean and with a faint scent of lemon in the air. Older furnishings, nothing fancy—and then Khan’s attention gets taken by the woman sitting quietly in a faded green armchair.

Calm dark eyes, hair hidden under a blue snood, and Khan sees the resemblance to Jake in the line of her face, the steadiness of her gaze. She rises to her feet as he walks in, and he notes that she isn’t all that tall; perhaps a bit taller than Alona, but not by much.

“Right, so,” Jake says, shutting the door and locking it with one deadbolt, one combination lock,
Sarah studies Khan silently for a moment, saying nothing; he meets her eyes and does the same. “Well,” she says finally, her voice low and clear. “We’ll see.”

“Well,” Khan says, feeling mildly irritated.

She smiles faintly. “Jake, I believe we need more coffee.”

“I just—” Jake sighs. “Yes, Eema. I’ll be back. Please don’t kill each other, Will will strangle me if you get blood all over the place.” He unlocks the door again and slips out, closing it firmly behind him.

“So,” Sarah says, taking a seat in the armchair again. She gestures to the sofa, but Khan takes a seat on the table to spare his wings the couch cushions. “Do I call you John or Khan?”

“Khan,” he says. “Does it matter?”

“I prefer to call people what they wish to be called,” Sarah says. She reaches down into a tote bag by her feet and takes out a half-finished knitting project in shades of pastels. Khan watches her study it for a moment and begin working, needles moving swiftly and steadily. “My oldest son called me last evening and said I needed to come to London to meet the man my daughter has fallen in love with—the man she steadfastly refused to tell me anything about, and with whom she denied she was in love. I find this curious, and I find it more curious that she doesn’t know I’m here. So I would like to know why I am in London at this time, and I would like to know exactly what is between you and Jill.”

Khan is so, so very tempted to comment that people cannot always get what they like, but recognizes it for a juvenile impulse and dismisses it. “She admits she loves me,” he says instead. “She does not believe I love her.”

“Do you?” Sarah asks.

“You,” Khan says although it galls him to tell her. He doesn’t know her, he doesn’t trust her, and he doesn’t want to do this at all. Anger and resentment coil uneasily in his stomach and he grits his jaw, looking away for a moment until he masters himself.

“I thought as much,” Sarah says. “If you didn’t, we wouldn’t be here.”

“Why do you think we are here?” Khan asks.

“A good question,” Sarah says, laying down her knitting. “I think Jill frustrates you, and I think you would like help with that. I think that whatever your story is, Khan who is John Harrison and about whom my son will tell me very little, the fault in your relationship with her could prove deadly if she doesn’t trust you at the right moment—or if you resent her enough to walk away at the wrong time. I think my son would like to know I have met you, so that at least if I get a uniformed Starfleet officer showing up on my doorstep to tell me my son is dead and not tell me more, I might have a name and a face to remember.” She looks tired for a moment, and looks down at her knitting. “Of my three biological sons, two are in Starfleet. Of my adoptive children, four out of the five of them are in Starfleet. Most of them are in Intelligence, or covert operations, and can tell me very little about what they do, but I live with the knowledge and the fear that one day they just...might not come home, ever again. I do not like it, but I am used to it, and I do not argue my children against their chosen paths. I am proud of them for serving, and I am proud that they do so
well."

She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. “But whatever you have drawn them into—my oldest son and my oldest daughter—this isn’t something I am familiar with. Jake tells me very little but enough for me to understand that he and Jill are working against Starfleet in whatever this is. Jill tells me very little but enough for me to understand that she is thinking of resigning her commission, that she feels ashamed of the organization she has served all of her adult life. This—I don’t understand this. I don’t know enough to know why this is, and instinct tells me you are the key to this.”

“What do you want from me?” Khan asks quietly.

“I want to know why you love Jill,” Sarah says. “And I want to know what is going on. Jake can’t tell me things because Starfleet forbids this, but there’s no regulation for this.”

“The two are related,” Khan says.

“Then tell me,” Sarah says. She doesn’t take her eyes off Khan’s, and the determination in hers is something he thinks Ekaterina would approve of.

“Jill…” Khan stops, considers for a moment. “She was the first person I met who asked me about myself,” he says slowly, carefully. “She was the first person I met who offered me her help, freely, unthinkingly, without care for what it might entail or what it might cost her. She asked nothing of me and she gave me everything of her.” He lets out a slow breath. “I owe her more than I can ever repay, and I know that, but I love her because she will never ask me for payment on that debt.”

The words hurt to speak, cutting into his throat. Khan doesn’t enjoy lying but he also doesn’t enjoy being this honest with someone he doesn’t know and doesn’t trust.

“Since when?” Sarah asks quietly. Khan frowns, looking at her.

“Clarify,” he says, not sure what she means.

“You said she was the first person you met,” Sarah says. “But you’re not exactly an infant or a toddler, and you were in Starfleet before you met her, clearly. What are you counting from? What changed?”

“Since I became John Harrison,” Khan says.

“You didn’t choose to do that, did you,” Sarah says.

“No, I did not.” Khan doesn’t explain further.

“Curious,” Sarah murmurs.

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because I would lay odds that very few people ever have forced you to do something you didn’t want to do,” Sarah says. “You remind me of my father in that aspect.”

“I take it that is not entirely a compliment,” Khan says at the tone in her voice.

“It’s not a compliment or a complaint,” Sarah says. “Just an observation.”

Khan doesn’t quite believe it. “What do you want to know?” he asks.
“Why did you become John Harrison, and what does it mean for my children?” Sarah asks.

“Alexander Marcus,” Khan says, gauging her reaction to the name.

She doesn’t give him a visible reaction but he sees recognition in her face. “I’m familiar with the man,” she acknowledges. “I haven’t met him personally, and I’d rather not. Meeting Starfleet’s lead admiral would likely mean something had happened to one of my kids.”

“He has a number of programs accountable only to him,” Khan says, considering how much to tell her and how much to hold back. “Most of which…do not fit Starfleet’s code.”

“I see,” Sarah says after a moment.

“Do you,” Khan says.

“It’s not difficult to put the pieces together,” Sarah says. “He coerced you into helping. Jill offered you help getting out, and where Jill goes, Jake goes. But taking that on…” She shakes her head slowly. “I don’t know whether to admire my children for their determination or slap them for their foolishness.”

“If no one tries to change the situation, it does not go away,” Khan says.

“No,” Sarah says. “But does it have to be my family that’s the front line fighters?” She sounds almost plaintive, not something Khan thinks she does often. And, in truth, a moment later she sighs and begins knitting again. “Of course it does,” she says. “I taught them that. I taught them that they couldn’t ask anyone to do things they weren’t willing to do themselves.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Sarah asks. “No human, or alien for that matter, is “better” than anyone else. We all have different skills, yes, and some of those skills are more valued than others. A Starfleet pilot will be considered a more important member of society than the crew who services his shuttle. But without that cleaning crew, the shuttle wouldn’t fly. So who really has the value in that situation? I sell handmade blankets, quilts, things of that sort. What do I contribute to society that couldn’t be done by another person? But is my value in what I, personally, do, or is it in the children I’ve raised and sent forth into the world? Is my value in being a small businesswoman or in being a mother, and either way, does it matter? I am entitled to respect and politeness from my fellow citizens, regardless of whether I salute an admiral or clean his toilet.”

So different from what Khan learned as a child, and yet truer than the words of the scientists ever were. He keeps his face and body still, not wanting to give her an advantage from any reaction he might have. He does think Cat will like this woman, and Anandi. But he doesn’t want her involved further than she already is.

The door opens and Jake returns carrying a drink tray with three cups in it. He looks warily from Sarah to Khan and back again. “Well, you’re both still alive and in one piece,” he says, shutting and locking the door. “That’s better than it could be.”

Sarah snorts and begins knitting again. “You say this as though you expected us to literally kill each other.”

“Your knitting needles are deadly,” Jake says, setting a cup on the end table next to her. He hands the next one to Khan, tosses the tray in the trash and drops onto the couch with his own. “Shove it up the nose, into the brain, he’d be dead before he knew it.”
“Thank you for that charming image, Aaron,” Sarah says. “Moving on, I believe there may be something you need from me, or from my family. Is there?”

Khan looks at Jake, wondering what he told Sarah. Jake grimaces and scratches the back of the neck. “We need to hide eight people, and I’d rather not use too many of the safe houses I know in case someone else needs them or someone catches on to what I’m doing,” he says reluctantly. “Eema…might be able to help. The family’s pretty huge, and somewhat scattered.”

“We have immediate family in New York, Oregon, and New Aegean, a mostly water planet not that close to here,” Sarah says. “A good place to hide or visit, but not a great place if you need to stay close to Earth. The cousins are scattered across Earth, the United States and Europe mostly.”

“Where in Europe?” Khan asks.

Sarah tilts her head, thinking. “I have two cousins and their four very large dogs somewhere in Sweden, but I can’t remember offhand just where. I have a cluster of cousins outside Moscow, the ones who emigrated back from the US after the Earth developed its unified government. Actually, of that cluster there are three about an hour from the city and a pair in the city itself. We have relatives in Israel, near Tel Aviv, and I believe Seth just moved to Edinburgh, Scotland although I may be misremembering on that one.”

“No, he did,” Jake says. “He got divorced from his husband and moved to Scotland because he threw a pin at a map and that was where it landed. So far he says he likes it, and he’s just started dating a chef. There’s also…huh. Did Michel and Laine move back to Paris, or are they still in Spain?”

“They split their time,” Sarah says. “This time of year they’ll be in Paris. But that does leave the house in Spain open for visitors or guests.”

“They would not object to unknown adults staying?” Khan asks.

“Not if family asks,” Sarah says calmly. “We’re Jews. We’ve been Jews for thousands of years, we will continue to be for hopefully thousands of years. We know the value of family, and of history. We lost people in the pogroms, we lost people in the Holocaust, we lost people in war after war, ethnic cleansing or even just by accident. Those of us left stay close to each other, and our family rule is that if someone asks, you help them.”

“But I and my people are not your family,” Khan says, not sure how he feels about this whole situation.

“That’s a debate for another time,” Sarah says. “And the key word in that sentence may be ‘yet’. I haven’t decided. However, the point is that we have a geographically diverse family across Earth and a few other planets, and if we need to take in eight people, it is possible and plausible.”

“I still don’t like it,” Jake mutters. “If anyone finds out, we could—“ He shakes his head. “I don’t like it and I don’t know if I have an alternative yet.”

“Tell me who you would need to hide,” Sarah says to Khan, ignoring Jake.

“At the moment, four of my siblings,” Khan says. “In two pairs, preferably. The first pair is Russian to the bone. The second pair are Japanese and French. Languages…are not a problem.”

“Then…” Sarah stops knitting, considers. “The Russians could easily stay with Eli and Natalia. They have a basement apartment in their house that has its own entrance, kitchen, bathroom, all that. Eli and Natalia often use it for houseguests, or visitors who want more privacy than their
guest room. I don’t think anyone is using it at the moment.”

“Are those the cousins in Moscow?” Khan asks.

“They are,” Sarah says. “Eli owns the local office of the family’s jewelry business, and Natalia is a professor at one of the universities.”

“What does she teach?” Khan asks.

“Earth history,” Sarah says. “She specializes in the time period just after the Vulcans made contact.”

Not a period with which Khan is all that familiar, for obvious reasons. He nods.

“I really, really don’t like this,” Jake says unhappily. “Eema, the stuff we’re—this could—“

“Six of our family survived the Holocaust because two couples hid them for years,” Sarah says. “We never paid back that debt. Perhaps now is our time to do so.”

Jake groans and slumps on the couch, thumping his head against the cushions. “What if we split it? We put some of your siblings with some of my less-crazy family members, and we put some of them in safe houses unlikely to be used or found out? Or what if we held this plan on the back burner until we find a way to avoid using it?”

“This isn’t an official Starfleet matter,” Sarah says. “You don’t have the resources you normally do, Jake. Use what you have.”

“Eema, half the time I’m not officially Starfleet anyway,” Jake protests.

“But you have access to official Starfleet resources if you need them,” Sarah says. “Like your team.”

“Yeah, but…” Jake groans again and rubs a hand over his face. “I don’t want you in this. I don’t want the family in this.”

“Then why did you mention it?” Khan asks.

“I didn’t,” Jake says. “Eema got it out of me. It’s a long story.”

“If you consider it long,” Sarah says. “He called. He asked me to come to London to meet you. I asked if there was anything else I needed to know or anything else I should be aware of. He said no, but that you might need something involving your own family.”

“I can’t lie to my mother,” Jake says. “Which is why she’s usually good about not asking questions I’m not supposed to answer. This is just—fucked up and are you sure we can’t just kill Marcus and be done?”

“I think it likely that would complicate matters more than simplifying them,” Khan says.

Sarah snorts. “Just a little.” She looks at her project and begins working on it again. “Jake, if you are in trouble and you need help from your family, you will ask for it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Eema,” Jake mumbles, sounding like a scolded adolescent rather than a Starfleet officer.

“Do you need help from your family?” Sarah asks.
“I don’t know yet,” Jake says. “I’m trying to avoid it. It’s—things are complicated. Really, really complicated.”

“Then explain them to me,” Sarah says calmly.

Jake all but squirms and looks at Khan. “It’s up to you,” he says finally. “This is your deal. I don’t want to spill anything that I shouldn’t.”

“The more you know, the more danger you are in,” Khan says to Sarah. “Just having met with me could be enough to put your life in peril.”

“If my life is already in danger I might as well know all of it,” Sarah says.

She has a point, Khan supposes, although he is starting to feel as though this entire situation is spinning out of his control, a feeling he loathes. “Marcus has several programs that need to be shut down,” he says, going for the brief explanation. “He is holding most of my family hostage against me to ensure my cooperation. Jill and Jake have offered to aid me in freeing my family and dealing with Marcus and his programs.”

“So you need to stay off Starfleet’s radar except for what you are already officially doing for them,” Sarah says. “Have you raised any flags already?”

“There is a group of people aware of my aid to Marcus,” Khan says. “They want me dead.” He looks at Sarah consideringly. “You seem remarkably unbothered.”

“You’re still alive,” Sarah says. “If I let myself get upset every time someone I knew had his life in danger, I’d never calm down. And I don’t even know about half of those times.”

“Two-thirds,” Jake says.

Sarah takes a sip of her coffee. “I’m starting to understand why Jill offered to help you,” she says. “And why she loves you.”

“Tell me why,” Khan says, not a request.

“You need her,” Sarah says. “Specifically, you need her, not just an ally. She would know that.”

“She does,” Khan says. “It’s also why she does not believe I love her.”

“Because once you no longer need her…” Sarah trails off and sighs. “My daughter has a thick head.”

“Hard head, thick skull,” Jake mutters.


“What will it take for you to decide?” Khan asks, wondering why it even matters.

“We’ll see,” Sarah says. “I think a lot of it will depend on how your situation plays out.”

“Something I can’t predict right now,” Khan says.

“No, I would expect not,” Sarah says. She studies her knitting again, as if looking for answers in the soft yarn. “If you’re expecting I can tell you how to make her believe you, I can’t,” she says. “If you want me to tell her I approve of you, I’m not quite ready to do that either. I don’t know you or
your history, and I don’t know all your problems or what it might take to solve them. And I’m not eager to approve of a relationship that might put at least two of my children’s lives in danger.”

“Whether you approve or not is beside the point,” Khan says. “This is the situation as it stands.”

“It is, and I can’t change that,” Sarah says. “But if you want my stamp of approval, you’re not getting it just yet.”

“I rather think I am past the point of needing parental approval in my affairs,” Khan says mildly, gritting his teeth against the irritation.

“You are,” Sarah says calmly. “So is Jill.”

“Then why does it matter?” Khan asks.

“Because she doesn’t trust herself, and she needs external validation to confirm what she doesn’t want to admit,” Sarah says. “If you want me to tell her you love her, that I can do. But I can’t make her believe it any more than you can, likely less.”

She has a point. More than one, really. Khan may be irritated, but the seeds of respect have started to grow. Whatever else he may say about her, at least Sarah is honest.

Jake takes a drink of coffee and sits up straighter. “Well, this is fun,” he says. “Eema, you need to be back in New York in what, eight hours?”

“Yes,” Sarah says. “And I want to talk to Jill before I leave.”

“I thought you might,” Jake says. “Let me call her and find out what the rest of her day looks like.” He digs out his link, getting up to duck into the bedroom to make his call.

Alone in the living room, Khan studies Sarah. “Tell me about Andorian flu,” he says after a moment, changing the subject entirely.

“Try not to get it,” Sarah says. “It mostly affects adults, although it’s deadlier in children. The main symptoms are extreme fatigue and muscle weakness, sometimes partial paralysis. About seventy percent of people with it also develop hives, although I never did. Sometimes people recover without ever having known they had it, if they get a particularly mild case. Sometimes it kills, and sometimes it disables people permanently.”

“You recovered fully,” Khan says, not quite asking.

“It took about six months to recover enough that I could do things, and a full year to get back to my former energy levels and strength,” Sarah says. “I do sometimes get easily fatigued, but mostly I’d say yes, I recovered fully.”

“Why do you think that is?” Khan asks.

Sarah shrugs. “God works in mysterious ways. So does medicine. I was healthy before I became ill, and I have been healthy since.”

“You believe in God,” Khan says. “Curious, in this day and age.”

“I’m a Jew,” Sarah says patiently. “Believing in God is somewhat critical for my religion.”

“But Judaism is an ethnicity as much as a religion,” Khan says. “Is it not?”
“It is,” Sarah says. “And I am ethnically Jewish, my many generations removed ancestors from various places in Eastern Europe. But I am a religious Jew, as are many of my family. I raised my sons in our religion and I celebrated their bar mitzvahs. I don’t ask whether they still believe. That’s between them and God. I ask that they come to Shabbat dinner when they’re in town, I ask that they go to services if they’re with me at a holiday or Shabbat, and I ask that they respect the religion. They do, and it works for me. My three grandchildren are being raised in our traditions, as are my great-nieces and nephews. We survive, Khan. Whatever you may say about Jews, we are survivors. We always have been and we always will be.”

“It must be difficult to be openly religious in a secular time,” Khan says.

“Secular but mostly tolerant,” Sarah says. “We manage. The Jews, the Muslims, the Catholics, we manage. Starfleet still has chaplains.”

“Is Jill Jewish?” Khan asks.

“No,” Sarah says. “If she wants to convert, she would be welcome, and she knows a fair amount about Judaism, but she doesn’t practice. Are you religious?”


“No,” Sarah says, surprising him. “What I care about is how you treat my daughter, not if you pray or who you pray to. Tell me that, Khan. Tell me what you want from her.”

“She is mine,” Khan says quietly.

“She belongs to herself,” Sarah says. “We outlawed slavery a long, long time ago.”

Khan snorts. “That is not what I meant, and I believe you know that as well as I do. She needs someone to put her needs first, someone who will take care of her and treat her as she should be treated. She is mine, and I will do that for her.”

“Why?” Sarah asks.

“Because I love her,” Khan says. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“I want to hear what you intend to do once your family is safe,” Sarah says. “Will you stay in Starfleet? I think not, so what will you do, and what role will Jill play in that?”

“I don’t have answers for those questions,” Khan says, tasting the uncertainty of it and disliking it. “I do not intend to remain in Starfleet, no. But I cannot make decisions for my family without their input, and much will depend on how we secure their freedom. Jill…I would have her with me, by my side, wherever we go.”

“Probably in front of you,” Sarah says. “She always has to be first, just to see what’s there.”

Khan smiles a little. “Yes.”

Jake comes back into the room rubbing a hand over his buzzcut. “Jill says she can escape the creepy head librarian at lunchtime, 1200, and we agreed on a meeting spot. Khan, are you joining us?”

“I think not,” Khan says. He has work to do and would rather not explain in public why he saw Sarah before Jill did.
“Not surprised,” Jake says. “Eema, do you want me to be there or not?”

“Not, please,” Sarah says. “I would like to speak with my daughter privately.”

“Then I’ll take you and find something else to do with myself,” Jake says. He looks at Khan. “Anything I can help you with?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says, considering it. “Yes.” Jake’s feedback on the weapons could be very useful, and he might have suggestions on what information to pass on to Marcus.

“Oh, cool,” Jake says. “Maybe we can get a spar in, too. I could use it.”

“You are still healing,” Khan says.

“I’m pretty much healed,” Jake says. “Anyway, I have to be able to fight when I’m injured. The bad guy won’t wait for me to heal up before he tries to kill me, you know?”

“We shall see,” Khan says. Although really, he thinks a better use of their time might be to have Jake meet his siblings and explain the tentative plan for housing. But he’ll talk to Jake about that later. For now—“I should be going,” he says, looking at the chrono. Almost 1100 hours, and he has to give Marcus something before the admiral becomes petulant and yanks the leash. “Jake, call me when you are free and we will arrange a meeting point.”

“Can do,” Jake says, pushing to his feet as Khan and Sarah do the same.

Khan looks at Sarah, who looks back at him steadily. “You might just be what she needs,” Sarah says after a moment. “And I think—I’m certain—she’s exactly what you need.”

“Yes,” Khan says to both.

Sarah smiles a little ruefully. “She never could do anything the simple way,” she says. “I only hope this time she’s not in so far over her head she’ll drown.”

“She will not if I have anything to say about it,” Khan says quietly.

“We’ll see,” Sarah says. “We’ll see.”

Khan nods and leaves without saying goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

The Latin phrase Jake says translates in English to "Hail, Caesar. We who are about to die salute you." The quote is more mythical than fact, but I thought it seemed appropriate.

As for Sarah - I am Jewish myself, although Reform, and a lot of Sarah’s beliefs about family are things I learned growing up. When your cultural and religious history involves an awful lot of persecution and prejudice, it becomes more and more important to hold to your beliefs and pass them down. And without family, who are you and who do you have to support you? (Note: chosen family is just as important, sometimes more so, than family of origin, at least in my mind.)
Family: the major theme of this story. It works for me.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

"Is this worth what we went through, the wars and the separation and the loneliness?"

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in updating; it's been A Month offline. Thank you for sticking with me! I hope you're still enjoying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He leaves Cat a message letting her know everyone survived with all parts and pride intact, and asks her to bring the others to meet him in two hours at the old bunker he has been using for weapons testing. He found the space months ago, when exploring London shortly after being released by section 31; long abandoned and hidden by its surroundings, it works well as a space to build and test weapons more powerful than a standard phaser or phaser rifle.

At the moment, he has two prototypes, one that he has turned into a viable weapon and one that still needs some adjusting. The latter he thinks Ekaterina may have interest in, as he took inspiration from antique bayonets to create it. The gun works perfectly well, but can be modified into essentially a shortsword blade should the enemy close distance. However, shielding the barrel of the gun enough that it does not melt the shortsword blade means that the gun is less effective than he wants. If he can get his hands on enough adamantium to make the blade, he thinks that would work, but finding that is almost impossible.

Today, however, he has something else in mind. A standard phaser is essentially useless against Klingons, but the weapons he already designed will not suit Jill; to be blunt, her hands are too small for them to be comfortable. The puzzle, one he finds interesting, will be to replicate the firepower of one of his weapons in a size she can handle easily.

He studies the pieces and parts on the long table in front of him, considering his options, and settles in to work. He spends a satisfying hour working on the puzzle, figuring how best to reduce size and keep the firepower he wants, and gets a prototype about half-built when his comm-link chirps. Khan gives thought to ignoring it, decides whoever it is he should likely talk to, and answers.

"Hey," Jake says. "Where the hell are you and where should I meet you?"

Khan gives him brief directions to the bunker and tells him to call when he gets there to be let in.

"I didn't even know that was there," Jake says, surprised. "Then again, London's not my best city. New York I know inside and out. London not so much. If I'm reading my directions right, though, it should only take me about twenty to get to you. See you in a bit."

"Yes," Khan says. He hangs up and studies the assembled and disassembled weapons on the long table in front of him, picking up the finished one and testing its balance and weight. Comfortable in either hand, solid grip and balanced well, not too heavy to carry for extended periods but also not
so light to feel flimsy. He really is pleased with it, and building others won't take very long. Katsuro won't want to do it, but perhaps he can convince Ekaterina. Or Alona, when they revive her.

He lines up the sight with the target at the end of the room and fires, pleased with the lack of recoil and the quiet sound. Twice, three, a dozen times more, and the gun grows warm but not overly so. He checks the power supply, determines it still has an almost-full charge, and sets it down just as his link chirps. Cat this time, letting him know they have arrived; Khan punches the code for the locks and lets his siblings into the room.

“Do you not trust us with the code, brother?” Cat asks, only partially teasing.

“The door can only be opened from inside once the safety has engaged,” Khan says. “And it automatically engages once someone walks inside and the door closes.”

“Interesting,” Katsuro comments. “What have you been working on?”

“A few different things,” Khan says, walking back over to the table. He shows them the weapon he was just using, offering it to Konstantin to test. “This I think you will like, if I can modify it appropriately,” he says to Ekaterina while Konstantin studies the other one.

“Oh, I do,” Cat says, taking it from him. “What is the problem with it?”

“The firepower is underpowered so as not to warp the blade,” Khan explains. “I have not yet found a way to shield the barrel from the blade to protect both and get the output I want. The metal of the blade is simply not strong enough. I need adamantium for it, but getting enough and having the ability to forge it…” His wings stretch and fold back.

“Well, where did you get the knives?” Ekaterina asks reasonably. “Perhaps we could ask them to build the blade.”

“Jake acquired them somewhere off-planet,” Khan says. “I do not know what the time frame would be or even whether it would be feasible to send the weapon off as well. We can ask.”

“When will we meet Jake?” Katsuro asks.

“In—now,” Khan says when his comm-link chirps again. He answers and lets Jake in, making a round of brief introductions and aware all four of his family are studying Jake closely, making no secret of it.

Jake, at least, has the sense to stay still, hands loose at his sides, body language not threatening. He says nothing until Ekaterina nods once. “So,” she says. “I understand you were also instrumental in our rescue.”

“Kind of,” Jake says. “Jill and Andy and Magpie did most of it. I helped where I could.”

“Jill is your sister, is she not?” Cat asks.

“She is,” Jake says. “Which means when she asks for my help, I help her.”

Ekaterina nods again, setting down the prototype. Khan doesn’t miss that despite Jake’s body language, he doesn’t relax when she does that. Intelligent of him. “Loyalty to family is admirable,” Cat says, leaning back against the table. “Blind loyalty is less so. How loyal are you to Starfleet?”

Jake snorts, his mouth twisting in a half smile. “I’m an intelligence operative,” he says. “Which
means that I know the dark side and I’m in it for my own interests as much as Starfleet’s. I knew about section 31 before Jill did, although not the extent of it, and I’ve never liked Marcus much. If you’re asking if you can trust me, I’d argue that you already have, given that I knew the details of the plan to revive you and have said nothing. I’ve gotten Khan weaponry and materials I shouldn’t be anywhere near, and I could get dishonorably discharged for so many reasons right now but I’m not walking away. I’ll take my chances and if I go down in flames I’ll do my best not to burn anyone else, but I don’t know how likely that is. Good enough for you?”

Cat doesn’t visibly smile but Khan reads it in the way her eyes widen just for a moment, the way she relaxes just a bit. “Da,” she says, extending a hand. “Welcome to our family.”

Jake doesn’t hesitate to take her hand, and Cat doesn’t try to break his fingers. Khan appreciates that. “You are healing,” Bishop says, studying Jake and the splint on his left hand. “What happened?”

“Stupid people being stupid and accidentally trying to kill me,” Jake says. “I’m fine, the bones are knitted but they’re not quite fully mended yet. I can take the splint off tomorrow, and the ribs are okay but I should try to avoid getting kicked or punched in the chest for another few days.” He rubs his good hand over his head, scratching the back of his neck. “I’d take the splint off today but the women in my life would yell at me and that’s grief I don’t need.”

“What women do you have in your life?” Cat asks.

“Jill and my mother,” Jake says with a sigh. “They’re individually scary, together terrifying. Well, no, Eema’s terrifying no matter what, but combined with Jill and it’s just…” He hangs his head. “Yeah. So. What can I do for you today?”

“Actually,” Khan says, moving over to the table and picking up the prototype. He explains to Jake what he needs, demonstrating the weapon as it currently stands. “Is this possible?” he asks.

Jake scratches his jaw. “Possible? Yes. Plausible? I’m…not sure. The guys I know who do the knives, they sometimes do custom jobs but you have to ask, like, months in advance and they’ll reject jobs they don’t think are worth their time. Or if they don’t like you, they’ll just refuse. They like me well enough, because I pay well, but I’ve never asked them for a custom thing like this before. I’d—” Jake chews his lip, studying the weapon. “I’d need to take it to them,” he says finally. “I’d need to go to them, show them what you wanted, negotiate for a price and a timeframe, and I absolutely can’t guarantee that a, they’ll do it and b, if they do agree they’ll get it done in the time frame you want.”

“What species are they?” Khan asks.

“Femaran,” Jake says. “Humanoid, gray skin, kinda tall and lean in general with horns and I think a prehensile tail but they’re very careful around aliens and I’ve never seen one personally.”

Khan frowns. “I have not heard of this species before,” he says.

“They mostly keep to themselves,” Jake says. “They have two planets and a habitable moon a few solar systems away from Alpha Centauri, or thereabouts, and they have a representative on the Federation council but mostly they keep to themselves. They’re deadly fighters, though, and the best weaponsmiths I’ve ever met, and I saved a couple of their lives so we’ve got a thing going, which is why they’ll let me buy knives. They don’t always let aliens buy them.”

“How difficult would it be to go there and negotiate?” Ekaterina asks.
“Answer varies,” Jake says. “To get there, not very, but it might take me a couple days. To negotiate could take two hours or two weeks. If they know you’re in a hurry they make you wait longer.” He blows out a breath. “On the other hand, they like new puzzles, and they like trying new things, and they’re good. Let me…let me make a few calls.”

Khan nods. “I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not going to be cheap,” Jake says, managing a smile. “So I hope you have income.”

“I do,” Khan says.

“Where did you get it from?” Cat asks.

“Everything these days is credits,” Khan says. “Simple enough to divert funds when everything is virtual.”

She snorts. “There is no security online.”

“There is not, and yet people keep deluding themselves there is,” Khan says. “It does make our jobs somewhat easier.”

Jake’s comm-link chirps. “Excuse me,” he says, looking at it and moving away slightly. “Yeah,” he says, setting privacy mode. He listens for a moment, then goes absolutely still. “Where—okay. Is she—okay. I need—give me twenty minutes. Can you keep her stable until then?” He grits his teeth and takes a breath. “Okay, fine, can you keep her alive until then? I’ll be there as soon as I can. Yeah. Bye.” He hangs up and looks at Jake. “Marika had something happen, some big vision or something, I don’t know, but it caused a brain hemorrhage. Gabe doesn’t know if he can save her life but she’s not letting him put her into trance or operate on her until she tells me what she saw. You have any way for me to get to San Francisco in about a minute?”

Khan looks at Katsuro, who takes the transporter out of his pocket and hands it to Jake. “Put your thumb and first two fingers there,” Katsuro says. Jake does, and Khan hears the faint beep as it locks to his DNA. “Input the coordinates and hit the button, and you are there.”

“Fuck, that’s handy,” Jake says. “I’ll call you as soon as I know anything. If you talk to Jill, tell her she has to take my mother home or find a place for her to spend Shabbat, because I don’t know when I’m coming back.”

“I will,” Khan says. Jake looks at the device, adjusts the coordinates, and shimmers out of existence.

“Perhaps you should have gone with him,” Katsuro says thoughtfully. “It is…logical to suppose that whatever Marika saw, it involved you somehow.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “But I would rather not cause her more stress when her life is in doubt. She could be useful to us if she survives.”

Bishop snorts. “I see you care about her well-being.”

Khan raises an eyebrow at Bishop. “Should I? She has some value for her psychic talents, but not much more than that, and her personality is not one I particularly find appealing. I care for what information she can provide us, and as a member of Jake’s team I suppose it would cause him difficulty if she died, but do I personally care whether or not she survives? No, I do not.”
His wings ruffle and he lets them stretch for a long moment before folding them back. “The list of people born in this century with whom I have actual personal connections has four entries on it, and you have met all of them.”

“No one ever tried, before Jill, did they,” Bishop says softly.

“Why should they have?” Khan asks. “People are motivated by self-interest. I was not interesting enough.”

“People are stupid,” Cat says with a snort.

“No,” Bishop says. “Well, oui, but no. People are sheep. They wish to be led.”

“Yes, and they are stupid,” Cat says.

“Stupid enough to defeat us, sister,” Khan says quietly.

She sighs. “Even the stupid sheep can win a battle with the right circumstances. The wolves do not always succeed.”

“Not all humans in this time are sheep,” Khan says. “There are some wolves.”

“Is Marcus a wolf?” Konstantin asks.

“Marcus…” Khan’s lip curls with contempt. “To call him a wolf would be an insult to wolves. He thinks himself a predator, but he is more a bully, accustomed to having his way through force of will and supposed intelligence. His sense of tactics is feeble, to say the least, and his leadership skills leave much to be desired. He thinks his way is best because no one tells him otherwise.”

“You have not?” Bishop asks.

Khan shrugs. “In some things, yes, but he will not listen to me about the Klingons. He wants the war. I have had enough of war.”

“So have we all,” Konstantin murmurs.

"Da," Ekaterina agrees. "But war appears to be a universal constant."

“It does, at that,” Bishop says. “Perhaps we can be more successful this time than we were in ours.”

Ekaterina snorts again. “We did succeed,” she says. “Just not for as long as we wanted, and not with the end result we wanted.”

“Is this worth it?” Konstantin asks, startling Khan. “To be here, together, in this time, with the galaxy ahead of us. Is this worth what we went through, the wars and the separation and the loneliness?”

“You sound like a fatalist,” Cat says.

“No,” Konstantin says. “Merely… I wonder. With our dreams, with the connection to Rani, the way pieces have lined up in this time—no, the odds are not in our favor, but at the same time we have advantages that we should not have, given the situation. We have a hand that may not be the highest in the game, but we can at least hold our own. I wonder if something, or someone, has guided this. If there is some kind of higher power watching us, or if Rani herself could be arranging things.”
"Why would she?" Khan asks softly. "Why would she do any of this?"

"To help you," Bishop says. "She loved you, Khan, and if there is any part of her left in this time, this universe, she loves you still. Death would not stop her from trying to help you if she thought you needed it, and to be honest, brother, you did. You do."

"We do," Katsuro says. "Whatever it may be, whether fate or Rani or a higher power we know not, I do agree with Konstantin. We have some kind of assistance here, something we cannot quantify nor define, but which exists regardless. We should not come to rely upon it, but we can appreciate it when we have it."

Khan takes a slow breath, lets his wings stretch and relax. "To answer your question—I do not know," he says to Konstantin. "I do not know if it is worth it, what we have or may have in this time. But whatever the answer, it matters not. This is what we have, this is our situation, we must turn it to our advantage."

"Practical," Cat says.

"I usually am," Khan says mildly.

"No," she says, but she smiles. "Mostly you are practical. Sometimes you are a romantic."

Khan doesn’t argue it. In the sense she means it, she’s somewhat right—not that he’ll admit that to anyone but his family.

His comm-link chirps and he answers it, not bothering to set privacy mode because what would be the point?

"Hi," Jill says. "I can’t reach Jake and I kind of need him. What did you do with him?"

"I did nothing," Khan says. "Jake was required in San Francisco for a medical emergency involving Marika. He said he did not know when he would be back."

"Well, shit," she says. "That…complicates my life. Okay. I can’t take someone not you with me via the transporter, can I?"

"No," Khan says.

"Didn’t think so." Jill blows out a breath. "Right, so…let me figure some of this out. I think I need to call Samuel and have him do me a favor or two. I’ll be back at my flat by 1800, but depending on what Samuel can do for me I might not be alone."

"I understand," Khan says.

"Do you," she says slowly.

"Jake mentioned," Khan says.

"Mm-hmm," Jill says and he knows she doesn’t believe him. "We’ll talk later. I’ve got to go make some other calls and figure some stuff out. Is it wrong that I’m kind of pissed at Marika?"

"I would be the wrong person to answer that," Khan says.


"It sounds as though your kitten is annoyed with you," Cat says, studying the prototype again. "If
you shifted the barrel two centimeters up and swung the blade out from the side, as so, what would it do?”

“She may be,” Khan says. “If…” He walks over to Cat, looking at the weapon. “If you shifted the barrel up two centimeters, the heat from the blast would still warp the blade, but you would have more room to use the blade if it worked. I would prefer not to swing it out from the side as it might cause injury to an ally in close quarters, which is why I had it swing up from the handle.”

“How?” She steps back a few paces and tests the weapon, lining up a shot—but not taking it—then rotating the barrel back and bringing up the blade. “I like the smoothness of this,” she says. “It switches from gun to sword quickly enough that it would not delay an attack, and it does not adjust the weight or the balance. The shielding is the only issue?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I had hoped to create one with a longer blade, but it would have the same issue. If I cannot get this one to work, the next version would be useless.”

“Da,” Cat says, setting it down. “And what is this?”

“A smaller version of this,” Khan says, indicating the finished weapon. “Something for Jill.”

“Something sized for her,” Ekaterina says, nodding in approval. “Good. What are standard-issue Starfleet weapons these days?”

“Phasers,” Khan says, picking up one of the two he has. “Security teams and some operatives have phaser rifles, down at the end here. Works like a gun, but lighter and without the kick. But underpowered, in my estimation, and useless against one of us or a Klingon. They have two modes, stun and kill. Stun will drop a normal human for perhaps twenty minutes. Kill will—if the target is hit in a critical area—do what it says. But if one misses a critical area, it will wound, perhaps gravely so, but not kill. Against us, the stun will drop us perhaps for a minute, the kill will injure but not actually kill us unless we were to take multiple direct hits in a critical area.”

“And the Klingons?” Cat asks. “What does it take to kill them?”

“More than one of these,” Khan says, tossing Cat the phaser. “Their biology is designed for redundancy and survival on the battlefield. Frankly, a knife would be better in close quarters. They have an interesting curved blade, the bat’leth.”

“I should like to see this,” Cat says.

“As would I,” Bishop says. “Have you one?”

“Not here,” Khan says. “Section 31 has several, but I do not personally have one. I can access one of the ones at the archive easily enough.”

Cat lines up a shot and fires the phaser, then again and again. “Bah,” she says after half a dozen shots, tossing it to Bishop. “Lightweight, flimsy, and as you said, underpowered. I would not use one had I a choice.”

Bishop studies the phaser. “No, I think not,” he says. “Khan, how many weapons can you make for us?”

Khan smiles. “The one I gave to Konstantin is easy enough,” he says. “If you and Konstantin help me, we can assemble enough for each of us, excluding Cat. I have the materials. After—after we started planning for the first mission to revive you, I contacted Jake to get the parts I needed.”
“Why excluding me?” Cat asks, mock-indignantly.

“Because—assuming we can create this one—it will be for you instead,” Khan says. “I would not give you a weapon without a blade.”

She laughs, pleased. “Well done, brother.” To Khan’s mild surprise, she crosses to him and leans up to kiss his cheek, leaning into him for a moment. He puts a wing around her and she sighs a little, resting her head against his shoulder. “You do not smell right,” she complains. “Bland and boring. You should smell of spices and the sun and…” She stops for a moment, and when she continues her voice is much quieter. “And jasmine.”

“Not anymore,” Khan says quietly, swallowing the pang of grief.

“No.” Ekaterina sighs again; he holds her more closely, letting her draw strength from him for a moment or three.

“So much is different,” Konstantin says, holding out a hand for Cat when she pulls away from Khan. She takes it, fitting herself against his side. “This is…this is not our time, and I feel adrift in currents I do not understand.”

“Learn quickly,” Khan states, but there’s no anger or bite to it.

“I am,” Konstantin says. “We all are.”

“We need Alona,” Bishop says. “And Matthew.”

“We do,” Konstantin agrees.

Khan tilts his head, curious. “They are next to be revived,” he says. “But why do you say that?”

“In a world so computer-centric, Matthew would be exceedingly useful,” Bishop says, smiling a little. “Not to mention excited to learn. And Alona—she understands people in a way many of us do not. She would be able to mix with the humans—and the aliens—and come to a better understanding of society, of its ebb and flow.”

“And they bring laughter,” Konstantin says quietly. “The five of us are many things, but quick to laugh is not among them. Given the stakes to what we are doing, given the possible consequences…I think some laughter would not be a bad thing.”

“It rarely is,” Bishop says. “When is the mission to revive them, Khan?”

“A week from this Saturday,” Khan says, although he knows Bishop knows full well. “We thought to leave time between the two sets, just in case we might need it.”

“We should plan secondary lodging for them,” Ekaterina says. “Should we need to vacate the house.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Jake had some thoughts on that, but I would need to speak with him.”

“What were his thoughts?” Cat presses.

Khan gives thought to only partially answering her. “He has a network of safe houses across the globe,” he says. “And off-planet, but that would be less convenient. Some of those might be suitable for our use.”

For a moment, he thinks she will accept that, but then she frowns, poking his chest. “What else?”
she asks. “What did you not say?”

“Nothing important,” Khan says.

Cat pokes him again, harder and with some strength behind it. “Do not lie to me,” she says, irritated.

“It may be nothing.” Khan says, but evades her next punch. “He has…a rather large and sprawling family, scattered over the planet and some off-planet. Some of us, may, possibly, be able to hide in plain sight among them. But that brings a level of risk and potential collateral damage neither Jake nor I are certain we are comfortable with.”

“No,” Ekaterina says slowly. “I am not either. But hiding among civilians might be a better option than utilizing military assets. The latter, Starfleet would have less compunction about destroying. If they are of the mindset to protect all civilian lives, we should use that while we can.”

“Are all his family civilians?” Bishop asks.

“I do not know,” Khan says. “Jake has two brothers, one of whom is in Starfleet. I do not know how many of his extended family are in the organization. The only ones mentioned in detail were both civilians. In Moscow,” he says for Cat.

She smiles a little. “It would be good to go home, even for a short while.”

“I thought you might think so,” Khan says. “And we may have possibilities for the others. But it is still not a strategy without a downside, and I am not certain it is our best option.”

“What about finding a rental property?” Konstantin asks. “Similar to what we have now?”

“I would prefer not to have a money trail, even if we were to pay in cash,” Khan says. “It is an option, but ideally we should stay off any kind of records.”

“Especially as four of us are not officially part of this society,” Bishop says. “How much can we trust that our IDs and documentation will hold?”

“That is not a concern,” Khan says. “Magpie is more than competent at what she does. She has built lives for herself and Andy, and she has been thorough and careful with creating backstories for you all. I would be more concerned about Marcus learning four of you are here than of her work coming up short.”

“How did she learn to do this?” Bishop asks.

“Honestly, I do not know,” Khan says. “She had almost no access to educational resources and admits she is almost completely self-taught. But she is a genius, and she was determined to get off the streets. Andy, as well—she had some education, and studied a good deal when she could, but not very much.”

“Do you think it possible that Rani was able to influence both of them?” Konstantin asks. “That perhaps she subconsciously gave them knowledge?”

Khan’s wings ruffle at that. “Possible, yes,” he says. “Plausible…” He gestures, spreading his hands. “Why?”

“One of those questions we may never get answered,” Cat says.
“Yes,” Khan says, disliking it. “I suppose it is possible, but both Magpie and Andy are geniuses, and I do not use that term lightly. They had the intelligence and they had the desperation, and the human mind can come up with a great deal given those circumstances.”

“How did Andy end up on the streets?” Bishop asks.

“His parents,” Khan says, scowling. “They disliked her gender fluidity and threw him out.”

Konstantin growls softly at that. “Some people do not deserve to be parents,” he says.

“Da,” Cat agrees.

Bishop, however, looks thoughtful. “Tell us,” Khan says, looking at him.

“Tell me more about the—what did Magpie call them? The street brats?” Bishop asks.

“Oui,” Khan says. “I do not know very much about them. They are mostly children and teenagers, simply because very few survive into full adulthood. Some are born there, some end up there due to other circumstances. From things Magpie and Andy have said, I believe there are brats in every major city on Earth, but I don’t know the extent of the population. They live off the radar, and while I find it hard to believe that the Federation is wholly unaware of their existence, it has not done anything either for or against them.”

Katsuro looks at Bishop. “You think we could hide with them,” he says. “Yes? No?”

Bishop grimaces and waves a hand back and forth. “I think it could be an option but given what Khan has said most of us look physically too old. But we could see where they exist and what they know about the local areas, perhaps. If we could find someone willing to talk to us.”

“Magpie keeps in touch, or at least helps some where she can,” Khan says. “But the street brats are quite insular, and the rule among them is that once someone leaves, they do not return nor do they try to get anyone else out.”

“I think they might be more useful as an information source than as a place to hide,” Konstantin says. “But I have no idea what information they could give us.”

“We can ask Magpie and Andy what the brats might be likely to know,” Ekaterina says. “And we will make plans for the Federation at a later date. We may have been called dictators, but at least we looked out for our people.”

“Even six dozen of us cannot take down an interplanetary governmental structure, sister,” Khan says.

“Bah.” Cat makes a sharp gesture. “I do not say we need to tear it down. I say it needs improvement, and who better than us?”

“Perhaps, but now is not the time,” Bishop says. “We have more urgent priorities. I need access to a laboratory to compound the stimulant before we try to revive Matthew and Alona, now that I have the materials.”

Khan grimaces this time. “I do not know of one,” he says. “Jake may. Have you asked Magpie or Andy?”

“Magpie said she has no contacts in this area,” Bishop says. “Andy has two contacts in California, but is not certain they will be able to help. He sent one of them a message but I do not know if he
heard back or not. Jill has no resources.”

“Jake might,” Khan says. “We can ask him when he returns. How long do you expect it to take you to put the stimulant together?”

“Hopefully not more than a day,” Bishop says. “If we cannot get access to a laboratory, I can attempt to compound it elsewhere with the right tools but the odds of getting the dosages calibrated would be lower.”

“Understood,” Khan says. “Let us see what Andy comes back with, or what Jake might know. For now, I need to finish up a few things in here and decide what partial information I will give Marcus.”

“Not this,” Cat says, touching the sword-gun possessively.

“No, of course not,” Khan says, amused.

“Can we assist you with anything in here?” Konstantin asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Let me show you and Bishop how to assemble the weapon here so we can make more of them. But I need fifteen minutes first to handle Marcus.”

It takes him thirty, actually, only because he ends up editing the message to leave out some important details and add two unclear red herrings. He adds in two observations about the latest reports from the Vengeance, one of which he thinks will make Marcus demand he goes there in person. Khan can’t blame him for that one, really; the last status report has some troubling details in it.

But he sends the message and walks Konstantin and Bishop through building the gun. Cat and Katsuro leave to wander the city and see if they can find and tag Ikan. Khan doubts they will have luck but they are starting to put together a routine for the man.

He settles in to work on the prototype for Jill, occasionally answering questions for one of his brothers, but mostly the three of them work in companionable quiet for a time.

Then the sound of a transporter makes all three of them look up and Khan automatically reaches for the finished weapon, but puts it down as soon as he sees Jake materialize. “She’ll live,” Jake says as soon as he solidifies. “Gabe wasn’t sure for a bit, but she’ll live.”

“Good,” Khan says. “What did she have to tell you?”

Jake sighs and rubs a hand over his scalp. “She said whatever you do, don’t get onto the Vengeance when it’s not docked. That if you did, thousands of people would die, possibly millions. It’s interesting, because usually she sees something that will be, but she said that she saw all kinds of paths, all sorts of choices, which is probably what caused the hemorrhage. Some led to war, some led to peace, but the one thing that stayed constant throughout was you getting on the Vengeance somewhere in the Neutral Zone, and that…led to disaster.”

“What other choices did she see?” Khan asks.

“She saw some kind of gladiatorial combat,” Jake says. “That was a pretty strong theme. Sometimes we won, sometimes we didn’t, and she didn’t get a sense of what happened after either way. There was a lot of fire, apparently, things burning and buildings falling. Basically, a lot of death and destruction. There were two paths she saw that avoided it, but she wasn’t coherent enough for me to understand exactly what to avoid to get one of those.”
“Do you think she will remember more when she has healed?” Bishop asks. “Will we be able to ask her again?”

“It’s likely,” Jake says. “But Gabe wasn’t sure when she’d wake again. She has the ability to put herself in a healing trance, but it takes longer the more serious the injuries, and given how close to death she was he has no idea how long it’ll take her to heal.”

"Do you know what triggered the visions?" Khan asks.

Jake shakes his head. "Not a clue. Gabe says she had come in to get medically cleared for her next gig, and he was about to sign off on it when she collapsed. It may possibly be the only thing that saved her life, her being right in Medical. There are drugs he can give her to reduce the psychic shock, but they're more effective the sooner he can get them into her system."

"Did she see anything about Marcus?" Khan asks.

"She didn't say," Jake says. "She did say she saw a starship crashing into Earth, specifically Starfleet HQ. That was one of the paths that had you getting on the Vengeance near the Neutral Zone." He shrugs. "Could be symbolic, could be literal, with her it's not always clear. She never claimed to have useful visions."

"Would her father's people have more knowledge of this?" Bishop asks curiously.

"Maybe? I don't know much about them," Jake says. "Never met one. Marika says some of her psychic stuff is due to her being half-human. Or part human, at any rate. I don't even know what planet her father's people are from. She refuses to say anything about them. She did teach me the language because it's really handy when you don't want to be understood, but that's all I know."

"Strange," Konstantin says. "I wonder why the secrecy."

"No idea," Jake says. "But everyone on my team has their own secrets, so as long as hers won't endanger someone else I don't care. Did you talk to Jill?"

"I did," Khan says. "But I have not heard from her since I let her know you might not be back."

"Okay, I'll call her in a bit," Jake says. "Where'd the others go?"

"To try and find Ikan," Khan says.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Jake says. "Anything I can do to help anyone?"

"Do you have access to or can you gain access to a medical or chemical laboratory?" Bishop asks.

"Um," Jake says. "That's random. And…" He chews his lip, thinking. "Gabe might," he says. "He's the assigned CMO for my team, but because of what we do he ends up doing a fair bit of research. I can call him and ask if he could get someone into one of the labs. I can't guarantee he'll be able to do it, but I can at least try."

"I would appreciate it," Bishop says. "Merci."

"Sure," Jake says. "And I need to make arrangements to go see the Femarans and talk to them about this thing you want. Let me find Jill, make sure Eema's settled, and I'll start making calls."

"Thank you," Khan says.

"No problem," Jake says. "If I can get the Femarans to agree to the commission, how soon do you
"As soon as possible," Khan says. "Within a week, ideally."

"Yeah, okay," Jake says. "Let me—I'll call you when I have answers for something, or if I learn anything else of use. If—there's a very good chance the Femarans won't agree to take the job unless you talk to them directly. Is that possible?"

"How far is it to their planet as compared to Qo'noS?" Khan asks.

"They're closer," Jake says.

"Then yes," Khan says. "The transporter has the range to take us there, and assuming I am not gone for more than one night, it should not be a problem."

"Good, because we might need that," Jake says. "I'll go start calling people. Catch you later." He punches something into the transporter and dematerializes.

Khan's comm-link chirps almost as soon as Jake disappears. "Yes," he says, answering it.

"John," Marcus says. "I got your message. We should talk about this."

"Likely," Khan says, keeping the annoyance out of his voice. "Where and when?"

"I can't get to London before Monday," Marcus says. "And I don't want to pull you away from your work. What you sent me, it's not critical right now, is it?"

"No," Khan says. "It can wait through the weekend."

"Good," Marcus says. "Then I'll meet you at 0900 on Monday at the archive. We'll likely need to go to the Vengeance for a day or three, if what you're telling me is accurate."

"Why would it not be?" Khan asks, his wings mantling in a sign of irritation.

"John, it's not that I don't trust your analysis," Marcus says, trying for appeasement and succeeding in condescension. "But I'd like to get the report from the engineer actually on the station."

"I did include that in what I sent you," Khan says evenly.

"Right, of course," Marcus says. "Let's just talk about this on Monday."

"As you like," Khan says. He hangs up before Marcus gets a chance to say anything else and growls, resisting the urge to take one of the weapons and destroy the link.

Bishop snorts. "I see the resemblance to Nikolai."

"Yes," Khan says curtly. "He second-guesses everything I tell him, a petty power play. He has never been able to correct me on anything, of course, but he continues to imply I do not know what I am doing. His agents double-check my work to make sure I have not left any back doors or loopholes that would allow me to control the systems."

"Have you?" Konstantin asks.

"Of course," Khan says. "And of course his agents have not found them. I left two for them to find and they have not yet been detected. Apparently I overestimated their intelligence."
"Magpie said something similar," Konstantin says. "No one ever went broke betting on the lack of intelligence among humans."

"Oui," Bishop says. "What should our next steps be?"

Khan looks at the chrono on the wall. "It is just about time for Jill to be done at the archive," he says. "Let us leave here and return to the house. I will call her on the way to determine where we will meet."

"Are the weapons safe here?" Konstantin asks.

"Yes," Khan says. "No one can get into the bunker without passing a DNA scan, and the only genome keyed in right now is mine. Anyone else who tries will be incapacitated."

"Fatally or not?" Bishop asks.

"Not on the first try," Khan says. "If they try again, however, it will be fatal. But I think it unlikely in the first place. No one knows this place is here. I happened to stumble over it."

"Coincidence, or…" Konstantin trails off. "It matters not. Let us go."

Chapter End Notes

I promise, those of you waiting for Sunday, it will happen. Possibly not in the next chapter, but I have ideas and I'm working on it.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Life goes on. It always does.

Chapter Notes

I had a fantastic time this weekend at GeekGirlCon, located in Seattle, so if you were there, belated greetings! If you were not, it was a lot of fun. But it did eat into my writing time, thus the delay in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Khan calls Jill on the way back to the house. "Hey," she says, sounding a bit out of breath. "I just got back from a run, checked out of the archive a little early today. I'm at my flat now, should I meet you at the house?"

"Yes, if you can," Khan says.

"Yeah, I can," Jill says. "And then we can talk. My unexpected guest went home. Have you heard from Jake?"

"I have," Khan says, letting her know what information Jake had.

"Okay," she says slowly. "Well, that's...interesting."

"I thought so," Khan says.

"Yeah," Jill says. "Yeah, that's...huh. I need to hop in the shower and then I'll head out, so figure I'll be at the house in maybe an hour. Please feed me when I get there."

"We should be able to arrange that," Khan says mildly.

"I certainly hope so," Jill says, laughing. "Okay. Catch you later." She hangs up and Khan slips his link back into his pocket.

"I will call Katya," Konstantin says. "She had mentioned wanting to go to the market earlier." He takes out his own link and dials, setting privacy mode simply because they are on a public street. A brief conversation in Russian later, he hangs up. "She is on her way back to the house now and will stop at the market on the way," he says. "She and Katsuro did locate Ikan, but they were unable to plant the bug. However, she said that they found his flat, so they may be able to plant a bug in it or near it."

"I hope so, but his security is undoubtedly difficult to hack," Khan says. "He does appear to be the most...paranoid of the seven."

"Well, we shall see," Konstantin says. "I would lay odds on Magpie and Andy given the stand-off,
but so far I have not seen much to indicate Starfleet computer security is particularly good."

"It depends on the source," Khan says. "But even their best systems analyst is not as good as Magpie, and combined with Andy's talents for hardware, they certainly have the advantage. I expect Matthew to have no problems with it once he catches up to current technologies and computer languages."

"Which should not take him long," Bishop says.

"No, I think not," Khan says. "It will be good to see him again."

"I look forward to the day when we are all together," Konstantin says. "And that day will come, brothers."

"Oui," Bishop says with no hesitation.

Khan only wishes he had their confidence.

The three of them arrive back at the house just as Cat and Katsuro open the door, both carrying grocery bags. "As we do not yet know where we may be migrating, I bought groceries for a few days," Cat says briskly, moving to put the food away. "And Jill requested dinner, so I will be preparing our meal."

"Spasiba," Khan says.

"Of course."

"Can we help?" Andy asks, looking up from his project on the kitchen table. "I'm just working on a miniaturized camera. Ekaterina called earlier and said they found Ikan's flat, so if I can make this do what I want, we can sneak it into his place and have eyes and ears on him. I'm not sure it'll give us anything useful, but I'm having fun building the thing at least."

"Thank you for your offer, but I do not require assistance," Ekaterina says. "Where did Magpie go?"

"She's upstairs taking a nap," Andy says. "We've been sleeping weird hours and it's catching up with both of us. I conked out earlier, she's napping now. What happened today?"

"An odd assortment of things," Khan says. He tells Andy about the weapons, Marika's vision and subsequent hemorrhage, his conversation with Marcus and likely trip to the Vengeance, and finally his meeting with Sarah.

"You met Jake's mother about Jill and didn't tell Jill about it?" Andy raises her eyebrows. "Well, that's not how I would have done it, but I can see why you did it that way. Does she know now?"

"I am not sure," Khan admits.

"That'll be an interesting conversation," Andy says. "And this offer of housing…" He wrinkles his nose. "I understand the reasons but…"

"That is about where we are on it as well," Konstantin says.

"So far no one has given any indication they know about the house, other than the bomb," Khan says. "And we do not know the purpose of that. The security system here has not picked up on anything to indicate we are being observed, and I should think it would have. I think we are likely
safe here for now—but I do not know how long that will last."

"Yeah," Andy says. "I don't know either, but I'd rather we get out before we get forced out."

"I propose we stay here until we have revived the last four of us," Bishop says. "But we will work on plans for moving after that, so that we do not lose time."

"That is logical," Ekaterina says, mincing garlic.

"So many plans to make," Andy says, pushing her hair back. "I'll leave that to you people and just work on building my toys."

Khan smiles a little at that. "You have more to contribute than your hardware skills," he says.

"Sure I do, but I'm not great at thinking strategically," Andy says. "Except in chess."

"Then think of this as a chess game," Bishop says.

"I've been told that before but I can't seem to translate it," Andy says, shrugging. "It's kind of a blind spot in my thinking. I can envision the chess board and plan ahead there, and despite my inability to win against Khan I'm pretty good at the game. But ask me to translate knights and pawns to real-life scenarios and I can't do it."

"I can help you with that," Bishop says. "If you wanted."

"Maybe, but at the moment I was hoping for—" Andy hesitates and looks at Katsuro. "A while ago, Khan mentioned you had studied lucid dreaming. Could you teach me some of what you learned? I'm really getting tired—no pun intended—of disturbing dreams every night."

"Are you having them that often?" Khan asks, surprised.

Andy nods. "Every time I sleep I dream about something in the same vein. Sometimes I'm even aware I'm dreaming, or that something's different in this dream than the last one, but I can't seem to change anything about it and I can't make it stop."

"I will teach you what I know," Katsuro says. "But given the possible cause of the dreams, I cannot guarantee success."

"Yeah, I know," Andy says. "But it's worth a shot, right?"

"Yes, of course," Katsuro says.

"My guess—and this is really a guess, it's not even an hypothesis—is that I'm having more dreams because I'm biologically kind of related to Rani, if she's the one behind this," Andy says. "It's the only thing I can think of."

"It does make sense," Bishop says. "Inasmuch any of this makes sense."

Ekaterina laughs. "It is not that much stranger than genetically augmented humans from three centuries ago working to take down the head of the interplanetary military," she points out.

"But at least we can quantify that," Katsuro says. "The presumed spirit of a woman deceased for hundreds of years providing assistance and guidance in the form of dreams? We cannot confirm anything about it. The only thing we can quantify is that we are all having similar dreams."

"Which is unusual but not unheard of," Bishop says.
"Hai," Katsuro says.

"Who dreamed last night?" Andy asks. "Other than me."

"I did," Konstantin says.

"I did as well," Bishop says. Ekaterina shakes her head, as does Katsuro. "Khan?" Bishop asks.

"No, not last night," he says. Before anyone can ask more questions, his comm-link chirps. "Yes," he says, answering it.

"Hey," Jake says. "So I have good news and I have not bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Either," Khan says. "Good news, I suppose."

"Good news is that Gabe can get Bishop into one of the small labs at Medical," Jake says. "He'll have to come to San Francisco for it, but he—Gabe—reserved it for the next five days, so hopefully that'll be enough time. It's smaller but it's still got all the stuff he's likely to need."

"Merci," Bishop says.

"You're welcome," Jake says. "I'll come by later and give you the instructions and all, but Gabe will be the one you really need to talk to. You can meet him in the morning, San Francisco time."

"I will, oui," Bishop says.

"And now the not bad news," Jake says. "The Femarans are willing to negotiate. They're interested in your design, which is a good thing. But they won't agree to anything without talking to you on it, and they want you there tomorrow morning to discuss it or they won't do it at all."

"Power games," Khan says, more than a little irritated.

"Yeah, sorry," Jake says. "I'll go with you, but they want to talk to you because you designed it. I have coordinates and a meet time, so we'll need to leave tomorrow around 0600. We'll be back within twelve hours, they did guarantee me that."

Which is good, because Khan has no intention of losing his Sunday with Jill. "Then we will leave at six," he says.

"Cool," Jake says. "I've got to deal with a couple things, but I should be at the house in an hour and a half, give or take."

"Be here in an hour," Ekaterina says. "That is when dinner will be ready."

"Ah—right," Jake says. "I'll be there in an hour. Catch you later." He hangs up and Khan sets his link down.

The front door opens and Khan turns to see Jill come in, her hair pulled back into a loose braid. She wears soft clothes and has a bag over one shoulder. "Hey," she says, walking into the kitchen. "Pardon me, I'm stealing you for a few minutes." She curls her hand around Khan's wrist and pulls him toward the stairs, her grip firm enough to make the point. Khan ignores Ekaterina's snicker and follows Jill upstairs.

"So," she says, closing the bedroom door behind Khan and tossing her bag onto the bed. "You met Eema today."
"I did," Khan says.

"Was it your idea or hers?" Jill asks.

"Jake's," Khan says.

Jill's eyebrows go up at that. "Why did he suggest it?"

"Honestly? Because you don't trust me enough to believe I love you," Khan says, not in the mood to dance around the subject. "And Jake thought it might help things if I met your mother. As evidence that I am not simply using you, that I am not going to walk away when this is over."

Jill opens her mouth, shuts it, opens it again and looks about to say something before she shuts it again. "Um," she says finally. "I…okay. I don't really…I have no idea what to do with that."

"What did Sarah say to you?" Khan asks.

"She—" Jill sits down on the edge of the bed. "She said she didn't know what to think of you, and she's not convinced you won't get me into something I can't get out of. She said you're dangerous, and she doesn't entirely like our involvement." She tugs the band out of her braid, disheveling the damp curls. "But she also said that it's obvious you, um, you love me, and that you've made me a priority in your life, regardless of whatever else is going on. And she gave you points for being honest with her, or at least as much as you could be. So…yeah."

Khan sits down next to her, folding a wing around her. "What do you think now?" he asks.

"I don't know," Jill says uncertainly. She leans into him, tucking her head against his shoulder. "You confuse me."

He brushes a curl back from her face, laying his palm against her cheek. "Tell me about your day," he says quietly.

"It was okay," she says, moving a little closer to him. "Creepy head librarian wasn't around in the afternoon, so that was good, and I got in a good spar with one of the other guys there who saw me and the asshole go a couple rounds. This guy treated me with respect in the ring and we were fairly evenly matched, he took me down once and I got him once. Then I got out a bit early and went for a long run, so I feel pretty relaxed physically and my head's clearer than it has been in a while. Tell me about yours?"

He does, giving her the brief version but letting her know he'll be away tomorrow to negotiate with the Femarans, and that he may have to go to the Vengeance on Monday. "But Sunday is ours," he says matter-of-factly. "I will not allow that to be interrupted."

Jill shivers all over and her breath catches in her throat. Khan smiles, brushing his fingers over the pulse in her throat, quick and strong. "I think we will be in your flat," he says. "But I may go to your apartment in San Francisco tomorrow to see if you left anything there I want to use."

"Whatever you want," Jill whispers.

"Yes," Khan murmurs. "Anything I want." He scratches a line down her throat, dragging his fingers back up and closing his hand around her throat, enough to push her head back and slightly constrict her windpipe. She whimpers, licking her lips, and he can see her nipples tighten under her shirt. "You need this, don't you, pyara?" he asks softly, easing the pressure on her throat just a little. "You need me to take control from you, to force you to let go."
Color rises in her cheeks and Jill swallows hard. "Please," she says shakily.

"I'll give you what you need," Khan says, brushing his thumb under her jaw. "You know I will."

"Yes," she manages, shifting against him unconsciously. "I know. I just—I want you so much."

"I know," Khan says, possessiveness and pleasure curling inside him at her words, at the way she shivers and arches against him. "But you will wait for me, won't you, milaya moya? You will be good for me."

Jill whimpers again, rolling her hips against him. "Please," she whispers. "Please—"

It may be cruel of him, but he doesn't care. He slips his hand between her legs, cupping her firmly in his palm and feeling her, hot and damp even through the fabric. Jill moans, a desperate sound, and would squirm against him if he let her.

He doesn't. Instead, he lifts her easily and lays her down on the bed, crawling over her and nudging her head back with a gentle bite to her jaw. "There was a place I knew, in my original time," he murmurs, pinning her wrists over her head. "An exclusive club, discreet and safe. Had we time, had we opportunity, I would take you there. I would show you off, put you on display for everyone to see you, how beautiful you would be for me. Would you like that, kitten?"

She swallows, her pulse quickening under his lips. "If you wanted," she whispers. "I'd do anything you wanted, if you asked."

"No one else would touch you, of course," Khan says, pleased at her answer. "I would kill anyone who tried. But everyone would want to. You would be so good for me, bound and collared on your knees at my feet. You wouldn't even notice anyone else, would you? Only me."

"You," Jill breathes, arching under him. "Please, Khan—"

"Sunday," he says gently, brushing a kiss over her lips. "Not until Sunday."

Jill whines, squirming under him until he growls softly and tightens his hold on her wrists. "Sunday," he says again, firm and low.

She takes a breath, lets it out slowly, clearly forcing herself to relax physically. "Bastard," she mutters after a moment.

"Technically, yes," Khan says, releasing her wrists and kneeling up. He gets off the bed, straightening his clothes, but it takes Jill a solid minute before she groans and gets up.

"I want a drink with dinner," she says, smoothing a hand over her braid. "You don't play fair."

"I never did," Khan says, amused.

"I know." She makes a face at him, but walks over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist and leaning her head against his chest. "Would you really—the club?" she asks. "Is that something you would actually want if we had the opportunity?"

"Were it discreet enough, and safe, yes," Khan says. "Why?"

"Because I know two places like that," Jill says. "One's in San Francisco. It's insanely expensive to join, the waiting list is about a year long because they only take a few members a year and a lot of it depends on current members not renewing their memberships—once you pay it's good for five
years. The safety regulations in place are impressive, and it’s incredibly discreet. The other, in New York, is similar. I belong to the club in San Francisco, which gives me visiting privileges at the place in New York, because they’re sister clubs. So I can go to the club in New York four times a year.”

“Tell me more about the place in San Francisco,” Khan says, brushing a curl back from her face.

“It’s a combination of a dungeon and a sex club,” Jill says. “There’s one main play floor, and you can reserve different platforms although some are first come, first serve. There’s a floor of private and semi-private play rooms, and there’s one floor of private rooms for people who want to have sex, because that’s not allowed in the public play spaces. The club’s staff are available to run scenes or act as submissives in scenes. Very few of them are licensed for courtesan work, but it’s possible.”

“How did you become a member?” Khan asks curiously.

“Magpie,” Jill admits. “I had…a not good experience with a guy, and it lasted longer than it should have because whatever his flaws he was a decent Dom and I hadn’t played in a while. Magpie bought me the membership because she said she didn’t want me in that kind of situation again. She has a membership to the place in New York.”

“How often do you go to the one in San Francisco?” Khan asks.

“When I’m on shore leave, maybe once a month,” Jill says. “I don’t usually have sex with anyone, but I do like to go and play and shut my brain off. I’m allowed to bring a guest, but if I do he’s not allowed to scene with anyone but me, and you’d only be allowed to come as my guest three times before applying for your own membership. But they fast-track partners of current members. Would you want to go?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says slowly. “When we have time, perhaps we can.”

He feels heat on her skin and smiles, rubbing the back of her neck. “Have you ever taken anyone with you?” he asks.

“No,” Jill says. “Well, I went with Magpie once but that doesn’t count.”

“Would Andy want to go?” Khan asks.

“He declined when we asked,” Jill says. “He’s not a voyeur and she’s definitely not an exhibitionist. Plus she’s so body-shy she didn’t want to be in a place that would nudge him into undressing. It’s not to say Andy isn’t kinky, but the club isn’t the right place.” She leans back, looking up at him. “I kind of wish Andy had a partner, someone who would value him for who he is and not only half of it. Don’t suppose any of your siblings would fit the bill?”


“Well, I guess we’ll find out,” Jill says. “Someday.”

“I hope so,” Khan says.

“We will,” she insists. “I have to believe that. If I stop believing we’re going to win I wonder why we even bother.”

“I understand,” Khan says. “But…the situation is complicated and dangerous, and we should not blindly trust things will work out for us.”
“We’re not,” Jill says. “We’re just being cautiously optimistic.” She kisses his sternum and leans into him. “I still can’t believe you met Eema.”

“Why not?” Khan asks.

“No one I’ve ever dated, or been involved with, has wanted to actually meet my mom,” she says. “It just never got that far with anyone.”

“I still think you were dating the wrong people,” Khan says quietly.

“Maybe, but I’m involved with you now, so it works out for you anyway,” Jill says. “It’s kind of funny, though. I’m a great poker player, I’m good at reading people, and I always fall for the wrong guy. You’d think I’d know better.”

“Do I count as the wrong man?” Khan asks.

“Completely,” Jill says, laughing. “You’re endangering my life, my career is terminal, I could end up dead or dishonorably discharged or both, and I could get my family killed for being with you. But aside from those small details…”

Khan smiles a little, still rubbing the back of her neck. “Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?”

She laughs again. “Pretty much.” Jill leans back, looking up at him. “But I love you, and this is worth it for me.”

He leans down as she stretches up, their lips meeting in the middle in an easy kiss. “We should get downstairs and see what’s going on,” Jill says against his mouth.

“Yes,” Khan says.

Downstairs, they find the kitchen table covered with electronic parts and computers, with a sleepy Magpie folded into a chair working on her tablet and Andy across from her building something about the size of his thumb. “This will need to be cleared away shortly for dinner,” Cat says, looking at it. “I suggest you start packing up things now.”

“Right,” Magpie says around a yawn, gathering her computers. “Andy, time to come out of the fugue.”

“Wha—oh,” Andy says. “Yeah, okay.” She starts gathering her parts into two small baskets. In short order the table has been cleared and Konstantin starts setting it.

“What are we having for dinner?” Khan asks.

“Pasta puttanesca,” Ekaterina says, stirring the sauce. “Easy enough.”

Also one of Khan’s favorites, but he doesn’t mention that. “Have we wine to go with it?” he asks instead.

“We have Chianti,” Konstantin says. “It is breathing.”

“Spasiba,” Jill says. “How soon will dinner be ready?”

“Perhaps ten minutes,” Cat says. “I expect Jake will be arr—“ She gets cut off by the doorbell.

“Now,” Jill says. “I’ll go get it.” She hurries down the hall.
“Is everything all right with your kitten?” Ekaterina asks in Russian.

“Da,” Khan says.

“Good.” She nods firmly and gets a spoon to taste the sauce.

“Hi,” Jake says, coming into the kitchen with Jill. “Thank you for dinner. I have information for various people, should I go over it now or after we’ve eaten?”

“There is some time now,” Ekaterina says.

“Okay,” Jake says. “So, Bishop, this is for you.” He hands over a memory chip and an actual piece of paper. “The chip has instructions to Gabe’s office once you get into Medical, and his comm-link details so you can call him if you get lost. It also has a list of equipment and supplies you’ll find in the lab, although Gabe will go over most of that with you. Also there’s a picture of Gabe so you know who you’re looking for. And some general information on Starfleet Medical, just as background knowledge.”

“Merci,” Bishop says. “And the paper?”

“Coordinates to transport yourself to tomorrow morning,” Jake says. “It’ll put you about a block away from the medical complex, but I didn’t think you’d want to beam yourself right into the building. People tend to ask too many questions when someone randomly shows up in the hallway.”

“They do,” Bishop says. “What time is Gabe expecting me?”

“No earlier than nine hundred San Francisco time,” Jake says. “So you’ve got until tomorrow afternoon local time.”

Bishop nods. “Merci.”

“Sure,” Jake says. “As for you, weapons builder.” He hands Khan a different slip of paper. “Coordinates for where we need to be tomorrow. The climate we’re going to is fairly cool and damp, think Seattle in fall if you’ve ever been there. Bring the prototype, and if you’ve got other cool weapons in progress you can feel free to bring those along. The Femarans mostly work in edged weapons but they’re interested in all kinds. They’ll feed us, they’re good at hospitality, but avoid what they call forge water if you can help it.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“It’s straight up moonshine, kicks like two teams of donkeys, and tastes vile,” Jake says, grimacing at the memory. “They love it, but I’ll stick to their beer, it’s much better and less likely to poison me.”

“I understand,” Khan says. “What else do I need to know?”

“They’re stronger than they look,” Jake says. “Sometimes they like to catch aliens off guard by it. Not that I think they’re stronger than you. Maybe. I don’t know. I’ve never seriously tried to test theirs.”

“And we will need to leave at six hundred,” Khan says.

“Yes,” Jake says. “No earlier than that, but if we leave any later we’ll run the risk of being late. We can’t transport ourselves right to the meeting point, so we’re landing a few klicks away and then
we hike. Wear good boots, we’ll be in the mountains. Not that high altitude, and their atmosphere’s a little thicker than Earth’s so even at higher elevations it’s still oxygen rich. But the ground can get rocky.”


“Have you met any Femarans before?” Jake asks.

“Once,” she says. “But it was a quick thing, and I doubt he even remembers me. But it doesn’t matter, I can’t go. I’d just get in the way.”

Jake grimaces but doesn’t argue otherwise. “If they were expecting you, or if you knew them,” he says.

“Yeah, but no,” Jill says. “It’s fine, I have stuff here to take care of. Just make sure you both come back in the same condition tomorrow night, okay?”

“Yes ma’am,” Jake says, tossing off a lazy salute. Jill snorts and punches his arm.

“If you two are done, dinner is ready,” Ekaterina says, but Khan hears the amusement in her voice.

“We’re done,” Jake says hastily. Jill swallows a giggle but hastily takes her seat when Cat raises an eyebrow at her.

They eat quietly; honestly, the meal reminds Khan of early adolescence, after they insisted they prepare their own meals but before they took control and rebelled against the scientists. After that, they had not had time to eat together much.

He does not want to get used to it, but there is comfort in the meal, a sense of family he had not had until just recently.

After the meal, Jake and Jill move to clean up automatically; Andy gets his baskets of parts and sets up on the table again; and Magpie pads into the living room to curl up with her tablet. “You did not spar with us this morning,” Cat says to Khan, idly flipping a knife in her right hand.

“I did not,” Khan says. “Are you suggesting we do so now?”

She flips the knife at him; he catches it before it slams into his forehead. “Da,” she says. “I think that would be a good idea.”

“Do you,” Khan says, flipping the knife back at her, an easy toss she catches without looking. “Then I suppose we should go.”

Bishop declines so he can continue his research and studying; Katsuro begs off to teach Andy and Magpie about lucid dreaming techniques; but Konstantin, Jill, and Jake head over to the gym with Cat and Khan.

Several rounds of sparring later, the five of them sprawl on the mats, sweaty, somewhat bruised, and in a few cases healing broken bones. Khan lies on his stomach, wings half-stretched out and left one aching from the cracked bone. Jill stretches out with her head on his hip; she absently brushes a hand back and forth over the line where his wing meets his back, and Khan doesn’t say anything but his skin tingles and he’s glad he lies on his stomach.

He flexes his left foot carefully, testing the ankle; it aches dully, but he thinks it has mostly healed. To his right, he sees Konstantin do something similar with his right forearm. Ekaterina lies still, but
after a moment she rolls up and begins working through some gentle yoga poses. “That looks like a good idea,” Jill murmurs but doesn’t move just yet.

“Do you know yoga?” Cat asks.

“I do, yeah,” Jill says. “I was a gymnast, so I studied ballet, yoga, and a few other things.” She takes a breath and rolls to her feet, stretching out and beginning to move through a few poses of her own.

“Gumby,” Jake says. “Whatever that’s referencing.”

“Some old cartoon character who had no bones or something,” Jill says. “I think.”

The name doesn’t ring a bell for Khan, and Konstantin shakes his head. “Feeling better, sestrenka?” Cat asks Jill.

“Yeah,” Jill admits. “It’s been…it’s been a long week.”

“You should take tomorrow to rest,” Cat says, straightening up and stretching her arms over her head. “You will need your energy.”

Jill’s cheeks turn a bit pink and she hastily moves to downward dog pose. “I probably will,” she says, muffled by her position and her hair. “Although I do have some things I want to get done. The next op isn’t for a week, I’ve got plenty of time to relax between now and then.”

“Next Saturday, da?” Ekaterina asks.

“Da,” Jill says. “So far all lights are green.”

“Good,” Konstantin says, getting up. “Should we shower here or back at the house?”

“I’ll shower at the house,” Jill says. “My bath stuff is there and I’m picky about what I use.”

“Since I don’t care and I’m also not staying at the house, I’ll shower here,” Jake says, slowly pushing to his feet. “Anyone else?”

Khan and Konstantin elect to shower at the gym and the three of them head upstairs. Khan spares a moment to wonder if he should be wary of Cat and Jill talking, but decides not to dwell on it.

“Do you need to get anything from the bunker before we leave tomorrow morning?” Jake asks over the water.

“I do, but I will go there in the morning to get it,” Khan says. “Or we can meet there and transport ourselves from the bunker.”

“That might be a better idea,” Jake says. “Is it possible to trace the signal of the transporters you built?”

“In theory, yes,” Khan says, scrubbing himself down with soap. “But the signal differs from a standard transporter, and one would need a device capable of recognizing transwarp signals to recognize it and identify it. Katsuro and Andy and I are discussing shielding options, but we judge the risk as relatively low right now. No one knows we have them, or what their capabilities might be, and since my siblings do not officially exist in this century, we do not have to worry about anyone specifically looking for them.”

“So it’s unlikely anyone just scanning for random electronic noise would be able to identify the
“signal?” Jake asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “If one were not specifically looking for transwarp frequencies, it would come across as just noise. The signal isn’t strong enough to trigger any automated alarms.”

“Okay, cool,” Jake says. “Since not many people use transwarp, then I think we’re safe.”

“Relatively,” Khan says. “What are the names of the people we are meeting?”

“There’s four of them,” Jake says. “Aktok is the chief weaponsmith. And then there’s his nephew Kalma, his son Dyval, and his daughter Melcrian. It’s a family business. A lot of the Femaran culture is based around family lines of work. There are other weapons builders through the culture, but for my money Aktok is the best, and we go back a ways. I saved Dyval’s life about three years ago.”

“How did you do that?” Khan asks.

“I was visiting the planet for some goods,” Jake says. “It was winter, Dyval had gone out hunting, and he got caught in a small avalanche on the mountain. I managed to find him and get him out before he could suffocate.”

“Not an easy thing,” Konstantin says.

“No, but the tricorder helped,” Jake says. “I was able to find his life sign and dig until I found him.”

Khan rinses off and shuts off the water. “Are we likely to encounter avalanches tomorrow?” he asks, rubbing himself dry with his towel.

“No, I don’t think so,” Jake says. “It’s spring over there right now, so we might get rain but the snow’s melted off the areas we’re likely to be. Their planet’s colder than Earth—not by much, but their high summer about equals New York early spring. And we’re going to one of the cooler areas on the planet. The adamantium is mostly found in the higher elevations of the mountains.”

“Is their planet mostly mountainous?” Konstantin asks.

“Kind of,” Jake says. “It’s about two-thirds ocean, and the third that’s land varies but it’s mostly mountainous. It’s a younger planet than Earth, so a lot of the mountains haven’t worn down yet. Also a smaller planet, but more mineral-rich. Gravity is pretty equivalent, though.”

“How big is their population?” Konstantin asks.

“About a hundred million live on the planet we’re going to, and about that many on the other planet,” Jake says. “They live a fairly long time, about a century and a half to two centuries, but their birth rate is really low.”

“Why is that?” Konstantin asks as the three of them get dressed.

“I’m not a social scientist, so I don’t know all the reasons, but their planet is heavy on minerals and inedible resources, but it’s harder to grow food due to the mountains and the cooler climate. So they don’t want to overburden the resources they do have,” Jake says, pulling on his shirt. “Until they invented warp drive they were actually declining in population because of scarcity. Now it’s easier for them to buy and trade supplies, but they still want to be fairly self-sufficient so they keep the birth rate low. Also, their history is about as peaceful as Earth’s—they’re such good weaponsmiths because they needed to be, because they fought each other all the time, smaller
conflicts and all out wars. They finally achieved peace, but it’s not always that solid. They almost
got into all out war over whether or not to join the Federation.”

“Interesting,” Konstantin says. “Is there any kind of databank for alien species? Something to give
one an overview of the various species in the Federation?”

“Yeah, there is,” Jake says. “The Federation has an official member species page with vital details
and stats for each, and there’s some other resources that give you more information than the main
official page. I’ll find the links for you.”

“Spasiba,” Konstantin says. “I should like that.”

“Sure,” Jake says. “Not a problem.”

They go downstairs and find Cat and Jill sitting cross-legged on the mat, talking quietly in Russian.
Both of them stop when the three men enter the room, and Khan didn’t catch whatever they said
before that. “We ready to go back?” Jill asks, bouncing up to her feet.

“We are,” Khan says. He raises an eyebrow at Cat, but she smirks and gets up without saying
anything.

“I’ll split off here,” Jake says as they leave. “See you at six hundred at the bunker tomorrow?”


“Anytime. Later, shorty.” Jake tugs a couple of Jill’s curls and kisses her forehead; she gives him a
hard hug and he heads off, whistling tunelessly as he goes.

The rest of them head back to the house, no one saying much on the way. At the house itself, they
find Katsuro and Bishop having tea in the kitchen, but no sign of Andy or Magpie. “They went to
bed,” Bishop says when Jill asks. “They were both tired, and they wanted to test what Katsuro
taught them, should they need it.”

“Would you like tea?” Katsuro asks. “The water is still hot, and we have a variety of options.”

“Thanks, but I’m going to go shower,” Jill says. “Unless Cat wants the first one.”

“No, I can wait,” Ekaterina says. “And I think I would like tea.”

Khan shakes his head. “I will say goodnight,” he says, giving Cat and Konstantin quick hugs.

“Good luck tomorrow,” Cat says, kissing his cheek. “Bring me back a weapon.”

“I will do my best,” Khan says.

Jill curls into him after her shower, her head on his shoulder and the scent of sandalwood in his
nose. He holds her close, an arm and a wing around her, stroking damp curls back from her face.
“What will you be doing tomorrow?” he asks.

“This and that,” she says sleepily. “Some prep work for next week’s mission, and stuff like laundry
and paying bills and normal life mundanity. Just because we’re plotting these huge major things
doesn’t mean we don’t run out of coffee and clean clothes, and I’m perilously close to being out of
both.”

“Life goes on,” Khan says softly.
“It always does,” Jill murmurs back. “We should sleep. Five am comes too early and I’ll get up when you do.”

“Yes.” Khan kisses her hair, slipping a hand under the weight of it to rub the back of her neck. She sighs and relaxes more against him, and in a few moments her breathing changes and he knows she is mostly asleep.

He closes his eyes against the darkness, letting himself relax. He isn’t safe enough to let down his guard entirely, but he can sleep without leaving most of himself on alert. It will do, for now.

Chapter End Notes

I thought next chapter would be Sunday, but now it'll be the chapter after the next one. I promise I will write it!
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

One should always make time for family.

Chapter Notes

Hi folks! Whether you've been reading along this whole time or just found me recently, welcome and I hope you're enjoying this ride. As always, feedback of any sort is gladly welcomed, even if you don't like it--I keep saying I can't improve if I don't know what I'm doing wrong. So happy reading, and I hope you like my worlds and my people.

The morning dawns gray and foggy; combined with the lack of people on the streets, Khan feels almost like a ghost or a wraith as he walks to the bunker. He gets there in enough time to pack a bag of weapons and dry off a bit from the fog and mist, but not much more than that. Jake shimmers into existence two minutes before six, dressed in clothes suitable for an all-day hike with a pack over one shoulder. “You ready?” he asks.

Khan nods. “Are you?”

“Eh, I don’t have much to do in all this,” Jake says, shrugging. He gives Khan the coordinates and Khan inputs them into the transporter. “And…one, two, go.”

They hit the buttons together.

The first breath Khan takes tastes of mint and something astringent, sharp but not unpleasant. The air feels cool against his skin, crisp with a hint of moisture and fresh in a way Khan hasn’t found on Earth in a long time. He looks around and sees a scene very similar to Earth, but not quite. The rocks are the wrong shade of gray, the sky the wrong color blue. Sparse grass looks similar enough but still, not quite right.

“I love the way the air smells here,” Jake says, tipping a pair of sunglasses onto his nose. “Dyval said the one time he came to Earth the air felt stale and dull, and after being here, I have to agree. Wish we could bottle it and pipe it in through ship’s air filtration systems. We’re headed thataway.” He points toward a path snaking upward through rocks and trees. “About five klicks, give or take a klick.”

That seems to be it for conversation; Jake says little else on the hike up, which Khan appreciates. The path winds around boulders and switches back on itself when the incline gets steep; not a tremendously difficult hike, especially for Khan, but the exercise combines with the scent and taste of the air to relax his body and quiet his mind. His thoughts empty out in a way he can almost never make happen; he stops analyzing what will be next and what may be and what must not be and just walks.
He feels physically relaxed, muscles warm and loose, by the time they reach the top. His mind feels clear and alert, and he thinks if nothing else comes of today at least he has had this.

They haven’t made it to the top of the mountain, but they’re high enough the trees are stunted and scrappily. A wide, open flat area doesn’t appear to lead anywhere but a small cave, except the entrance to the cave looks buried by a substantial rockfall. Khan doesn’t see another path up or down, and looks to Jake, wondering what next.

Jake walks over to the rockfall and studies it for a moment, reaching out. His hand hovers over one rock, then another, and he finally picks up a small red-and-gray rock about the size of a baseball. “Yeah, we’re here,” he says to the rock before tossing it back.

The entire rockfall shimmers briefly and disappears, leaving in its place a much larger, shaped entrance with intricate metal and stonework edging it. Khan can’t read the writing spelled out on the floor, but presumes it says *something* from the patterns.

“Jake, welcome,” a gray-skinned humanoid says, walking out of the cave. He stands about as tall as Khan’s shoulder, with two stubby horns on his forehead and no visible hair, and wears a stained and scarred leather apron over rough clothes. Three others follow him, dressed similarly; Khan notes breasts under one of their tunics and presumes her to be Melcian.

“Aktok,” Jake says, clasping shoulders with him. “This is my brother Khan. Khan, this is Aktok. The tall one in the back is Kalma, the one on his right is Dyval, and this is Melcian on Aktok’s left.”

He was right about Melcian, at least. Khan nods, exchanging brief greetings with the others, wondering why Jake used the term brother.

“Come, come,” Aktok says, gesturing for them to follow him into the cavern. Inside Khan notes a comfortable seating area around a small firepit, a large stone table inlaid with metal, and a rather enormous wall display of weapons. He walks over to it, curious. One look tells him the Femarans are among the best weaponsmiths he’s ever encountered, including himself. His fingers itch to take one of the swords off the wall, test its balance and its length, but he clasps his hands behind his back and says nothing.

“You like our display,” Melcian says to him, her voice softer than her father’s.

“I do,” Khan says, looking at her. She’s about Cat’s height, although built more broadly through the shoulders and chest. “Did you make these?”

“No, my family,” she says. “It’s in order—if you start at the top, here, this is my great-great-grandmother’s work, and then my great-grandfather’s, and then my grandfather’s, and then my father’s. The rest of us—Dyval, Kalma, myself—we’re not on here yet. Only the master’s work hangs on the wall, and none of us have achieved master status yet. We’re artisans, and senior smiths, but we’re not masters.”

“How does one achieve mastery?” Khan asks.

“One shapes the best weapon one is capable of, alone, and takes it to the council of masters to be judged,” Melcian says. “The council assesses the weapon and passes judgment. If they grant mastery, the weapon goes on the wall. If not, it is destroyed and the maker starts again. Perhaps a quarter of our smiths achieve mastery within the first three attempts. Many never do.”

“How long did it take your father?” Khan asks.
“His first try,” Melcian says, smiling. “Come, let us talk of this weapon you want us to make.”

She draws him over to the large table, lit from below by some source Khan doesn’t see. “Show us what you have,” Aktok says, gesturing at the table.

Khan sets down the bag and reaches into it for the gun-blade, setting it on the table. “It is designed to go from blade to gun and back,” he says, demonstrating the switchoff. “But the firepower from the gun is too powerful for the blade; the metal warps and melts from proximity. I need adamantium for the blade.”

“You need adamantium and stronger shielding on the barrel,” Aktok says, looking at it.

“Not without compromising the weight of the weapon, I do not,” Khan says.

Aktok smiles faintly. “And reducing the firepower is not an option?”

“No,” Khan says. “Not for what it may be needed for.”

“What are you using to power the weapon?” Dyval asks.

“I designed it myself,” Khan says. “Based on a fuel cell, but does not require recharging.” He explains briefly what he built, and how the weapon functions, demonstrating the switch from gun to blade and back.

“Interesting,” Aktok says finally, looking at it. “This is something I have not seen before. Are you building this for yourself?”

“No,” Khan says.

“Then come, sit,” Aktok says. “Before we agree to refine your idea, I want to know who you are building it for and why you designed it for him.”

They take seats around the firepit, Khan taking a backless couch, and Aktok looks at him expectantly. “Tell me who this is for,” he says.

“My sister,” Khan says, wondering the purpose of this.

“Why would you build her a weapon like this?” Aktok asks. “I don’t ask to know what battles or wars you might fight, that is between you and your enemy. I ask why you would design a weapon like this for your sister, what purpose it would serve for her that another would not.”

Khan dislikes talking about his family to anyone not of his family, but he is—rather literally—between a rock and a hard place. He forces his wings to relax. “She prefers blades to ranged weapons, but I think that in our future, we will have need of both,” he says. “I would rather have her use something that does not slow her down when changing from distance to melee.”

“But why her?” Aktok persists. “Why would you create a weapon for her? Is she not able to do so herself? This, what you have designed, I have not seen its like before. Why does your sister inspire your creativity in this manner?”

“She is not a weaponsmith,” Khan says. “She…” He takes a breath, tasting the astringency of the air. “At the time I designed the weapon, she was not available to help me create it, or provide me with feedback. I…missed her, and I wanted to work on something that would remind me of her, and this was the result.”
“You are close,” Melcian says.

“Yes,” Khan says simply.

“Tell me more about her,” Aktok says, leaning forward. “What kind of fighter is she?”

“One of the best I have ever known,” Khan says. “One of the two best, to be precise. She is deadly, and graceful, and her knives are a part of her. I have never known her to lose one unless she meant to, and I have never known her to miss with a blade. She prefers them to guns because she wants to see her opponent when they fight. She believes that she cannot rely on anything that might break, jam, misfire, or malfunction to save her life, because it will invariably do that at the wrong time.”

"Knives can break," Aktok says.

“She doesn’t need knives to be deadly,” Khan says.

“Why give her a ranged weapon at all?” Aktok asks. “If she prefers knives, if she is as good with them as you say.”

“Sometimes there are situations where melee is neither optimal nor tactically sound,” Khan says. “I would not have her unarmed or idle during those times.”

Aktok nods thoughtfully. “Does she like the idea of this weapon?” he asks.

“She does,” Khan says, again wondering why it matters.

“Tell me something,” Aktok says. “Why should we help you with this?”

“This is a new weapon, something you admit you have not seen before,” Khan says. “Why should you not want to work on it? Why should you not want to create something unique? I am not so possessive of the general concept that I would not allow it to be recreated.”

“Would you work with us on creating more?” Aktok asks. “As I doubt we use similar technology to the firepower in this one.”

“If I have time and am able, yes,” Khan says, not really convinced either is likely.

Aktok nods again. “How soon do you need this?”

“Yesterday,” Khan says and makes all four of the Femarans laugh. “How soon can you complete it?”

Aktok gets up and walks over to the table again, studying the weapon. Khan follows him, watching him study it carefully, turn it over in his hands and mutter under his breath. “In order to modify the blade, we need to take it apart,” he says. “The heat necessary to forge the adamantium would melt the rest of the gun. We could recast the entire weapon in adamantium, which would be my preference as it would balance better and provide more shielding for the ranged firepower. That might be easier, although we would need to forge it in parts and build it around the power source. Were we to do that…” He trails off, studying the weapon some more. “Two days,” he says finally. “Two days, and that would be with your assistance to take it apart and rebuild it. We would not need your help to forge the parts. If we can take it apart today, you would need to come back the day after tomorrow to provide the power source and reassemble it.”

“I may not be able to come back in two days, but I will return as soon as possible,” Khan says. “Is there any harm in delaying the reassembly after the parts are forged?”
Aktok shakes his head. “The metal must cool entirely before we can work with it. Waiting will do nothing but test our patience.”

Khan smiles faintly. “Then do we have a deal?”

“With one condition,” Aktok says. “When you come back to finish the weapon, bring your sister with you. I would like to meet the woman you have made this for, and see her reaction to it.”

That’s easy enough. “Done,” Khan says. He doesn’t know if the Femarans shake hands, but Aktok clasps his shoulder firmly, a gesture Khan returns.

“That’s easy enough. “Done,” Khan says. He doesn’t know if the Femarans shake hands, but Aktok clasps his shoulder firmly, a gesture Khan returns.

“Of course, there is the small matter of payment,” Aktok says as they return to their seats. “Adamantium is not cheap nor easy to mine.”

“And this is where I step in,” Jake says, grinning. “So let’s talk numbers.”

Negotiations take a solid half hour; Khan stays quiet mostly because he honestly doesn’t know the value of the materials and the labor. Jake, on the other hand, clearly has a sense of it. He and Aktok barter back and forth, discussing the less-tangible rewards, such as the value of constructing a new weapon, as well as hard numbers. They finally settle on a price about forty percent lower than Aktok’s original offer. It’s cheaper than what Khan paid for the knives, but not by much.

Cat better appreciate this, he thinks wryly.

“So,” Aktok says in satisfaction. “We shall have lunch, and then you will show us how to disassemble this weapon.” He looks at Dyval expectantly, and Dyval nods and gets up, hurrying off.

“A question,” Melcian says, getting up and walking over to the table. “Would you consider lengthening the blade? I would think you have the space for it, yes? If you lengthened the barrel, or slightly modified the grip. Or would that be problematic for what you want it to do?”

Khan walks over to her. “I would not want to lengthen it too much,” he says. “The purpose of the blade would be close quarters fighting, and if the blade is too long it will prove a hindrance more than a help. But it could be extended by a few centimeters, perhaps…so long?”

“Yes,” Melcian says slowly. “I think—let me show you why I think this.” She hurries over to the wall display and takes two swords off it, bringing them back over. “This one about matches the dimensions of your current weapon,” she says, laying the smaller sword down next to it. “And it is a good weapon for close combat, certainly. But in a way it is almost too short, and could allow an enemy to get closer than you would want him. This blade, here—it is not much longer, maybe a fingerlength or two, but I think it actually is more versatile. You can keep an enemy at bay without letting him get so close, but still it would not prove a danger to your allies.”

Khan picks up the longer sword, in large part just to feel its weight and balance. He’s not surprised to find them perfectly matched, the blade comfortable in his hand immediately. Testing it, he steps back, moving through a brief practice spar against an invisible opponent. “This is a beautiful weapon,” he says, reluctantly putting it down. “And yes, I see your argument. I think increasing the length of the blade to something matching this sword would prove beneficial.”

Melcian nods. “Yes, I think so. Would lengthening the barrel to match be a problem?”

Khan shakes his head. “No, not at all. If anything it would focus the ranged fire more, make it perhaps more of a sniper’s weapon.”
“Have you made sniper guns before?” Melcian asks.

“I have used them,” Khan says. “But I have not constructed one of my own. Do you make them here?”

“We have done,” Melcian says. “My father prefers to focus on edged weapons, but we know how to construct rifles and guns and the like. Kalma has a focus in archery, so we sell bows and arrows.”

“What is your specialty?” Khan asks.

“At the moment, I make the knives like the ones Jake carries,” she says, bending to pull one out of her boot. “They look deceptively simple.”

“They are exceedingly well made,” Khan says. “I bought several for my sister. She says she has never used knives this balanced and sharp.”

Melcian smiles at that, her cheeks flushing darker gray for a moment. “They require patience, because forging the blade and the grip at the same time can be difficult. One mistake and the entire weapon is ruined, and adamantium does not forgive easily. It can be melted down and forged again, but only once. After that the metal begins to stress and will have weak or brittle spots.”

“What does your brother specialize in?” Khan asks.

“He takes after my father,” Melcian says. “He prefers the longer blades, ones designed more for dueling than mass combat.”

“Do you have duels often?” Khan asks.

“We do,” Melcian says. “Often two individuals will settle their grievances in the fighting ring, rather than in the courts. All duels used to go to the death, but now there is an option to stop at first blood, depending on the severity of the argument.”

“What sorts of arguments lead to duels?” Khan asks curiously.

“Almost anything,” Melcian says. “We are not a particularly pacifistic people. A legal duel must at least be recognized in the courts, that way the winner won’t face charges if he kills his opponent. But the bar for having a duel acknowledged is…low.”

“Have you fought any?” Khan asks.

“No, not me,” Melcian says. “Most people don’t try to challenge the weaponsmiths, as everyone may need our services someday and we have the right to refuse service. There are others on our planet, and on our sister planet, but honestly the four of us are the best. Which is why Jake comes to us.” She smiles, taking the swords back to the wall. The defined muscles in her arms bunch and flex under her tunic as she hangs the swords. “That, and I think he has a crush on my brother.”

“Do you,” Khan says, amused.

“I do,” Melcian says, laughing. “Not that either of them will admit it. But it’s their loss, really. Do humans care about that sort of thing?”

“Define that sort of thing,” Khan says.

“Sex before a marriage bond,” Melcian says. “Or…” She frowns, tilting her head. “Do humans
“Some do,” Khan says. “Some sects believe two partners of the same gender is forbidden."

“But…” Melcian looks completely dumbfounded. “But why? I mean, wouldn’t one’s best lover be the same gender? And there’s no risk of children with a same-gender relationship, and wouldn’t that be also a good thing? There are never enough resources.” She shakes her head. “This makes no sense. The humans rarely do. My people joined the Federation, but we mostly keep to ourselves. The Federation, as a whole, seems both decadent and prudish, and not worth our time.”

“I did not choose to join it,” Khan says honestly. “Do other alien species confuse you as well?”

“Some,” Melcian says. “The Vulcans are ridiculous, of course, but we can’t mock them as much these days since there are hardly any left. The Andorians are all right, I suppose, although I have never seen one fight. And I have never seen whatever species you are before.”

“I am human,” Khan says simply.

“Really?” Melcian blinks. “Then why do you have wings?”

“It is a long story,” Khan says. “And not one I want to tell in this setting.”

He’s not sure how she’ll take it, but Melcian nods, accepting his demurral. “Perhaps someday,” she says, glancing over as Dyval reappears. “For now I think lunch is ready.”

Lunch bears a very strong resemblance to fajitas, Khan discovers. Round flat breads with an assortment of grilled, sliced meats, vegetables, and assorted toppings. Melcian gives him a quick rundown of the foods on the table, and Khan follows Jake’s lead in assembling his flatbread. He can’t quite pinpoint what the flavors remind him of, but he enjoys the meal regardless.

Jake spends most of the meal telling the others the story of his ill-fated survivalist trip. He makes it sound much less life-threatening than it was, Khan observes, and adds a good dose of humor. He’s a good storyteller, which doesn’t surprise Khan; most intelligence operatives have charisma in spades.

“Next time, you should bring your cadets here,” Aktok says, still laughing a bit. “The mountains are not very friendly.”

“There’s not going to be a next time unless I pick each person,” Jake says with a sigh. “I can only deal with that much stupidity once in a very rare while.”

“How did you end up doing this anyway?” Dyval asks. “I thought you had passed the point of taking on junk assignments.”

“So had I,” Jake says. “But they were short-handed, I’m good at survivalist stuff, and I was on downtime between assignments. So I got screwed.” He sighs and takes a sip of beer. “Next time they try to throw me into something like this I’m coming here and hiding.”

“You are always welcome,” Aktok says. “But if you come you may be put to work.”

“Busman’s holiday,” Jake says cheerfully. “Maybe next time I’ll bring my sister so you can meet her.”

“We would like that,” Dyval says. “You keep saying you will and then you don’t.”
“Our schedules don’t always line up,” Jake says apologetically.

Aktok frowns. “Family is important, Jake. One should always make time for family.”

“I do,” Jake says. “Believe me, I do. I just have a rather big family that keeps growing and a job that keeps me traveling nine months out of the year and only so much time.”

“When did Khan become part of your family?” Aktok asks. “You had not mentioned a third brother before, let alone one with wings.”

“It’s kind of complicated, but the short version is that he’s my sister’s mate,” Jake says, looking at Khan. “Which makes him my brother.”

“It does,” Aktok says, sounding pleased. “Khan, have you two wed?”

“No,” Khan says. “Not yet.”

“Why do you say not yet?” Aktok asks. “Do you not want to legally marry her? Or does she not want it?”

“It is also complicated,” Khan says. “At the moment, it isn’t possible. In future, I hope it will be. Why does it matter?”

“Because I am an old curious man making you a weapon for your sister,” Aktok says. “Why do you want a weapon for your sister and not your mate?”

“My mate doesn’t need a weapon quite like the one you are helping me build for my sister,” Khan says. “She has her own weapons and is well suited for them. If there is time, however, I may ask about forging her a sword. Your blades are the finest I have ever seen and I would like her to have one.”

“We can find time,” Aktok says. “Perhaps it can be your wedding gift to her.”

“We would not be wed by the time she would need it,” Khan says. “Are weddings so important here?”

“They are,” Melcian says. “So much of our society is passed down through familial lines, so we place a very high importance on weddings and continuing the family. We have two kinds of marriage—there is the amiko wedding, a short-term bond that lasts perhaps five years at most, often used by people who are having a child but do not want to stay married forever. Then there is the amata, which lasts until death. An amiko bond can become an amata, but not the other way round. But we have ended wars by marriage, and at least two wars in our history were started due to a broken marriage.”

“Are you married?” Khan asks, possibly rude of him but he’s curious.

Melcian smiles and shakes her head. “I was in an amiko match six years ago. It lasted three years, long enough for me to have my daughter and wean her, and then her father and I ended it amicably. I have not yet found anyone else I want to marry.”

“My granddaughter deserves nothing less than a true love match for her mother,” Aktok says proudly. “She should grow up knowing the value of an amata bond.”

“Papa, if it were up to you Kels would be treated better than our prime minister,” Melcian says fondly. “I don’t disagree that she needs a solid marriage as a role model, but let’s not get carried
away. She has other examples all around her.”

“Of course she does, but she is your daughter,” Aktok says. “And as such, her best examples for behavior come from you.”

“Yes, Papa, I know,” Melcian says patiently. She laughs, taking a sip of her beer. “Come, let us go disassemble Khan’s weapon.”

They do that, gathering around the table. Khan takes the weapon apart slowly, explaining each piece as he does, until it lies in a half-dozen pieces on the table. He puts it back together to show the Femarans how it works, and hands it to Aktok to disassemble, clasping his hands behind his back to keep from reaching for it again.

Aktok takes the weapon apart carefully but makes no mistakes, and nods when it lies on the table. He puts it back together, murmuring under his breath as he does, and then takes it apart one last time. “Excellent,” he says finally. “Now, explain to me the restrictions on the power source so I know what I have to work with.”

They end up spending a solid hour and a half discussing the weapon, Khan explaining everything he did to create the power source and the phaser fire. Dyval makes notes on a tablet as they talk, and Kalma takes pictures. Melcian takes measurements and adds them to Kalma’s notes.

“Two days,” Aktok says finally. “A day to forge the pieces, a day to let them cool. We will start building the models now, so that we can forge the adamantium first thing tomorrow. I will contact Jake when it is ready to be rebuilt.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“One more thing,” Melcian says. “Jake, how tall is your sister? How broad are her shoulders?”

“Tiny and not,” Jake says. “Let me—hang on.” He takes a tablet out of his bag and his fingers dance over the screen for a moment before he projects a hologram onto the table, showing an image of himself next to one of Jill. “That’s accurate.”

“Good lord,” Dyval says, looking at it. “She’s barely bigger than Kels.”

“Not quite that small, but close,” Melcian says. “Still. Give me two minutes.” She hurries off before anyone can ask any other questions.

“Payment upon delivery, as always,” Jake says to Aktok.

“Half down now,” Aktok says. “This is a new project and we are putting it ahead of all our other commissions.”

“One quarter down,” Jake says.

“A third,” Aktok says.

“Deal,” Jake says, clasping shoulders with Aktok. He takes a credit stick out of his bag, plugs it into his tablet and makes a few edits before handing the stick to Aktok. “One third on there, the other two-thirds to be paid upon delivery and successful test.”

Aktok nods, satisfied. “It is good. Khan, will you have a drink with us? To celebrate this new project?”
“One drink,” Khan says, remembering Jake’s warning about the forge water.

“Of course. Kalma, would you please?” Aktok asks.

Kalma nods and heads in the same direction Melcian had gone. A few moments later, Melcian returns, almost running over to them, a black case in her hands. “This, I think, will suit your mate,” she says, setting the case on the table and undoing the clasps. She opens the case and Khan’s jaw all but drops, but he manages to contain his reaction before anyone notices.

Either a large dagger or a small shortsword, the blade gleams in the light, a two-edged weapon with a point reminiscent of a stiletto. The hilt looks solid, with a guard to prevent knuckle damage and a cross-hatched pattern on the grip to keep it from becoming slippery. A dark blue gem sparkles slightly in the pommel, and all in all it’s one of the most beautiful weapons Khan has ever seen. He takes it out of the case carefully, not surprised by its perfect balance and weight. “This is beautiful,” he says quietly. The hilt is too small for his hand, but he knows it will fit Jill’s perfectly. “Did you make this?”

“I did,” Melcian says. “It would have been my daughter’s first blade, but I think your mate has need of it now. I can always make another one for Kels.”

“What do you want for it?” Khan asks, laying the sword back down in its case.

She shakes her head. “This one is a gift. I didn’t make it with the intention of selling it, so I cannot take money for it. Use it well, and when you and your mate wed, invite us to the ceremony, and I am content.”

Khan takes a slow breath, in and out. “Thank you,” he says finally, looking at Melcian. “And I will.”

“The scabbard is under the blade, if you lift the velvet here,” Melcian says, showing him. “It has a cross-body strap, but can be modified to fit along the spine.”

“I see,” Khan says. “Thank you hardly seems adequate.”

“I don’t need anything else,” Melcian says.

Kalma returns with a tray containing six small glasses and a squat decanter of some dark red liquor. He sets the tray down and Aktok pours glasses for them all, handing them out. “A toast,” he says, raising his glass. “To new projects and new family.”

“L’Chaim,” Jake says, grinning. They clink glasses, and Khan downs his without hesitation when he sees the others do the same.

Jake wasn’t kidding, he thinks a second later, the kick hitting him as hard as Katsuro ever does. He manages to keep from choking or coughing, but it takes a few seconds for his vision to stop blurring and his ears to stop ringing, and the burn goes all the way down.

“You drink like a Femaran,” Aktok says proudly, clapping Khan on the back and not quite staggering him. “Well done, and welcome to our world.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, grateful it doesn’t come out as a wheeze.

“You know, I’m okay with not drinking like a Femaran,” Jake says breathlessly. “Christ.”

Aktok laughs. “We will see you in a few days. Be safe getting home.”
“Thank you,” Jake says, shaking himself all over. He gathers up his bag, Khan does the same, and they leave.

Khan expects them to walk back down the trail to their starting point, but Jake stops after about five minutes, just out of sight of the cave. “We can transport back to the house from here,” he says. “Or wherever you want to go.”

“The house is fine,” Khan says, taking out his transporter and setting the coordinates as Jake does the same. They hit the buttons together.

When they materialize in the living room, they find Katsuro and Andy playing chess, but Khan doesn’t see the others. “Welcome back,” Andy says, looking up from the board. “We’re a bit scattered at the moment. Bishop’s still in California, Konstantin and Ekaterina went out for a run, Magpie had to make an emergency trip to New York to get some things from her nest, and Jill is at her flat, she said she had to do laundry and some cleaning stuff. How’d it go with the Femarans?”

“It went well,” Khan says. “The weapon for Cat will be ready in a few days, and I have a different one for Jill.”

“I didn’t know you were getting one for her,” Andy says in surprise.

Khan smiles faintly. “Neither did I.”

"Ah, one of those,” Andy says. “Can I see it?” She grins. “Although if you want Jill to see it first, I get that.”

“I can show you,” Khan says, taking the case out of his bag and setting it on the table next to the chess board. He undoes the clasps and opens the case, showing Andy and Katsuro the sword inside.

“Beautiful,” Katsuro murmurs in Japanese, studying it. “That is a work of art, not just a weapon.”

“Yes, I thought so,” Khan says. “Melcian says she intended it to be her daughter’s first blade, but that Jill has more need of it now.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Andy says. “I don’t use weapons, but that’s just…it’s incredible. Jill’s going to love it. No idea when she’ll need it but given everything, odds are it’s not a question of if but when.”

“Yes,” Khan says. He closes the case and slips it back into his bag. “I think I will go see how she is doing. As a note, we will be unavailable tomorrow.”

“Not asking,” Andy says. “But I’ll pass the word on.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

Katsuro raises an eyebrow at Khan. “Do I want to know?” he asks in Hindi.

“She promised me one day,” Khan says in the same language. “Tomorrow is that day.”

Katsuro smiles at that. “I see,” he says. “We will not contact either of you until Monday.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“And on that lovely note I don’t want to understand, I’m heading out,” Jake says. “I’ll be in London for the next few days, so call me if you need me. I might have to bounce back and forth
between here and San Francisco a bit, I want to keep an eye on Marika and I need to make sure I’m not going to get signed up for any more bullshit survival classes, but if my leave goes through soon I’ll be in a good place for a while.”

“I would ask that you start seriously considering housing options,” Khan says. “We may need to move people once we revive the last four of my family.”

Jake sighs. “Yeah, okay, I’ll start looking into that and figure out our best plans. Still not sure I want to use my family for it, but I’ll see what other options we have if any.”

“Understood,” Khan says. “I am not certain I want to use your family either.”

“Well, at least we’re on the same page there,” Jake says with a snort. “I’ll see what I can figure out. Catch you guys later.” He leaves via the front door, closing it quietly after him.

“What time is it here?” Khan asks, realizing he doesn’t know.

“About four in the afternoon,” Andy says. “Cat and Konstantin said they’d be back by six, but I don’t know about Bishop, and I don’t think Jill was planning on coming back to the house tonight.”

Likely not, Khan thinks. “I am going back to my flat,” he says instead. “I will see you on Monday, but likely not before then.”

“Not asking,” Andy says, laughing. “Just be careful.”

“I will be,” Khan says, smiling a little.

Andy pushes to his feet and gives Khan a quick hug, kissing his cheek. “See you Monday, uncle,” she says.

“Be well,” Khan says, kissing her forehead. He punches the coordinates to Jill’s flat into his transporter and hits the button.

When he materializes, he does so to find Jill pointing a phaser at him, hands steady. “Oh, it’s you,” she says as soon as she sees him. “Okay. Whew. Thought you were someone unfriendly, since you’ve never just beamed into my flat before.” She engages the safety on the phaser and sets it down. “Next time, could you give me some warning?”

“My apologies,” Khan says, amused but glad she didn’t just shoot him. “Who else would be beaming into your flat?”

“No idea, but it’s not like no one would want me dead,” Jill says. “Those seven people who want you dead might know about me by now, for one. Or Marcus might have caught on to me, or…who the hell knows? Usually if someone beams into your living space unexpectedly it’s not for friendly reasons.”

Khan smiles and walks over to Jill, smoothing a curl back from her face. “No one is expecting to see us until Monday,” he says, deliberately lowering his voice.

Color rises in her cheeks and she licks her lips, looking up at him before she ducks her head. “How long until midnight again?” she asks, her voice more than a bit breathless.

“Around eight hours,” Khan says, curling his hand around the back of her neck. “Do you have plans?”
“I wanted to make the bed with clean sheets,” Jill says, swallowing hard. “And, um, clean some of my toys I haven’t used in a while. And I wanted to do some more laundry just to have clean clothes.”

“All good plans,” Khan says, letting go of her slowly and stepping back. “You should do those things.”

“I can’t if you’re here,” Jill says honestly. “You’re distracting.”

He smiles again. “Then I will leave,” he says. “I will be back before midnight.”

“Okay,” she says, taking a breath. “Okay.”

"Be good for me, kitten,” Khan says, a warning in it even though his voice stays gentle.

“I will,” Jill says, licking her lips again. “You know I will.”

“I do,” Khan says. “I will see you in a few hours.”

She nods but doesn’t go to him; Khan leaves her standing in her living room and shuts the door firmly behind him before he goes to take the stairs to his own flat.

Chapter End Notes

And...Sunday has arrived, or just about. Are you excited?
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

I never claimed to be sane.

Chapter Notes

So. I started posting this story on 10/14/13, in case you weren't around at the time. That means this story has been in progress for over a year. I don't even know how that happened. I also don't know how far I am from the end; I think I might be halfway through the story, if I'm lucky, but there are still people to introduce and a war to stop and all sorts of fun ahead.

If you've been on this journey with me all along, thank you so much for your patience and your encouragement. If you're newer to this story, welcome and I hope you're enjoying.

For reference, in case you were curious, my other epic wingfic took about 13.5 months and was only slightly longer at conclusion than this story is now. I don't even know, guys.

He lets her wait until almost eleven-thirty, even though he has no real reason to do so and very little with which to occupy his time. But he reads a bit, amuses himself for a time with a spot of blackmail against two online thieves before diverting more of their credits to his own accounts. By the time he logs off and erases his traces, he’s made back twice what he paid Aktok for the weapon, bought some supplies they might need in future, and spent some money on a couple other items for Cat and Alona. The last might be overly optimistic but Khan chooses to believe they will succeed in their goal.

Finally, he takes a long shower, dries off, pulls on soft clothes and walks downstairs to Jill’s flat. He lets himself in and locks the door behind him, double-checking the jammer she keeps on her coffee table and the secondary in the kitchen. All lights show green, bright in the mostly-dark flat.

As he expected, he finds Jill in bed, mostly asleep, hair spilling over her pillow and one arm flung over her head. Khan smiles a little and slips in next to her, fitting himself against her back and brushing his lips over her throat.

“Is it midnight yet?” she mumbles, stretching a little against him. It surprises Khan a little to note that she’s wearing a tank top and panties; he’d have laid odds on her sleeping nude. “Can we pretend it’s midnight?”

“Twenty til,” Khan says, slipping his fingers under the hem of her tank top. He drags his nails up her belly, slow and firm, and pinches one nipple when his hand slides over her breast. Jill whimpers, twists against him, her head tipping back against his shoulder.
“Can we pretend it’s midnight?” she asks again, swallowing a whine when he rolls her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, teasing it into hardness.

“We can,” Khan says because frankly it’s close enough and his own patience isn’t infinite.

“Thank God,” Jill says immediately and fervently enough Khan laughs.

“My poor kitten,” he says, teasing her. “Surely there have been more frustrating periods in your life.”

“Yeah, of course there have, but you bring sexually frustrated to a new level,” Jill says, a little sheepishly. “You turn me on so damn much, and then, when I’m already wet and almost ready to beg—then you just walk away, and I don’t know whether to curse you or cry in frustration or both.”

“Have I ever not made it worth your patience?” Khan asks, still toying with her nipple.

“No,” Jill says. “I mean, it’s always worth it, just…you drive me crazy.”

“So you tell me,” Khan says. He kisses her throat, tracing a line up the side of her neck with his tongue before he bites her jaw. “And you promised me anything I wanted,” he says in her ear, his hand sliding back down over her stomach, between her legs, holding her in his palm. “Which wasn’t very sane of you, pyara.”

“I never claimed to be sane,” Jill says, a little shaky around the edges.

“No, you never did,” Khan agrees. “And I never claimed I played fair.”

“You don’t,” Jill says, breath catching in her throat when he bites her again.

“Anything,” Khan murmurs against her throat. “Anything and everything I want. Do you have any idea what I will have from you, pyara?”

“No,” Jill whispers.

“So many things,” Khan says, shifting his hand to slide two fingers under the hem of her panties, touch her without really touching her. Jill whimpers, pushing into his touch a little. “You’re already so wet for me,” he says softly, stroking her labia with a finger. “I could make you come just like this, couldn’t I? Just the brush of my fingers over you, and you would come for me.”

“Please,” Jill breathes. “Khan, please.”

He pretends to consider it, long enough that she whines when he touches her and he smiles against her skin. “Come for me, kitten,” he whispers, biting her earlobe sharply and pressing two fingers hard against her clit. Jill gasps, arching back against him, shuddering through her orgasm.

When she goes lax against him, breathing hard, he pulls his hand away slowly and licks his fingers, considering his options. He had intended to bathe her first, an indulgence for both of them, but she’s here and already so wet…and he knows her, knows that after the build-up of the last few days, one climax is more of a tease than anything else.

He can bathe her after, he decides, and nudges her onto her stomach, moving to draw her panties down and toss them aside. She draws up her knees when he runs a hand up her leg, resting her head on her crossed arms. Khan considers taking her camisole off and decides not to bother for now, and doesn’t get undressed himself, just shifts clothes out of the way.
"Please," Jill murmurs; Khan scratches his nails up her thigh and sees goosebumps form. He smiles to himself, and as he pushes into her, he leans down and bites her throat. Jill moans, tipping her head to the side to give him access, fingers curling against the sheets.

"Mine," Khan says against her skin, low and more of a growl than anything else. Possessiveness makes him bite her again, hard enough he’ll leave a bruise, one she might not be able to cover tomorrow. He doesn’t care. The build-up to today worked both ways and she’s perfectly hot and wet, tight around him, making soft broken sounds and moving with him, pleading with every centimeter of her body even though she doesn’t say a word.

She gasps, shivers, but when she moves to reach down Khan growls and pins her hands over her head. “You come when I let you,” he says in her ear. “Not before.”

“Please,” Jill begs. “Khan, please.”

“No,” he whispers, tightening his hold on her wrists. “Not now.”

He doesn’t let her come. He brings her to the edge, until she shivers so hard the bed shakes with it, but he doesn’t let her come before he does, and he doesn’t touch her after until he knows some of the need has subsided. “Anything I want,” he says finally, running his fingers up and down her spine. “And what I want is you like this, wet and open and desperate for me, so eager to come you’d do anything I asked, anywhere. I might let you come, if you’ve pleased me enough, if I feel generous. Or I might just tease you and leave you wanting.”

Jill whimpers but doesn’t move from where she lies prone in the sheets.

Khan smiles, pleased, and gets up from the bed, finally stripping off his own clothes. He may be cruel, but it’s not without purpose; this may be ostensibly about what he wants but in reality it’s about what she needs, and she needs to get out of her head, forget everything else and stop thinking. If he lets her come too soon or too often, he runs the risk of her falling out of headspace. His goal isn’t to please himself, although he will, but to pull Jill down into her body and force her to focus only on that, only on him.

"Come here," he says, watching her. It takes a few moments, but she takes a breath and pushes up from the bed, stripping off her tank top and walking over to him. Khan smooths a hand down the side of her face, leaning down to kiss her. He takes her wrist and draws her into the bathroom, turning on the hot water. Jill leans into him, clearly not wanting to be out of contact, and sighs when they get into the shower, resting her head against his chest.

Not for the first time, Khan wonders how she got into this, how she discovered this aspect of herself. She’s talked about play parties at the Academy, but he thinks she found her interest in submission before that. He knows she enjoys it, but he also knows she hesitates, that something or someone made her uncertain. Not about what she wants, no, but if he gives her any hesitation, any indication at all he is less than completely in control, it’ll throw her out of headspace and ruin the day. She’s not confident enough about her ability to please him.

But now is not the right time to ask; really, it’s the opposite of the right time. So Khan says nothing as he holds her, lets her relax against him. Jill sighs and arches under his hands as he washes her. Khan finds it both amusing and gratifying that he can see her mind emptying, quieting and focusing on him alone.

He knows she expects him to make the day all about sex, which is why he doesn’t initiate anything sexual as they get out of the shower. He dries her carefully, thoroughly, smoothing lotion into her skin and letting her run product through her hair.
Jill yawns, not arguing when Khan draws her down on the bed, letting her curl into him. He kisses her softly, strokes her skin, but doesn’t try to push her toward orgasm, not right now. He knows she’s aroused, knows it would take very little to make her whimper and beg, but he wants her utterly pliant first, relaxed and warm and feeling safe. So he holds her instead, scratches his nails over the back of her neck, and lets her fall deeper into headspace.

It’s a while before he lets her come, and by the time he does she can’t even speak to beg him for it. She squirms under him on the bed, whimpering, wrists cuffed over her head and fingers curled into her palms, but she doesn’t say a word and he stays quiet, his fingers deep inside her and his thumb firmly against her clit. He’s brought her to the edge three times already and backed off every time she pleaded; this time she says nothing but he reads her desperation in her body, in the way she tries to spread her legs wider for him and her head tosses against the pillow.

“Now,” he says finally, his voice low and intent. Jill wails when she comes, shuddering and hips bucking up, clenching so tightly around his fingers they almost cramp.

Khan gives her a few seconds to breathe, to fall back against the bed, and starts again. She whines, squirming in what isn’t entirely pleasure, but he doesn’t care and he doesn’t stop.

As the day goes on, as he takes her apart, he thinks the difference between this and Dante is that at least this time, he has control of himself. He knows exactly what he’s doing, how he wants to affect her. He marks her, leaving bites that will mostly hide under her clothes, the same with bruises. He causes her pain and balances it with gentleness, with pleasure enough that she shudders and arches against him.

They have down times, periods where he coaxes her to drink something, eat a few bites here and there. She curls into him then, completely trusting and pliant in his arms, even when he presses his fingers and his lips against the bite marks in her skin, the bruises around her wrists and on her hips.

Jill may drive him mad, but he has this, Khan thinks, stroking her back while she dozes. She trusts him enough for this, enough to give up her safeword and let him take what he wants. That isn’t inconsequential.

In the evening, he starts bringing her back to reality, talking to her and holding her, letting her spiral back into normal headspace at her own pace. It takes a solid three hours before she finally sighs, nods, and stretches, moving out of his arms. “I’m okay,” she says quietly.

“Yes,” Khan says, watching her sit up and stretch. “How do you feel?”

“Relaxed and sore,” she says, pushing her hair back. “Really, really relaxed. You…that was amazing.” Jill licks her lips, looking at him uncertainly. “Was it—did you—”

“Yes,” he says, answering without answering. “I did.” Khan sits up, running a hand up and down her back, over the scars. “Tell me something.”

“What do you want to know?” Jill asks, arching into his touch.

“Who was your first like this?” Khan asks. “Who was the first person you let dominate you?”

“His name was Tarin,” Jill says. “I met him in school after the Olympics. He was studying to go to med school someday, and I was irritated by biology, so he offered to work with me. We ended up screwing more than we studied, but I got an A in the class.”

“What happened to him?” Khan asks.
“We went separate ways,” Jill says. “He went to Yale and I went to the Academy and we fell out of touch. I have no idea whatever happened to him. Why?”

“I am curious,” Khan says. “You enjoy submission, but you’re not confident about your skills as a submissive. I want to know why.”

“It wasn’t Tarin,” Jill says. “He and I were good together. It was his idea to try things, but I’d been reading stuff, so I was all for it. I’ve just…there were a couple that didn’t work out. It doesn’t matter, they’re in the past.”

“It matters,” Khan says softly. “Tell me about them, the ones that didn’t work out.”

“Not tonight,” Jill says after a moment. “I’m relaxed and my mind is quiet and I feel pretty damn good and I don’t want to have that conversation.”

Khan doesn’t like it, but nods. “We will discuss this, pyara,” he says.

“I’m sure we will,” Jill says, pushing her hands through her hair. “But not now.” She stretches again and gets up, turning to look at him. “I would like another shower,” she says. “And then I think I need to sleep if I’m to have any chance of making it to work tomorrow.”

“Would you like company in the shower?” Khan asks, expecting the answer to be no and not surprised when she shakes her head.

“I need a bit of space to finish clearing my head,” she says, smiling a bit. “I’m back, but I’m still…I could fall back down really easily and I’d like to avoid that because I really won’t make it to work tomorrow if I do.”

“I understand,” Khan says.

“Do you?” Jill tilts her head to the side. “Have you ever—like this, I mean?”

Khan shakes his head. “No, not quite like this.” He doesn’t elaborate and while he knows Jill wants to ask, she doesn’t.

“Okay,” she says after a moment. “Shower. Back in a bit.” She blows him a kiss and disappears into the bathroom.

While she showers, Khan remakes the bed with clean sheets; the ones from earlier badly need washing. He shoves those in the hamper and has enough time to find the massage oil Jill prefers before she comes back into the room, wrapped in towels. “How do you feel?” he asks, watching her dry off and move through her post-shower routine.

“Really, really good,” Jill admits, sounding a bit sheepish about it. “More relaxed than I can remember being, and my head’s…it’s not so noisy. Like I know there’s a million things to think about and deal with but right now none of it’s demanding attention, it’s just kind of…there, and I’ll think about it when I’m ready.”

“And physically?” Khan asks, pleased by her answer.

“Sore,” she says. “My muscles ache a bit and, um, other parts of me are kind of sore, but in the good way. This—“ She touches the bite on her shoulder. “This hurts more, though, and I was hoping you could treat it? This one and the other one on my thigh.”

Khan nods. “Where did you put the cream?”
“It’s in the bathroom, one moment,” Jill says, ducking in to grab it. “Thank you.”

“Lie down,” Khan says, moving to give her room. “On your stomach for now, I think.”

Jill stretches out, forehead on her crossed arms. She winces a bit when Khan smooths the cream into the bite mark, but relaxes after a moment when the anesthetic kicks in. “Did you break the skin?” she murmurs. “I don’t remember and I can’t see it well enough to know.”

“I did,” Khan says, a combination of possessive pride and slight guilt in his stomach at the admission. “I doubt it will scar, however.”

“I don’t care if it does,” Jill says. “I just care if it’ll hide under my uniform.”

“This one will,” Khan says, although that’s more by luck than anything else. He finishes with the mark on her shoulder and studies her for a moment, a curl of pleasure in his stomach when he sees the marks he left on her. Bruises on her wrists, her hips; the bite mark on her shoulder and one on her inner thigh; he can’t see the red lines from the knife but knows they scatter over her breasts and stomach. Nothing enough to truly injure her, nothing to impede movement or cause problems with her daily routine, but enough to satisfy both of them.

He treats the rest of her, using the anesthetic cream where he needs it—her thigh, a few of the cuts, and her sex. He’s as gentle as he can be but she still tenses when his fingers enter her, not relaxing until he finishes. “Talk about being worked over,” Jill mumbles, stretching against the bed. “Oh, God. I feel—not as bad as I did after Dante, because that was insane, but wow. I feel like I could sleep for a day and a half. Come lie down with me and tell me what you’re doing tomorrow.”

“One moment,” Khan says, getting up to put the cream away and wash up quickly. He comes back to the bedroom and settles next to Jill, drawing her into his arms. “I have to meet with Marcus tomorrow,” he says, stroking her hair. “The odds are high I will be on the Jupiter station for a day or two. There’s no need for it but I think Marcus will insist.”

“Likely,” Jill says, sighing. “Well, I’ll miss you, but it’s not like you can’t return immediately if you absolutely have to.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Although…” He trails off, thinking about it. “The Vengeance has an advanced warp drive that incorporates some elements of transwarp. If I use the transporter while on the ship or in its vicinity, it is possible someone would pick up on the signature. Whether or not they could identify it for what it is, I don’t know, but there is at least some chance.”

“So, let’s avoid that,” Jill says, kissing his collarbone. “If you desperately need to get home, we’ll deal with that when it happens, but for now let’s just figure you’ll be by Jupiter for a couple days.”

“Yes, I think so,” Khan says. “What will you be doing this week?”

“The usual academic stuff and working with Jake on alternate housing,” Jill says. “I don’t want to split your siblings up right after we revive them, so I’m figuring we’ll be here for a week and then a week after we get the last four, but after that I think we should scatter. You and I need to stay in London but everyone else…shouldn’t. Or, rather, if they do stay in London it shouldn’t be in the house. We’re too much of a target even with eight people not really being on anyone’s radar. I don’t want to risk it, especially since we haven’t neutralized our gang of seven. Speaking of, that should be on our list of things to deal with soon.”

“We tagged three of them, and can track a fourth,” Khan says. “How do you propose we neutralize them?”
“There’s always the method of luring them all to one location and killing them,” Jill says matter-of-factly. “Although if we’re going to do that I want to grab one of them first and find out what they know and what they want. So let’s make that our first goal—grab one, interrogate him or her, then decide what to do next, but I’m not ruling out seven killings.”

“Neither is anyone else,” Khan says.

“No, I know,” Jill says. She yawns into his shoulder and sighs. “I need to sleep before I can think critically, I’m too wiped to analyze anything.”

“Sleep, pyara,” Khan says, rubbing the back of her neck. “You are safe here. I have you safe.”

“I know,” she murmurs, sighing again. “You’ll keep me safe until I die because of you.” Her words trail off into mumbles and Khan almost doesn’t catch the second half of the sentence. When he does, he almost laughs even though it’s not that funny. Accurate, though.

Eventually he drifts off himself, waking when Jill starts tossing and turning, face screwed up in her sleep. Khan soothes her out of the nightmare without waking her, but stays awake the rest of the night, watching her for any signs of another.

Rani used to do this for him, he remembers. She never admitted it, but he remembers more than a few nights where he woke to find her watching him, her dark eyes filled with concern. Sometimes he only knew she had been watching him because she was so tired the next day. The first time, Khan remembers, he had eventually fallen back asleep with his head in her lap, her fingers running through his hair as she sang softly to him.

Khan thinks about it for a moment and realizes she’d sung the same lullabye to him as she did to Andy. His throat tightens at that observation and he takes a breath, forcing his muscles to relax before he disturbs Jill. “Tell me why,” he murmurs under his breath in Hindi. “Tell me why you did this, why you are doing this now.”

He doesn’t get an answer, not that he really expected one.

In the morning, he wakes Jill in time for her to have a cup of coffee before she leaves. “Keep in touch, if you can,” she says, tying off her braid. “If I don’t hear from you, I’m going to assume—possibly stupidly, but still—that everything’s okay.”

“If I can contact you, I will,” Khan says. “Will you be staying at your flat tonight?”

“Yeah, probably,” Jill says. “It depends on what’s going on at the house and if they need me for anything. Also, I had a thought you may not like, but…can I keep the transporter until you get back from Jupiter?”

“Yes, but why do you want it?” Khan asks.

“I want to go to New York and talk to Eema,” Jill says, not quite looking at him. “She’s not Starfleet, but she’s really smart and she might have some ideas about this whole situation that we haven’t come up with. And if I know her at all, I know that by now she has a spreadsheet of possible locations for your family to stay with all kinds of information. Jake won’t want to get it from her, but I’m less reluctant. I mean, I’m not all that happy about possibly putting them in danger, but if we have to…”

Khan nods, taking the transporter out of his pocket and handing it to Jill. “Send me a message once you talk to her,” he says. “Let me know what she says and what options we have.”
“I will,” Jill promises. She rinses out her coffee mug and puts it in the dish drain before walking over to him and leaning up for a kiss. “Be safe,” she says. “I love you. I’ll see you in a day or two.”

“Yes,” Khan says, kissing her one more time. She smiles against his lips and leans into him, her palm against his cheek. After a long moment, she pulls away and gets her bag, leaving the flat. Khan finishes his own coffee and goes to get his computer, deciding how best to handle the day.

Rather than waste time in London at the archive or the weapons facility—which he does not want to go near at the moment, not with two missions complete and two more to go—he tells Marcus to meet him at the station by Jupiter, and arranges for a shuttle. He doesn’t give Marcus a chance to argue or order otherwise, something he thinks Marcus will not like but doesn’t much care. Khan’s never-generous patience has reached its breaking point with Marcus, and he knows the time is not far away when he will disappear from Marcus’s control entirely, drop off the radar and let Marcus live with the uncertainty of Khan’s location and his next actions.

That thought, the idea of drawing it out, stalking the admiral and making him fear for his safety—that pleases him, and he smiles in the shuttle, considering his options. Cat would love to be in on it, he knows, and Bishop as well. He expects Alona and Matthew to leap at the chance to play games like that, and once those two know the truth…

Yes. This will do nicely, Khan thinks, beginning to consider just how he wants to torment Marcus before he finally kills him. He already has the man’s home location and the safety codes to his apartment, as well as the standard safety protocols used in his office and at Starfleet HQ in general. And since none of his siblings officially exist…

With that in mind, he changes his plans for what information he will give Marcus today, intending to add bits of misinformation here and there, subtle errors that no one trying to replicate his work will catch. He has enough time once the shuttle docks to make notes, determining what best to leave out and what to add. The office he uses sits off the bridge, and serves no actual purpose in the ship design but Marcus insisted on it and Khan finds it adequate for the time being.

Mostly, though, he intends to make this as fast a trip as possible. He has actual work to do back in London, and Aktok will have Cat’s weapon ready soon.

“John,” Marcus says finally from the doorway, after having stood there for a solid five minutes while Khan didn’t bother to acknowledge him, simply out of annoyance and curiosity about how long it would take Marcus to speak.

“Admiral,” he says, raising his head from his tablet.

Marcus scowls, clearly annoyed. “What’s so important we couldn’t meet in London first?”

“Since we were going to end up here anyway, I elected to save time,” Khan says mildly, pushing to his feet and letting his wings stretch simply because he knows it discomfits Marcus. “Most of what I want to discuss with you involves improvements to the Vengeance’s phaser banks.”

“Not the torpedoes?” Marcus asks, an odd tone in his voice. “You were supposed to be working on those.”

“The torpedoes are well in hand and I am not needed for the building,” Khan says dismissively, even though he probably could be useful. “Do you want my intelligence or my strength?”

“I just thought you had a special interest in them,” Marcus says. “It’s not like you to just drop one project like that.”
“And you know me so well that you know my work habits,” Khan says pointedly. He doesn’t rise to the bait about the torpedoes, knowing now that Marcus had a clue about Khan’s intent for them. Where he got that clue, Khan intends to find out, but not right now.

Marcus flushes a dull red but doesn’t answer. He’s not completely idiotic, Khan thinks, as he’s clearly realized Khan is annoyed and not in a mood to be toyed with.

Not that he ever is, not with Marcus.

“Well, then, what do you have to show me?” Marcus says finally, trying to regain the upper hand.

“Here,” Khan says, turning back to the computer in the small office and projecting the image he wants onto the wall. He explains the modifications he wants to make, adding in the deliberate errors and leaving out one key point.

Marcus frowns, thinking about it. “But—“ He stops, thinking more. “How do you deal with the slowness to charge?” he asks finally.

A question Khan expected, and one he answers easily. “They charge passively while the ship is at warp,” he says. “Draws power from the bleed-off of the warp drive. Once the ship goes to impulse, they have enough power to function for at least three hours. After that, one would need to recharge them, but five minutes in warp would give them eighty percent.”

“All right,” Marcus says slowly. Khan doesn’t expect him to catch the errors or the missing information, and while Marcus asks more questions, none of them involve that data. “Let’s take this to the engineers,” Marcus says finally.

“As you like,” Khan says, gathering up his computer and waiting for Marcus to leave first simply because he doesn’t feel like turning his back on the man.

They talk to the engineers, who take Khan’s notes and ask more questions. One comes close to touching on the misinformation but accepts Khan’s explanation, and one looks confused about something but doesn’t ask a question. Khan doesn’t bother prodding the woman for one, not in front of Marcus.

“What else are you working on?” Marcus asks after they leave the engineers and are heading back to the shuttle bays. “You mentioned something about a weapon prototype? A phaser cannon?”

Khan shakes his head. “It’s not yet ready for testing,” he says. “I am unable to acquire the materials I need to make it properly.”

Marcus frowns. “Why not? You should have access to anything you need.”

“Really,” Khan drawls. “Then tell your accountants to release the hold they placed on my requests.” He could easily have bypassed the security and made it look like they had, of course, but he finds it more amusing to point out to Marcus the length of the leash Marcus still thinks he holds.

“I—it must be an error,” Marcus says. “I’ll look into that right away. It’ll be cleared up by the end of the day.”

Khan makes a noncommittal sound. “I have work to do back in London,” he says. “If, as you say, I will have no further trouble acquiring materials, I have a few ideas I would like to test. I trust you won’t need reports.”

He knows full well Marcus does need those, or at least pretends he does. “You’ll need to give me
more than that,” Marcus says, and Khan wonders what threat Marcus will use this time. “I’ll need something to indicate your progress.”

“Really, admiral,” Khan says, mocking this time. “Don’t you trust me?”

He’s not surprised when Marcus whirls on him and steps closer, all but pushing him against the wall. “No,” Marcus says, voice low and probably trying for intimidating. “No, John, I don’t, and I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do. You’d better rethink who has the upper hand here, especially if you want your…family…to stay safe.”

Four of them already are, Khan thinks, and it galls him but he inclines his head, a display of submission even though every centimeter of him itches to grasp the man’s head between his hands and…squeeze. “As you say,” he says finally, enough to let Marcus know he’s bowed but not beaten. “I’ll update you.”

Marcus nods, stepping back. “Good. I’d like you to stay here another day, make sure the engineers have your instructions correctly.”

What he expected, even though there’s absolutely no need for it. Khan grits his teeth, considering whether he wants to push his luck or acquiesce for now. He decides on the latter, simply because if he is not careful he will kill Marcus here and now, and that would be…problematic.

As soon as Marcus leaves, though, he finds an unmonitored corner of the station and sends a few messages letting his family know he will not be back until tomorrow. One to Jill, one to Cat, and one to Andy, just to cover all his bases. Then he thinks better of it and messages Jake as well.

It doesn’t escape him that mere weeks ago he would have had no one to contact. As usual when he thinks about this, the emotions that twist in his stomach pull at him from opposite directions. Gratitude, yes. Anger, also yes, at himself as well as Marcus. To be perfectly honest, Khan finds it somewhat incredible—and frustrating for himself—that Jill and her siblings, four unenhanced humans, were able to come up with and execute most of a plan that Khan would never have tried on his own, one that has so far saved four of his siblings.

It galls him, not as much as Marcus threatening him, but still. Sometimes he wonders if he lost something in revival, if part of his intelligence, his ability to think tactically didn’t come back with the rest of him. He wouldn’t have been surprised had Marcus operated on him before he was revived, modifying things he had no right to touch and about which he had no knowledge. But the security feeds and information Khan accessed told him that surprisingly Marcus had not done anything of the sort.

Perhaps that was a plan for later, depending on how Khan reacted to the weeks he’d spent in section 31’s custody. It doesn’t matter at the moment; Marcus will never get his hands on another one of Khan’s people.

Unless…unless Marcus wants to prove an unnecessary point. Unless he decides to make an example out of one of Khan’s family. Khan would not put it past him, and in some ways he’s surprised Marcus hasn’t already done it. The problem with this, of course—other than the obvious one of him killing one of Khan’s siblings—is that Marcus might discover the empty cryotubes, and…Khan doesn’t particularly want to imagine the consequences of that. What Marcus lacks in ingenuity he makes up for in other ways; Khan has no desire to return to the section 31 labs, and if he were to disappear Marcus might just kill everyone else.

Somehow that fact hits him harder now than it did even three weeks ago. With four of his family safe, the thought of losing the rest makes him clench his jaw and focus lest the rage overtake him.
entirely. Logically, he should be less upset over it—he has some of them, should that not be better than nothing? But it is one thing to contemplate losing all his siblings, and quite another to think about losing most of them. Somehow the latter cuts more deeply.

Still, though. Cat and Konstantin, Katsuro and Bishop. The four closest to him, the four with whom he can be completely and utterly honest. He holds to that, and the rage subsides slowly. Not completely, never completely, but enough that he can focus.

He remembers Marika’s comments to him, about the rage he holds. It wasn’t always this way. In his own time, he had had purpose, had what he thought was a duty and a responsibility, one about which he was passionate—but not enraged. Now, though…

Marcus will regret his actions, Khan thinks.

He spends the rest of the day making notes about the phaser cannon and the weapon he wants to construct for Jill, even as he discusses improvements with the phaser bank engineers and leaves out crucial pieces of data. His opinion of their intelligence doesn’t increase when none of them catch those pieces.

Andy, he knows, would realize the gaps, even if she didn’t catch the misinformation. She doesn’t normally design weapons but she’s intelligent enough to follow the theory and see what Khan has modified.

Then again, Andy is a genius, and the people on this station…are not.

In the evening, he gets a message from Jake. It’s ready. Let me know when you’re free. AJ.

Khan hides a grimace. Two days, he sends back. I cannot leave my current location until tomorrow evening.

Two minutes later, his link buzzes again. Can you go tomorrow night? Time changes mean if we leave around 1900 London time we’ll get there in late afternoon. AJ.

He’s not certain, but…Yes. Meet me at the house.

At least something about today is acceptable.

Khan doesn’t sleep that night, unwilling to let himself relax that much in a hostile environment. Instead, he goes for a long run through the station and spends a satisfying session with the weight machines, taking advantage of the late hour and solitude.

He takes a quick sonic shower back in his temporary quarters and comes out of the bathroom to find his link blinking with a new message. Curious as to who is messaging him at 0230, he looks at it.

We tagged Ikan, and Bishop tagged Keroack while in San Francisco. Luck was on our side. More details when you get back. J.

Unmitigated success on that one, Khan thinks. He doesn’t bother replying, but does check his mail to see if he has anything else to be aware of. Nothing in his official inbox, of course, but the anonymous one has one from Magpie.

Since I know you like to know everything, have a program to allow you to see where our bugged people are. It has planet-wide range, but doesn’t quite get to the moon and depending on how far you are from the target it may be a bit less specific. Interestingly, our four subjects don’t cross
paths that often. I don’t have enough data to see if there are pre-arranged meet points or times, but I’m working on it—I’ve hacked into mail for two of them, working on the last two. Baker and Keroack were relatively easy, but Verity and Ikan have much tighter security and I’m being careful.

Stay safe. See you in a few. M.

While he finds the idea tempting, Khan decides not to run the program from his current location. It can wait until he returns to London. He doubts any of the seven are on the Vengeance or the station, and he can’t do anything about them until he gets back. As well, he thinks it likely Marcus has software on the station computers to review activity, and something like this might draw his attention.

So he shuts down his email, wipes the history, and begins making a list of materials he can request as part of the phaser cannon but which he intends to use for other purposes. Marcus won’t know the difference, and neither will anyone else, assuming anyone even looks.

Actually, he thinks he might be able to use some of the cannon materials to create a personal force shield, something to block or at least partially stop phaser attacks. If he can get it right, a killing shot through the shield would do no more than stun, and a stun would have almost no effect. He considered it previously but dismissed it as unnecessary, since a kill shot from a phaser can’t kill him and a stun would be no more than an inconvenience.

Now, though…

Khan focuses on his work, only surfacing when his wings threaten to cramp from too long held still. As he stretches them, he realizes it’s full morning, and he should likely make an appearance with the engineers. He saves his work to a memory chip, tucks it into his shirt, and leaves his quarters, thinking that this may be either his last or next to last official visit on the station.

Marcus can deal with his absence; Khan has actual work to accomplish.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Not everything can be quantified.

Chapter Notes

We've hit another milestone in this story; that is, this is now officially longer than that other wingfic I wrote that finished up over the summer. And we've got a ways to go yet. I'm not entirely certain how I feel about this, but I still like the story and I hope you do as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Khan leaves the station, he barely has enough time to get back to London and the house before Jake shows up. His head also aches, a rare occurrence but two days of grinding his teeth and pushing down anger takes its toll.

At least he managed to finish the plan for the personal shield, even if he didn’t have time or materials to build a prototype. He intends to talk to Katsuro on this one; while Katsuro prefers not to build weapons, he never objected to defensive technology. Andy, also, will likely have some good input.

Somewhat surprisingly, Marcus did clear him to request materials for the phaser cannon, so Khan spends much of the shuttle ride to Earth submitting those forms. He needs a place to construct it, but a few of the lower levels of the archive have spaces for similar work. Khan doesn’t particularly want to spend much time there, but figures it as an incentive to work quickly.

He runs through a series of muscle stretches and relaxation techniques to rid himself of the headache before he gets off the shuttle. They help, although not completely, but enough.

Unfortunately he doesn’t have enough time to walk or run to the house.

At 1845, he opens the door, and almost immediately stops cold, barely daring to breathe at what he hears. Ekaterina’s voice soars through the air, effortless and beautiful, a song Khan knows to be one of her favorites. Konstantin’s bass joins Cat’s soprano, the harmony enough to give Khan goosebumps.

Slowly, carefully, he closes the door behind himself and walks quietly into the kitchen, watching them sing. Cat glances up when she sees him but doesn’t stop the song, as does Konstantin, but when she reaches the chorus Ekaterina looks at Khan impatiently, gesturing for him to join in.

He hasn’t sung in a very, very long time, and part of him hesitates, but Cat glares and Khan takes a breath, adding his own harmony to theirs. It feels…good, he admits to himself. Another puzzle piece fitting in.

When that song ends, Konstantin starts another one, a round; Khan joins in after the first verse, and
Cat after him. The tempo increases as they sing, an old game to see how quickly they can manage without making mistakes. But after several runs through, Konstantin trips over a word, then Khan, then Ekaterina, until they dissolve into laughter and the song crashes to a halt.

“Jesus,” Magpie says after a few moments of silence. “That was…wow. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything like that before.”

“We would be better with others,” Ekaterina says. “Maeve or Alona, for a mezzo-soprano, and Anandi for a contralto. Matthew as our tenor, and perhaps Bishop to balance as another baritone.” She looks pleased, though, and picks up her coffee mug to take a sip. “Still, though, that was not terrible. We are out of practice, but we can remedy that.”

“Actually,” Khan says slowly, considering it. “That…would be a good idea.”

“Why so, brother?” Konstantin asks.

“The Klingons love opera,” Khan says. “They take it very, very seriously. Should we need to engage with them, we could use that fact in our favor.”

“I see,” Ekaterina says. “Then yes, we will practice. I shall look at possible scores we might want to rehearse, something suitably impressive.”

“When did you learn to sing like that?” Andy asks.

“As children,” Konstantin says. “Well, adolescents, once our voices changed. A superior human must be superior in all aspects, including cultural knowledge and talents.”

“Were any of you visual artists?” Magpie asks.

“A few, but none that we will revive yet,” Cat says. “Well, no. Alona often made pencil sketches, but she did it more for things Bishop needed than for her own enjoyment.”

“Writers?” Andy asks.

“Some, yes,” Konstantin says. “We had little time for hobbies, or artistic pursuits, but some of us found ways.”

“Kostya wrote,” Ekaterina says, giving him a fond look.

“Mysteries,” Khan says when Andy looks curious. “He had a series of historical stories, set around World War 2. But we never had time for him to publish them.”

“Maybe now you will,” Magpie says. “Once everything here is all over and done with. I mean, you’ll need to find some way to occupy your time, right?”

“We will,” Konstantin says. “And it is possible, although all my work is inaccessible at the moment. My stories were saved to electronic media and taken on the ship, however I doubt any computer these days would be capable of reading the files.”

“We could build something,” Andy says. “That would be the easy part. The hard part would be getting to the ship to get the files.”

“A problem for a later time,” Konstantin says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Where are the others?”
“Bishop and Katsuro went out to dinner,” Ekaterina says briskly. “Jill came by earlier and left that for you, but said she had to run back to the archive as she had agreed to spar with another officer.” She points with her mug at the transporter. “She was not sure when she would return.”

“Then I will likely miss her, as Jake should be here any moment and I know not when we will return,” Khan says, picking up the transporter. “Where did Bishop and Katsuro go for dinner?”

“Tokyo,” Konstantin says. “They said they would not be back tonight. Bishop wants to test the stimulant, so their intention is to find a private space and spend the night. The idea is to take a depressant tonight, to force them to sleep heavily, and then take the stimulant upon waking to see what kind of effect it will have on them. It is not a perfect comparison, of course, but they thought it could be analyzed well enough to know how it will work on Saturday.”

“Where did they intend to stay the night?” Khan asks.

“Near Kyoto,” Konstantin says. “Magpie found them a suitable private apartment, one that we think may work for them when we leave this house. Although Jill also has some options for us on that front.”

“She had mentioned she would look into that,” Khan says. “Has she shared any details?”

“Only that she has a list of about a dozen options,” Konstantin says. “She wanted to wait to discuss it until everyone could share in the conversation.”

“Practical,” Ekaterina says. “There is no need to repeat everything.”

“Indeed,” Khan says. The doorbell rings then and Magpie pushes up from her seat to go answer it, returning a moment later with Jake.

“Hey,” Jake says. “You guys ready? I should have asked earlier, but are either of you required to be anywhere before tomorrow morning local time?”

“We are not,” Khan says. “Are we spending the night?”

“I don’t know, it depends on how late things run,” Jake says. “You might want to bring a bag, though, just in case.”

“Give me a moment, then,” Khan says, heading upstairs quickly. It takes him a few moments to put together an overnight bag with a change of clothes and toiletries, as well as slip a knife into his boot and strap a forearm sheath around his right arm. The knives don’t feel like part of him, the way he knows Cat’s do, but he feels better with the weapons in place.

“You guys ready?” Jake asks when Khan returns. “Konstantin, are you coming too?”

“Da,” Konstantin says, a small bag over his shoulder. “Will that be a problem?”

“Shouldn’t be,” Jake says. “The Femarans are big on marriage and happy couples.”

“Please let Jill know where we are,” Khan says to Andy. “You and Magpie will be all right?”

“We’re fine,” Andy promises. “Jill will be back in a couple hours and the three of us will have a quiet night in. Will you be able to contact us or vice versa if we run into trouble?”

“Yeah, we should be able to,” Jake says. “Regular comm-links won’t work over that distance but I’ve got a booster on mine, so if you need to reach us call me.”
“No problem,” Andy says. “See you when you get back, whenever that is.”

“The coordinates, please,” Konstantin says. Jake reads them off and Khan inputs them into his own transporter as Jake and Konstantin do the same with their own.

“And…go,” Jake says. They hit the buttons together.

The four of them materialize in the same spot Khan and Jake arrived last time. This time, a soft fog swirls around them, and through it Khan sees vivid orange and purple streaks from the setting sun. Ekaterina takes a breath, then another one. “What is that scent?” she asks. “It is marvelous.”

“I don’t know what it is, but it’s fantastic,” Jake says. “It has some really awesome effects on human physiology. I told Khan last time I wish they could use it in the air filtration systems on ships. We’re about five klicks from here, though, so let’s get moving before we lose all the light.”

“What is the reasoning for beaming here, rather than the actual destination?” Konstantin asks as they start walking up the path. “Does something block transporters?”

“No, it’s not that,” Jake says. “It’s kind of—it’s essentially a matter of etiquette.”

“How so?” Konstantin asks.

“So there’s a few different factors about it,” Jake says. “One is that it shows the seriousness of your interest. The hike up the mountain isn’t that strenuous, or that long, but it’s still a hike, and it demonstrates that you’re willing to put in the time to meet Aktok and his people, that you’re taking this seriously. Aktok won’t sell to anyone he feels will disrespect his work, or who he feels doesn’t have the proper attitude toward a weapon.”

“What is the proper attitude?” Cat asks.

“Basically acknowledging that the thing in your hands is capable of taking a life, and should not be wielded lightly or treated with carelessness,” Jake says.

“You said that was one factor,” Konstantin says. “What are the others?”

“The only major one I know of is related to the attitude aspect,” Jake says. “The hike up isn’t so difficult that it’s impossible for all but the most dedicated, but it’s not so easy that you can mostly not pay attention to what you’re doing. You have to watch your footing, and there are a couple places you can fall off the path—or the mountain. Combine the physical exertion with the scent of the air, and the end result is that by the time people hit the top of the mountain they’re physically warmed up and mentally alert, a good combination for discussing weapons and fighting.”

“Anandi would love to study the air,” Ekaterina says. “As would Bishop, I expect.”

“I thought so as well,” Khan says.

Conversation dies down as they continue the trek; with the lack of light none of them want to risk being distracted enough to trip and fall. Jake does pull a flashlight out of his bag, which helps, and Khan and his siblings have good night vision. Still, they go more slowly than Khan and Jake did last time, and the last streaks of color have disappeared from the sky by the time the four of them reach the top.

Fortunately, the open area has lighting; Khan doesn’t see actual bulbs or other sources, but the soft clear light makes it easy to see without blinding him. “Welcome back,” Aktok says, walking out of the cave, followed by his family. “Thank you for coming so late.” He clasps shoulders with Jake
and then Khan before looking at Khan expectantly.

“Aktok, this is my sister Ekaterina,” Khan says. “And this is her mate, Konstantin. This is Aktok, a master weaponsmith. His daughter Melcian, his son Dyval, and his nephew Kalma.”

Aktok clasps shoulders with both Cat and Konstantin, although he has to stretch for the latter. “Please, come in,” he says, gesturing to the cave entrance. “We were waiting for you.”

Inside, the same soft clear lighting brightens the area, and the big stone table glows with light. Khan sees pieces of Cat’s weapon on it and walks over, studying the disassembled weapon. Each piece gleams dully, the casting beautiful enough Khan folds his hands behind his back to keep from picking it up immediately.

“Melcian did most of the casting,” Aktok says proudly as the others surround the table. “We made two pieces for each part of the weapon, should you want to make a second.”

“I may,” Khan says slowly. He looks at Ekaterina. “Anandi might like this, do you think?”

“I do,” Cat says, looking at the table. “But let me try it first, da?”

Her impatience shows through and Khan smiles. “We need to put it together first,” he points out.

“So, what is stopping you?” she asks.

Aktok laughs. “A woman who knows what she wants,” he says. “By all means, put it together. Have you the power source?”

“I have,” Khan says. He takes a box out of his bag and opens it, taking out the sphere. It shimmers blue, and while logically Khan knows he cannot sense anything from it, he would almost swear he can feel the energy thrumming inside the sphere.

Aktok gestures to the table, and Khan looks at it for a long moment before he picks up the first piece. He’s careful as he works, each piece locking into place solidly before he adds the next. The last part locks with a satisfying thunk sound and he smiles again, stepping back to test the weight and balance. He flips the weapon from gun to sword and back again, moving through a few test positions with the sword extended.

“Is this weapon for you or for me?” Ekaterina asks impatiently. “Let me have it, brother.”

Khan laughs, but flips it back to the gun and hands it to Cat hilt-first.

“Oh, my,” she murmurs, testing it the same way Khan did. “This is a work of art. Is there a target I may shoot?”

“Yes, of course,” Aktok says. “Outside.”

The lot of them go outside and Aktok indicates a red target on the other side of the clearing, lit brightly. Cat nods in approval and swings the weapon into gun position, lining up her shot and firing. The bolt of white energy makes the entire target glow; Cat doesn’t hesitate before firing again, and again.

She stops after six shots, surveying the blackened hole in the center of the target. “I quite like this,” she says after a moment.

“Let me see it for a moment,” Khan says. “I want to make sure it is not…” He trails off, taking the
weapon from Ekaterina. The metal feels slightly warm, but nothing dangerous, and when he
switches to the sword the blade is no more than lukewarm against his skin.

“Does it pass inspection?” Aktok asks when Khan hands it back to Cat.

“It does,” Khan says. “It is exactly what I intended it to be.”

Aktok smiles. “Good. Then I am satisfied.” He looks at Ekaterina. “Are you pleased with it?”

“Da,” Cat says firmly. “I am quite pleased with it.”

“Would you like to take the pieces home to assemble another one?” Aktok asks. “And please,
come inside. We will have a meal and talk.” He looks at Kalma this time, who nods and hurries
off.

The rest of them go back inside and take seats around the firepit. “So,” Aktok says, taking what
looks to be his usual seat. “Tell me something about yourself, Ekaterina. I like to know the people
I build weapons for.”

“What would you like to know?” Ekaterina asks, setting the weapon down on the end table next to
her.

“Something I would not know from looking at you,” Aktok says.

Cat laughs and shrugs a shoulder. “This is my mate,” she says, touching Konstantin’s thigh. “We
have been together over four decades, and in that time we have never spent a single night apart.”

“How long had you known each other before you wed?” Aktok asks.

“We grew up together,” Ekaterina says, looking at Konstantin and smiling. “I used to follow him
and Khan around when we were small children. Khan is my brother, but we are not biologically
related.”

“A true amata bond,” Melcian says quietly.

“What is that?” Cat asks.

“A permanent marriage,” Melcian says. “Only death can break it. Different from amiko, a short
relationship usually entered into by people who want a child but don’t want to stay together
forever.”

“I like that,” Ekaterina says. “It is quite practical.”

“We take marriage seriously,” Melcian says, smiling.

“It should be taken seriously,” Cat says. “Too many people do not.” She leans into Konstantin for
a moment. “I study languages,” she says. “Would you teach me a bit of yours?”

“What would you like me to teach you?” Melcian asks.

“How does one say ‘I love you’ in your language?” Ekaterina asks.

“It depends on the situation,” Melcian says. “To say it to your mate would be one way, to a family
member another, to a friend a third.”

“Tell me how to say it to your mate,” Ekaterina asks. “Does it vary for gender?”
“No, our language is gender-neutral,” Melcian says. She says a phrase, slowly and clearly. “That would be how you say ‘I love you’ to your mate.”

Cat repeats it, and Melcian nods in approval. “Exactly so.”

“Tell me something about yourself, Konstantin,” Aktok says. “Would you want a weapon as we make here?”

“Had you one sized for me, I would,” Konstantin says. “I am not a sharpshooter the way some of my family are, but I am quite good with a sword or a battle-axe. The problem with those weapons is that they are awkward to carry and impossible to hide.”

“Not…entirely,” Aktok says. “Excuse me. One moment.” He gets up, heading down the hall.

“What is he looking for?” Jake asks Melcian.

“I have no idea,” she says, laughing.

“Well, that makes six of us,” Dyval says. “I’ve no clue what he’s looking for.”

“It—do you think it’s the longsword we made last year?” Melcian says suddenly. “The one with the—“

“That…could be it,” Dyval says slowly. “I can’t—but I thought we melted it down, because she didn’t want it?”

“But we wouldn’t have just scrapped it, we never do that,” Melcian says. “I mean, I know she told us to but when would Papa have listened?”

“Who am I listening to?” Aktok asks, returning with a lacquered black box. “Come, look at this.” He sets the box on the table and opens it as the others come over to see it.

“It’s a hilt,” Jake says, looking at it. “A quite nice hilt, mind, but it’s…a hilt.”

“Observant of you,” Aktok says, grinning. “Now watch.” He takes the hilt out of the box and makes a quick, sharp twist of his wrist.

A blade erupts from the hilt, unfolding itself and locking into position in two seconds. The metal has the sheen of adamantium, and once it locks Khan sees no visible joins or folds in the blade. “Okay, that’s cool,” Jake says.

“I rather thought so,” Aktok says, making the same sharp gesture. The blade folds back in on itself and disappears into the hilt. “An axe would be impossible to make like this, but a broadsword we could do. I think one of those would be suited to you.”

“Da,” Konstantin says. “I have no idea how soon I would likely need it, or in what circumstances, but I would not argue against having a weapon such as this.”

“Let us have dinner and talk about it,” Aktok says as Kalma returns. “As well as any other weapons you may need.”

The eight of them take seats around the long table, each person serving himself from the platters. Kalma pours wine; when Khan takes a sip he thinks Bishop would quite like it. “How many of your family would need weapons?” Aktok asks. “How many are you?”

“There are five of us now, and hopefully soon there will be nine,” Khan says. “Not everyone needs
a weapon. Cat has hers, I have mine. Katsuro does not use weapons given the choice.”

“And the others?” Aktok asks.

Khan looks at Cat. “Kostya would like a broadsword,” she says, drumming her fingers on the table as she thinks. “Matthew would do well with a longsword or similar weapon. Anandi I think we will give the other build of my weapon. And—do you make quarterstaffs?”

“We do,” Aktok says. “Would one of your family need one?”

“Yes,” Khan says, thinking of Alona.

"Those are easy to make,” Dyval says. “We have some ready now, I think.”

“Could you make one with the same properties as the sword you showed us?” Ekaterina asks. “One that would fold into itself?”

“We could,” Aktok says. “That would take a bit longer to make, but it is certainly doable.”

Ekaterina nods. “So. One broadsword, I think two longswords—one for Matthew and one for Bishop—one staff for Alona. Maeve would need a shortsword, if she uses a melee weapon at all. Anandi and I will have ours. Khan?”

“I do not need a melee weapon,” Khan says.

“Everyone needs a melee weapon,” Cat says, making a face at him. “Except Katsuro.”

“A longsword, then,” Khan says rather than have her pick something else for him.

Dyval looks up from his notepad. “Three longswords, one broadsword, one shortsword, and one quarterstaff, yes?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “And ideally all of them would have the properties of the folding sword.”

“We can do this,” Aktok says thoughtfully. “How soon do you need the weapons?”

“As soon as you can make them,” Khan says. “We are not, I think, about to be in battle, but we will need to practice, and I would not have my family unarmed. I am building ranged weapons for us, but I have not the time nor the equipment and space necessary to forge swords.”

“Fortunately, we do,” Aktok says, smiling. “I think…” He looks up, fingers moving slightly as he calculates. “Two weeks for everything. Dyval?”

“I think that should be accurate,” Dyval says slowly. “But we will need to put a couple of commissions on hold.”

“Yes,” Aktok says after a moment. “Nothing of any significant consequence, but yes, we will need to reprioritize. Of course, you could wait, but I have the feeling you would prefer not to.”

“You are correct,” Khan says. “And naturally, I would expect this to be reflected in the price. But I would also expect you to acknowledge the number of weapons we are commissioning, plus the work we have already done.”

“Ah, and so we come to this,” Aktok says with a broad grin. “Of course, we would discount the price of each individual weapon given the quantity you would like, but adamantium is not inexpensive, and we need to earn a living ourselves. Melcian has a daughter to support.” He names
a price that makes Khan’s eyebrows raise.

“For that sum of money I could set up my own forge to build the weapons myself,” Khan says, settling in to enjoy the negotiations. “I admire your talent in building weapons, but no sword is worth that much.” He counters with a deliberately low number.

Aktok pretends to wince, a hand on his chest. “Surely you mock me. The materials alone are worth more than that pitiful sum.”

They go back and forth for about twenty minutes, bickering and calling each other thieves, liars, rogues; Aktok claims Khan is trying to beggar him, and Khan retorts that he will not allow Aktok to rob him blind. Both of them thoroughly enjoy the debate, and when they finally settle on a price Khan thinks it a fair one. He looks at Jake, just to make certain, and Jake gives him a quick nod and grin.

“So,” Aktok says as they get up. “Let us discuss the requirements you have for each weapon, and then I think we shall find our beds for the night. I would be a terrible host if I let you leave at this hour. You will stay the night, yes?”

“We will,” Khan says. “Thank you.”

“Of course, of course,” Aktok says, waving a hand as they walk back to the main room. “Let’s look at the wall display to see what appeals to you. That way we can have an idea of what weapons to make.”

“Everything appeals to me,” Cat murmurs, looking at the display. “These are works of art.”

“They are,” Melcian says, smiling. “This one, the topmost, I think would work for your mate.” She reaches up and lifts down the broadsword carefully, handing it to Konstantin. In his hands, it looks like a regular sword.

Konstantin takes a two-handed grip on the sword and moves through a few poses, sparring against an invisible opponent. “This is incredible,” he says. “It is balanced so well I could use it in either hand, and despite its size I don’t find it heavy in the least.”

“Adamantium is a relatively light metal, for all that it is incredibly strong,” Melcian says. “It will be a bit heavier if we design it to fold into the hilt, though.”

“That’s fine,” Konstantin says. “That will not stress the metal?”

“No,” Melcian says. “The only thing to truly stress the metal is when we melt it down and cast it again. Adamantium can only be cast once or twice before it becomes fragile.”

“Why is that?” Konstantin asks.

“It isn’t a very flexible metal,” Dyval says. “It prefers to be cast, and once it has a form it will keep that form under almost any circumstances. But it doesn’t like to be given a form and then have that form taken away.”

“You speak of it as though it has a personality,” Ekaterina observes.

“We work with it all day long,” Dyval says, smiling. “I suppose we do think that.” He turns back to the wall and lifts down a longsword. “This one, I think, would suit you,” he says, offering it to Khan.
Khan takes the sword, adjusting his grip on it until it feels comfortable in his hand. A one-handed weapon, this; he could use a shield in his other hand, or a shorter sword. He studies the sword for a moment, something niggling at the back of his mind. There’s something, it won’t—

Clash of blades and a shriek of metal on metal as the wind howls around them in the dark purple sky. Khan wrenches himself away from one opponent, turns and slices through the next, the sword encountering resistance from an armored coat but not enough to make a difference. He hears a bellow of rage and glances back to see Anandi’s blade erupt from the man’s chest; he’s dead before she pulls back.

“This way, quickly,” Ekaterina shouts over the wind. She scrambles up the side of what might have been a building once, now just a tumble of rocks and broken concrete. Khan follows her, hastily sheathing the sword. He ignores the bleeding scrapes and cuts on his hands and forearms except when the blood causes him to slip; before he falls more than a meter or two Bishop hauls him back up.

Konstantin reaches the top last, panting for breath and still holding the broadsword in one hand. “Which way?” he asks, looking up as green lightning flashes in the sky.

“Here,” Anandi says, pointing with her own weapon. “Move fast, we have to get to shelter before the storm breaks.”

Whether or not they’ll actually make it Khan doesn’t know, but he says nothing as the group of them pick up speed.

Only Cat’s reflexes keep the sword from hitting the ground when Khan snaps out of the vision, stumbling back and dropping the weapon before he realizes entirely where he is. “Tell me,” she says quietly, a hand on his arm to steady him. “What did you see?”

He shakes his head. “Similar,” he says. “A storm, and a battle, and…some of these weapons.”

“The long sight,” Melcian says softly.

Khan looks at her. “What is that?”

“Something more myth than history, with our people,” she says, taking the longsword back from Ekaterina and hanging it on the wall. “There are stories of people who could see coming battles, who knew what would happen next in war. Often those visions were triggered by holding a weapon, or in some cases being cut by one. It’s not happened in a long time that I know of, but that doesn’t mean it can’t or wouldn’t show up. I didn’t know humans had similar abilities.”

“Technically, we don’t,” Jake says, rubbing the back of his neck. “Humans are mostly psi-null unless you’re talking about an alien and human half-breed. I’ve never heard of anyone quantifying psi talents in a pure human.” He looks at Khan, though, and Khan knows Jake is wondering how human Khan actually is.

“Things happen,” Melcian says. “Not everything can be quantified.”

“No, of course not, but you’d think we’d know whether humans were psychic or not by now,” Jake says.

“One would also think we’d know humans come without wings by now,” Dyval says pointedly. “How did you get yours?”

“I didn’t choose it,” Khan says shortly, still feeling off-balance from the vision. Konstantin touches
his shoulder, hand heavy enough to make a point, and Khan nods, taking a breath and letting it out slowly. “My…apologies,” he says. “I was not expecting that.”

“No, I can’t imagine why you would have been,” Melcian says. “The discussion can wait until tomorrow. I think for now we should show you to quarters, yes?”

“Thank you,” Konstantin says. “We would appreciate that.”

“Jake, Khan, do you two mind sharing a room?” Melcian asks, gesturing for them to follow her back into the cavern structure. “There is a suite with two bedrooms and a bath that we made up for you.”

“We don’t mind,” Jake says when Khan says nothing, but he looks at Khan cautiously. Khan nods, although he doubts he will sleep much if at all.

They travel deeper back through a few hallways and up one flight of stairs until reaching a softly lit corridor with polished stone doors set at regular intervals. “Here,” Melcian says, laying her palm against a door; it glows for a moment and moves aside silently. “You have a sitting room here, each bedroom, and the bath. Jake can show you how everything works.”

“Thank you,” Ekaterina says. “We appreciate your hospitality.”

Melcian clasps shoulders with her and Jake before turning to leave. The four of them enter the sitting room and Jake touches the panel to the right of the door, closing it. “So, uh, what the hell happened?” Jake asks after a moment.

Khan’s wings ruffle and stretch; he lets them. “I don’t know,” he says finally, walking over to what looks like a small bar. “I picked up the sword, and there was something in my mind, and then…”

He describes the scene as he saw it, the wind and lightning, the battle and subsequent climb up a ruined building. “I did not know if we were going to make it to safety before the storm broke.”

“You two,” Khan says. “Anandi. Bishop.” He closes his eyes, willing himself to remember. “I think…it was the nine of us,” he says slowly.

“But not Jake, nor Jill,” Cat says.

“No,” Khan says. “They have not…” He looks at Jake. “They have not been in my dreams, not with us.”

Jake shrugs. “Mine are always muddled by the time I remember them,” he says.

“This makes no sense,” Ekaterina says in frustration. She pushes a hand through her hair in agitation. “None of this makes sense. I am not the scientist Anandi is and yet my sense of rationality is offended by this…nebulosity.”

“You did not see anything when you picked up the broadsword, did you,” Khan says to Konstantin.

“Nyet,” Konstantin says. “But if the visions, the dreams are coming from where we think they are, it is plausible that you would be more likely to have them than I.”

“We have nothing to prove that theory,” Khan says, not quite looking at him.

“We have nothing to disprove it either, and a lack of other sources,” Konstantin says gently. He
walks over to Khan, hands on Khan’s shoulders. “I know not why she would do this and not talk to you directly, brother, but as theories go, it is our only one that makes any sense at all.”

“That still does not mean it makes sense in the first place,” Khan says, but he sighs. Konstantin simply wraps his arms around Khan and lowers his forehead to Khan’s, holding on tight. Khan closes his eyes, allowing himself this moment of vulnerability, allowing Konstantin to support him for a short while.

Eventually, though, he pulls away and Konstantin lets him go. “Jake,” Ekaterina says into the silence. “Have you spoken with Jill or your mother about possible locations for us to stay?”

“I haven’t,” Jake says. “Jill talked to Eema but I had a thing and couldn’t be there. I know the two of them came up with stuff, but I don’t know specifically what it is. My guess would be cousins in Russia, maybe France or Spain, a few scattered through the States, and I’m not sure about others. I was trying to get a list of safe houses we can use instead, so we don’t have to bunk with my family. I’d rather not put them in danger.”

“I understand,” Cat says. “Let us sit and discuss this more.” The four of them move over to the couches and chairs and take seats; Khan sits on an end table rather than crush his wings. “What safe houses do you have available?”

“Not as many as I’d like, but my team’s mostly off-planet work and if I start taking up too many resources on Earth I’ll have to involve another team,” Jake says. “There’s the one in London. I have about five more scattered through Europe, eastern and western. We have a lot in the US but only about three are available. None available in Asia, a couple in Africa but I’d rather not use those because there’s some stuff going on there that means they could get put into official use soon.”

“Political instability?” Konstantin asks.

“Resource issues,” Jake says. “Parts of Africa never have enough, and there’s rumblings indicating the populace is getting unhappy about it. Well, more so than usual.”

“What would Starfleet intelligence do with that?” Konstantin asks.

“Either try to quell it or try to incite it, depending on the way things look to be going and who’s in place,” Jake says. “If they get told to quell any uprisings, it looks good for the Federation overall because hey, we’re still a peaceful world. If they get told to light the match, Starfleet will come in soon thereafter and make a production out of providing resources and calming the populace, which looks good for the Federation because hey, we provide for our citizens and we can avoid uprisings and political instability. Plus then the citizens might feel like they get listened to and be more likely to protest through negotiations in future rather than demonstrations and mobs.”

“The Federation is cynical,” Cat observes.

“It’s a government,” Jake says. “Weren’t you?”

She smiles and shrugs a shoulder. “Da, I suppose so, but I like to think I had the best interests of my people first, rather than my own self-preservation.”

“Had we had our own self-interest first we might not have been forced off the planet,” Konstantin says.

“Perhaps,” Ekaterina says. “I think it matters not. I do not regret that we are in this time now. I could not change it if I did, but things are so very different from our time and I look forward to
seeing what we might accomplish without the weight of governing a planet.” She laughs. “Although we might find our own planet to govern at some point.”

“Maybe even Earth,” Khan says to make her laugh again.

“It is possible,” Cat says. “How likely, I do not know, but I suppose it is possible. We accomplished it once as adolescents.”

“Would you want to, though?” Jake asks.

“Now that is an excellent question,” Ekaterina says. “And I think not. At least, not at this time.” She takes Konstantin’s hand absently. “Right now, my goals are the same as Khan’s. To ensure the safety of our people, deal with this Marcus, and avoid a war against an alien species likely to decimate the Federation.”

“Oh, is that all,” Jake says, laughing.

“Speaking of Marcus,” Khan says although it makes his lip curl. “I have some…thoughts.”

“Tell us,” Cat says.

“The long game,” Khan says, knowing she gets the reference. “I think you, Alona, and Matthew would enjoy it. Perhaps Bishop.”

“Da,” she says, nodding thoughtfully. “I think we would.”

“Uh, what is the long game?” Jake asks. “Or…no, I think I get it.”

“Surely you have done similar things,” Cat says.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jake says. “I can’t—well, no, I shouldn’t say that. I was going to say I can’t be part of this one but fuck, if we get caught I’m getting court-martialed as it is, so it really doesn’t matter.”

“You could walk away now,” Khan says.

“You have met my sister, haven’t you?” Jake asks incredulously. He scratches the back of his neck. “And my mother? Besides, I was considering resigning when my current contract is up anyway. If I have to do it a little sooner, it’s not a big deal.”

“If you’re certain,” Konstantin says.

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Jake points out.

“But this is not breaking any Federation laws, is it?” Ekaterina asks.

“No, it’s not,” Jake says. “Although I’m not sure what the rules are on privately held swords. Earth really restricts access to phasers and similar weapons, but I never bothered to look up the laws on edged weapons.”

Cat shrugs. “I care not,” she says. “If we get caught, we have larger problems.”

“Yeah, I’m with you,” Jake says.

“What sort of criminal activity is there on Earth now? I mean in the organized sense, syndicate?” Konstantin asks.
“Um,” Jake says. “The biggest players at the moment are probably the Russians, with a runner up from Japan. There are some smaller networks, but mostly if it’s organized the Russians have their fingers in it or at least know about it. The Japanese are impossible to infiltrate but smaller in scope, and the Italians moved a lot of their interests off-planet when they got into one too many scuffles with the Russians. The Chinese have been really quiet lately but they’re probably planning something, and there’s a combined Central and South American syndicate that handles most of the drugs in the Western hemisphere. Honestly some of it depends on what you’re looking for. Drugs is one group, weapons another, contract killings depends on who you want dead and why. The human trafficking stuff is mostly gone, there was a really big push by the Federation to stamp that out last century and to give them credit they succeeded. Money laundering depends on how much and where your income is sourced from, but your best bet is likely the Russians because they’re less exclusive about who they’ll work with.”

“Who have you been working with?” Cat asks Khan.

“You say that as though I have been allying with organized crime,” he says, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes, so who have you been working with?” Cat asks.

Khan laughs. “In truth, I avoided most of the established syndicates as I did not have a cover identity that would stand up to a background check. I have made dealings with some of the Russians, and a small group of people from southeast Asia, but mostly I looked for independent players. There is a man from Nigeria who has been useful.”

“Should we consider trying to infiltrate the Russians?” Konstantin asks.

“I think it unnecessary at this time, and might have more problems than it solves,” Khan says. “We have contacts for the black market, for money, and we have not made any enemies we cannot handle ourselves. There are no groups planning to overthrow the established government, at least not on Earth.”

“Most people are smart enough to realize that if we create a vacuum we’ll get the Klingons,” Jake says.

“True.” Ekaterina smooths a hand over her ponytail. “When do we start the game with Marcus?”

“Not until after we have executed the last two missions,” Khan says. “If he decides to take revenge…our family might not survive.”

“We never thought we would survive the trip in the first place,” Ekaterina says. “But…yes. So after this weekend. Perhaps then you should disappear from his control as well.”

“I have given it some thought,” Khan says. “It is possible, certainly, but there are still things I want to get from the archive and from the station on Jupiter, research and parts I need to acquire. If I can do that this week then yes, I will go underground. If not—well, it is only a short while longer until I can.”

“Will Jill need to disappear with you?” Jake asks.

“I think not,” Khan says. “At least, at this time.”


Khan nods. “Yes.”
“Well,” she says. “I think I shall go to bed. It has been an…interesting day.”

And she likely wants to discuss some of it with Konstantin, Khan thinks. Possibly with him, as well, but not with Jake.

“Let me show you the controls for the bathroom really fast, they’re a bit non-intuitive to humans,” Jake says, getting to his feet. He does just that and they say their goodnights. Ekaterina and Konstantin disappear into one bedroom, and Jake into the other, but Khan returns to the living room, not ready for sleep yet and unwilling to disturb Jake.

After a while, Konstantin comes out to the living room, followed by Cat. Neither of them say a word, but Konstantin takes one of Khan’s arms, Cat the other, and they pull him to his feet and steer him into their bedroom. Cat pushes him toward the bed and Khan laughs, sitting down to pull off his boots first.

The three of them tangle around each other, Cat in the middle as always, and Khan closes his eyes. “Stop thinking,” Cat murmurs, touching his cheek.

“Easier said than done,” Khan murmurs back.

“Try harder,” she says.

Konstantin runs a hand up Khan’s arm to his throat and Khan bows his head, knowing Konstantin’s intention. And yes—there, and there, and one more there, and Khan feels himself drifting into sleep almost immediately. He doesn’t try to fight it.

Chapter End Notes

If you did read FF, the augment singing thing came up right at the end of the story; given the Klingons' enjoyment of opera, I thought it might be more important here. Although why the augments would be dealing with the Klingons...well, I think I've given you some clues *g*

Also, the folding sword thing is a direct steal/adaptation of Sulu's katana in the first movie, in case you missed that one.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Are there to be secrets among family?

Chapter Notes

hello people! November is not being a great month to me health-wise, so my writing has been limited for the last couple weeks. For that, I apologize. I do so very much appreciate those of you reading along, and if you've just found me--welcome and enjoy the ride!

In the morning, Khan comes into the living room to see Jake tip a pill into his hand and swallow it. He raises his eyebrows, curious. “It’s nothing,” Jake says after swallowing a drink of water. “Helps the bones knit faster in my ribs and my forearm. I only have to take it a couple more days.” He puts the bottle in his bag and takes out another one. “Stims, easier than coffee because the Femarans don’t have coffee and I don’t wake up without chemical assistance if I’m not working,” he says, tossing one back. “You want? They’re not the stuff Jill takes, because I’m not insane. It’s just a kick to wake your brain up.”

“No, thank you,” Khan says. “Do you take them often?”

“I try not to,” Jake says. “They’re psychologically addictive and habit-forming, and the doctors swear they won’t create physical dependency but that’s just because they haven’t proven they do yet. But I don’t wake up well without coffee if I’m not working, and the Femarans are a caffeine-avoidant species, so here we go.”

“Why are they caffeine avoidant?” Ekaterina asks, coming into the living room followed by Konstantin.

“Never developed on their planets,” Jake says, shrugging. “They got access to it after warp, but they don’t metabolize it well and it tends to give most of them headaches and upset stomachs, so they don’t drink it. Their morning beverage of choice is kind of like spicy hot chocolate. It has some kind of stimulant in it—I forget the chemical, but it’s something humans don’t metabolize well either, so I’d recommend passing unless you want a migraine.”

“Interesting,” Ekaterina says. “What else can they eat that we should not?”

“Their forge water’s about as potent as an EMP,” Jake says. “It’s pretty much straight moonshine. The Femarans have a higher alcohol tolerance than humans, so to them it’s like good whiskey would be to us. To us, it’s insane and I try not to drink it.”

“Did you try it?” Cat asks Khan.
“I did,” he says. “It kicked about as hard as Katsuro.”

Konstantin laughs at that. “I should like to try it,” he says. “Once.”

“Once is enough,” Jake says. “But someone should be by in a minute to let us know it’s time for breakfast.”

“It is very odd to know time without windows here;” Cat observes. “Why do they build so deeply into the rock?”

“Weather here gets violent, especially at this altitude,” Jake says. “They have some killer storms. Any kind of window, even what we use in ship building, would get destroyed. Also, it gets cold and the stone helps insulate.”

“Have you been here during storms?” Ekaterina asks.

“I got stranded here for a week because of one,” Jake says. “It was too wild for anything to get into atmospheric space, and the energy from the storm scrambled transporters. Spent a lot of time playing dice with the Femarans. They have a number of games that can go on for days, developed out of necessity.”

A soft chime sounds by the door and Jake moves over to answer it. “Morning,” he says to Dyval. “I was just telling these guys about your interesting weather.”

“Yes, this winter should be something,” Dyval says. “We’re already seeing signs it will be difficult and have started to lay in supplies. But for now we are fine, so please, come have breakfast. I don’t think you would like our normal morning drink, from what Jake tells me, but we have juices and water and food that should all be fine.”

“If you need anything you can’t produce here, you know I can help,” Jake says as they leave the room.

“I know,” Dyval says. “And we have official Federation channels to go through to request help and supplies as well. We have survived winters like this before. It helps that we were able to enclose some of our farmland to prevent it from early frost and hail.”

“How long is winter on this planet?” Konstantin asks.

“Our seasons are different from what I know of Earth,” Dyval says. “We have a growing season that lasts about a third of the year, perhaps a bit more if the weather cooperates. There is the early fall season, that lasts maybe six or seven weeks, in which the storms begin, and then we have the winter season with its storms that lasts the rest of the year. Jake tells me our solar year is about six Earth weeks longer than Earth, although our day is comparable and our week also comparable.”

“Their months are about five days longer than Earth’s,” Jake says. “Lends itself to all kinds of time zone conversions because they don’t use the official Starfleet calendar, which makes sense since that’s based on Earth time and they’re not.”

“What timekeeping do Starfleet ships use?” Ekaterina asks.

“The official calendar, since a majority of Starfleet crew are human,” Jake says. “And eight hours seems to be close enough to a galactic standard for sleep. No one needs more than that, anyway, and the folks that need less just have more free time.”

“Why are so many Starfleet officers human?” Konstantin asks.
“That is a complicated question and depends on who you’re asking,” Jake says with a grimace.

“I am asking you,” Konstantin says patiently.

“Right,” Jake says. “Okay, so, short version. It depends on species. Some, like the Femarans, prefer to keep to themselves and have their own planetary military. The Federation prefers that all military or armed forces be units of Starfleet but depending on when a species joined, some of them got waivers due to difficulty in arranging that. The Vulcans had their own science academy, and very few of them ever joined Starfleet because they tend to see humans as inferior beings too easily ruled by emotion. Also, there’s not many of them left these days. There’s a never-ending cyclical problem where some species don’t join Starfleet because they think it’s too human-dominated, but then it keeps being human-dominated because no one else joins. There’s more non-human representation in government, but also keep in mind that the Federation was an Earth idea and headquartered there.”

“Humans, I have learned, are hierarchical pack animals,” Dyval says. “They feel more comfortable among their own, and they are never quite certain where another species stands in their established hierarchy.”

“Hey,” Jake protests. “Not me.”

“No,” Dyval says. “But you yourself say you aren’t a typical human. Are your family?”

“Nope,” Jake says. “Not in the least.”

“Do many humans have wings?” Dyval asks.

“As far as I know, only one does,” Khan says.

“That…is odd,” Dyval says. “Here, breakfast is ready.” He gestures for them to enter the same room they ate in last night.

Femaran breakfast consists of various breads and cheeses, with pickled vegetables on the side and a smoked fish that Khan thinks tastes like a cross between salmon and herring. It’s not unpleasant, though, and he copies Jake’s lead of adding some to his flatbread.

“All right,” Aktok says after the meal, while Kalma and Melcian clean up. “Let us discuss your needs for the weapons you want us to make. We can start with the broadsword for Konstantin, I think.”

They move back to the main cavern and the weapons wall. “Something very similar to this, I think,” Konstantin says, touching the hilt of the broadsword he held yesterday. “I think perhaps a bit longer, if possible.”

“It is certainly possible,” Aktok says as Dyval makes notes. They discuss hilts and guards and weight; Melcian and Kalma return in time to take Konstantin’s measurements to better tailor the weapon to him.

It takes about two hours to determine the details for everyone else’s weapons, the process made longer by a lack of images or concrete measurements for Khan’s siblings. Aktok makes them promise to bring them back along with their weapon if something does not suit, and while Khan thinks it unlikely he agrees.

Khan pays for Cat’s finished weapon and gives Aktok half the price of the other weapons. “And that, I think, concludes our business for now,” he says after handing over the credit stick.
“Yes,” Aktok says. “But you will have one drink with us before you leave.”

“One,” Khan agrees.

Melcian pours glasses of the forge water and hands them out. “To family,” Aktok says. “And new friends.”

“To success in battle,” Cat says. Aktok grins and raises his glass, and they all down their drinks.

Khan sees Cat barely hide a cough and a wheeze, and Konstantin bends down for a moment, breathing hard. “That…” Cat clears her throat. “Now that is a drink.”

“Would you like to take some home with you?” Aktok asks.

“I would,” Ekaterina says. “I think that would make an excellent toast for celebrating victory.”

“One moment,” Dyval says, hurrying out of the room. He returns a few moments later with a soft black case. “I recommend not drinking more than one shot at a time,” he says, handing it to Cat. “Apparently this can make humans very ill.”

“This does not surprise me,” Cat says. “Spasiba. I will share this with my family in good health.”

“You are welcome,” Aktok says. “We will message you when your weapons are ready.”

A round of shoulder clasps later and the four humans leave, getting about ten minutes down the trail before Jake says they can transport. They arrive in the house to find Andy in her kimono in the kitchen sipping tea and Magpie in pajamas at the kitchen table, frowning at her computer. “How’d it go?” Andy asks when they materialize.

“Very well,” Khan says. “We have Cat’s weapon, the same model for Anandi, and the Femarans are working on weapons for the rest of my family.”

“Brilliant,” Magpie says, looking up. “Jill says to tell you she says hi but she had to go to the archive today to pretend to do work and also to do some recon before the missions this weekend. She thinks there’s information at the archive she can use for the facility, especially including new security personnel and their files and any changes in patrols or other security systems.”

“Are there many new personnel?” Ekaterina asks.

“About half a dozen,” Magpie says. “It doesn’t look out of the ordinary to me, from what I can tell they cycle through security staff at the facility every four to six months, but we just want to make sure.”

“Speaking of cycling personnel,” Khan says. “Have you seen any new transfers in or out of section 31? Specifically medically?”

“You sent me the two a while back, but I didn’t turn up anything suspicious about them,” Magpie says. “One of them left already on maternity leave but I think she’s working remotely based on the amount of email I see going back and forth. The other looks to be working on chemical warfare, which is against so many galactic rules even I know it’s a terrible idea. But I don’t see anything to indicate he’s doing anything else illegal or unethical. I…hang on, let me pull up the list, I don’t remember it all.” She types a few commands into her computer, chewing her lip as she studies the screen. “Okay. One medical left to ship out on the Bradbury, they’re going to one of the frontier planets that’s having trouble with a growing epidemic of some disease I’ve never heard of, and apparently she did research on it so she’s as close to an expert as we have. One more left because
he resigned from Starfleet entirely, and I didn’t look that closely at why or where he went after that. I can find out, if you want, though. I don’t have any other new transfers into the medical section."

“What was his name, the one who resigned?” Khan asks.


“I would need to see a picture,” Khan says. “Most of the personnel I…met…didn’t bother to introduce themselves.”

“Hang on,” Magpie says, tapping at her screen. A few moments later she turns the computer toward Khan. “Does he look familiar?”

“Yes,” Khan says, his throat tight enough the word hurts to get out. “Yes, he does.”

“I’m guessing that’s not a good thing,” Magpie says cautiously.

“No,” Khan says shortly.

“Does he have information we might need?” Ekaterina asks, idly flipping a knife over and over.

“He…might, but I doubt it,” Khan says. “He was not in charge on any of the…tests involving me, and he lacked intelligence enough to come up with new ideas.”

“So, we kill him,” Cat says. “Da?”

“I would like to know why he resigned first,” Khan says after a moment. “Once we have that data then yes, we kill him.”

“Let me see what I can find out,” Magpie says. “The official file just says he chose to leave Starfleet and find work in the private sector. Could mean any number of things. Give me a bit, this may take a while.”

“Where is he located now?” Ekaterina asks.

“He appears to be in New York,” Magpie says. “City, that is. He’s working for a pharmaceutical company there, and…” She trails off, typing quickly. “I think it’s a money thing,” she says finally. “He’s got an ex-husband demanding alimony and some seriously large gambling debts, and he’s making a lot more at whatever this place is than he was in Starfleet.”

“I would like you to be able to confirm that,” Cat says. “Just in case that is a cover for something else.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Magpie says. “Give me a bit to tackle this, I should have concrete data for you by the end of the day or first thing tomorrow depending on what else I get caught by today.”

“We can wait a day or two before we make plans to kill him,” Ekaterina says amiably. Andy snickers at that, pushing his hair back.

“Have you seen Bishop or Katsuro yet today?” Khan asks.

“No, not yet,” Andy says. “It’s early, though, I mean it’s like eight o’clock here. Jill only left when she did because she wanted to go for a run before work. I’m not sure why Magpie and I are even awake, but here we are and I have tea so I’m not going back to sleep any time soon.”

“I might be,” Magpie says. “Once I set up some of this it can run without me and I can get a nap.”
“What are you doing today?” Cat asks Jake.

“Nothing that can’t get put off if you need me for anything,” he says. “ Mostly I was going to deal with some very boring domestic stuff like laundry and try to fit in a trip to see Samuel and David and their kids.”

“I do not think we need you for anything urgent today,” Ekaterina says. “You should make time to see your family.”

“I know,” Jake says. “With what we’re getting into—I’d like to get in what time I can before things go completely insane. Also, if I swing by New York I can talk to Eema about what she and Jill decided about you guys staying with my family and check it against the list of safe houses I have. How geographically scattered do you want to be?”

“With the transporters, it matters not,” Ekaterina says. “However, we would need to be staying in places where we could transport ourselves without being observed.”

“Yeah, agreed,” Jake says. “I also want to check in on Marika today, see how she’s doing and if she’s conscious yet. She might have more information, but even if she doesn’t she’s still a member of my team.”

“How did she join your team?” Konstantin asks.

“I recruited her from the Academy,” Jake says. “ Most operatives end up teaching a class or two to senior cadets, to see if we can find anyone we think might work for us. She has—I don’t know if you saw it or if anyone told you about it, but one of her psychic skills involves the ability to be pretty much invisible. She just kind of fades into the background and no one really recognizes she’s there. I saw her do it, realized how useful that could be, and made her an offer.”

“I see,” Konstantin says. “I admit, I find it curious that she will not disclose her father’s species or origin.”

Jake shrugs. “Everyone has something they’d rather people not know about. Marika’s file lists her as wholly human and as far as I can tell she grew up on Earth. But she’s obviously not completely human—hell, sometimes I’m not sure she’s even part human. It’s never endangered a member of my team, and while her skills are more of a liability in some situations they’re damned useful in others, so I don’t push.”

“What would you rather people not know about?” Cat asks.

“That would be the point of people not knowing about it,” Jake says with an easy grin.

“He has you there, Katya,” Konstantin says with a laugh.

“And are there to be secrets among family?” Cat asks archly.

“Depends on the secret and the family in question,” Jake says. “ Jill’s mine, so that makes Khan mine by extension, which I guess makes you mine on top of that. But my brothers aren’t, and it’s not fair of me to share anything that might involve them when they’re not here to give consent.”

“You have a remarkable sense of loyalty and family,” Ekaterina says, studying Jake.

“Thank my mom,” Jake says.

“But you are not wholly loyal to Starfleet, and most military I knew placed their service and their
fellow soldiers above all,” Ekaterina continues. “Why is this?”

“I used to be,” Jake says after a pause. “But I’ve seen things and done things that have left me more than a bit jaded. I used to be—not really an idealist, I’ve never been one of those—but I used to think Starfleet had the best interests of the Federation, of all species, at heart. I used to think they wanted to know the enemy so they could be *better* than that. Now, though…Starfleet has its own interests at heart, its own self-preservation. Marcus wants a war because he’s arrogant enough to think he’s the only one who can save the Federation if we have to fight. It’s not about what’s best for the Federation, it’s about his own ego. Not to say he might not have a point, but…” Jake spreads his hands. “It’s hard to separate the two. And my mom raised me to believe that family is what matters more than anything else. Family are the ones who can’t turn you away when you need help, the ones who will have your back no matter what, even if you argue nonstop in private they’ll support you in public. Sometimes you get born into a family like that, sometimes you choose it, sometimes it’s both.”

“I think I should like to meet your mother,” Ekaterina says.

Jake winces. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

“Certainly if we take her offer of help and lodging, I would need to meet her,” Cat says, finally putting her knife away. “But more than that, I should like to know why she is doing this. Jill may be her adoptive daughter, and you her son, but that does not mean she is required to put the rest of her family at risk to help you, and there is a very real possibility she could be doing exactly that.”

“I know,” Jake says. “Which is why I don’t like the idea of you guys bunking with my cousins. But my mom rules the family, so if she decides that’s what will happen, then that’s what will happen.” He scratches the back of his neck. “Let me find out what her schedule looks like for the next few days and I’ll let you know when she’s free.”

“Spasiba,” Ekaterina says. “Andy, Magpie, have the trackers we placed on any of our targets given us any useful information?”

“The four of them met down by the Thames last night,” Andy says, refilling the kettle. “We couldn’t get a clear video, and the bugs don’t transmit audio, so we don’t know what it was about, but they were down there for a solid two hours. We have the coordinates in case anyone not us wants to check it out, though.”

“Not you, brother,” Konstantin says before Khan even opens his mouth. “You are too visible a target. Katya and I, on the other hand, are not. Neither are Katsuro or Bishop. When they return, we will talk to them and determine who would be best to go look at this location and then track down our four targets. I think we are approaching the point where we care not what information they have, we simply need them neutralized. Da?”

“Da,” Khan says.

“Do we think this Rickman is working with those seven?” Ekaterina asks. “That he is behind some of this, or at least in on the plans?”

Khan’s mouth twists as he considers it. “I think it possible, but I know not how plausible,” he says. “Rickman was…less interested in scientific pursuit and more of a pure sadist.”

“I didn’t see any email to him from our seven,” Magpie says, looking up from her computer screen. “Or vice versa, and I’ve tracked down all accounts those seven have, anonymous and otherwise. They put a lot of things in anonymous addresses that I wouldn’t have trusted, but what do I know?”
“Are you sure it is not a trap? Not misinformation there to deceive you?” Ekaterina asks.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Magpie says. “For one, they weren’t that easy to find. For another, I ran them through a lot of security scans and other issues and none of it pinged. Based on what I’ve seen elsewhere in their security I’d have expected to see a couple different things if they were fakes, and I didn’t, so while I’m not ruling it out I think it’s pretty unlikely. I’m thorough.”

“Have you found anything that would be a red herring? Something to point the wrong way?” Konstantin asks.

“I found a couple false traps on the security for some of the accounts,” Magpie says. “If I’d tripped it wrong, I’d have gotten what looked like access to the account but it wouldn’t have been valid and it would also have put a worm on my machine to let them trace back to me. However, I’m better than they are, so I didn’t fall for it. The anonymous accounts I found mostly relied on older encryption techniques—they’re older, but no one thinks to use them these days so they’re considered safer than some. If we get a spare hour or two I can show you how I got into everything. But the point here is that I’ve seen nothing between those seven and this Rickman asshole, whoever he is. And everything I’m seeing on Rickman indicates that he’s in over his head gambling-wise and owes a lot of money to some very big and scary people so decided to leave Starfleet and go somewhere that pays better. I’ll keep digging but I’m fairly confident that’s the truth.”

“So,” Ekaterina says. “We kill him. Where is he located now?”

“He is…” Magpie trails off for a moment. “New York, specifically Manhattan, and I can get you an address if you give me a few minutes. He never turned off the tracker in his comm-link, which is stupid of him but he’s a gambler so he’s not known for intelligence in the first place.”

“Jill gambles,” Jake points out.

“Yes, but she doesn’t lose money she can’t afford to people who will come break parts of her body if she can’t pay them back,” Magpie says. “Jill gambles when she thinks she can win and stops playing if the game is rigged, and she never says ‘Oh, just one more round’.

“Usually never,” Andy amends. “I have known her to buy in again for poker tournaments if she got knocked out.”

“Okay, point, but still, different than this asshole,” Magpie says. “And the last time she bought in again she won the thing, so there you go.”

“What did the money go to?” Khan asks.

“Survivors’ fund,” Andy says. “She was playing in a charity tournament for Starfleet, the pot went to the fund that helps pay for survivor benefits for wives, husbands, kids, anyone left behind when a Starfleet officer dies. I think she technically got to keep half the pot but donated all of it anyway.”

That doesn’t surprise Khan. “I need coffee,” Magpie says, scrubbing her hands through her hair. “I don’t know what you all are doing today but before I can provide more data to anyone I need caffeine.” She gets up to go make a pot, rubbing her eyes while she waits for it to brew.

“Kostya and I will be either gathering information on our four targets in London or taking out our target in New York,” Cat says. “I expect Katsuro and Bishop to be doing the same once they return.”

"Stuff," Jake says. "Possibly involving my mother and my brothers and my other relations. I’ll be
around, but if you need something from me best bet is to send me a message.”

“We will,” Ekaterina says. “Would you like coffee before you leave?”

“No, I’m good for now, thanks,” Jake says. “Besides, if I go see Eema she might have cookies to
go with coffee. I’ll try and bring some back if we have any.” He takes the transporter out of his
pocket, punches in a few coordinates, and shimmers out of existence.

“Do you object to not being in on the kill for Rickman?” Cat asks Khan in Russian.

He shakes his head. “Not him, no. He isn’t worth my time. Really he isn’t worth yours either.”

“Probably not, but he needs to die,” Cat says matter-of-factly. “We need to start making a list of
people who should join him.”

“There are…many,” Khan says carefully.

She shrugs. “So? When did that ever stop us?”

He smiles at that. “True.”

“We can prioritize,” Konstantin says. “But Katya is right, Khan. For what they did to you…” He
shakes his head.

“Let us see what Katsuro and Bishop say when they return,” Khan says. He doesn’t expect them to
argue anyone out of anything, nor does he really want them to. But they should at least be
consulted.

“If you like,” Ekaterina says. “Do you need to do anything for Marcus today?”

Khan grimaces. “Likely,” he says. “I should go deal with that soon.”

“Now would be a good time,” Cat says. “We will keep in touch and let you know what’s going
on.”

“Would it, now,” Khan says, amused. “One day, sister, you will stop trying to run my life.”

“Yes, and that will be the day you weep at my funeral,” she says, laughing.

“Likely,” Khan admits. He crosses to her and leans down to kiss her forehead. “Be careful,” he
says quietly. “I would not want any of us to fall back into section 31’s hands.”

“Da, I know,” she says, touching his cheek. “We will be careful.”

He doubts that, but Konstantin should at least be a check on her impulses, and Khan will take what
he can get. He says his goodbyes to everyone else and leaves, sending Jill a quick note on his way
to let her know he will be at the archive. He doesn’t expect a response and doesn’t get one before
he takes the lift down to the shielded floors where comm-links work unreliably at best.

On the good side, assembling the phaser cannon takes very little time once he ascertains what he
wants to do. Even better for his purposes, the shielding on these floors blocks regular transporters
and normal visual security methods. It does not, however, block transwarp, a fact Khan utilizes a
few times to take extra parts to the bunker without being observed. Marcus doesn’t know
specifically what Khan needs to build the cannon, and Khan has no intention of giving Marcus
details if he can help it.
He does have to give Marcus something, though, much as it irritates him. Once he clears away the extra parts and makes a few modifications, he takes a quick video and sends Marcus a very brief report. Not long now, he thinks after closing down the link. His patience won’t allow it, and he would rather disappear while he can and watch Marcus sweat rather than kill him too soon. Thanks to Magpie, he now has multiple ways to do those things.

Magpie and her skills, Andy and his, Jill and Jake and Jake’s family, and somehow it all ties back to Rani. Khan is only grateful Jill prefers sandalwood to jasmine.

He leaves the archive shortly before lunch and takes himself to the bunker to construct the second—the real—cannon, working quickly and without distractions. His link buzzes with a message after an hour but he ignores it, as he does the next. The actual call, two hours in, annoys him enough he puts down the soldering gun and grabs the link, growling “What?” into the receiver.

“One down,” Konstantin says calmly, ignoring Khan’s tone of voice.

“Rickman?” Khan asks.

“Da,” Konstantin says. “He knew nothing, but he did have access to some interesting accounts. Katya has taken his computer to Magpie.”


“He’s dead,” Konstantin says.

Khan knows better than to ask more questions on that front. Nor does he ask who actually killed Rickman—he knows his sister and his brother too well. Konstantin never takes the death blow from Ekaterina, not unless she cannot do it herself. And in this situation, dealing with someone who had hurt Khan…

He only wonders how long it took her to draw it out.

“We did, also, find some…records,” Konstantin says after a pause. “Video recordings.”


“Ah, Khan,” Konstantin says, almost sadly. “You should know better than to think we would not, and you should know us better than to think you could keep this from us. You are ours, brother, and what was done to you…we will have justice for it, for every last centimeter of it.”

“We haven’t time now,” Khan says, taking a breath. “And we may not have time or ability later.”

“Then we will shift our priorities so we do,” Konstantin says, and the finality in his voice makes Khan bow his head. When Konstantin—the biggest and yet the gentlest of his brothers—insists on a course of action, it will be done regardless of the cost.

“I don’t have all their names,” Khan says finally.

“Then give us what you have, and we will get the rest,” Konstantin says. “We have a little under a week until the next operation, we can get anywhere in the world, and we have multiple geniuses on computers. This is not an impossible task, brother, nor is it as difficult as I think you would like to make it.”

“Later today,” Khan concedes. “I will give you what information I have then.”
“Thank you,” Konstantin says.

They get off the link and Khan looks briefly at the messages. Nothing important or urgent, but even as he thinks to go back to work he gets a call from Jill. “Yes,” he says, answering with more grace than he gave Konstantin.

She laughs. “I miss you,” she says in Russian. “I haven’t seen you in days. Far too long and you left the archive before I could drag you into the bathroom and have my way with you.”

“If I said I would make it up to you later, would you believe me?” Khan asks in the same language, smiling for the first time in hours.

“Probably,” she says. “Although I’d want a better timeframe than ‘later’.”


“Yes,” Jill says immediately. “Twenty hundred, I need time to get out of here and go for a run and a shower.”

“The run, yes,” Khan says, knowing how much she dislikes the days of inactivity over a computer. “The shower, you will take with me.”

“Okay, that’s a fair deal,” she says, a little breathless. “I have to go. I’ll see you tonight. If I don’t get back to the house, tell the others I’ll be there tomorrow or something.”

“I will,” Khan says.

“Love you,” Jill says, hanging up before Khan can answer her. He smiles, a little ruefully, and goes back to work.

If he is to have time to talk to his siblings before he sees Jill, he needs to be done at the bunker sooner than he originally intended. It still takes him until four PM to accomplish what he wants, and rather than waste time walking or taking transit he transports himself back to the house, arriving in the living room to a rather heated argument.

“Nyet,” Ekaterina says, making a sharp gesture with her hands. “No. Not now, not ever. We will not expose ourselves to that.”

“Bishop has a point,” Katsuro says calmly. “Who better than us?”

“You saw what they did to Khan,” she snaps, flinging out an arm at him. “The only interaction we will have with these…butchers…is when we kill them.”

“And I am not saying we will not kill them, Cat,” Bishop says. “I am saying perhaps we want to acquire their data first, find out their projects and do the research on what they might have done that we could find useful.”

“Like chemical weapons? Biological terrorism?” Ekaterina all but snarls. “We are better than that, Bishop, and you should be more than most. You studied how to save lives, not how to kill thousands of civilians remotely.”

“We all studied how to kill thousands of civilians remotely,” Katsuro says quietly. “Cat, one way or another we will have the data, but if we kill them first we lose the chance to ask any questions we might have.”
“So be it,” she says. “They will die, Katsuro, and by my hand if not by yours. Would you stay the killing blow against these torturers, these men and women who hurt Khan?”

Khan actually doesn’t know how Katsuro will answer. He rarely killed once the actual wars ended, but this…

Katsuro hesitates, long enough for Cat to growl and Khan to tense. “No,” Katsuro says finally. “No, I would not. Not after what they did, after what they put him through. They do not deserve the mercy of defeat.”

Not actually what Khan expected, and he looks at his brother in surprise. “This is not our time,” Katsuro says, looking back at him. “Humans have not evolved in ways I find particularly pleasing, and the ones I have seen so far…no. They do not deserve my mercy. They have no honor, and they deserve death.”

“And yet you say we should wait to kill them,” Ekaterina says, but she sounds about as nonplussed as Khan feels.

“I do,” Katsuro says. “I say we should learn everything we can about them. Everything they did to Khan, everything they probably have done to regular humans who did not ask for this. Then I say we kill them, and we use what they learned against them.”

“Katsuro,” Bishop says quietly. “You always said a clean death was the best.”

“I had not seen my brother tortured then,” Katsuro says. “I am no better than the rest of us, Bishop, and I am…angry at what I have seen today, what I have learned. There were enough records from our time that Marcus did not need to order the experiments he did. I will not ask Khan to share that kill, nor do I think the rest of us should. Marcus is his to dispose of as he sees fit, whatever form that may take. But the rest…I am angry, and my anger does not cool easily.”

It doesn’t. Khan once thought of Katsuro as a volcano, slow to erupt but impossible to stop once started.

Ekaterina sighs and sits down on the ottoman. “Then we study them,” she says. “We get their names and we study them and we learn everything we need to so that we may kill them in suitable fashion. But—” She points at Katsuro. “If it looks as though that may take time away from our more pressing goals, we kill them quickly and without hesitation.”

“Hai,” Katsuro says.

She nods firmly. “Then I am agreed.”

“What the fuck did they do to you?” Magpie asks into the silence.

“Everything possible with one exception,” Khan says. “Physical tests of healing, of endurance, of limits. Mental tests of acuity and intelligence and memory and perception, with increasing…punishments…for incorrect answers. Marcus’s people were interested in pure science, but some of them were conveniently sadists.”

“I…right,” Andy says, looking faintly green. “One line, huh?”

“Apparently there is a difference between breaking every bone in a man’s hands to see how quickly they will heal and actually raping him,” Khan says, voice clipped.

“There is,” Andy says softly. “You know there is, even if you don’t personally know the
“I do,” Khan concedes. He walks over to her and brushes her hair back from her cheek. “And I fully healed from all they did.”

“Physically,” he says quietly.

It takes a moment, but Khan nods. “Physically.”

Andy touches his cheek, her fingers cool with odd calluses and scars from her work. “You’re a survivor,” she says in Mandarin. “You survived. It’s what you do. It doesn’t mean it didn’t leave you unchanged. No person, augmented or not, is so amazing that trauma can’t change him.”

“I know,” Khan says in the same language, his voice quiet like hers but he knows his siblings can hear and understand the conversation. “But I am…it is no longer important to my daily life.”

“Liar,” Andy says, but he smiles when he says it.

Khan covers Andy’s hand with his own for a moment, then turns back to the room. “What information did Rickman have?” he asks, clearly changing the subject and challenging his family to stop him.

“We don’t yet know all the value of it,” Bishop says. “He had recordings, of course, and other test results and reams of data output but the source is encrypted and Magpie has not yet broken it to tell us specifically what the data references.”

“I will,” Magpie says, looking up from her tablet. “But you can’t rush genius.”

“He did not seem to have any current connections to section 31,” Ekaterina says. “Or our seven immediate targets. We are still confirming that. Magpie has given Konstantin some lessons on computer hacking and he is working on this information. Clearly we need Matthew, but Kostya will do in a pinch.” She gives him an affectionate look and Konstantin laughs, taking her hand and kissing it.

“I never thought to hear you say we needed Matthew,” he says. “Times really have changed.”

“What’s wrong with Matthew?” Andy asks.

“He is…everyone’s little brother,” Konstantin says.

“No siblings but I think I get it,” Magpie says. “Andy?”

“He’s probably annoying as hell when he wants to be, a constant imp, and is only redeemed by his unshakeable loyalty and his intelligence,” Andy says. “I didn’t have siblings either but I’m familiar with the concept.”

“Indeed, that is exactly so,” Konstantin says. “But he is a computer hacker without peer, or at least will be once he acquaints himself with current technology.”

“Sweet, I’ll have a minion,” Magpie says, grinning. “So what are we doing now?”

“Khan has a list of names for us to hear and begin researching,” Konstantin says before Khan can even try to find a way out of the conversation. “Andy, would you please write them down?”

“Sure,” Andy says, grabbing a tablet and his stylus. “These are the people from section 31?”
“Da,” Konstantin says. “Khan admits his information is incomplete but with what he gives us and what Rickman still had we should be able to piece together the rest.”

“Is there an order in which you would like them killed, brother?” Cat asks, idly toying with one of her knives.

“No, but Marcus will be the last, and the only one I claim for myself,” Khan says.

“It is agreed,” Bishop says. “Do you want a glass of wine before you tell us? Katsuro and I bought some in Paris.”

“I would like to know how your night was before I start this,” Khan says. “And I think I would like a glass of wine.”

“Tokyo is…different, yet the same,” Katsuro says as Bishop gets up to get the wine. “So fast, so busy, and not that different. Kyoto was more familiar. There were places I would swear had not changed since our time. It was…it was good to go back, to see Japan again and hear my language. Bishop had a similar reaction to Paris. We would like to go back again, to see our countries for longer, but we have determined that whatever path our future holds, it does not require staying there. We have too many options now to restrict ourselves to Earth, and too many ties to history for this planet to fit comfortably for us.”

“I understand,” Khan says.

“Have you been back to India?” Katsuro asks.

“No, I have not,” Khan says, his wings ruffling a little. “After—after Rani died, and then after we left…there is nothing for me there but memories I don’t necessarily want to revisit.”

“Our memories are what make us,” Katsuro says softly.

“Not entirely,” Khan says. “Would you go back to Japan had Bishop died there?”

Katsuro inclines his head, conceding the point. Bishop returns and hands Khan a glass of red wine; when he takes a sip, he smiles faintly, appreciating the full body and smooth taste. “Cabernet?” he asks.

“Oui,” Bishop says. “We had a bottle with our dinner, and enjoyed it so much I bought two more.”

“How did the stimulant work?” Khan asks.

“It will work for Matthew and Alona, and then Anandi and Maeve,” Bishop says, sounding pleased. “Katsuro and I could not emulate the hibernation of cryosleep, but we did drug ourselves to sleep, and the stimulant completely negated the grogginess and after-effect of the drugs. We were somewhat too energized and our concentration was not completely focused for an hour, but we think that cryosleep will balance that effect. The stimulant lasts approximately four hours, and we did need to rest after that time but so will they.”

“Well done,” Khan says, touching Bishop’s shoulder. “I did not doubt you could create it.”

“Merci,” Bishop says, smiling. “I have made six doses, just in case we need extras, and will give them to Jill before the mission on Saturday.”

He takes another sip of wine, as much to stall for time as to gather his thoughts. Cat looks at him levelly and he sighs, nodding. “All right,” he says, his wings folding around him. “All right.”

He gives them fourteen names in total, technicians and doctors and security guards. “Marcus tried to keep the…project…quiet,” he says. “There were two other doctors who supervised but I never knew their names.”

“We’ll find out,” Magpie says.

“This may be an odd question, but is there anyone you don’t want to kill?” Andy asks. “Anyone who actually helped you, who argued against what they were doing to you?”

He’s not surprised Andy asked. “One person,” he says. “Her name was Tara Kendrick. She was an orderly, and she…gave me kindness, as much as anyone did.”

“What happened to her, did you know?” Bishop asks.

Khan shakes his head. “Once I was released from that part of section 31, I never saw her again nor attempted to contact her.”

“We will find her,” Konstantin says.

“Bishop, it is your turn to make dinner tonight,” Cat says after a pause. “Khan, are you staying with us?”

“I am,” Khan says. “I need to leave by nineteen-thirty. I am meeting Jill back at her flat.”

“And Jake? Have we heard from him?” Cat asks.

“We have not,” Khan says. “Likely he is in New York with his family. Do you want to call him?”

“Nyet, it is not important,” Ekaterina says, waving a hand. “We will hear from him soon enough. If not, we will contact him if we need.”

She has no maternal instinct, but still she keeps track of her people, makes sure they are safe and provided for, Khan thinks. In her own way.

He finishes his wine. “Bishop, I will help you prepare dinner,” he says.

“Merci,” Bishop says. “I purchased enough duck to feed us, and have some thoughts as to preparation, but it would go easier with a sous-chef.”

“Duck’s not cheap,” Magpie comments. “I think I’ve had it once.”

“I quite like it,” Bishop says. “And since you were kind enough to give me a credit card with no limit…” He smiles, and Magpie laughs.

“It’s all other people’s money, I don’t care,” she says. “I mean, it won’t trip any flags or anything, but it’s not like I gave you a credit card on my account. I’m just moving some credits around.”

“Easy to do in days where no one uses cash,” Konstantin says. “Katya and I are going to go for a run before dinner. Katsuro, would you join us?”

“I would,” Katsuro says. “We will be back in an hour, is that enough time?”

“It should be,” Bishop says.
Katsuro nods and he gets up, along with Ekaterina and Konstantin. The three of them go to change their shoes and leave.

“And back to the grind with me,” Magpie says, sprawling out on the couch.

“Don’t overwork yourself,” Khan says. “We need you functional more than we need the data right this moment.”

“I appreciate the concern, demon, but I’m okay,” Magpie says. “I got a good nap this afternoon while your family were out committing murder, and I like some of the stuff I’m doing now. Well, most of it, but the subject matter is less than thrilling. But I’m fine, I promise. If I start feeling overworked or burned out, I’ll let you know.”

“She’ll let me know, at any rate,” Andy says. “Bishop, do you want my help in the kitchen too?”

“If you would like,” Bishop says.

“Sure, I’ve got nothing mid-build,” Andy says. “So here’s a question. If Khan is my uncle—generations removed and all, but if he’s my uncle, does that make you my uncle too?”

Bishop looks surprised, which amuses Khan. “Would—I have no idea,” he says, falling into French. “Is this something you would want?”

“English, s’il vous plait,” Khan says, more amused than he should be.

“Pardon.” Bishop turns to look at Andy in the kitchen. “You are Jill’s family, which makes you our family by extension,” he says. “And you are Khan’s family, which makes you our family twice over. I had not thought to give it a name, but if you would like me to be your uncle, I would…I would be honored.”

Andy smiles. “It goes the other way too,” he points out. “If Khan’s my family, you’re mine by extension. So yes, I would.”

Bishop smiles and crosses to Andy, kissing his forehead and his cheeks. “Bien,” he says. “Now, where do you keep the knives in this kitchen?”

Chapter End Notes

If you haven’t read the Khan backstory comic, it attempts to explain the difference in Khan’s appearance by attributing a lot of things to Marcus. Before Khan officially woke up, Marcus had him surgically altered physically to look different (aka a white man), changed his voice, gave him false memories, etc...and then was surprised when Khan wanted to kill him, but no one ever said Marcus was that intelligent.

I, clearly, haven’t used a lot of the comics canon, but when I was writing this chapter I found myself wondering what would be worse--to wake in a world you knew nothing of and have been so altered, or to know who you were but to go through what I’ve said section 31 did to Khan. I frankly think the comics canon is worse. Marcus didn't just use Khan, he took his identity away. At least in my story, he may have gone through hell but he knew who he was, he knew what was happening and why.

I still think Marcus needs to die, but my characters are a little bloodthirsty. What do
you think?
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Your worst monsters are your own creations.

Chapter Notes

Happy December, all. If you're in the US I hope you had a better Thanksgiving than I did, as mine did not go smoothly at all and things happened that prevented me from being able to write for a while. Thus the delay here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They have duck, and wine thanks to Konstantin, and a chocolate torte for dessert that Cat pronounces almost as good as her own. Jake arrives just in time for coffee and dessert, and while at first Khan thinks it a trick of the light he realizes halfway through the torte that Jake has colored marker scribbled on his t-shirt and his arms. “What happened?” he asks.

“My nieces and nephew,” Jake says with a sigh. “It'll wash out, I just haven’t had time to deal with it yet. They gave me marker makeup—that I did wash off—and decorated my clothes.”

“Their parents did not stop them?” Cat asks.

“No, because Samuel is a dick who thinks me getting covered in marker is hilarious, and no one else was around to tell him otherwise,” Jake says. “Samuel had all the kids and is terrible adult supervision. I made the mistake of closing my eyes for five minutes and woke up decorated. My own damn fault, but Samuel is also a dick.”

“How old are the children?” Konstantin asks.

“Samuel and Linda’s daughter Deborah is five,” Jake says. “Their son Tobias is three. David and Elizabeth’s daughter Rose is four, and Elizabeth’s pregnant again but I’m not supposed to know that for another three weeks.”

“How far apart in age are Samuel and David?” Bishop asks.

“Two years,” Jake says. “There’s three years between me and Samuel, and another two between him and David. Eema wanted more but she miscarried after David, and she and Abba decided at that point to count their blessings.”

“And you have many cousins, do you not?” Ekaterina asks.

“I have too many,” Jake says. “Eema’s the oldest of six. One of her sisters has two kids, another sister has three, and her youngest brother has four. One sister and one brother avoided procreating. But then you get into extended families and second cousins and third cousins and I’m pretty much related to people all over the planet.”
“Are many of them in Starfleet?” Bishop asks.

“No, not many,” Jake says. “Of my cousins, two went through the Academy and served for a time but resigned a few years ago to go settle New Aegean, a water planet. I have one other first cousin who’s a cadet currently but is on the medical officer track and doing a truly hellish combined med school and Academy program. I think there are a few extended cousins in various security positions or local law enforcement, but no one that I know of is actually on a Starfleet ship or HQ.”

“But the risk is not to those in Starfleet,” Cat says. “The risk is to the civilians. How much danger would we be putting your family in if we chose to stay with them?”

“Honestly, it depends on who’s staying with whom and what covers you have,” Jake says. “I don’t have enough data to theorize right now. Like, Eli and Natalia, the ones in Moscow? They have people staying with them all the time, so a couple new people won’t raise any red flags. Michel and Laine rent out their houses in Spain and France depending on which one they’re not in at the time. So that’s all fine. But I don’t know about anyone else, and I don’t know who’s where and what they might be doing. Jill has more data than I do, at this point. I think—I think—that if we combine things, if we let a few of you stay with my cousins and others use safe houses, we’re probably about as low-target as we’re going to get. I just have to find out from Jill which cousins would be best. Or my mother.”

“Yes,” Cat says, drawing out the word. “Speaking of, you were going to tell me when it would be a suitable time for me to meet her.”

“I was,” Jake says, squirming a little in his seat. “She says tomorrow is open, but you would need to come to her as she has to be in Manhattan in the morning and won’t have time to come to London. She invited you and Konstantin for lunch, thirteen hundred local time.”

“Then we shall accept,” Ekaterina says. “I would think your mother also has data on your cousins and their relative safety, so I will ask.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you will,” Jake says morosely. “Just…don’t try to intimidate her. It won’t work.”

“I would not,” Cat says, sounding indignant. “Contrary to what you may think, I do have a sense of etiquette.”

“I never said you didn’t, just…you like to be the most alpha person in a room and so does my mom,” Jake says. “And I’d really rather you didn’t try to kill each other.”

“I should think we can manage that,” Ekaterina says. She finishes her coffee and sets her mug down. “And now, you may do the dishes.”

“Somehow I knew that was coming,” Jake says with a sigh, but gets up.

"I'll help," Magpie says, also getting to her feet. “Should we be expecting Jill back here tonight at all?”

“No,” Khan says, glancing at the chrono. “I am meeting her back at her flat tonight, we will not be back until tomorrow, and in fact I should leave within half an hour.”

“It would be good if she could join us for lunch tomorrow,” Cat says. “Since she and Sarah have already spoken on the subject of housing.”

“Yeah, but I doubt she can get away,” Jake says. “I’ll message her and ask, though.”
“I can ask her tonight,” Khan points out.

“I still think the answer’s likely to be no, regardless of who asks, but we’ll find out,” Jake says, gathering dishes.

“Da, we will,” Konstantin says. “Is your father as strong-willed as your mother?”

“Abba? No,” Jake says, laughing. “No, Abba is…he’s one of those guys who doesn’t just give someone the last few credits in his wallet, he’s the guy who takes the person to a diner for coffee and a real meal, finds them a place to spend the night, and follows up in a day or two to see if they need anything else.”

“Why would he do this?” Ekaterina asks.

“Because Abba thinks people are genuinely good, some just need reminding,” Jake says. “Some need a lot more reminding than others, but he has a much more optimistic view of people than I do. More so than Eema, too, but she’s less—Eema’s not cynical, exactly, but she’s much more realistic about things than Abba is. Abba’s the eternal idealist who wants to help the sick kid, Eema’s the realist who will point out that the sick kid just stole your wallet.”

“And they produced you,” Cat says thoughtfully.

“Yep,” Jake says. “And Samuel, who’s like me but way more domesticated, and David, who’s an actor and completely head over heels in love with his wife and his daughter. Really, I’m the odd one out, especially when you add in the rest of my family, but they keep me around anyway.”

“I should think so, given what you have told us about your mother’s attitude toward family,” Ekaterina says.

“Something like that,” Jake says. He looks down at his arms and sighs. “It’s going to take forever to get the marker off, and I’m pretty sure this shirt is a lost cause. My brother is an asshole.”

“Does he do things like this often?” Konstantin asks, amused.

“Eh, depends on the week,” Jake says. “To be fair, three weeks ago I put blue hair dye in his soap and it took him eleven days to get the last of it off his skin.”

“Do you always play jokes on each other?” Bishop asks, laughing.

“Yeah, usually,” Jake says. “We add David into it sometimes, and Jill’s always up for a prank if she’s around. I have a couple other friends Eema’s adopted the way she did Jill, so…it gets interesting when we’re on leave at the same time.”

“Interesting is one word for it,” Andy says. “I’d go with batshit crazy, myself, but I’ve heard the stories.”

”Batshit crazy’s probably fairly accurate,” Jake says, loading the washer. “Especially where Jill is concerned.”

”We love our tiny psycho,” Magpie says. “But I do use that word pointedly. She told me about the game of tag you guys played one December.”

“Oh, God, that,” Jake says with a groan and a laugh.

“What was this?” Konstantin asks.
“Okay, so, the thing to note is that we were all—me, Samuel, Jill, a couple guys from my unit, and one other person—we were all on leave at the same time, and we were in New York, and there was a massive blizzard, dropped like a meter of snow in some places,” Jake says. “The city essentially shut down for a few days, because blizzard, and the lot of us were trapped and we got cabin fever. So we set up some basic rules. The person who was ‘it’ started two hours ahead of the rest of us, and had to leave us at least one clue every hour. If six hours passed once the rest of us started looking, whoever was ‘it’ automatically won, and we switched it up. But if someone managed to catch ‘it’, he or she became ‘it’ for the next round. We said no breaking laws, and we had to stay within the boundaries of New York City, but anything else was fair game, like I got a friend to beam me from Staten Island to the Lower East Side at one point. And bribing random passers-by was totally fine. The whole thing took…four days, I think, and the finale was literally a chase through Central Park because Jill was on the edge of just winning, and we could see her, but if we couldn’t actually catch her she won. So we had these six people running through snow and over and under things and around people and we eventually picked up an audience who all cheered when the timer on Jill’s phone went off and she won. Two seconds more and I’d have grabbed her.”

“What did she get for winning?” Bishop asks.

“We each threw a sum into the pot, and divided it up in the end according to who had won what and by how much,” Jake says. “Jill and I took our shares and donated them to the Starfleet survivors’ fund.”

“What were the oddest ways you got around the city?” Ekaterina asks.

“Beaming, that was a handy one,” Jake says. “Samuel skied across half of Manhattan—cross-country skiing, obviously. Jill climbed a ten-story building, jumped to the roof of a nearby building, and rappelled down, because she’s fucking insane and was trying to throw us off her trail, a move that totally worked, too because none of us thought she could have made it up the first building. One person took six different cabs and buses and we lost a ton of time tracking each one until we discovered she’d finished three blocks from where she’d started. I think someone swam part of the Hudson river, too, but I was it at that point so I don’t know a lot of what everyone else did.”

“She told me someone—I don’t remember who—ice-skated through a parking lot,” Magpie says.

“That would have been Mac,” Jake says. “Samuel’s partner at the time. A water pipe had ruptured from the cold, or something, and flooded a parking lot and promptly froze.”

“I should think ice skating would not have saved much time,” Ekaterina says.

“It didn’t, but the arrow scratched in the ice was our clue for the next hour,” Jake says.

“This sounds a game we could enjoy playing,” Konstantin says thoughtfully.

“We’ve played it before in various forms,” Jake says. “It works really well as a way of getting accustomed to a new place. If I get dropped into a place with someone else on my team and our target isn’t immediately time-sensitive, we’ll play it for a few days and have modifiers to make us talk to local people and learn how to fit in. I found Jill once because she’d left me two clues that wouldn’t have made sense if we’d never played, but based on our history of the game I knew what she meant and I found her pretty fast. You can add all kinds of things to it, too, like you can only travel by methods powered by human energy. So biking is okay, but a car, mass transit, beaming, all aren’t. Or you can say that you’re not allowed to use a certain type of transport. We usually rule out beaming because it’s too easy to get anywhere and too hard to track it.”
“Do you play this with cadets?” Konstantin asks.

“No,” Jake says. “Because cadets are universally idiots and this game requires not being an idiot. I won’t play it with anyone who’s less than two years out of the Academy.”

“And when did you and Jill first play?” Cat asks.

“Our senior year, but we were idiots,” Jake says cheerfully.

“I do rather like the idea of this game,” Ekaterina says, smiling at Jake’s response. “I think, if we have time, we should consider it.”

“My recommendation would be to work in pairs,” Jake says. “Depending on how you set the boundaries and the restrictions. I’m guessing you’d want to go planet-wide, and it’s a lot easier for two people to get around than one. Also safer, for everyone around you as much as you.”

“Bien sur,” Bishop says.

“Anyway, for tomorrow, I’ll swing by here and pick you up before we go to New York, if that works,” Jake says.

“It does,” Cat says.

“How is Marika doing?” Khan asks, changing the subject.

“Still unconscious,” Jake says. “Gabe says there’s brain activity, which is good, and the brain activity is increasing, which he says is expected and good. He doesn’t exactly have a medical history of whatever she is to compare against, but he says based on the information he does have about her, she’s healing and it’ll just take time.”

"She is part psychic," Bishop says. "Could another member of a psychic species form a telepathic link with her? Try to communicate with her while she is unconscious?"

“Probably,” Jake says. “A Vulcan would be best suited for it, since they’re touch telepaths. We have…a couple around Medical. There’s only one Vulcan currently in Starfleet that I know of and he’s shipped out, I think, but there might be more on Earth I don’t know of.”

“Who is the one in Starfleet?” Bishop asks.

“He’s the first officer and the science officer on the Enterprise, the flagship,” Jake says. “He’s actually half-human, joined Starfleet a while back and ended up teaching at the Academy for a while, during which time he was the bastard who designed the Kobayashi Maru test.”

“What is this?” Ekaterina asks, leaning forward.

“It’s designed to be a test of a no-win scenario,” Jake says. “It’s fucking stupid, and it wrecks every cadet who goes through it except—ironically—the current captain of the Enterprise, but he cheated.”

“Tell me more,” Cat says.

Jake sighs, leaning against the counter. “Basically, you have a choice to either try and rescue a crippled civilian spaceship or abandon it to the Klingons. If you try to rescue the ship, you get destroyed by the Klingons. There’s no way out of it, unless you hack the fucking scenario.”

“You went through it, I take it?” Ekaterina asks.
“Had to,” Jake says. “Then I went to advanced combat and beat someone up.”

“Did Jill take it?” Ekaterina asks.

“She was the first officer in my simulation, and I was the navigation officer in hers,” Jake says. “Like me, she left it and went and beat people up. Spock is a bastard, and I wish I could have punched him. This is what happens when you have people who don’t use emotions designing tests for cadets who are mostly bundles of hormones and emotions.”

“But surely the cadets must learn to master those things,” Bishop says.

Jake groans and rubs his hands over his face. “Yes, of course, and I’m not saying the thing is completely without merit. I just…it’s brutal and I don’t think it needs to be.”

“How did the Enterprise captain win it?” Ekaterina asks.

“He hacked it,” Jake says. “Made it so the Klingon’s shields were down, so the simulator ship could destroy them and then rescue the civilian ship. Nice trick, really, but it takes a certain amount of chutzpah to even think of doing that, let alone actually pull it off.”

“Starfleet must appreciate chutzpah, since he is now the flagship captain,” Bishop observes.

“Yeah, not so much, but Kirk plays by his own rules and Starfleet’s found it easier to go along than force him to play by theirs,” Jake says. “I’m not saying he’s not brilliant, and we get together once in a while when we’re both on downtime to have a beer and shoot the shit. But I wouldn’t want him on my team. I don’t think I could count on him reliably.”

“Ironic, that you would say that regarding a field in which nothing is reliable,” Ekaterina says, amused.

“That only makes it more important that your team is,” Jake says simply.

“Tell me more about your team,” Cat says. “Can we rely on any of them?”

“We’re not going to,” Jake says. “I trust my team more than I trust almost anyone, but this isn’t their mess and they didn’t sign on to help me with family concerns. One member of my team is now in a coma for reasons that I’m pretty sure I can lay at your door—you in general—and I’m not risking anyone else’s health or sanity for a personal matter.”

“A personal matter that involves Starfleet administration,” Cat says sharply.

“That’s as may be,” Jake says. “And if anyone on my team comes to me and says they’re aware of the problem with section 31, do I know anything, things might change, but while I’m putting my career on the line for you guys I’m not risking my teammates’.”

“Your loyalty is commendable, but I hope it is not misplaced,” Bishop says.

“If—if—we need to involve my team, we will,” Jake says after a pause. “But I’m hoping to avoid that as long as possible.”

“Why?” Cat asks. “This should impact them, should it not? Your team is affected by what happens to Starfleet administration, is it not?”

“They are,” Jake says. “But they didn’t sign up to go against the entire administration.”

“Neither did you,” Konstantin says.
“No, but I signed up to be Jill’s brother, and she asked for my help,” Jake says. “Much as I respect my team, much as I trust them, they’re not my family. Jill is.”

A fine line but one worth standing firm about, Khan thinks, and from the slight huff Ekaterina makes before she sits back in her chair she agrees. “But you will talk to them if we need them,” she says.

“If we do, yes,” Jake says, sounding like he intends to make that a very remote possibility.

Khan can’t fault him for it, not entirely. Jake has honor, and while Starfleet brass may not be deserving of Jake’s respect, his teammates are another matter. It does involve them, because all of Starfleet is implicated in Marcus’s actions, but he will leave things be for now. Probably.

“I should be leaving,” he says instead. “I will see you tomorrow, in all likelihood.”

“Oui,” Bishop says. “Be well, frere.”

“And you,” Khan says. He says his goodbyes to the rest, gathers up Jill’s sword—somewhat amused he hasn’t had a chance to give it to her yet—and transports himself to her flat.

He gets there just before she does, and has enough time to set the sword case down on her coffee table before she walks through the door, skin damp with sweat and hair bundled into a ponytail. She wears running clothes and takes out her earbuds when she sees him. “Well, finally,” she says, laughing, and runs for him, leaping on him and wrapping her legs around his waist. Khan expected that and catches her easily, balancing her weight and meeting her mouth with his, hard.

“Missed you,” she whispers against his lips, biting the lower one and scratching her nails over his scalp. “Almost as much as I need a shower right now.”

Khan simply carries her to the bathroom, setting her down only so he can turn on the water and they can both undress. Once they get under the spray, he picks her up again, crowding her against the wall and kissing her hard enough she whimpers. “Please,” she whispers. “God, I missed you.”

He keeps her balanced against the wall as he sinks to his knees, her hands tangling in his hair for support and her legs over his shoulders. When he licks her, she moans, nails digging into his scalp, a sharp pain he relishes. Jill breathes his name, shivers and trembles against his hands and his mouth. She comes so quickly the first time, he gets almost no warning, and he smiles to himself at the thought that she must have waited for him.

He brings her to orgasm twice with his mouth before he takes mercy on her and lets her slide down the wall to sit in the tub, breathing hard. After a few moments, Jill carefully pushes to her feet, leaning into Khan for a long minute before she reaches for her pouf and body wash. “Let me,” Khan says, taking them from her.

“Really not going to complain about it,” she says, laughing. “Christ, that was fierce. Tell me about your last few days while we get clean?”

“Not all that exciting, although I have some progress on a few things and a gift for you from the Femarans,” Khan says as he bathes her.

“For me?” Jill sounds surprised. “Why me?”

“I honestly am not sure,” Khan says. “Melcian gave me a weapon she said would suit you. I agree,
but I do not know why she thought I should have it. She would not take payment for it. I actually had it after the first time Jake and I went there, but never had a chance to give it to you.”

“No, I want to see it,” Jill says, wriggling with impatience.

“You will,” Khan says, amused. “It will not disappear in the ten minutes it takes us to finish this shower and put on clothing.”

“Are you sure?” Jill grins at him. “Yeah, okay, and oh, that feels good.” She groans and pushes into his fingers as they knead the tight muscles in her neck. “What do I have to do to get you to give me a full massage?”

“Bribery is not required,” Khan says. “Begging, however…”

Jill laughs. “Oh, I’ll get there, I’m sure.”

“Indeed,” he murmurs, sliding his hands down her shoulders and over her breasts. She shivers and leans back against him, her nipples hardening under his touch. Khan smiles, slides his hands lower, until he can lift her and press her against the wall, nudge her legs a bit wider and enter her. She’s so perfectly hot and wet, so tight around him; he bites the back of her neck to feel her moan, her fingers clawing at the slippery tile.

“Please,” Jill says, breathless already. “Please. I’ll—anything you want.”

“I know,” he murmurs in her ear, biting it sharply. “You’ll give me everything I want, won’t you, kitten? You’d crawl to me wherever I asked, whenever I wanted. I could fuck you in the bathroom at the archive and you’d beg me for more with your skirt around your waist and your panties in tatters, and you’d go back to work with my seed inside you and my marks on your skin. I could have you in public, with others watching, and you’d cry out and come when I told you, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” Jill says, more of a moan. “You want me to admit that? I’ll do that now, Khan. I’m yours, you know that. You could have anything you wanted from me, anywhere you wanted it. Please, just—please—“

“Tell me what you want,” he says gently, pinning her wrists over her head with one hand when she moves to touch herself.

“Let me come,” she pleads, squirming against him. “Please, Khan—“

“Why should I?” he asks, sliding one hand down to tease her clit. “You’re so beautiful when you’re desperate, pyara, why should I let you find release?”

“Bastard,” she throws at him. “Please, Khan, I can’t—“

She can, actually, and Khan doesn’t let her come until she’s lost the ability to speak and her voice has broken to whimpers. The water just starts to run cool by the time he turns it off and carries her out of the shower; Jill doesn’t really manage coherency for a solid ten minutes after, but she snuggles into him on the bed and Khan can’t find it in himself to mind.

“Weapon,” she says finally, after she’s recovered enough to deal with her post-shower routine and pull on soft clothes and he’s put on slacks. “You promised me a weapon, and good God we need food. Well, I need food. I don’t know about you.”

“Have you any?” Khan asks, following her out to the living room.
“I have a frozen casserole from Eema that will take very short time to heat up and should be delicious,” Jill says. “It’s chicken and onions and mushrooms and carrots and rice, and I love it. I’ll go get that started—I can manage that much—and you can show me this present the Femarans gave you for me.”

Once she puts the casserole dish in the warmer, Khan motions for her to come over to the couch. “This was made by Melcian,” he says, undoing the latches. “She intended it for her daughter, but said it was more suited for you.”

He opens the box and Jill audibly gasps. “That is possibly the most beautiful weapon I’ve ever seen,” she says, her hand hovering over the hilt as though she’s afraid to pick it up. “It’s…God, I don’t even know if my melee fighting skills are enough to do it justice.” She does pick it up, though, and moves through some basic sparring poses. “It’s the perfect size for me, and it’ll be perfect for my preferred use of knifework.”

“What is that?” Khan asks.

“I like to sneak in from behind and stab someone when they’re not expecting it,” Jill says. “I’m not built for frontal assault, I’m the hit and run attacker, the person who gets in a kidney stab when the opponent is otherwise distracted. This—it’s bigger than a dagger, but it’s not quite a shortsword, but it’s perfect for that kind of sneaking.”

“Do you use knives often in Starfleet?” Khan asks.

“Hardly ever, but I practice,” Jill says. “Mostly with Jake when we have time, and with a couple security guys on my ship when Jake’s not around. Jake and some other people and I sometimes play a weird version of tag, and in a couple versions of it the goal is to kill ‘it’ without being caught. I’m usually good at that one if I’m not it.”

“Interestingly, we were discussing that earlier,” Khan says, amused. He tells Jill about the conversation and the discussion of the December game.

“Oh, man, that was an awesome one,” she says, laughing. “I won at the last minute because I climbed a tree and jumped over a brook, and Jake had just started climbing the tree when the timer went off. Before that I was running flat out through groups of civilians and occasionally borrowing a hat from random girl children to pretend I was elsewhere. Everyone in the park got in on the game by the end, it was fantastic. I had the most points at the end, Jake had the second, Jake’s teammate An had the third but only because Jake got really, really lucky once.”

“Where did you come up with the idea?” Khan asks.

“I always wanted to do parkour,” Jill says. “And I can do some of it, and Jake and I learned some of that when we were in the Academy or whatever, and the rest kind of evolved out of it. Some of it we got through necessity, like Jake would be sent on these missions and given five clues and a goal, so we decided that we should practice things like that in our downtime so it wasn’t quite so impossible when lives depended on it. Plus, it’s just fun. We try to challenge each other to the craziest stunts and most impossible ways to get around things—that’s the parkour element—and it keeps us sharp, mentally and physically.” She lays the blade back down in the case and looks at him. “Maybe someday we’ll get to play. Although in that case I’m demanding teams. But for now I think I need to get you and Cat to show me better ways to use that beauty.”

“We can do that,” Khan says. “I find it troubling that Starfleet does not adequately train its personnel for melee combat.”
“You find a lot of things troubling about Starfleet,” Jill says.

“True enough,” Khan admits. “But this seems a major omission.”

“They do teach unarmed combat,” Jill says. “And advanced combat classes are available if you sign up for them, which a lot of people do and security people are required to take. Swordfighting—that’s not exactly twenty-third century, so it’s not something that’s offered much. But I mean, I think you can study it in advanced combat.”

“There are reasons the design of swords has changed very little in thousands of years,” Khan says. “I sound like Cat, but they work.”

“You do sound like her,” Jill says, laughing. “But I get it.” She goes to serve the casserole, handing Khan a plate and taking her own over to the small dining table. Khan turns a chair around and straddles it; he isn’t particularly hungry, but the social aspect of sharing a meal outweighs his lack of appetite.

Contrary to what Marcus thinks, he is capable of following social convention and getting along with people. He just chooses not to where the admiral is concerned.

Jill says little as she eats, clearly more interested in food than conversation. She devours two helpings of the casserole, and gives the dish a considering look before she laughs and puts the remainder away. “Eema made that for me—well, not me, but the house—the first weekend I stayed there,” she says, loading dishes into the washer. “It’s one of my favorite dishes she makes. It’s so easy, supposedly, but so good.”

“How tired are you?” Khan asks, watching her.

“Mm, depends on what you have in mind,” Jill says, turning to look at him. “Sex? Probably in a bit. Running or sparring? Not so much right now. What were you thinking?”

“We haven’t gone flying in a while,” Khan says.

Her face simply lights up. “Yes,” she says. “Yes. Please.”

She pulls on a jacket and her fingerless gloves, and they simply launch into the air from the roof of their building. Khan keeps her close to his chest as they fly over London, high enough not to be seen clearly; Jill stays quiet and still in his arms but her pulse beats fast and strong, and occasionally Khan hears her whisper something under her breath.

He stays up in the air longer than he intended, long enough that he feels Jill shivering by the time they touch down on the deserted sidewalk. Earth feels both all the heavier for returning to solid ground and yet more easily shrugged off, as though the constraints and secrecy and danger of life have eased their burdens.

“Thank you,” Jill says softly as they go inside.

“I did not do that just for you,” Khan says equally quietly.

She touches his hand, her fingers still warm for once. “I know. But you didn’t have to take me with you either.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I did.” He did and he will, whether or not she believes him.

Where they will go…he doesn’t know, but the destination matters little at this point. Away, that
matters most. Off Earth, away from the Federation.

“Are you spending the night with me?” Jill asks, letting them into her flat.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Unless you would prefer I did not.”

“No,” she says quickly. “I’ve slept alone these last few nights, and it sucked.”

“Did you have nightmares?” he asks, touching her cheek.

Jill hesitates, then nods. “Woke up hysterical last night, couldn’t get back to sleep. It was…different, and…and not a good difference.”

“Tell me about it,” Khan says as they get undressed for bed.

“The Ventraxans,” Jill says, not looking at him. “That part—that was the same. But—“ She sits down on the edge of the bed, still not looking at him. “But you were there, and you…you watched, and you didn’t say anything. You watched them as they—as—and you didn’t do anything. And—and when it was over, and I was just…I looked at you, and you said nothing, and you left. And I woke up screaming and you weren’t here and I thought it had actually happened and you’d—and—“ She stops, takes a slow breath. “Anyway, I called Magpie once I could breathe enough to speak, and she and Andy came and snuggled with me until I had to get up.”

“Your worst monsters are your own creations,” Khan says when his throat is less tight. He sits on the bed next to her, touches her shoulder. Jill tenses for a second, then leans into him, letting him wrap an arm and a wing around her.

“I know,” she says, her head against his shoulder. “I know.”

He wants to tell her she won’t wake alone again, but he can’t make that promise and they both know it. Instead, he draws her under the covers with him, holding her close. “Sleep, milaya moya,” he says, brushing her hair back. “I have you safe here.”

“I know,” Jill murmurs.

She doesn’t sleep soon and neither does Khan, but rather than speak they lie there quietly. Khan gives thought to the pressure points in Jill’s neck but doesn’t actually touch them, and finally she sighs and he feels her body go lax in slumber.

He chooses not to sleep, using the hours of the night to analyze the phaser cannon and the personal shield, making mental notes he’ll transcribe in the morning. He’ll need to talk to Katsuro more about the shield, but given recent events Khan wonders if he’ll get his brother’s attention or whether Katsuro will be more interested in finding the scientists from section 31.

It bothers him a little, this need his siblings have to avenge him. All of them know life isn’t fair, and that sometimes there can be no justice. They know that in full measure. But none of the four currently awake will even listen to the idea that perhaps this should wait, that perhaps they have more important needs than executing a handful of sadistic scientists.

It makes him wonder what they see in him, what damage they read in him that they see this as so crucial. Khan won’t lie to himself and say he isn’t damaged; he knows better. But he believes—or possibly believed—himself strong enough that it didn’t matter.

He’s no longer certain of that.
Chapter End Notes

Jim and Spock, so maligned by my characters.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

We may be fucked up but at least we're not alone.

Chapter Notes

I am quite pleased, my friends. Not only did this chapter come together fairly easily, but thanks to some help from friends and my husband I know where I'm going and I've worked out the tricky plot bits. Stick with me; I think I can finish this. At some point.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Saturday evening rolls around, Khan has the actual phaser cannon constructed, the one for Marcus about 95% done, and the prototype of the personal shield about three-quarters built. To his gratitude—and relief—Katsuro has been working on it with him, rather than hunting down scientists from section 31.

However, Bishop, Konstantin, and Ekaterina are doing exactly that, tagging locations and places and creating an order of assassination. Magpie helps them in between—Khan honestly doesn’t quite know what else she’s doing and doesn’t ask.

Still, tension crackles through the hours, and when Khan walks into the living room ten minutes before the op begins and doesn’t see Jill, his wings half-flare. “Where did she go?” he asks Andy shortly.

“Look up,” Andy says calmly.

Khan does and blinks, seeing Jill on the ceiling, arms and legs outstretched and hands and feet pressed against the surface. She ignores him, but moves slowly across the ceiling, graceful despite the situation. He watches her spider-walk her way to the wall and come halfway down before she pulls her hands away from the wall, touches a button on her right wrist, and dives for the floor, landing in a somersault and coming up easily. “And that’s how that works,” she says, brushing off her hands. “I can’t explain the tech, but Andy can. But that’s for later, right now we have to run through our checks and I need to get going.”

“Yes,” Andy says. “You have everything?”

“Shields, stims, phaser, transporter, earbud, gloves, boots, I’m out of funny hats but I’ve got a jacket that’ll do in a pinch,” Jill says, running down the list of equipment. “We tested the comms, you promised me the shield wouldn’t break the comm-link again—“

“I did and it didn’t last time so shut it,” Andy says, throwing a glove at Jill’s head.

“Yes, well, every mission has a new adventure,” Jill says. “First time it was the comm link and the shield, second time it was Bishop being zombied, this time…who the hell knows, but we’ll find
out.” She throws the glove back and pulls on her jacket. “A kiss for luck and I’m off,” she says, looking at Khan.

He manages a smile, although his nerves feel too jangled to really put much effort into it. Still, he holds out a hand to her and she comes to him, stretching up as he leans down, their lips meeting briefly in the middle. “I love you,” she says softly against his lips in Russian. “Trust me to do this.”

“I do,” Khan says honestly.

“Good.” Jill bites his lip sharply and steps away. “And away we go,” she says, slipping out the door.

“Didn’t have this much of an audience last time,” Magpie comments, typing in a few commands on her second computer. “You five can relax, you know. We did this twice already and no one died.”

“That does not mean tonight will go smoothly,” Khan says.

“Of course it doesn’t,” Andy says serenely, cross-legged in front of his own machine. “But it does mean we’re more familiar with the situation and more likely to be able to prevent any major problems.”

“One would hope,” Ekaterina says. She sighs and flips knives in both hands, smoothly drawing a third and beginning to juggle them.

“Could you—you know—not do that near my equipment when Jill’s out there doing this?” Magpie asks warily, hunching over her laptop.

“Pardon,” Cat says, putting the knives away. “I think...how long does the mission take in total?”

“Maybe two hours,” Andy says. “Give or take.”

“Good enough,” Ekaterina says. “Kostya, you and I are going for a run. Khan, I strongly recommend you come with us.”

“No,” Khan says. “I am remaining here.”

“I will go with you,” Bishop says, unfolding from the couch. “Katsuro?”

“No, I think not,” Katsuro says, looking at Khan. “I rather think my brother and I need to talk.”

“Do we,” Khan says, feeling more and more irritated by the moment.

“Hai,” Katsuro says calmly. He rises from his seat on the floor and gestures to the door. “On the porch, I think.”

The problem with refusing is that his other siblings would undoubtedly become involved and not to Khan’s advantage. Khan grits his teeth and stalks onto the porch without a word.

Katsuro follows him a moment later. “What do you want?” Khan asks curtly, not quite able to stand still or keep his wings quiet.

“Pax, brother,” Katsuro says, taking a seat cross-legged on the porch floor. “I mean you no harm, and you know that. I am not your enemy here.”

“I am in no mood for conversations,” Khan says.
“No, you are not,” Katsuro says. “Which, I think, makes it all the more important that we have this one.” He folds his hands in his lap. “You told us what happened to you,” he says. “You told us the outline, and some of the details, and the rest we can fill in for ourselves. But you tell us this as though it happened to someone else, Khan. You tell us what you endured as though it had no lasting effect, and we all know that to be a lie.” He looks at Khan steadily. “You are not the man I knew in our time, brother. I do not say you are worse, or better, but you are changed, and I wonder if you have acknowledged that. To be thrust into a time so far removed from our own, forced to adapt so quickly without any kind of support—it would change any of us, and would possibly have broken some of us.”

“Not you,” Khan says quietly.


“Barely,” Khan says without meaning to, and the word escapes on what would almost be a sob if he let it. He takes a breath, swallows, sinks to his knees opposite Katsuro. “I almost…there were times I wished I would.”

Katsuro reaches out, taking Khan’s hands. “I know.”

“It would have been so much easier,” Khan whispers, looking at their hands. “To just become John Harrison, to just…”

“I know,” Katsuro says again, softly. “But we never did anything the easy way, brother, and you are too strong for Marcus to break you. You are not unbreakable. None of us are. And you know as well as I do that he damaged you, that he caused cracks and strains where previously there was strength. You can heal from this, Khan, and you will. But first you must acknowledge they exist.”

“I have,” Khan says, still looking down. “Had I not, I would never have told Jill the truth. I was…I was desperate, and she offered me the first glimpse of hope I had had since awakening in this time.”

“Why do you think that is?” Katsuro asks. “Why do you think she offered you her trust so quickly?”

“It is who she is,” Khan says. “I told Cat, and Konstantin—she gives of herself more than she will ever ask of another. She did not know me, she did not know whether or not she could trust me or believe me, and yet she did, because she saw me, and she saw I needed her.”

“Rani would like her, I think,” Katsuro says after a moment.

“Yes,” Khan says, managing a smile. “I thought so too.”

“Do you think it possible Jill is—there could be a connection to Rani? That Rani is reborn as Jill?” Katsuro asks carefully.

“Yes and no,” Khan says. “There is a connection, I know that. But Jill is not Rani reborn. There are too many differences, and—and to be honest, Rani is not who I need in this time. Jill is.”

“Hai,” Katsuro says. He tightens his hold on Khan’s hands. “You need her, and you need us.”

“I don’t deny those things,” Khan says tiredly.

“Then perhaps you should be a bit more willing to let us take your burdens for a time,” Katsuro says gently. “Why do you not want us to kill these people? Do you honestly think you are not
“I think it an unnecessary use of our resources,” Khan says, stiffening.

“And had it been Cat who was held captive by them?” Katsuro asks. “Would you still feel that way?”

Khan opens his mouth to say he would and closes it without saying a word. The thought of his closest sister in his place—no. He would raze the place to the ground, with its inhabitants inside.

“As I thought,” Katsuro says. “So why are you worth anything less?”

“I am the oldest,” Khan says finally. “It is my role to take care of you, not yours to take care of me.”

“Now *that* is untrue,” Katsuro says. “We are a family, Khan, we take care of each other. You taught us that.” He looks at Khan steadily, meeting his eyes and not letting Khan look away. “Why do you think you are worth less to us? Is that truly what Marcus did to you?”

Khan’s mouth works but he can’t find words, can’t find an answer for Katsuro. The grip on his hands tightens more and he realizes it’s because he’s shaking, that his breath comes harsh and raw in his throat. “Khan,” Katsuro says softly.

“I can’t,” Khan says finally, aware he is repeating a line Jill uses and not even sure what he means.

“Sometimes, one must break before one can heal,” Katsuro says quietly, releasing one of Khan’s hands to cup the back of Khan’s skull, bring their foreheads together. “Marcus did not break you, brother. But the scars *will*. Have you mourned for what you lost? Have you grieved the man you were to accept the man you have become?”

His throat is too tight to talk and he has to look away, has to close his eyes against the sting he can’t acknowledge. Katsuro doesn’t let him move and Khan takes a breath, swallowing hard.

“You don’t even sound like yourself,” Katsuro says, gentle but implacable. “The British accent suits you, I admit, but…this is not you, Khan.”

“It is now,” Khan says hoarsely.

“Yes, it is,” Katsuro says, and for some reason *that* is the final straw. To hear his brother say that, for Katsuro to acknowledge that the Khan who ruled India, who loved Rani, is gone—Khan shudders, the tears hot on his cheeks and his body shaking with the force of his grief, finally forced into the open.

He comes back to himself slowly, breathing hard, feeling exhausted as though he just ran a marathon. It doesn’t surprise him to find himself in the center of a circle of his siblings, each of them touching him somehow. Katsuro still holds one hand, Konstantin a hand on his back, Bishop on his knee, and Ekaterina rests her hand against the back of his neck.

“Welcome back,” Katsuro says quietly.

Khan takes a breath, lets it out slowly. He feels…empty. Drained. And yet, more at peace than he has been in weeks.

Cat squeezes the back of his neck, massaging the muscles. “That was overdue,” she says matter-of-factly. “Thank you, Katsuro.”
“I thought it better to force now rather than have Matthew trigger an explosion,” Katsuro says and Khan has to laugh.

“Probably for the best,” he admits. He loves Matthew, of course he does, but Matthew can be unceasingly irritating, and will not stop pushing if he thinks something wrong.

“Matthew at the best of times is not subtle,” Cat says. “Matthew just out of cryosleep and on a stimulant Bishop concocted… I rather fear for Jill.”

“Oh, she will be fine,” Khan says, meaning it. “How is the mission going?”

“No major problems,” Cat says. “One minor one I did not fully get explained, but which was resolved. If my timing is correct, they should be about to revive Matthew and Alona.”

“Then let us go inside,” Khan says. “I would know how that goes.”

“I would recommend you wash your face,” Ekaterina says briskly, standing up and giving him a hand up. Khan ignores the comment, but touches his cheek as they go inside and admits she has a point.

“Cryotube time,” Magpie says when the five of them enter the living room. “Everything went fine until then, so we’re not expecting any crises. She’s got seven minutes left.”

Andy looks at Khan but doesn’t ask and Khan says nothing as he goes upstairs to wash his face and regain a measure of his composure. He spends a couple minutes in the bathroom with his eyes closed, just allowing himself to breathe and acknowledge what happened.

The scar that tore open doesn’t hurt now, not as it did, but the new tissue is still tender and he knows himself to be not fully healed. Still, that weak spot no longer comes dangerously close to giving way and he thinks himself capable of pushing back should Matthew press it.

He goes back downstairs just in time to hear Magpie say “Hold. Fast. Unexpected patrol two corridors to your right, not sure which way they’re going to turn. Okay. They’re—okay. Looks like they’re going toward the torpedo bays, but—hold for another thirty seconds. I want to make sure you’re clear.”

“Officer incoming,” Andy reports a moment later without inflection. “High-ranking Starfleet credentials just swiped in at the building entrance. Heading directly for the lift, so—okay, let’s move.”

Magpie and Andy guide Jill—and, Khan presumes, Matthew and Alona—out of the building, but it requires four more points of waiting and two points at which they have to double back to avoid being seen. Something has building security on high alert, and Andy reports two more credentials scanned into the building.

“We’re clear,” Jill says finally. “We’re clear but I’d rather not beam us back to the house until we’re a little further away from this building. Too much going on and transporter signals would send up the wrong kind of noise.”

“Agreed,” Magpie says. “Make a heat run of it.”

“That’s the plan,” Jill says. “See you in a bit.”

She cuts the transmission and Khan grimaces. “What is going on there?” he asks.
“I don’t know,” Andy says. “If I had to guess—but honestly I’d rather Jake offered his opinion, because to me it could be anything.”

“Call him,” Ekaterina says.

Khan takes his link out and calls Jake. “Yeah,” Jake says a moment later. “Hang on.” Khan hears two clicks and a beep. “Okay. Talk to me, what do you need?”

“An opinion on something,” Khan says. “The mission tonight was successful, but there were some surprises. It looks as though three high-ranking officers entered unexpectedly and there were two extra security patrols, but they focused on the area around the torpedo construction. What do you know?”

“Um,” Jake says. “Top of my head, it sounds like an unexpected inspection. Paranoid part of my brain says maybe they got tipped off something was going on, but I’m less sure it has to do with us, since they didn’t go near the cryotubes. They didn’t, right?”

“Negative,” Magpie says. “Patrols back on regular schedules, and one set of the credentials has left the building.”

“Then yeah, my guess is it was an unexpected inspection, maybe they think the torpedoes are not being built to spec or something,” Jake says. “Or they wanted visual proof of something. Pull up the security camera feeds, see what you find out.”

“Yeah, was planning on it but not until everyone was out of the building,” Magpie says. “If I do it now and they find me, we’re fucked.”

“Well, yeah,” Jake says. “Keep me posted. Also, Ekaterina, Eema says she will consider giving you the recipe for her apple cake someday. Which probably means you’re never going to get it, but it’s not a direct no.”

“I see,” Cat says. “Spasiba.”

“I tried,” Jake says. “Jill on her way back?”

“She is,” Khan says. “Do you want to come here and meet Matthew and Alona?”

“Yes, sure,” Jake says. “Be there in ten.” He hangs up and Khan does the same.

“One more set of credentials left the building, one still in,” Andy reports. “Patrols back to normal, and—huh, Magpie, did you catch that?”

“I did,” Magpie says slowly. “I’m not sure what it is, but I caught it.”

“I see,” Andy says. “A blip in the system,” Andy says. “Not one we put there. Like the whole thing shut down and reset itself. And by system, I mean the entire security and monitoring framework at that facility.”

“It’s consuming more power, too,” Magpie says, typing quickly. “A third again as much. They—son of a bitch, they found the damn clue I left them! About fucking time!”

“What does this mean?” Ekaterina asks impatiently.

“I left them a tail the first mission we ran, a red herring to indicate someone had hacked into the system, made it look like it came from a satellite off-planet,” Magpie says. “I wanted to see how
good they were at tracking things down, and whether or not we had cause to be worried. They never caught it. Now it looks like someone finally clued in. When they reset the system, they put in a tracker, they’re trying to find any other signals and trace that one back to its source. They shouldn’t be able to trace it back because it doesn’t exist anymore, but if they do it’ll dead-end at a satellite just out of Moon orbit.”

“Will they find you now?” Khan asks.

“That’s the beauty of this style of tracker,” Magpie says, laughing. “Now that—oh, man, I am so fucking good, babies. When the system reset itself, it kicked out all connections it couldn’t identify, but it left me passively logged in because I’d previously convinced it I was a known connection. So now any time I log in, it will authorize me and no one will notice a goddamned thing. I rule!” She shoots both arms up over her head.

“Yes, you’re so awesome, please don’t forget who built you the damn machine to go do those things,” Andy says, sticking out her tongue at Magpie.

“We rule together,” Magpie says. “Shit, I am so giddy right now. Let me see what else I can get this lovely network to do for me. Come talk to me, baby.” She lapses into silence, typing furiously. “Okay, hm, that’s…I can turn that off?”

“Turn what off?” Khan asks.

“They added auditory monitoring to the cameras and infrared,” Magpie says, distracted. “Give me a minute.”

Khan tells himself at least Jill and his brother and sister are out of the building and sets himself to wait, but in Magpie’s favor not two minutes later she looks up. “Okay, so they added some new monitoring systems,” she says, rolling her head around on her neck. “Auditory monitoring and it looks like they’re setting up pressure sensors in some sections. Which isn’t good for us—but the good news is that, as Andy can tell you, pressure sensors take time to set up and calibrate correctly, and so far the ones I’ve seen aren’t fully calibrated yet and are only in the immediate hallway around the torpedo construction, where we don’t need to go. So that one’s not a worry. The auditory monitoring is more of a problem, because that ties into the overall security network of the building and we don’t have a shield that blocks it, nor do we have time to construct one unless Andy knows something I don’t.”

Andy shakes his head. “No, and that’s a lot harder than visual and heat sensors. In order to block that kind of monitoring I’d essentially be leaving a negative space in the system, which could be found pretty easily. Can you shut it off?”

“I can,” Magpie says carefully. “So, basically we have a couple options here. I can turn off that monitoring for the whole building, but unless we’ve got a way to send a message with Starfleet credentials saying that system’s been shut down, it’s going to raise alarms. I can turn it off section by section, and if we’re fast enough at getting through those sections by the time it would raise alarms we’d be gone. Either way is a risk, and I need more time before I can safely say I can do either, to be honest. I can be fairly confident about it by tomorrow night, the last op, but we need to decide what we’re doing so I know what I’m doing.”

“Would it be plausible for a system so newly installed to be shut down?” Ekaterina asks.

“For calibration, yes,” Andy says. “Those types of monitoring systems can involve a lot of tweaking to get right, and we haven’t seen any kind of indication they’ve been doing that yet. I would think it’d be fairly reasonable for them to shut the system down overnight on a weekend to run some checks on it, and Magpie can probably come up with some sort of program for it to run
that would look good and not really do anything.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Magpie says. “I’m just not sure I can compose the right kind of message to building security to convince them of it happening.”

“I can do that,” Khan says simply. Forging a message like that is easy enough, and for that he has access to the correct security protocols.

“Then it sounds like we’re set,” Magpie says. “Cool. If you can send the message or set it to send first thing in the morning tomorrow, we should be fine. That’ll give me time to figure out what to make it do tomorrow night.”

“Is that enough time?” Bishop asks, frowning. “Do we need to postpone the last mission?”

“No,” Andy says. “No, and in fact we can’t. The longer we wait, the more time they have to calibrate the systems and set up things that will be harder for us to get around, like the pressure sensors. Honestly, tomorrow night might be the last chance we get.”

“Andy’s right,” Magpie confirms. “The longer they take to calibrate their own systems, the less chance I have of faking it.”

Bishop grimaces. “I like this not,” he says. “It seems too high a risk.”

“It’s not, really,” Magpie says, pushing her hair back as Jake materializes in the room. “It’s in some ways less of one than we had tonight. New systems are always buggy, and I can probably tweak some other stuff to make it look like the new stuff or the tracker is glitching. Shouldn’t be too big a deal and we can make it work. It’s different risks, but they’re not that high.”

“What new systems?” Jake asks.

Magpie fills him in briefly. “Sounds like something twisted their tails,” she says cheerfully.

“Sounds like they found your clue and freaked,” Andy says, tossing a stylus at Magpie.

“Which was the intent, so yeah, I’m pleased,” Magpie says, tossing it back.

“Just so long as they don’t find anything you don’t want them to find,” Jake says.

“They won’t,” Magpie says. “Not after the system reset.”

“Did it leave you connected?” Jake asks.

“It did,” Magpie says, grinning.

“Nice.” Jake grins back. “Nice work, bird.”

“What would have happened if the reset had not left you connected?” Konstantin asks.

“Um,” Magpie says. “I’d likely never have been able to get back in. They locked down the network pretty tight.”

“Is there a chance it will kick you out now?” Konstantin asks before Khan can.

Magpie shakes her head. “No. It reads me as a trusted connection, and it’ll let me get in any time I want. To be on the safe side I’m going to leave this machine logged in, but the network recognizes me now and considers me safe traffic. I’m disguising my source through a Starfleet router, so it
thinks I’m coming from a known entry point, and we’re clear. I actually might have more access to
the system now, since it’s reading all current connections as trusted and I don’t have to sweet-talk
it into cooperating with me. I’m going to play with it a bit overnight, see what I can do. They’ll
have turned down the monitoring on the system for the next six hours as it settles in, so anything I
can’t hide they’ll either miss or consider a system glitch.”

“That isn’t an excuse to be sloppy,” Andy says.

“Oh, fuck you,” Magpie says amiably. “I’m never sloppy in that aspect.”

Jake snickers, but says nothing.

The comm-link to Jill beeps then. “Hey,” Jill says through the speaker. “We’re maybe five minutes
out, we took the very scenic route that included two taxis and the Tube. Everything’s just fine and
we’re all getting along just fine.” She laughs. “Matthew says if he wasn’t so simultaneously wired
and exhausted we’d be getting along more than fine, to which I said I’ve already got the best of
you, sorry hon.”

Ekaterina laughs at that one and Khan smiles a bit. “He woke up well, I see,” Cat says.

“Oh, yeah,” Jill says, laughing again. “Anyway, we’ll be there in five. Someone please make sure
there’s a giant bottle of water for me?”

“On it,” Andy says, getting up.

“Spasiba. Catch you in a few.” Jill closes the connection.

“Seven of us,” Bishop says. “A tenth of us overall, but enough to make a difference.”

“Nine tomorrow,” Magpie says, glancing up briefly.

“We think,” Bishop says.

“I’m going with the odds,” Magpie says. “Our odds get better and worse every time we do this, but
given what happened tonight I’d say we have a better chance of getting out safely tomorrow than
we did tonight.”

“I didn’t think you gambled,” Jake says.

“Once in a while,” Magpie says. “I just don’t play cards with Jill. But I’m a hacker, I mean it’s all
about calculating the odds and making them work in my favor. It doesn’t happen often, but I’ve
turned down jobs because I didn’t think the risk was it.”

“You took down the firewall for Starfleet’s mission reports,” Jake says. “What the hell was more
difficult than that?”

“It wasn’t about the difficulty,” Magpie says. “There were two jobs I got offered, to basically hack
this one person’s security and expose his assets and his personal information to the world. I could
have done it, but the levels of security he had on his stuff would have torched my systems if I’d
screwed up, and I didn’t judge the payoff worth that level of risk.”

“Who was he?” Jake asks.

Magpie shakes her head. “Client privacy.”

Jake actually pouts, but Magpie refuses to say anything and a moment later the door opens,
admitting two short brunettes and one tall redhead. “And we’re here,” Jill says, pulling the pin out of her braid and letting it tumble down her back. “Someone make introductions while I go drink a liter of water.”

Khan moves to follow her into the kitchen but before he can, Alona runs for him. “Hello, my favorite oldest brother,” she says, slamming into him and hugging him hard. “God, this is going to be fun. I’m also insanely wired—what the fuck did Bishop put in that stimulant? And I’m going to crash in a bit, I can feel it, but hello twenty-third century and covert ops and all sorts of things I look forward to learning about. I like your Jill, brother, she’s got spunk.”

“I like your Jill, too,” Matthew says, moving in for his own hug when Alona lets go. “She’s cute.”

“She’s mine,” Khan says briefly in Irish, even though he hugs Matthew back. Matthew laughs and squeezes the back of Khan’s neck briefly.

“So that’s how it is, aye, I see,” he says. “Anyway, yes, we’re wired and exhausted and apparently there’s a ton to learn and I’m going to love computers in this time, yeah? Introduce me to the tech geniuses?”

“Alona, Matthew,” Khan says when Matthew lets him go. “This is Magpie, our software genius, and Andy, our hardware expert. Also here we have Jake, who is an intelligence operative with Starfleet.”

“Hey,” Jake says.

“Hello, hello, and—” Matthew stops, looking at Andy. “Hello,” he says, more carefully than before. “Hi.”

Khan tenses; Matthew at the best of times can be unpredictable and tactless, and this...

“Hi,” Andy says, a little cautiously, tucking her hair back behind her ear. “I’m—I’m Andy.” Slowly, she extends a hand, and Matthew takes it, not letting go for a moment.

“You—I’ve seen your face before,” Matthew says, sounding about as nonplussed as he ever has. “I’m not—fuck me, I can’t remember where, or when, but I’ve seen you before.”

“How is that possible?” Alona asks. “It’s not possible. You’re hallucinating.”

Khan, however, looks at Cat, who raises her eyebrows. “Focus, Matthew,” Cat says. “When did you see Andy’s face?”

Matthew reluctantly lets go of Andy’s hand and rubs the bridge of his nose, muttering a bunch of Irish Khan doesn’t quite catch to translate. “It was…oh, Christ, I can’t place it,” he says, finally moving to sit down on the couch, rubbing his face again. “It—wait. I…I remember.” He looks up then, at Khan, and bites his lip. “It was the night after Rani’s funeral,” he says quietly in Hindi. “We were still there, Alona and me, and I can’t remember if it was a dream or if it was someone I’d seen out of the corner of my eye, but I remember it so damned clearly. The eyes, the hair, the—everything.” He gestures toward Andy. “Clear as Andy is now.”

He doesn’t use a pronoun, Khan notes, which both doesn’t surprise him and pleases him. “I can’t remember the context entirely, but you know me, Khan, I don’t forget faces. I just never saw that one again, until hundreds of years later.” He blows out a breath. “So what the fuck is going on?”

“The very abbreviated version,” Khan says, reverting to English. “Andy is a descendant of Rani’s brother Hitesh, and we think there is some…supernatural or psychic activity going on that is
causing most of us to have similar dreams.”

“We think, but have not been able to prove in any real quantifiable fashion, that Rani’s spirit may still be...out there somewhere,” Konstantin says, spreading a hand. “And that she may be trying to influence things from wherever she is.”

Silence follows that, until Alona whistles and sits down next to Matthew. “So we’re awake in the twenty-third century, there’s an intergalactic war brewing we need to stop, most of our family is still in cryosleep and in danger of being killed as popsicles, we’re working against the established government and its military, and we’ve got ghosts and weird dreams to deal with?”

“That about sums it up,” Jill says, coming back into the room. “Still think it’s going to be fun?”

“I think this is going to be brilliant,” Alona says, laughing. “But I always did like the dirty work.”

“Which is good, as we will have need of some,” Ekaterina says. “Marcus, the admiral in charge of the military. Did Jill tell you about him?”

“Only that we don’t like him,” Alona says.

“Think Nikolai,” Cat says.

Alona makes a face. “How soon can we kill him?”

“Not as soon as I would like, and it is not a we,” Khan says. “I will not share the kill.”

“Right,” Matthew says slowly. “Okay, so, lots of information we need to know there, but I’ll save my questions for a time when I feel less like my brain’s on amphetamines and out of my control.”

“Does that ever happen?” Alona asks.

“Rarely, but it’s possible,” Matthew says. “Christ, Bishop, what did you put in this thing?”

“A few different things,” Bishop says, crossing to Matthew and leaning down to hug him, then Alona. “Believe me, it was better than the way I awoke.”

“You mean didn’t,” Jill says. “Matthew, Bishop barely came back to consciousness, so Katsuro and I had to carry him out of the building.”

“Well, shit,” Matthew says. “Glad it wasn’t me, Bishop’s fucking heavy.”

“Glad it wasn’t me,” Alona says, elbowing Matthew. “You’re fucking tall.”

“No, you’re just short,” Matthew says, poking her back. “Although you’re taller than Jill, so congratulations, you’re not the shortest woman in the room anymore.”

“A victory I struggled for mightily,” Alona says around a yawn. “Okay, I think I’m hitting the wall here. Is there a bedroom for me? Or a bathroom where I can take a shower?”

“There is,” Jill says. “If you and Matthew want to follow me upstairs I’ll show you. You’re sharing a room because we’re tight on space, and your bath is shared with Katsuro and Bishop.”

“Ugh,” Alona complains. “Three hundred years and I still have to share with this arse?”

“Be nice, I could have dropped you out the window and I didn’t,” Matthew complains back.
“You two can argue it with Anandi and Maeve tomorrow,” Konstantin says. “But unfortunately no one else in the house is giving up a roommate to share with one of you.”

“Of course not,” Alona says. “We’re surrounded by happy couples, or at least couples.”

“We’re not,” Andy and Magpie say together. “I mean, yeah, we’re sharing a room, but we’re not actually a couple,” Magpie continues, sounding like she has had to give this explanation many times. “And Jake is our lone wolf but he’s not staying here.”

“Most of us won’t be staying here within a week,” Jill says, drifting over to Khan’s side. He rests a hand on her back, a wing folding around her, and she leans into him. “We finally hashed out the relocation plan, but it’s not starting until at least Wednesday and probably more like Thursday.”

“Why are we relocating?” Matthew asks.

“We’re not convinced the house is safe much longer, if it even is now,” Jill says, pulling away from Khan slightly to look at him. “Khan and I have flats in London that we have to keep, at least I do for now. Jake has his own space, Andy and Magpie have safe spaces, but the rest of you are being divided between two sets of Jake’s cousins—it’s a long story but we’ll get into that tomorrow—and two safe houses Jake has access to, one in Spain and one in Japan.”

“Where are the cousins?” Alona asks.

“One set is in Russia, in Moscow,” Jill says. “The other set is in France at the moment. Obviously Cat and Konstantin are going to Russia, but we haven’t figured out where everyone else is going yet. Katsuro and Bishop have to decide whether they want to go to France or Japan or whether they want to split up and go one to each with other people.”

“That, I think, is not optimal,” Bishop says.

“I didn’t think it would be,” Jill says. “We’ll sort it out before we disappear. Alona, Matthew, we’ve got some tech advances that will allow us to keep in contact and visit each other.”

“Teleportation,” Khan says briefly. “I improved on existing technology and built a portable transporter for every two people. The range is farther than the planet, and it takes approximately ten seconds to travel regardless of distance.”

“Damn, I love this century already,” Matthew says. “What happens if someone else gets their hands on one and is it traceable?”

“Nothing would happen, as each device is locked to biometrics—specifically, DNA,” Khan says. “And it is traceable but it requires a scanner set to a certain type of energy signature that is not usually used on planet. We think the risk acceptable, and have not encountered anyone who has discovered us so far.”

“How much energy does it use?” Matthew asks. “Does it need a recharge?”

“It recharges itself passively, and has enough charge for multiple uses at full power,” Khan says. “The depletion rate depends on the distance traveled and whether one or two people are using it, and I think it likely to create one that never needs recharging once we get a few more people to look at it. But right now it will suffice for our needs.”

“What about weapons?” Alona asks. “How have those improved?”

Khan gives her a brief description of phasers and similar weapons. “Still, there is need for melee,
and Jake introduced me to members of an alien species that focus on weaponry,” he says. “They are constructing weapons for all of us, and I think you will be pleased with your staff.”

“When do I get it?” Alona asks immediately.

“A little over a week,” Khan says.

She sighs. “I’ll live. I guess.” The last comes out around another yawn. “Right now, though, I think I’ll sleep. Someone point me to the bedroom.”

“Follow me,” Jill says, pulling away from Khan. “Matthew, you too?”

“Aye,” Matthew says, rubbing his eyes. “Is this fatigue from the stimulant wearing off or is it a post-waking up thing?”

“Both,” Bishop says. “You and Alona may need most of tomorrow to rest, but after that you should be back to normal.”

“I really hope so,” Matthew says, yawning.

The two of them follow Jill upstairs. “So,” Cat says after a moment. “The day after Rani’s funeral.”

“It could be nothing,” Andy says quietly.

“Do you really think that?” Cat asks.

Andy sighs and shakes his head. “No, I don’t.”

“But why Matthew?” Konstantin asks. “He was not especially close to Rani.”

“I don’t know,” Khan says, wishing he had answers, or at least fewer questions. “Let us…let us see if anyone dreams tonight.”

He goes up to bed shortly after, not all that tired but wanting some space. When he walks into the bedroom Jill’s not there but he hears running water. He undresses while he waits for her and a moment later she comes into the bedroom dressed in a camisole and panties, her hair tumbling down her back. Khan frowns, seeing a shadow where there shouldn’t be one; he moves closer and Jill sighs, lifting her cami to let him see the bruise spreading over her ribs. “It’s nothing,” she says, even though he sees the shades of blue and purple, fading into sickly brown. “It’s just a bruise.”

“How did you get it?” Khan asks, his hand hovering over the bruise but not quite touching it.

“Alona punched first, opened her eyes second,” Jill says. “She apologized once she realized the situation.”

Khan grimaces. “That…does not surprise me, but I apologize on her behalf,” he says.

“It’s really okay,” Jill says, laying her palm against his cheek. “It’s just a bruise, she didn’t crack a rib or anything. I can live with it.”

“Will it bother you tomorrow night?” Khan asks.

“Maybe a little,” Jill says. “I do have a medkit that can help it—it won’t fully heal the bruise, but it’ll at least make it a few levels less severe. I’ll deal with that tomorrow, because it hurts to do and I’m not in the mood for pain tonight.”
Khan smiles a little at that, turning his head to kiss her palm. “Your turn,” Jill says. “What happened tonight? You look—you look different than when I left.”

“Different how?” Khan asks.

Jill tilts her head to the side, considering it. “Less tense,” she says. “You’re not *relaxed*, but you’re not—you don’t look as brittle.”

Her perceptiveness doesn’t surprise him but it does make his chest tight for a moment. “Katsuro insisted on having a conversation,” Khan says, drawing Jill over to the bed and sitting down with her. “One I—I needed to have, but did not want to have.”

“I hate those,” Jill says, resting her hand on his thigh. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

He doesn’t, but he nods anyway. But he can’t find the words; he doesn’t know where to start, what to say. “Marcus wanted to break me,” he says finally, looking at Jill’s hand, at his own. “He didn’t. But he…I am not the same man I was when I went into cryosleep, not even the same as when I first awoke. Katsuro forced me to admit that to myself.”

He doesn’t know what he expects from Jill, but the soft, almost bitter laugh he gets surprises him. “You and me,” Jill says, looking at him. “We’re so fucked up, aren’t we? I thought—when I first met you, I thought you were so sad, so lonely, and I was right. I didn’t realize until later that you’re about as broken as I am. In different ways, but…we’re just fucked up, Khan, and sometimes I wonder which of us is worse off.”

“I do not know,” Khan says softly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jill says. She leans her head against his shoulder. “It doesn’t matter. I love you in spite of it, or maybe because of it. I don’t know which, and that doesn’t matter either. Neither one of us is about to break into pieces, and that’s what counts right now. We’ve got each other, for now, and we may be fucked up but at least we’re not alone.”

“No,” Khan says, putting an arm and a wing around her. “That we are not, not anymore.”

“We should sleep,” Jill says after a moment.

“Are you tired?” Khan asks.

“A little,” she admits. “Not hugely, but I think if I can relax and zone out I’ll sleep soon.”

“Then let us go to bed,” Khan says. He kisses her hair, holding her close a few more moments, before he lets go. Jill crawls under the covers and curls against Khan’s chest once he settles, her breath soft against his skin.

Khan closes his eyes, but can’t settle enough to sleep. What does it mean, that Matthew saw Andy hundreds of years ago? What does any of it mean?

He sighs, gently stroking Jill’s hair. “I love you,” he says softly, in Hindi. She may not believe him, she may not want the words, but he needs to say them, needs to tell her the truth even if she can’t understand it.

She doesn’t answer him, but Khan thinks her mostly asleep. Probably for the best.
Hello, Alona and Matthew! I hope you like them. I do.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Marcus has a lot to answer for.

Chapter Notes

For some reason this chapter started pretty easily but refused to finish. There were a lot of glares and muttered curses toward this file!

Something that I find kind of amusing, or at least interesting: I've now been writing this story for a longer period of time than it took me to write (and finish) Flying Free, and the posted arc of this story is longer than the complete story of FF. And I'm still not sure where in the story I am right now! I know where I'm going, but I can honestly say I'm not sure how long it's going to take to get there. So for those of you who are still reading along, who are on this journey with me--thank you, so very much. I wouldn't be doing this without you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To no one’s surprise, Alona and Matthew spend most of the day asleep. Bishop theorizes that the crash from the stimulant wearing off exacerbated the fatigue from revival; it seems plausible enough to Khan. He and his siblings do take turns checking in on them, just to make sure they haven’t woken or need anything. At one point Alona opens her eyes blearily and mumbles something in Irish Khan can’t understand, but she closes her eyes and immediately falls back asleep so he figures it can’t be that important.

Khan spends the day working on the personal shield with Katsuro; they finish the prototype, but when they test it they immediately find two major problems and three minor ones. With Andy’s assistance, they fix the first major problem and two minor ones, but the second major problem has both Khan and Katsuro grimacing. “The theory is sound,” Khan says in frustration. “Could the parts be defective?”

“I think not,” Katsuro says. He frowns, staring at the device. “If—could we modify the power level? Perhaps it is using too much?”

“If we throttle its usage, you think it would stabilize?” Khan asks. His wings ruffle, reminding him he has been hunched over the table for too long. “It is possible, I suppose. I do not see why that would help, but at this point I am open to anything.”

“Now that’s a killer line to walk in on,” Matthew says sleepily, coming into the kitchen. “Finally had to get up to take a piss, decided I wanted to try this conscious thing for a bit. Where’s everyone else?”

“Cat and Konstantin went out,” Khan says. “Reconnaissance for an upcoming mission. Bishop did the same. Jake had other matters to attend to, Magpie is taking a nap before tonight’s mission and
Andy is meditating outside. Jill went for a run.”

“Andy is…” Matthew rubs his eyes and drops into a seat at the table. “So, because I’d rather not fuck this up, is Andy male or female and what pronouns do I use?”

“Andy is non-binary,” Khan says. “You may use whichever pronouns you want, we generally alternate.”

“Yeah, okay, I can do that,” Matthew says. “And he’s Rani’s many-greats nephew?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “We…” He tells Matthew the story, how they think Rani saved Andy’s life.

“Okay, that’s…crazy,” Matthew says around a yawn. “I don’t…Christ, Khan, that implies Rani’s ghost knew all of what was going to happen.”

“We know,” Khan says. “But between that, and the dreams—“

“What dreams? You mentioned something about them but I don’t know what you meant,” Matthew says. “Also, is there coffee in this place?”

“Sit, I will make it,” Katsuro says, getting up.

“Arigato,” Matthew says. “So about the dreams?”

Khan fills him in, and explains about Marika and her visions. “Did I wake up in the twenty-third century or in an alternate universe somewhere?” Matthew says when he finishes. “Because this stuff seems too fantastical to be real in the universe as I understood it.”

“It does, rather,” Khan says as Katsuro sets a mug in front of Matthew. “But we have few other explanations.”

“We have no other explanations,” Katsuro says.

“True,” Khan admits.

“Okay, on a more material note,” Matthew says, taking a sip of coffee. “Tell me more about the current universe.”

“Technologically advanced, socially…in theory they are civilized, in reality I think few things have changed substantially since our time,” Khan says.

“Tell me more about the technology level,” Matthew says.

While Khan does, Andy comes back into the kitchen, hair tousled and cheeks pink from the brisk wind. She goes to make herself a cup of tea, and Matthew looks at her for a long moment but doesn’t say anything or interrupt Khan.

“Andy would actually be the best one to tell you about hardware,” Khan says, unsure if he is playing matchmaker or causing trouble where he shouldn’t. “He is a genius where it is concerned.”

“I’m not, not really,” Andy says, taking a sip of tea.

“You are,” Khan says. “And I don’t use that word lightly.”

Andy flushes a bit and looks down. “Thank you,” he says softly. “Anyway, yeah, if you’ve got questions I can probably answer them.”
“I’ve a ton of questions but some of them won’t coalesce properly,” Matthew says, rubbing his eyes again. “I think I need to wake up a bit more before I can be properly inquisitive.”

“Consider yourself lucky,” Khan tells Andy. “When Matthew starts asking questions, he only stops when forcibly made to.”

“I resemble that remark,” Matthew says, laughing. “Andy, how did you get into this anyway? By this I mean building hardware, although how you got into this mess is also curious.”

“They’re related,” Andy says. “I met Magpie when I was living on the streets. I’d always had a fascination with computer hardware and electronics, but on the streets I didn’t get a lot of access to learn anything, and then I got addicted to coke and stopped caring. When I was getting clean, I started focusing on hardware again because it gave me something to do that wasn’t getting high. Magpie and I started offering our services rather than our bodies, and I met Jill through Magpie on a job—Jill used to be our thief when we needed to steal things. Jill saved my life, and she’s my family, and so when she got herself into this tangle I had to help.”

“How did Jill save your life?” Matthew asks quietly.

“I fell off the wagon,” Andy says, studying her mug. “I might not have gotten back on if she hadn’t been there to help me through it, if she hadn’t promised me I could do this again, I could stay clean and be more than a junkie.”

Matthew, to Khan’s mild surprise, doesn’t ask how Andy ended up on the streets. “Anyway,” Andy says abruptly. “You said—you saw me. After…” He trails off, looking at Khan, then at Matthew.

“I did,” Matthew says. “I think—“ He looks up, trying to remember. “Alona and I were in the courtyard,” he says slowly. “It was like two in the morning, and no one else was around, and we were out there talking because neither of us wanted to sleep. And I remember seeing a figure, a shadow really, which was weird because where we’d been sitting there was no way into the courtyard that didn’t go past us or which we wouldn’t have seen. But we hadn’t heard or seen anything. I went over to the figure, and she—you—turned, and I saw your face, and then you were gone. At the time I blamed it on lack of sleep and grief and the hour.”

“The figure didn’t say anything?” Andy asks.

Matthew shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know what that’s all about,” Andy admits.

“Neither do I,” Matthew says. “But I don’t know what a lot of this is about, I’ve been awake in this time less than twenty-four hours.” He takes a drink of coffee. “What I do know is that our current circumstances are weird and surreal, but normalcy is overrated.”

“How would you know what normalcy is like?” Andy asks lightly.

Matthew laughs. “Good point. I’ve heard stories?”

“No one in this house is normal,” Andy says. “And I’m including the people staying here who aren’t here at the moment.”

“Jill isn’t normal?” Matthew asks.

“Jill is about as far from normal as the Klingon homeworld is from Earth,” Andy says.
“Klingons? Wait, Jill mentioned this. Alien species we’re trying to prevent a war with,” Matthew says, catching himself quickly. “How far is their planet?”

“Multiple light-years,” Khan says.

“Right,” Matthew says. “So tell me more about her.”

“What do you want to know?” Andy asks.

Matthew shrugs. “General background? How she met my brother and started this whole ball rolling?”

“She’s American, from New York,” Andy says. “Trained as a gymnast, made it to the Olympics and medaled. Spent a couple years stealing things, then went to Starfleet Academy. She started out as a pilot, then worked her way up through the command ranks until she made it to first officer on a starship. As for how she met uncle, that’s his story.”

Matthew looks at Khan expectantly. “She…she is very perceptive,” Khan says, falling into Hindi without thinking about it. “I was walking down the street, and she saw me, and she realized something was not right. If you ask her, she says I looked…lonely, and sad. So she contrived to trip into me, and then she contrived to have me have dinner with her. I agreed to see her again, because—I honestly, she reminded me of Alona, and Cat, and I was…weary. The second night, she asked me to tell her two truths and a lie. She caught the lie, and she pushed me to tell her the truth. I did, and…and she offered me her help.”

“She does remind me of them,” Matthew says in the same language. “And there’s more to this story you’re not telling me, Khan. Why were you so sad? What happened to you?”

Khan shakes his head. “Not now.”

Matthew glares at him but—surprisingly—doesn’t push. Khan can only presume he’s more tired than he wants to admit.

The front door opens and Khan looks over to see Jill coming in, skin damp and wispy curls framing her face where they escaped from her ponytail. “It is lovely out,” she says, coming into the kitchen. “Cool and windy, great weather for a run. What’s up with the coffee klatch?”

“Just talking about nothing,” Andy says. “Do you want coffee?”

“No, I want water and then I want a shower,” Jill says, moving to get herself a bottle of water. “Hi, Matthew, welcome to the land of the conscious.”

“Barely, but aye, thank you,” Matthew says. “I’ll likely go fall over again in a bit.”

“Probably a good idea,” Jill says. She twists the cap off her bottle and drinks down about half of it before pausing to breathe. “Where’s the bird?”

“Sleeping,” Andy says. “She was up most of the night playing with the security systems, she wanted to get in a few hours before tonight’s op.”

“Good,” Jill says. “She’s okay with what we need to do?”

Andy nods. “Uncle sent the message, so they’re expecting the auditory system to go down half an hour before you’re due to get into the building, and Magpie thinks she can cause a few glitches while you’re in the building that should make getting around a bit easier.”
“So long as we don’t have another surprise inspection we should be good, then,” Jill says.

“Is that likely? Another one so soon?” Andy asks.

“I don’t think so,” Jill says. “They’ll probably hold off on another inspection until they either get something in the security system they need to look at or until brass demands it for some reason.”

“Then we should make sure we do not give them anything to look at,” Katsuro says.

“That is the goal, yes,” Jill says, laughing. “Okay. I’m for a shower and then I think a brief nap. Wake me about an hour and a half before I need to leave?”

“I will,” Khan says. He holds out a hand, though, and she smiles, coming to him and taking it. Khan slides his hand up her arm to the back of her neck, tugging her down into a kiss. He doesn’t let her up for a long moment, and when he finally releases her he sees color in her cheeks and she falls into his lap rather than pull away.

“Or, you know, I could just stay here for a bit.” Jill says, tucking her head against his shoulder. “So long as you don’t mind me being a bit sweaty.”

“I don’t,” Khan says, resting a hand on her thigh.

“Making a point, brother?” Matthew asks in Hindi.

“What point would that be?” Khan asks in the same language.

“If you were trying to say mine any more clearly you’d have pissed on her,” Matthew says.

Khan grimaces at the image, but privately admits Matthew may have a point. Possessiveness coils in his stomach when he looks at Jill and he doesn’t entirely understand why; she hasn’t threatened to leave him, or given him any indication she wants to. Far from it. But—

But Matthew is here now, he thinks, not liking the realization but honest enough to make it. Matthew, who unlike his other brothers is not mated; who is attractive and interested in women; who would clearly do more than flirt with Jill if he could.

“I get it,” Matthew says, sticking to Hindi. “Khan, I’m not a threat to you or her. You know that. She’s yours, brother, and more than that, she loves you more than anything. She loves you about as much as Cat loves Konstantin. Relax.”

Khan takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “Pax,” he says, an admission and apology in one.

“Pax,” Matthew says, smiling a little.

Jill looks between them curiously but shrugs and lays her head down on Khan’s shoulder again. He catches the scent of sandalwood, stronger now from her body heat, and the sharp tang of sweat, not unpleasant.

“Matthew,” Katsuro says. “Are you awake enough for a conversation?”

“Depends on the subject matter,” Matthew says. “What are we discussing?”

“Why Bishop, Ekaterina, and Konstantin are out performing reconnaissance, and how we will need your assistance once you are recovered,” Katsuro says. He looks at Khan. “I thought perhaps it would be better if I told him.”
“Do you really think me that fragile?” Khan asks quietly in Japanese.

“Better for him, Khan,” Katsuro says. “He isn’t fully recovered from cryosleep yet and the last thing this house needs is the two of you in an altercation.”

“Hey,” Matthew protests. “I can understand you, you know.”

“We know,” Katsuro says, standing up. “Come. The porch is a good place to talk.”

Matthew looks at Khan curiously, but pushes to his feet with a groan and follows Katsuro out of the room.

“Only one more mission, and then you can stop telling the story,” Jill says softly in Russian. “At least for now.”

“Yes,” Khan says, not sure how he feels about it.

“Tonight we’re getting Anandi and Maeve, aren’t we?” Andy asks in English.

“That’s the plan,” Jill says.

“What will they be studying once we get them back?” Andy asks.

Not quite the change of subject she hoped for, Khan thinks wryly. “Anandi studied biochemistry, and Maeve medicine,” he says. “I think—” He stops for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “The… tests run on me,” he says. “The scientists at section 31 collected a large amount of data. There has to have been some reason for it, some goal they were trying to accomplish. I would like to know what that was, or is, and what data they still need. I know that some of what they did to me was at Marcus’s instruction, but beyond that, there was a purpose, and I want to know what it was.”

“So Anandi, Bishop, and Maeve will be working on that,” Jill says. “Yes?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “At least until we turn our attention to the Klingons and preventing that war.” He doesn’t mention Jill’s idea, not knowing whether or not she’s told Andy about it.

“That’ll require all our brainpower and then some,” Andy says. “I’m not a tactician or a diplomat, I’ve got no ideas.”

“You play chess, though,” Jill says. “Which is all tactics.”

“Yeah, but chess doesn’t have millions or billions of lives at stake,” Andy says. “And it doesn’t involve situations where my opponent can cut off my head with a bat’leth.”

“I…I may have an idea about avoiding that,” Jill says hesitantly. “But I’m not quite ready to explain it yet.”

Andy’s eyebrows go up, but he doesn’t ask. “Waiting for someone else to poke holes in it?” he asks.

“Kind of,” Jill says. “Also waiting for us to have all our people together and up to speed on current events, and if anyone else comes up with a better idea.”

“Without knowing what yours is there’s no way to judge that,” Andy points out.

“Well, then let’s say I’m also waiting to see if anyone else comes up with another idea period,” Jill says.
“Okay, that’s fair,” Andy says. “You’re not going to get one from me. I know very little about Klingons period.”

“Yeah, it’s not like we have classes on it or anything,” Jill says. “Well, no, that depends. Starfleet Academy has a few different classes on alien species, and there is one on Klingons. It’s not much but it’s better than nothing.”

“Do they teach the language?” Andy asks.

Jill waves a hand back and forth. “They teach the basics of it—the written alphabet, and how to recognize it, and a few important phrases, but that’s about it. I think there’s an advanced language class available for comms officers, but I’m not completely certain.”

Andy looks at Khan. “I forget, do you speak Klingon?”

“I do,” Khan says. “Marcus was insistent I learn. I intend to teach my siblings, but we have little time.”

“Fortunately we learn fast,” Alona says, walking into the kitchen. Her hair looks like she just rolled out of bed, and she yawns as she speaks. “What are we learning this time, though?” She takes a seat at the table, rubbing her eyes.


“Cool,” Alona says. “How are the Klingons in battle?”

“They are a warrior species,” Khan says. “Their biology is designed for redundancy, to allow them to keep fighting while injured. In a one-to-one battle against a regular human, they would have a very big advantage.”

“Are they as good as we are?” Alona asks. “And is there coffee?”

“I’ll make you some,” Jill says, getting up. “And from what I’ve seen I’d say no.”

“They are not,” Khan says, agreeing with Jill. “More of a challenge than a regular human, but in a one-on-one battle we would win. The odds vary by numbers, but still I think we are better.”

“Is there an alien species out there better than us?” Alona asks.

“No,” Khan says. “At least, not from my experience and knowledge. Jill?”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t know of one. The Femarans, from what Jake says, are really good in battle but I doubt they’re as good as you. Alona, what do you take in your coffee?”

“A lot of sugar,” Alona says. “Or whatever you guys use for sweetener in this time.”

“Sugar,” Jill says. “There are alternatives but I don’t like them.”

“I like you already,” Alona says, laughing.

Jill grins, pouring Alona’s coffee and spooning in sugar. “You should. I’m very likeable.”

“I know you’ve probably told this story a million times, but how did you end up in this?” Alona asks.

“I tripped into Khan on the street,” Jill says. She sets the mug in front of Alona and takes her seat
in Khan’s lap again. “He…something was wrong, and I wanted to know what it was, so I tripped into him, and it kind of went from there.”

“What was wrong?” Alona asks Khan.

“A multitude of things,” Khan says. “Katsuro can tell you the story.”

“Are there people we have to kill because of it?” Alona asks.

“Yes,” Khan says quietly.

“Right,” Alona says. “Okay, well, that’s good to know. I kind of was expecting that, given the circumstances under which Jill revived us and got us out of there, but…are we taking on all of whatever the planetary military is called?”

“Starfleet, and no,” Jill says. “We’re just taking on the admiral in charge of it.”

“Oh, is that all,” Alona says. She laughs and takes a sip of coffee. “Fuck, Khan, how do you end up in these situations?”

“I had very little control over how this one began,” Khan says mildly.

“Where did they even find our ship?” Alona asks. “And how?”

“That’s a really long story that I promise you’ll get told but can we wait until after we have Anandi and Maeve back so we only have to tell it once more?” Jill asks.

“Aye, that’s fine,” Alona says. “I’m tired anyway, I might not make sense of it the way I normally would.” She takes another drink of coffee. “Also, Khan, why the fuck do you sound like a bloody Brit?”

“Needs must,” Khan says.

“What needs?” Alona asks.

“Not standing out in the middle of London,” Khan says.

“So will you sound like yourself again once we get to leave England?” Alona asks.

“Perhaps,” Khan says. In truth, he’s not sure he wants to change his voice again. He’s gotten used to the way he sounds now, and going back to his old speech patterns, that accent—he’s not that person anymore.

“Why are we in London anyway?” Alona asks.

“It is where Starfleet’s black ops research is centered,” Khan says. “My cover identity is John Harrison, a Starfleet agent assigned to R&D.”

“Huh, okay,” Alona says. “Are they researching anything all that interesting?”

“A few things you might find so,” Khan says. “Some things that run counter to all of Starfleet’s regulations and ethical code.”

“The more humans change, the more they don’t,” Alona says. “Is Starfleet human only?”

“Human centric but not solely,” Khan says. “All alien species are welcome to apply.”
“Do other aliens have similar ethical codes?” Alona asks.

“It depends on the species,” Khan says. “The Federation, the governmental body for all member species, has a defined code of rights and ethics, and that is considered the baseline for any species who wants to join or who belongs. Species can include things that aren’t in the Federation’s code, but not take anything away from it.”

“The Vulcans, for example, are vegetarians,” Jill says.

“They already sound boring,” Alona says.

“They also live by logic and refuse to have emotion,” Jill says cheerfully.

“Oh, God, just shoot me,” Alona says. “I think I’d go nuts within an hour of meeting one.”

“You’re not the only one to have that reaction,” Jill says. “If that helps at all.”

“Maybe. I’d just love to know if there’s a species out there that likes to fight, fuck, and drink. Do we have one of those?” Alona asks.

“The Femarans like to fight and drink,” Jill says. “I’m not sure about the fucking, though. We can ask Jake.”

“Yes, the very cute Jake,” Alona says.

“Oh God,” Jill says. “He’s my brother, I don’t want to know what you’re thinking about him.”

“He’s my brother,” Alona says, pointing at Khan. “And you’re sitting in his lap. I think I’m already knowing more than I wanted to.”

“Sorry, but I’m not moving, he’s comfortable,” Jill says. “Besides, I’m just sitting here, it’s not like we’re fucking.”

“Thank God,” Andy mutters. “Can we move on from sex, please?”

“Are you asexual?” Alona asks Andy. “Sorry.”

“I’m celibate by choice,” Andy says. “But Khan’s my uncle, I really don’t need images like that in my head.”

“How did you even find that out? Did you have a family history or something that traced back to a guy with wings?” Alona asks.

“No, not quite,” Andy says. “We, um. The short version is—and you can disbelieve me—I think a ghost saved my life when I was on the streets, and there’s some…some evidence to indicate it was Rani. My biological father’s ancestry was Indian, so I got curious and traced it back and determined that if you go back far enough you get to Rani’s brother Hitesh.”

“What—how do you even determine that a ghost who saved your life was Khan’s wife?” Alona asks, fascinated.

“Because I never saw her face but I remember the scent of jasmine,” Andy says. “And—and she sang to me, and Khan says it’s an old Indian lullabye, one that was a favorite of Rani’s. She—the ghost—told me someone would need me someday, and I had no idea what she meant at the time, but looking back now…”
Alona whistles. “And you didn’t know Jill at the time,” she says. “Did you?”

Andy shakes his head. “I didn’t meet Jill until a year or so later, maybe a bit more.”

“So…” Alona takes a drink of coffee. “This is wild.”

“That’s one word for it,” Jill says.

“Surreal, that’s a good one,” Alona says. “Also, fuck, I’m tired. Where’s everyone else?”

Andy gives her the brief rundown. “Katsuro and Matthew are on the porch, if you want to talk to them,” she says.

“Do I?” Alona looks at Khan. “Is there a reason I need to talk to them, oldest brother?”

“More than one,” Khan says.

“And is there a reason I need to talk to Katsuro rather than you?” Alona asks.

“I think it would be…easier for you to hear some of this from Katsuro,” Khan says carefully.

“So,” Alona says. “How many people do we need to kill?” She asks this in Irish, not looking away from Khan.

“We are making a list,” he says. “Cat, Konstantin, Bishop, they are out getting information on some of our targets.”

“I see,” Alona says. She hides a yawn behind her hand and picks up her coffee, getting to her feet. “Then I’ll go talk to them before I fall asleep again.” She says this in English. “Thank you for the coffee, Jill.”

“You’re welcome,” Jill says.

Alona nods and leaves.

“Okay, I really do need a shower,” Jill says. “Andy, my love, will you forgive me if I abandon you?”

“I think I’ll manage to carry on,” Andy says solemnly. “Also, you need a shower.”

“Well, it’s not my fault, I did intend to go take one,” Jill says, poking Khan’s shoulder. “Are you coming up with me?”

“Yes,” Khan says even though he doesn’t really have a reason to.

“Okay, but I still want a shower and then a bit of a nap,” Jill says.

Khan nods, following Jill upstairs. She shuts the bedroom door behind them and turns to look at him. “So,” she says. “You honestly think you have anything to be worried about from Matthew? From me and Matthew?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, I do not. It…I know how he is. He enjoys flirting, especially with attractive women, and the lure of the forbidden holds a great deal of interest for him.”

“Yes, but you’re forgetting something,” Jill says, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re forgetting that it’s me, and I’m not interested in him. I might have been, in another time or place,
but I met you first, and I’m with you. I love you, idiot, and I’m not about to betray you by cheating on you with one of your siblings. Don’t get me wrong, I think the possessive thing can be hot under the right circumstances, but it’s really not necessary.”

“I know,” Khan says, holding out a hand for her. “I was not worried about you, kitten.”

Jill frowns at him, but sighs and crosses to him, taking his hand. “Besides, I think Matthew is more interested in Andy than me,” she says.

“You may be right about that,” Khan says, unsure how he feels about it.

“Does Matthew go both ways?” Jill asks.

“He has done,” Khan says. “Matthew—he enjoys beauty for its own sake, but he has always been more interested in people for their intelligence and personality than their gender or sex.”

“Andy has plenty of intelligence and personality,” Jill says. “And beauty. But she’s also got a lot of baggage around sex and I don’t want him hurt.”

“Neither do I,” Khan says. “She is my niece.”

“So…this could be good, because Magpie and I agree that it would be awesome if Andy did have a partner who could accept all of him,” Jill says slowly. “Or it could be really bad, if Matthew can’t do that.”

“I think it is perhaps too soon to think about this,” Khan says. “I am not saying it is not going to happen, but Matthew can barely keep his eyes open. Let us see what happens when he is less overtired and more coherent.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jill says. “That makes sense. And really, I need a shower.” She stretches up to kiss his cheek and pulls away to undress.

“Do you want company in the shower?” Khan asks, watching her strip out of her clothes.

“No, not this time,” Jill says as she pulls off her shirt. “However, I could use your help on something when I get out of the shower.”

“What do you need?” Khan asks.

“Help with the bruise,” Jill says, wincing a little as she touches it. “I’ll show you what to do but it’s easier if you do it rather than me.”

“Of course,” Khan says. He grimaces inwardly when he sees the bruise and wonders how close Alona came to breaking a rib. Fortunately, neither Anandi nor Maeve are likely to have the same instinct.

“It’s okay,” Jill says, wrapping herself in a towel. “It hurts, but it’s not that awful. Back in ten or so.” She slips out of the room.

While she showers, Khan catches up on his mail. He doesn’t see anything of importance one way or the other, and puts his tablet away when Jill comes back into the room wrapped in towels and trailing steam.

“Let me just do my girly stuff, then I’ll show you,” she says. Khan nods, watching her smooth moisturizer over her face and lotion over her arms and legs. She works product into her hair and
braids it back tightly, finally pulling on a pair of black panties before she gets a small gray bag from her nightstand. “Have you used a dermal regenerator before?” she asks, taking out a device about the size of Khan’s palm.

“No,” Khan says.

“It’s pretty easy,” Jill says. “Press the button here to turn it on, hold it about ten to twelve centimeters above my skin, and slowly circle it over the bruise for about two minutes. It’s supposed to beep when it’s done, but because it doesn’t work on me the way it works on most people that’s not accurate.”

Khan nods, taking it from her. “You said last night this would hurt,” he says.

“And it will,” Jill says matter-of-factly. “But I’ll live, and it’ll be better once it’s done.” She lies down on the bed, tucking her hands behind her head. “Thank you.”

As soon as he starts using the regenerator on her, Jill tenses, biting her lip. Khan doesn’t stop, even when he hears her whimper softly, but it’s difficult to ignore and two minutes never seemed like such an endless span of time.

When he finally puts the device down, Jill gulps in a breath, then another one, slowly relaxing. “Fuck, I hate those,” she says, sounding exhausted. “But it’s better already.”

Khan looks at the bruise; it’s not gone, but what was dark blue and purple has faded into lighter shades, mottled with yellow. “You should rest, pyara,” he says, putting the regenerator away in her bag.

“Yeah, I’m going to stay put for a while,” Jill says. “You don’t have to stay with me. I’m sure you have other things to deal with.”

“Are you sure you are all right?” Khan asks, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“I am,” she promises. “Just…that hurt, and now I’m going to relax and rest before tonight’s mission.”

He nods and leans down to kiss her forehead. “I will be back,” he says. “An hour and a half before you need to leave?”

“Sounds good,” Jill says, closing her eyes. “Love you.”

Khan brushes his fingers down the side of her face and gets up, leaving and shutting the door quietly behind him. He goes downstairs and looks out on the porch, but doesn’t see any of his siblings. In the kitchen he finds Andy with his head close to Katsuro’s, both bent over the personal shield. “It’s—I think I see the issue, but I’m not sure how to fix it,” Andy says.

“What is the issue?” Katsuro asks.

“The flow of power isn’t smooth,” Andy says. “It has spikes and valleys, and the shield is either overloading or underpowered.”

“What is causing that?” Khan asks.

“I’m not sure, which is why I’m not sure how to fix it,” Andy says, pushing her hair back. “It could be a flaw in the power source, a structural defect. It could be there’s a mismatch between the power source and the parts that project the shield. It…” She shakes her head. “The only way I can
think of to test it is to swap out each piece and see if that changes anything, and that’ll only work if the issue actually is a structural defect in a part. If it’s more a code issue then we’ll have wasted hours of work for nothing.”

“What do you think is most likely?” Katsuro asks. “You have more experience than either Khan or I.”

Andy shakes his head again. “Off the top of my head, I can’t make an educated guess. What I can do is research the specific parts we’re using to see if anyone’s reporting issues with them. If no one is, that means it’s probably a code bug somewhere. If there are reports of issues, we start looking for replacement parts.”

“I will re-examine the code,” Katsuro says.

“I’ll go over it with you,” Khan says although he doubts the code is actually the problem. “Where are Matthew and Alona?”

“Asleep again,” Katsuro says. “Cat and Konstantin returned but then went to the gym to spar, and Bishop called and said he would be here before dinner time.”

“How did your conversation with Matthew and Alona go?” Khan asks, unsure he wants an answer.

“They are angry,” Katsuro says. “As they should be.”

“Just as long as they don’t do anything rash,” Andy says.

“No,” Katsuro says. “They have not enough data for that, and they are both aware they need more time to acclimate to this century before they go charging off in search of anyone.”

“That would not necessarily stop them,” Khan murmurs.

Katsuro smiles faintly. “No, but I think in this case they will be more prudent.”

Khan can only hope. He looks at the personal shield again, irritated at its lack of functionality and almost—almost—tempted to rebuild the entire thing.

“I think perhaps we should go for a run,” Katsuro says, interrupting his thoughts. “Staring at this will only increase our frustration.”

“I’ll do some research while you’re out,” Andy says, pulling his laptop over.

Running actually appeals to Khan at the moment. He nods, both to Andy and Katsuro, and goes to change his shoes.

Neither he nor Katsuro are distance runners the way Alona and Maeve are, but they go for what would be a lengthy run for a non-augmented human. Neither of them talk on the run, and Khan relaxes more as his mind quiets and clears, thoughts and worries fading away as he puts one foot in front of the other.

By the time they get back to the house the sun has started sinking, and they walk into the living room to see everyone there, including Alona and Matthew and Jill. “Couldn’t sleep,” Jill says when she sees Khan’s questioning look. “It seems to be going around.”

“We slept for centuries,” Matthew says, yawning anyway. “Anyway, I wanted to be awake to see the mission from this side tonight, how it works and what was involved.”
“Likewise,” Alona says, hands wrapped around a large mug.

“When do you need to leave?” Matthew asks Jill.

She looks at the chrono on the wall. “About thirty minutes,” she says. “Maybe a little less.”

“Do you need to eat anything?” Alona asks.

Jill shakes her head. “If I eat something I’ll be slow and sleepy. I’ve had a meal bar, that’ll keep me going until I get back at which point I will drink well over a liter of water and consider actual food.”

“Please tell me meal bars in your time taste better than protein bars in ours did,” Alona says.

“They’re definitely not actual food, but they’ll do in a pinch,” Jill says. “I keep a supply of them handy because I can’t cook for shit and sometimes I don’t have other options. I like the bars better than the protein shakes, and the meal bars have more complete nutrition in them. You want to try one?”

“Sure,” Alona says. “I could use food I don’t have to think about.”

Jill pushes up from the couch and heads into the kitchen, returning a moment later with a wrapped bar she tosses to Alona. “It’s theoretically peanut butter chocolate chip flavored,” she says. “Mostly they all taste the same though.”

Alona tears open the wrapper and takes a bite. “It’s definitely better than the protein bars in our time,” she says after chewing and swallowing. “I wouldn’t exactly call it tasty, but it’s edible, and it’s not terrible. I’ve definitely eaten worse.”

“So have we all,” Matthew says. “Let me try a bite?”

Alona scowls at him, but breaks off a piece. “Okay, so, either I was asleep or mostly asleep, but why are we not going back for any more of us after tonight?” she asks.

“Every time we go, the odds of us getting in and out successfully decrease, and the odds that they’ll find us or find something increase,” Jill says.

“I would not put it past Marcus to kill the rest of our people if he realizes what we have done,” Khan says even though the words make his throat feel tight and raw. “The less he knows…”

Alona mutters something in Irish Khan can’t quite hear. “Okay,” she says, swallowing a bite of meal bar. “But it’s possible he’ll clue in anyway, even if we don’t give him one. Or it’s possible he’ll find out some other way, if he goes to inspect the cryotubes or something. Right?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I opted to get those I could to safety, and the rest…if we are better than Marcus, we will get them back when this is over.”

“We knew we might not ever wake up,” Matthew says somberly. “And given what I’ve learned today, better to die in cryosleep than wake and go through what you did, Khan.”

Khan’s wings stretch and he folds them back with more emphasis than he intended. “Had I not,” he says, “none of us would be here now.”

“That’s rather fatalistic,” Matthew says. “Also not the point.”

“What is the point?” Cat asks.
Matthew rubs his hands over his face. “Marcus has a lot to answer for.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “And I will make him.”

“If he kills the rest of us,” Alona says. “Will you share the kill then?”

“No,” Khan says. Marcus is his to kill. No one else’s.

She whistles under her breath. “Okay,” she says. “But if he kills the rest of us, I want to watch and I want it to take a while.”

“Da,” Cat agrees.

Khan nods. “Acceptable.”

“Tell me more about this relocation plan,” Matthew says. “Why do we need to scatter?”

“We’re too big a target here, and we don’t want to take chances after all we went through to get you guys,” Jill says. “There’s…the official Starfleet division, or unofficial since it’s all classified, that Marcus is controlling is called section 31. Within that group of people there are seven we’ve identified who want to kill Khan, or at least use him for their own purposes. We don’t think they’ve found us, but the longer we stay here the higher the odds that they will.”

She gets up, beginning to move through some stretches. “We have identified all seven of them, and have tagged…four, I think,” she says, falling into a yoga pose. “But we haven’t yet determined their overall goal, so we haven’t moved to neutralize them.”

“They have not, as of yet, made any offensive moves toward me,” Khan says. “There was one attack on the space station, a bomb, but since then they have not made any attempts on my life. We want more information about them before we take them out.”

“They are, however, on the overall list of people from section 31 we need to kill,” Ekaterina says matter-of-factly.

“Is there anyone from this group we don’t want to kill?” Alona asks.

“One person at least,” Khan says. “Beyond that, I am not sure.”

“And this one person, do we actively want to leave him or her alive?” Alona asks.

“We do,” Khan says. “She is a better person than most of section 31, and I would not have her dead by our actions.”

“Okay,” Alona says. “So how about we get her to safety and blow up the place?”

“I’m not going to object,” Jill says, standing on her head. “But I want to make sure we get all the information we need from that place first.”

“How much do we need compared to what we have now?” Matthew asks.

“We would need to run an analysis,” Khan says. “Something I expect you will be able to do for us once you familiarize yourself with computers in this time.”

“I’m barely conscious and you’re assigning me work,” Matthew says. “Some things really never do change.”
“Consider it incentive,” Khan says. “The faster you learn, the faster we can blow things up.”

“Sweet talker,” Matthew says, laughing. “Magpie, since you’re our computer goddess, can I watch over your shoulder during tonight’s mission?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to be able to answer questions,” Magpie says. “And if you distract me we’re going to have problems.”

“I promise to be on my very best behavior and not distract you,” Matthew says.

“Speaking of the mission, time to run our prechecks and get you going, Jill-Bear,” Andy says.

“Yeah, I know,” Jill says. She shakes herself all over and goes over to Andy. It doesn’t take them long to run through the prechecks and make sure Jill has all the necessary items; Jill walks over to Khan when she’s done. “A kiss for luck and I’m off,” she says, stretching up on tiptoe.

Khan leans down and kisses her lightly. “Be safe,” he says, touching her cheek.

“I always am,” Jill says, turning her head to kiss his palm. “Back in a couple hours.” She squeezes his hand and skips out the door.

“And now, we wait,” Andy says.

“No, now I take down the auditory monitoring,” Magpie says absently, fingers flying over her keyboard. “Which means I need you to log into that server.”

“On it,” Andy says, pulling his computer toward him. “Is it 03 or 05?”

“It’s 05,” Magpie says. “03 is a dummy server.”

“Dummy for what?” Matthew asks. “Sorry, I’ll shut up.”

“I’ll explain later, let me just deal with this first,” Magpie says. “Andy, you in?”

“Not—yes,” Andy says. “I’m in now.”

“Okay, good,” Magpie says. “Are we clear?”

“One moment,” Andy says, studying her screen. “I—there’s an alert I need to look at, came in just after I logged on. It’s not me, I mean it’s not alerting because it thinks I’m unauthorized, but I don’t know what it is.”

“Let me see,” Magpie says, moving over to look at Andy’s screen. “That’s—“ She stops, frowning. “I think that’s just an alert that the system will be shutting down for maintenance, actually. Which is what we told them it’d do.”

“If you’re wrong?” Andy asks.

“Then we could be fucked, but let me check a couple more things, I didn’t see anything to indicate they thought the maintenance was a scam, and…” Magpie moves back to her own computer, typing quickly. “Okay. Okay. I see no alerts, no emails indicating security problems, the security network reads me as a trusted connection, everything is green, we’re good. Starting the shut down in five, four, three, two…go.”

“System shutting down,” Andy confirms. “No alerts, no alarms going off, everything looks fine.”
“I’m setting it to turn itself back on an hour after Jill leaves the building,” Magpie says. “We can change that if we need to, but at least this way it’ll be there if we forget.” She stretches her arms over her head, rolling her head around. “Okay. Let me see what else I can have fun with. Matthew, if you want to look over my shoulder, I can explain some of this.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” Matthew says, moving to sit by Magpie. “What are you logged into now?”

“This is the overall security system for the building,” Magpie says. “Red marks are infrared and heat sensors. Green are video cameras, blue are locked doors. Yellow are locked doors that are biometrically locked.” She continues explaining, showing Matthew the path Jill will take to get to the room with the cryotubes and what will need to happen once she gets into the building. “I’m actually going to disable some of the cameras now,” she says. “Not ones near where Jill will be, but the hope is that I can distract some of the security guys and make them go look at it. Or I can make them think there’s a bigger issue with the video monitoring and shut it down entirely. That would be awesome, but the odds of it are pretty low so I’m not counting on it.”

She continues explaining, but Khan moves out to the porch, wanting fresh air and a bit of quiet. He can’t shake the feeling that tonight’s mission is in more danger than they calculated, but neither can he determine why he feels that way in the first place.

Was there more to the surprise inspection than they think? Could Marcus have realized what Khan has done, is doing? Have they been discovered?

Khan breathes out slowly. Logically, he doubts it; Marcus is not subtle, nor is he particularly patient. If he had proof of Khan’s actions, he would have revealed it, or taken revenge in some fashion. Marcus clearly has suspicions, but Khan thinks it unlikely he has actual evidence.

They will be fine, he tells himself, looking up at the darkening sky. Jill will return with two of his sisters, and they will be fine, and it will not be so long after that before he has the rest of his family safe.

For a moment, he would swear he hears laughter, a woman’s laugh. He sees nothing to indicate a source, but he would swear he heard something, faint enough Khan wonders if he heard a sound or just remembered a memory.

He shakes his head to clear it, turning to go inside. Visions aren’t what he needs right now; answers are.

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to have another chapter posted before next week, but in case I don't, I wish all of you a very happy December, whatever holiday you may celebrate (or just a happy month, if you don't celebrate any). The best present I've gotten this year (other than my dog, who wasn't a present) has been your support and feedback on this story; without it I'm not sure I'd have the confidence to keep going. Thank you all, so much.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

It is enough to make one wonder what superiority actually means.

Chapter Notes

Hopefully you all had a happy holiday of whatever kind you celebrate, and here's to 2015, may it be better than 2014. (For the record, my 2014 wasn't that terrible, but I have friends who had a horrid year.)

My goal for 2015 is to finish this story. Think I can manage it? :)

Inside, he spends more time observing his siblings than he does listening to the mission play-by-play. Matthew crouches next to Magpie, eyes intent on her screen, and Khan sees him filing bits of information away, his eyes flicking up and left the way they always do when he notes something mentally.

Khan expects him to ask questions despite his promise not to, and he’s not entirely wrong but he wasn’t giving Matthew enough credit. Once, twice, a dozen times, Matthew starts to ask a question, catches himself and shuts up. Magpie laughs when he does it, but doesn’t look away from her own computers and her work.

Things go smoothly enough until Jill gets through the forcefield, but the ten minutes of enforced silence chafe at Khan and he grits his teeth to keep from snapping at Matthew, or at Alona, who doesn’t look any happier than Khan about the situation.

Ten minutes isn’t so long but it seems endless before Jill blinks back into existence on the map; looking at the clock, Khan sees she actually had close to two and a half minutes left. “Status check,” Andy says.

“We’re fine,” Jill says, slightly out of breath. “Heading out.”

“Hold for five,” Magpie says. “I have to—hold five more.”

She hasn’t done that before and Khan looks at her in concern. “Okay, okay, go now but move fast,” Magpie says. “I’ll need you to hold again just after the right turn in two hundred meters, and I need you to get there fast.”

“Holding,” Jill says a few seconds later. “Bird, we need to get out of here, something’s going on.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m trying to figure out where it—fuck,” Magpie says.

“Two sets of credentials just swiped in the front door,” Andy reports tonelessly. “Can we get them somewhere safe to beam them here?”
“Trying to find that somewhere safe, this isn’t easy, the entire building’s like an ant’s nest or something,” Magpie says. “Okay. Okay. I’ve got us a clear path, but you’re going to have to move fast. Go straight until the T-junction, turn left, sprint down the hall to the end and turn right. When you get to the lifts in that hall, tell me, and I’ll clear the next segment.”

“Moving,” Jill says softly and then Khan hears nothing but her breathing, growing harder as she runs. He looks at Bishop, hoping the stimulant will be enough to get Anandi and Maeve through the trip back to the house. Bishop meets his eyes, but doesn’t look particularly reassuring.

“Made it,” Jill says a few moments later, clearly trying to steady her breath. “How many more of these do we have to do?”

“Four unless we can beam you out after the next one,” Magpie says. “Which we can only do if Andy can disable the sensors that’d detect it.”

“Working on it,” Andy says.

Magpie gives Jill the next set of directions, slightly more complicated and involving at least one turn back on their own path, but Khan mostly trusts Magpie to know what she’s doing. Jill reports in just as Andy slumps over his computer. “What happened?” he demands, looking at Andy.

“I’m a genius is what happened, and Jill, we are beaming you out of there in five, four, three, two, now,” Andy says, hitting three keys on his computer. “Of course, that system’s not going to come back online without some repair, but they’ll think it was a mechanical defect in one of the sensor processors, since that’s what just overheated and melted down.”

“You physically melted a processor?” Matthew asks, looking up as white light starts to coalesce into three forms in the living room.

“It’s pretty damn awesome,” Andy says. “A lot of the higher-end processor chips in electronics these days can’t take that much heat, so they’re set to run cooler than their max abilities allow. If you force the chip to operate at max capacity, it almost always overheats and in some cases physically melts or breaks down, sometimes it just shuts off until it cools down.”

“That’s a really crappy design flaw,” Matthew says. “Who made it?”

“The designers who figured out they could make more credits per processor by not making them with full cooling capacities,” Andy says. “There’s one company I trust to make quality processors and other chips, and one more that looks promising, but in both cases you have to know someone to be able to order them and your average computer user wouldn’t even think about it. Ninety-seven percent of what’s on the market these days is flawed somehow, but hey, it makes money.”

“Hi,” Jill says when Andy stops talking. She looks pale, and clammy, and sways on her feet as she strips out of some of her mission gear. “I’m, um, they didn’t see us, right?”

“You look like shit and no, we didn’t get caught as far as I can see,” Magpie says.

“Yeah, um, you can thank Anandi for that one, and I’m going to go throw up now,” Jill says, stumbling toward the stairs. “Actually, no, you can thank Bishop.”

“What happened?” Khan asks.

Anandi grimaces. “Before we went to sleep, I coated my fingertips with a sedative mix,” she says. “Apparently three hundred years in cryosleep was not enough to make it non-effective, and on instinct I grabbed Jill’s wrist when she awakened me. Also, hola.”
“To sedate but not kill?” Khan asks.

“Si,” Anandi says. “She gave me the dose of stimulant before the sedative kicked in, but when she started falling over Maeve saw the extra doses and gave her one. It worked enough to get her here—where exactly is here, brother? And what is going on?”

“Here is Earth, just outside London, England,” Khan says, looking up the stairs. “What is going on—Cat, would you explain?”

“Da,” Cat says.

Khan stops briefly to kiss Anandi’s forehead and give Maeve a quick hug, then takes the stairs as quickly as he can.

He finds Jill in the bathroom, sitting on the floor, stripped down to panties and looking decidedly unwell. “Okay, so one sister just punched me in the ribs and now one sister tried to poison me where the other sister tried to save me by poisoning me more, because fuck that stimulant wasn’t designed for someone without your biochemistry,” she says. “I feel terrible. I’m sleepy as hell but I’m so wired I can’t relax, my stomach is in knots and I’ve already lost most of what was in it, my head is pounding, and I think I’m shaking. But I’m afraid to take anything other than anti-nausea medication because I think that’d just be a really bad idea.”

“Do you have anti-nausea medication?” Khan asks quietly.

“Yeah, I do,” Jill says. “It’s. Um.” She points at the medicine cabinet. “Green bottle, I need two pills. They dissolve under your tongue, so I don’t need water or anything.”

Khan gets her the pills and a cup of water anyway, and she does sip it after the pills dissolve.

“What I’m hoping is that the sedative cancels out the stimulant or even wins and I can just sleep this off,” she says, leaning against the toilet. “The odds, I’ve no idea.”

“How did the mission go other than Anandi trying to poison you?” Khan asks, kneeling by her and resting a hand on her back.

“When we got out of the force field, I knew something wasn’t right,” Jill says. “There was too much energy in the air, or something, but it was—I knew there was something going on, that we were in trouble. I had just enough time to show Anandi the earbud comm and tell her that if I fell over, she needed to take it out of my ear, stick it in her own, and let Magpie and Andy know what had happened, and then we had to start running.”

“Jill! Shorty!” Jake bursts into the bathroom, promptly squawks and covers his eyes. “Shit I never needed to see, sorry, but it’s important, I need to talk to you. And Khan.”

“Well I’m not getting dressed right now and you’ve seen my tits before so hit us,” Jill says.

Jake sighs and turns around, facing the door and resolutely away from any mirrors or sight of Jill. “They’re shutting down the torpedo project,” he says. “Last night, tonight—that wasn’t actually random. They’re looking at how best to reallocate personnel and resources, but apparently the decision has been made from somewhere that it’s taking too much of both for a design that whoever feels won’t actually give us that much of an improvement over current models.”

“That’s not accurate,” Khan says. “I designed the torpedoes personally. They would improve range and firepower greatly over existing design.”
But you designed them,” Jill says. “And either you’re about to be persona non grata or someone’s asking too many questions about you.”

“Or…” Khan’s eyes widen as he puts it together. “Marcus expected me to use them,” he says. “He expected me to use the torpedoes to hide the cryotubes, and from that—I don’t know what he would have expected, but it would…it would have pleased him greatly, to order an unsuspecting captain to fire my torpedoes at me, or an unsuspecting planet.”

“Or both,” Jill says. “Don’t forget what Marika saw, about you getting on the Vengeance in the Neutral Zone. Only so many ways to get out there and only so many places to be in or near there.”

“But you’re not using the torpedoes,” Jake says. “So where does that leave Marcus?”

“Wanting to hide my existence and without a chance to expose me for a traitor working against him,” Khan says. He takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “I would…not be surprised if he decided to inspect the cryotubes next, to see if I somehow accomplished what he took pride in taunting me I would not.”

“If he does that, he’ll see the eight empty ones,” Jill says softly. “And then…”

“I don’t know,” Khan says. “The eight were scattered among the rows. It’s possible he might not notice. If he did…” He trails off, not wanting to say it even though all three of them know it’s true.

“I think maybe you need to drop off the radar soon,” Jake says.

“Really, really soon,” Jill says.

The problem, Khan reflects, is that he has no good options. If he stays, he leaves himself open to Marcus’ abuse and possible sabotage. If he leaves, he has no way to prevent Marcus from destroying the cryotubes. But if he stays, and Marcus decides he has become expendable…he cannot protect his family if he is dead.

“Just because you can’t stay doesn’t mean we can’t keep watch,” Jill says softly. “Jake and I are still in good standing. We can listen for scuttlebutt and see what we hear, and Magpie’s tied into the network at the building where your family is.”

“I hate to be a downer but even if we still hear about it, there’s no way we can revive the remaining sixty-four people before Marcus does whatever,” Jake says reluctantly.

“I know.” Khan pushes to his feet, wings trying to flare out in the small confines of the bathroom; he folds them back, grimacing inwardly at the muscle strain, and looks down at Jill, still leaning against the side of the toilet. “I know. I have known since Marcus revived me that the odds of saving my family were higher than even I could hope to pull in my favor. We have eight of them back now, the eight closest to me and the ones I trust absolutely. Even if we cannot save the rest…this is not insignificant.”

“The problem with you disappearing off the radar is that I can’t go with you,” Jill says after a moment. “At least, not without raising a ruckus and causing more issues for my former crew and Starfleet friends. You going missing is one thing. Me going missing at the same time, given what I’m doing now, might raise a few flags. And you can’t either, Jake.”

“No, but I’m on leave anyway so it doesn’t matter,” Jake says. “I’m officially on leave, I put in for time and flat out refused to do any more classes, trainings, or other bullshit for the next three months. God knows I have enough banked.”
“I’m surprised you’re only taking three months of it,” Jill says.

Jake shrugs. “If in three months this isn’t all over and I haven’t resigned or been court-martialed, I’ll put in for more time,” he says practically.

“Don’t sound so broken up about it, Aaron,” Jill says.

“You know I was thinking about getting out anyway,” Jake says. “Like this, at least it means something more than just wanting a better choice of job.”

“Yeah,” Jill says. “Still.”

The tone in her voice makes Khan tense and Jake wince. “Can we talk about this after you put clothes on?” he asks plaintively.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Jill says. “And yes, I am going to put clothes on, but the clothes are in my bedroom which means you need to go downstairs first.”

“Going,” Jake says, leaving hastily.

“There is something to talk about, pyara,” Khan says as Jill slowly pushes to her feet.

“No. Not tonight. I want to let this run its course. Maybe in five hours, if I still can’t sleep and I feel shitty, but not right now,” Jill says. “I’ll see you downstairs, okay?”

It’s not okay, but Khan touches her shoulder, leaving quietly and closing the door behind him. Downstairs he finds his family gathered in the living room, Magpie and Andy talking quietly in the corner, both huddled over multiple computers and a couple other devices. Matthew huddles near them, listening intently and at one point offering a quiet suggestion that has both Magpie and Andy staring at him for a moment before Magpie laughs, Andy nods firmly and they both dive back into whatever they’re doing.

“What is going on?” Khan asks Cat, who sits on the coffee table, back straight as one of her knives.

“I am not entirely clear on what they are doing,” Cat says, frowning. “Something about alarms and credentials and tracing back queries.”

Khan looks at the rest of his family, but no one else seems to have a good answer.

“They’re tracing back the orders to shut down the program,” Jake says, popping up from where he had been apparently hiding behind Andy. “Trying to see if this came from Marcus or elsewhere. If we can determine whose credentials were swiped into the building tonight, we can start unraveling the bureaucracy. And also tracing some random alarms and making sure we don’t get caught doing this.”

“Always a good plan,” Alona says. “Khan, how many of us are left in cryotubes, and how big an effort would it take to get them?”

“Sixty-four and too big,” Khan says.
“Sixty—but there were eighty-four of us on the ship,” Maeve says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “When I was awakened, I was told seventy-two others had survived. I do not, as of yet, know what happened to the other eleven, and it was not for two months until after I awoke that I knew exactly who died, or rather, who I was told died.”

“Who?” Maeve asks softly.

Khan closes his eyes for a moment and gives them the names. “I think Marcus may actually have been telling the truth that they simply died in cryosleep,” he says. “There seems to be no rhyme nor reason to those deaths.”

“Why revive you first, and you alone?” Maeve asks.

“The alone is easy enough,” Anandi says. “One of us is a dangerous predator but can be tamed in times of dire necessity. Two, never, and more than that…” She shakes her head. “And as for why first—that, too, seems logical. Khan was the oldest, the ship’s captain and its titular leader. Had Marcus had any records at all, he would have realized that.”

“He did,” Khan says briefly.

“I see,” Anandi says, looking up as Jill comes downstairs. “Buenos noches, hermana. I am sorry for my actions earlier.”

“De nada,” Jill says, dressed unusually for her in thick fuzzy pants and a fuzzy sweatshirt, her hair still in its braid but hanging down her back. “You didn’t know, and at least it was only a sedative, not a toxin. But what was the point?”

“Things were unsettled when we left, and we did so as condemned criminals,” Anandi says. “I thought it not unlikely that when—if—we were awakened, it might not be by people friendly to us. The mix I used on my fingertips would cause one of my family perhaps a few minutes of sleepiness, but nothing more. I gauged it better to take my chances and at least have time to understand the situation before determining my next actions, should that be necessary.”

“Which only shoots you in the foot when you’re awakened by a non-engineered human trying to get you out of a classified military facility with a short time frame before the military comes in and possibly kills you all,” Jill says. She glances at Khan; he simply holds out a hand. It doesn’t surprise him when she hesitates, but she does come to him, and when he slides his hand around the back of her neck he feels the tension. Still, she leans into him and relaxes slightly when he puts pressure on the muscles, kneading them as best he can in this situation.

“You do have to admit that on the list of possible ways in which we could have woken that was low on the list,” Alona says.

“Says the one who took a swing at me,” Jill counters, and Alona hangs her head. “Stop it. I’m fine. You didn’t break anything, the bruise is mostly healed thanks to modern medicine, everything’s fine.”

“How do you feel now?” Bishop asks.

“Crappy, but I’ll live,” Jill says. “I think it’s just a matter of the sedative and the stimulant stopping fighting each other. Eventually one of them will win or I’ll take the damned sleeping pills and wake up with a migraine.”

“The sedative should wear off within an hour, if it has not already,” Anandi says. “It was not
particularly long-acting.”

“The stimulant, for you…” Bishop grimaces. “Perhaps another six hours.”

“I may need someone to beat me unconscious,” Jill mutters in Russian. “Or take the sleeping pills. Six of one.” She sighs and rubs her hands over her face. “Lo siento. I am not making the best impression right now, thanks to the drugs and everything.”

“You broke into a classified military facility to revive us and sneak us to safety, or as much safety as we can lay claim to,” Anandi says. “What else do I need to know?”

“That she’s Khan’s and he won’t share,” Matthew offers cheerfully, popping up for a moment.

“Neither will I, thanks,” Jill counters. “I know it’s old fashioned but I kind of like monogamy.”

“We are not exactly the right group of people to complain about old fashioned,” Konstantin observes.

“Or monogamy,” Ekaterina says, laughing. “At least in our case.”

“Talk about one and done,” Alona says. “Sometimes I hate you just a little for it.”

“You really don’t,” Maeve says. “You like the thrill of the chase.”

“Yeah, okay, true, but still,” Alona says. “I mean, Cat and Konstantin, how do you not envy them just a little?”

“Some of us find our own company sufficient,” Anandi says mildly.

“Says the asexual,” Alona says. “Never mind. I give up.”

“I think maybe it’s bedtime,” Matthew says. “I’ve been where Anandi and Maeve are now and I’m guessing their stimulants are wearing off really damn soon if they haven’t started to already.”

“Si,” Anandi admits, rubbing her eyes. “I am quite fatigued. I think perhaps a bed would be a good idea.”

“Aye,” Maeve says around a yawn. “Now that you mention it, I would like to fall over and not move for a few hours.”

“We can arrange that,” Jill says. “If you ladies will follow me upstairs, I’ll show you your room. You’re sharing due to lack of space, but you each have your own bed if you want it. We’ve laid in toiletries and clothes—Magpie and Andy started with the very basics, but as we’ve been reviving people they’ve been buying for others, so hopefully you’ll have things that mostly suit you. We can go over details of life in this time tomorrow.”

“Gracias,” Anandi says, getting to her feet. “Good night, everyone.”

“Good night,” Maeve says, doing the same. They follow Jill upstairs.

Khan looks over at the group huddled over the computers, but they don’t seem inclined to notice him or update anyone on their actions. He sighs inwardly and resigns himself to waiting.

About ten minutes later, Jake scrambles to his feet and comes over to everyone else. “Okay, so we’re making progress,” he says. “It looks like Marcus was not among the credentials scanned into that building tonight. Which isn’t too surprising, really. We did identify the officers who were
there, and I think—that just from what I know—that they’re part of the group loyal to him, but I need to do some more research on that. Magpie is still back-tracing the orders, which is only complicated because each message is encrypted and she has to unencrypt it before she moves on to the next, and part of the encryption blocks the source information. So far what it looks like is that Marcus himself did not start the conversation to shut down the torpedo program—but I think, based on the information we have, that he put someone else up to suggesting it and then supported the idea once it was out there. I can’t prove it but I’d bet on it.”

“Good enough for me,” Ekaterina says. “Khan, what does this mean for you?”

“I think—and Jake and Jill agree with me on this—that I need to drop off the official radar quickly,” Khan says. “I dislike losing my ability to monitor Marcus, or at least have that limited, but if he wants the torpedo program shut down it means he thinks I am becoming too much of a liability.”

“On the upside, if you disappear we can start the game,” Alona says. “Which will allow us to get close to him and hopefully distract him from destroying everyone else in our family.”

“True,” Khan says.

“What does this mean for the group of seven?” Konstantin asks.

Khan shakes his head. “That I do not know. We still haven’t determined their motives yet.”

“We need to find out,” Konstantin says. “I think perhaps we take one of them into custody and ask.”

Khan doesn’t disagree. “Perhaps more than one,” Cat says. “We do have four tagged and can pick them up whenever we like.”

“Two, then,” Bishop says. “We can compare answers and seek out the others if we get contradictory or unsatisfactory information.”

Jill hasn’t come back downstairs yet, which bothers Khan enough that he leaves the others to continue the discussion and goes upstairs.

He finds her in the bedroom, huddled against the wall, arms wrapped around her knees and head buried in them. “Kitten,” he says softly, kneeling in front of her. “Tell me.”

“I—I need Magpie,” Jill says, shaky and breathless, not looking up. “Please.”

Khan doesn’t ask why, just goes. He gets back downstairs and touches Magpie’s shoulder. “Jill needs you,” he says when she looks up.

“Is it—never mind.” Magpie groans. “Jake, Matthew, Andy, you guys saw what I’m doing, right? Just don’t fuck it up, I’ll be back soon.” She scrambles up and follows Khan back upstairs. “Oh, honey,” she says, dropping all irritation as soon as she sees Jill. “Oh, sweetie. Okay. It’s probably the stimulant fucking things up as well as the usual, right?”

“Yeah,” Jill says, muffled by her arms.

Magpie hurries across the room and crouches in front of Jill. “Okay. Okay. I’m right here, honey. Breathe with me, okay? I’ll count it for you. Inhale for one, two, three, four, five, six. Hold. Exhale, two, three, four, five, six.” She keeps counting like this, her voice steady and even, and it takes a few cycles but eventually Jill manages to keep breathing with her. “There we go,” Magpie
murmurs. “You want to tell me what triggered it?”

“Give me a minute,” Jill says, still clearly focusing on breathing normally. A minute, maybe two later, she raises her head slowly. “I was rethinking the mission, and…and I think someone might have seen us. Just for a second, and no one came running, but I think…I’m not sure.”

“Where do you think this happened?” Magpie asks.

“I think…just after the first sprint,” Jill says. “I’m really not sure, but if they do find out we were there—”

“I didn’t see anything to indicate they did,” Magpie says reassuringly. “I’ll double-check my scans and alerts and ask Andy to review the video footage. You all had the shields on by then, though so video and infrared won’t give us much.”

“If someone saw us, it might be too late to save the rest of your family,” Jill whispers, looking at Khan. “And it’d be my fault.”

“No,” Khan says, quick and firm. “No, it would not. You have done more than anyone could expect to save my family. You have saved eight of them. This is not your fault, Jill. None of it is.”

Jill rubs her hands over her face and her hair. “I just—I wasn’t thinking all that clearly and I think I just did something, moved wrong or something, but I don’t know.”

“Stop obsessing over it,” Magpie says. “If they saw you, we’ll find out and we’ll deal with it. So far it doesn’t look to be like that, though.”

“What does it look to be like?” Jill asks.

“Red tape and cover thine ass,” Magpie says. “No one’s worried about us, everyone’s worried about why this project just shut down and what might be next on the chopping block, and so I’m seeing a ton of traffic as people hastily publish reports and try to prove they’re doing things.”

“Of course,” Jill says. “Did you find where the orders came from?”

“Still working on that, but we’re zeroing in,” Magpie says. “And I should get back. Are you okay?”

Jill nods. “I am now. Thanks, bird.”

Magpie pushes up but leans down to kiss the top of Jill’s head. “You are not a fuck up,” she says. “You did nothing wrong. Everything is fine. Just relax. Do you want one of my pills?”

“Um,” Jill says. “I shouldn’t.”

“Be right back,” Magpie says, leaving quickly.

“What are her pills?” Khan asks.

“She gets panic attacks from nightmares sometimes,” Jill says. “She has a small supply of tranqs for when those hit and she can’t calm down. I don’t because I’m afraid I’d end up abusing them, but every now and then I take one of hers.”

“I think that would be a good idea right now,” Khan says, crouching next to Jill. “You are still speaking too quickly and you sound agitated.”
“I am agitated,” Jill mutters, dropping her head back against the wall.

“I know,” Khan says, resting a hand on her knee.

“You should be downstairs planning things with people,” she says, closing her eyes. “I’m shit for brains right now but you aren’t.”

“I will go back downstairs momentarily,” Khan says. “Ekaterina and Bishop can handle things until I get back, and likely even after that. It may be better that I do not know all of what they plan.”

“You think it’s likely you could let something slip?” Jill asks skeptically.

“No one is perfect,” Khan says and immediately regrets it when she winces. “That was not what I intended to mean.”

“Accurate, though,” Jill says, sighing.

“What’s accurate?” Magpie asks, returning with a bottle of water. She hands Jill the bottle and then hands her two pills which Jill knocks back.

“Wait, two?” Jill asks as soon as she swallows. “Why did you give me two?”

“Because with the stimulant, it’s probable one won’t do enough,” Magpie says reasonably.

“I’m a fucking pharmacy,” Jill says, sighing. “Let’s go back downstairs and figure out what’s going on.”

By the time they get downstairs, however, things appear to be decided. “Kostya and I are going to apprehend Verity the day after tomorrow, while Alona and Bishop take Baker,” Cat says. “Depending on what we learn from them, we will go after the others. In the meantime, Khan, you will make plans to disappear from official Starfleet records and go underground. Jill will continue at the archive for now, but perhaps should lay groundwork for a personal emergency that may cause her to need to leave quickly and be gone for an indeterminate amount of time. Tomorrow we will spend with our sisters, to gain their insight and discuss the situation, and depending on that we may modify plans.”

“We will continue with the relocation as planned, starting Thursday, regardless of what we learn,” Bishop says. “Staying here for too much longer may bring attention to ourselves we do not want, possibly from a source we have not identified.”

“We also must begin thinking about a plan to prevent the overall war between the Klingons and the Federation,” Ekaterina says. “None of us, as of yet, have enough data about the Klingons to theorize options. We will need to remedy this.”

“We can get you whatever data Starfleet has, and some it doesn’t,” Jake says. “I’ll start collating that tomorrow.”

“Spasiba,” Cat says.

Khan looks at Jill, wondering if she will mention she has an idea, but she stays quiet, leaning against the door frame. He’s not the only one, though; Jake also looks at her questioningly. Khan knows better than to think Cat missed those glances, but she doesn’t push.

“I think I would like to go for a run,” Alona says, standing up and stretching. “Do I need to take any precautions for my personal safety?”
“You shouldn’t,” Jill says. “And I’m pretty sure you could handle whatever tried to jump you.”

Alona laughs. “Aye, well, that goes without saying unless Katsuro was the one jumping.”

“Not tonight, I think,” Katsuro says mildly.

“Matthew, come with me,” Alona says. “I like running better with a partner.”

“Make Bishop go, I’m busy,” Matthew says, waving a hand at her.

“Magpie, is he actually helping or is he being a prat?” Alona asks.

“He’s helping,” Magpie says. “Interestingly so.”

“What does that mean?” Jill asks.

“It means he’s asking questions I wouldn’t expect but which are helping Andy and me on this dig,” Magpie says. “Leave us to the data mining, Jill-Bear, we’ll surface eventually.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jill says, sticking her tongue out at Magpie.

“Bishop?” Alona turns to him.

He smiles and stands up. “Oui, let us go. Cat? Konstantin?”

“Da,” Cat says, getting up. “Kostya?”

To Khan’s mild surprise, Konstantin shakes his head. “Nyet, not tonight.” He does get up, though, coming over to Khan and Jill. “A word, if I may,” he says quietly in Russian.

Khan nods. “Of course.”

“I’ll head upstairs,” Jill says.

“No, I would speak with you, please,” Konstantin says.

“Okay,” Jill says uncertainly. “Let’s go upstairs, then.”

They take Khan and Jill’s room, closing the door behind them. Jill looks at Konstantin, then at Khan, and laughs suddenly. “I feel very, very small,” she says.

“In truth, that is the last thing you should feel,” Konstantin says. “May I sit?”


Konstantin smiles and sits down carefully on the edge of the bed. Khan stays on his feet, as does Jill, but even standing she’s barely taller than Konstantin. “My family and I—our family, I should say. Those of us downstairs were talking, while you and Khan and Magpie were upstairs,” Konstantin says. “Will you tell me something, Jill? Will you tell me why you believed Khan when he told you his story? Why you were so willing to trust a man you barely knew, who you knew had lied to you already?”

Jill tugs on her braid, pulling out the band and disheveling the curls. “Because I knew he was telling me the truth,” she says. “I know Marcus by reputation and a little by personal experience, and anyone who knows anything about Starfleet politics knows he’s got it in for the Klingons. And he’ll use whoever and whatever he has to, to achieve that. And—“ She licks her lips. “I studied...
psychology, in school and at the Academy,” she says. “And I gamble. You have to be able to read people, know their tells and figure out a bluff from what’s real. I’m a good gambler.”

“But you barely knew Khan,” Konstantin says. “What tells did he have?”

“His eyes,” Jill says softly. “And his wings. Every time he told me something about one of you, both of them relaxed. Every time he mentioned Marcus or that you were hostages, they tensed. Even if Khan had been lying about the details, he wasn’t bluffing there. He wasn’t lying to me about people he loved being helpless hostages for a man he loathes. He doesn’t like lying, and he didn’t want to lie to me.”

Konstantin nods, slowly. “My siblings and I talked it over, a bit, have done, and—we may be engineered for superiority, Jill, and we may have advantages you do not. But none of us, I think—no. None of us, I know, would have done what you did, changed our lives and careers and gambled everything to help someone. Not without weighing the cost, the odds of deception. Not without ensuring a way out for ourselves. You—you did none of this. It is enough to make one wonder what superiority actually means.”

He lifts his hands, lets them fall. “But I tell you nothing you do not already know. I would tell you more, that you are willing to risk more, put more on the line than any of us would be. I would tell you that without you, none of this would have happened, and all of us would still be hostages to be used as bait in a war nobody but Marcus wants. I would tell you that I have lived decades, and I have fought and won wars, and I have not met anyone with your courage, your fearlessness and determination before except perhaps my Katya. But you already know that.”

Jill stays silent, but she chews her lip and one hand tugs on a curl.

“Instead, I would tell you this,” Konstantin says quietly. “I would have you know that courage has its place, and strength is a virtue, but that no one is without vulnerability, and no one can be brave or strong every moment of the day. I would have you know that I trust my brother with my life—and more importantly, I trust him with my Katya’s. I am certain he will be there for you, whatever you might need from him. But—on the off-chance that you would rather not speak to him, I would have you know that you may always come to me, if you need an extra shoulder. I would be honored if you would trust me so, Jill.”

Khan doesn’t know what to expect from Jill in response, but her bursting into tears certainly wasn’t it. He moves toward her, but—again, in a complete surprise—she falls into Konstantin’s arms, sobbing.

Konstantin holds her, cradles her in his arms, lets her cry herself out until the sobs taper into silence and Jill sits in his lap, slumped against his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she says, voice thick and husky. “I didn’t mean—it’s the drugs and everything and just—you were so nice and I fucked up, I could have gotten everyone killed and there’s still a chance Marcus might know we were there and if he does he might kill everyone and it’s my fault.”

“Nyet,” Konstantin says. “It most certainly is not. You said it yourself, sestrenka. The odds went up against us every time you went into that building to retrieve my brothers and sisters. Had anyone seen you when you had to carry Bishop out of the building, would you have considered that your fault?”

“No,” Jill says. “Well, probably not.”

“So how is this your fault? You were involuntarily drugged by two of my sisters,” Konstantin says. “This undoubtedly left you operating at reduced capacity. This was not your fault. The fact that all
three of you made it out of there without setting off alarms or instigating a firefight is an excellent thing. Should anyone realize there were intruders in the building, I would think the authorities would be more inclined to look at possible saboteurs for the torpedoes, not someone reviving people from cold sleep. Would anyone in your time even know the proper protocols?"

“Medical personnel might, I don’t know,” Jill says. “But no. We haven’t used cryo technology in centuries, not since we developed warp.”

“Marcus would have no reason to think anyone would be after the cryotubes,” Konstantin says. “He thinks—fairly reasonably, given the circumstances—that Khan would not break in himself, and Marcus has no reason to think or believe Khan has allies.”

“Now you’re being logical and I’m in meltdown aftermath and I can’t process,” Jill says, sighing. “I’m so tired.”

“You should rest,” Konstantin says. He kisses her forehead and sets her on her feet gently. “We will keep you safe tonight.”

“He tells me that,” Jill says softly, looking at Khan. She smiles a little. “I probably look awful.”

“You might want a shower,” Khan says as tactfully as he can. “Or to wash your face.”

“I’ll wash my face, I’m too tired for a shower,” Jill says. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly before looking at Konstantin. “Thank you.”

“Pazhalsta,” Konstantin says, getting to his feet. “Sleep well, sister.”

Jill nods and leaves the room, heading for the bathroom. Khan looks at Konstantin, raising his eyebrows.

“Both Jake and Magpie muttered things about Jill being upset,” Konstantin says softly in Hindi. “I thought perhaps it might help for her to hear reason from someone not so immediately close to her.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, equally softly. “I think it did.”

“Besides,” Konstantin says. “It was not as though I said anything untrue. Your Jill is one of a kind, brother, and a very rare kind at that.”

“I only wish she had more faith in herself,” Khan murmurs.

“Well,” Konstantin says. “No one is perfect.”

Khan snorts. “Thank you for stating the obvious.”

Konstantin smiles. “At least we have our nine,” he says. “It is something.”

“It is.” Khan doesn’t know who moves first, himself or Konstantin, but they hug as hard as they ever do, and even if Konstantin doesn’t smell quite right he knows he doesn’t either.

“Thirteen,” Konstantin says finally, pulling back. “Lucky or unlucky?”

“I think that depends on whose perspective you are using,” Khan says.

“Does it not always?” Konstantin smiles again. “I think perhaps tomorrow we should sing.”
“Perhaps,” Khan says.

“Perhaps what?” Jill asks, walking into the bedroom with a freshly scrubbed face.

“Many things,” Konstantin says. “Perhaps you will be able to sleep without nightmares.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Jill says. “And I’m exhausted, plus the tranqs are winning out over the stimulant.”

Konstantin leans down—way down—and kisses her forehead. “I will see you in the morning,” he says.

“Da,” Jill says, covering a yawn. “Thank you.”

Khan clasps Konstantin’s shoulder and then he leaves, moving as quietly as he ever does. Jill pulls off her fuzzy sweatshirt, revealing a cami, and crawls into bed. “Will you—will you do something for me?” she asks hesitantly, not looking at him.

“Anything,” Khan says, turning off the light and moving to undress and get into bed next to her. She fits herself against him, her hand on his chest, over his heart.

“Tell me a story,” Jill says. “Please.”

Khan smiles a little and kisses her hair. “Once upon a time, there was a princess,” he says, his voice low and soothing.

Jill falls asleep before he gets more than a third of the way through.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

What can we use as leverage against him?

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Happy 2015, hope yours is starting on a good note. Mine...eh, but hopefully it'll improve, we're only a week and a half into it.

I do not, at this point, know how far into the story we already are versus how much more we have to go, but we're making progress. Hopefully y'all will continue to stick with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite it being Monday, no one goes anywhere the next day. Jill leaves a message for the librarian at the archive that she has personal business to attend to—absolutely true and seeding the ground for a potential emergency leave. Khan just doesn’t bother giving Marcus any indication of where he is or what he is up to.

Khan, all of his siblings save Anandi and Maeve, Jill, and Jake head over to the gym early in the morning to exercise and spar. Possibly not the wisest move for some of them, but when they call an end to it Khan counts six broken ribs, one dislocated finger, and a lot of bruises among the lot of them. Since neither Jill nor Jake have more than bruises, he considers it a successful bout.

“I want my staff,” Alona complains, gingerly flexing her hand after Bishop fixes the finger. “I know mine’s impossible, but I’d settle for an adequate substitute at this point. When are those weapons you promised me due in, Khan?”

“Perhaps a week,” Khan says.

Alona sighs. “This better be worth the wait.”

Ekaterina drops one of her knives into her hand and throws it at Alona, who catches it neatly. “They made this,” she says. “I think you will find it worth the wait.”

“Fuck, I think I want one,” Alona says, studying the knife. “Do we have more?”

“We do,” Khan says. “I ordered enough for each person to have at least two, save Cat, who has a dozen.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Alona says. “This is one hell of a blade. I don’t think I’ve ever held something this perfectly balanced.” She flips it in her hand a few times and throws it back to Cat, who catches it easily and slips it back into its holster. “What even is the material? That’s not steel.”

“Adamantium,” Khan says. “A new metal; stronger than steel, lighter, and capable of holding a
sharper edge for longer. It is actually mainly used in shipbuilding these days, but the Femarans use it for weapons.”

“I’m impressed,” Alona says. “But that knife felt about the same weight as a steel one would have.”

“They weight the handles so the knives are more comfortable and easier to hold,” Jake explains. “Otherwise it would feel too light and not get the right kind of balance necessary for throwing.”

“I’m more impressed now,” Alona says. “Also really wanting my staff. What else do they make? Or are making for us?”

“Melee weapons,” Khan says. “Cat has one I designed specifically for her, but I needed the Femarans’ help to construct it properly as I did not have access to the right materials. We made another model, and that one should likely to go Anandi. Your staff, of course, a broadsword for Konstantin, and a few longswords for the rest of us.”

“Shortsword for Maeve,” Jake says.

“Does Jill need a weapon?” Matthew asks.

Khan shakes her head. “Melcian, one of the Femarans, gave me a blade for her.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Jill says dreamily. “I should have brought it today to practice with but I didn’t think of it.”

“Do you study sword fighting?” Alona asks.

“I have done,” Jill says. “I’m not outstandingly practiced with it, but I’m not terrible, either. Jake and I spar with blades when we have time and opportunity. Problem is that they’re expensive to acquire and usually prohibited while in uniform, so I never bothered to really make an effort at it.”

“Me, I’m never in uniform,” Jake says. “But I prefer phasers, or the local equivalent.”

“Why?” Ekaterina asks.

“I generally don’t like getting close enough to people to deal with knives,” Jake says. “I mean, I do it, and I’m not terrible at unarmed combat, my showing against you all notwithstanding. But I’d rather shoot and be gone before anyone knows I was there.”

“We, I think, are not your typical opponents,” Bishop says dryly. “And you were more than passable.”

“Damning with faint praise but I’ll take what I can get,” Jake says.

“If it helps, Bishop’s highest compliment is satisfactory,” Alona says. “From him, adequate generally means genius levels.”

“Right,” Jake says. “Okay. I feel a little better now.” He grins and shrugs. “And thank you for not breaking me.”

“We only try to break our enemies or ourselves,” Ekaterina says. “You and Jill are ours, but you are not like us, and thus we would not want to break you.”

“We appreciate that,” Jill says, twisting her ponytail into a braid. “Especially since I don’t heal as quickly as Jake does.”
“Why is this?” Konstantin asks, frowning.

“Modern medicine doesn’t like my physiology,” Jill says. “Our current technologies of dermal and bone regeneration only work partially at best on me. Jake could get a broken arm and be good in about four days, five depending on the break. I’d be down to one good arm for at least two weeks, possibly more.”

Konstantin looks at Khan then, and Khan doesn’t need Konstantin to explain the thought. He knows it too well. If they are to be in battle, Jill is a liability. She has the training, she has the fire in the blood to disable or kill an opponent—but will speed and dexterity matter against a squad of Klingons, or will she be too overwhelmed by sheer size and strength? Add in her limitations with modern medicine and Khan thinks, not for the first time, that keeping her out of whatever trial by combat she fashions may be the hardest battle of them all.

Lost in thought, he slams onto his back on the mat before he has a chance to realize someone jumped on him, and a knife presses at his throat before he can draw a full breath. “Coup,” Cat says, the knife just shy of drawing blood. “And a reminder, brother, that none of us can lose our attention to the here and now.”

“Coup,” Khan agrees through gritted teeth. “Now get off me.”

She vanishes the knife and sits up, straddling his chest. “Tell me what you were thinking,” she says instead, in Greek.

“No,” Khan says.

Ekaterina scowls at him. “You are wrong, you realize.”

“You often say that,” Khan says. “About what am I wrong this time?”

She leans down, nose to nose with him. “She could never be a liability,” Cat murmurs in Hindi. “She is what Rani once was to you, brother. A light in the darkness.”

Shadows and light, Khan thinks, and there’s something he can’t quite—“Similar, but not the same,” he says slowly, thinking about it.

Rani was the light in his heart, the beacon that called him home from wherever he was. He liked her in gold because it glowed almost as much as she did, he told her. But darkness, too; she understood him too well for there not to be.

Jill—Jill covers herself in layers of deception, an ever-changing mask to hide the very real vulnerability that hides at her core. But under the layers, under the mask of Starfleet officer and sister and friend, she shines as brightly as Rani ever did.

Rani called him home. To Jill, he is home.

And there’s still something niggling at his mind, something—

*The figures, the people who grabbed him, it was like they were mirror images of each other. One was covered in shadows like the man, but you could see light through them, so bright it hurt my eyes. The other was made of light, but you could see darkness underneath.*

A soft laugh bubbles through his mind and is gone, and Khan lies there on the mat even after Cat gets up, stunned and bemused.
Marika had said that vision hadn’t come true yet, but Khan doesn’t understand why, and that twists uneasily in his gut.

“Hey,” Jill says softly, dropping to her knees next to him. “You okay? You look—not well.”

“One of Marika’s visions,” Khan says, pushing himself to sit and then kneel. “I think I understand it, but I do not understand why it has not come true.”

“Because visions are freaky shit and not that reliable,” Jill says. “At least, that’d be my guess.”

Khan smiles a little. “Such a pragmatist,” he says.

She laughs. “Sometimes. I mean, I believe in things we can’t quantify, and I believe there are more things out there than modern science can prove exists, but Marika’s visions are a little too… something for my taste.”

Interestingly, she doesn’t ask him about the vision which is just as well; Khan has no idea what he would tell her.

“Come on,” Jill says, pushing to her feet. “Let’s go either shower or go back to the house and shower, whichever we’re doing. I’m opting for the house since the showers here tend to be co-ed and there are things I don’t need to see, Aaron.”

“Says the woman who blinded me with her boobs last night,” Jake grumbles. “Fine. I will shower here. You go home so I can take a shower without fears of inappropriate eyes.”

“Ours are considered appropriate?” Alona asks brightly. “Because I’m showering here.”

“You know, I have no real good way to answer that,” Jake says after a moment. “Maybe I’ll just go back to my own place to shower alone.”

Alona pouts, but Ekaterina rattles off a string of Irish at her that Khan wishes he didn’t understand and which makes Alona laugh.

“This language thing is seriously unfair,” Jill says, poking Khan.

“Why are you hitting me?” he asks, catching her hand. “I said nothing.”

“You’re the oldest sibling,” Jill says reasonably.

“That means very little where my brothers and sisters are concerned,” Khan says ruefully.

“Mostly because we know you too well,” Alona says. “And we know you’re too serious for your own good.”

“Some of us are not serious enough,” Khan says. “And this century does not lend itself to levity.”

Alona makes a face. “There’s always time to laugh,” she says. “Or there should be.”

“I have not had much chance for humor in this time,” Khan says, more curt than he means to be.

“Well,” Matthew says. “We’ll fix that.” He grins and drapes an arm around Alona’s shoulders. “If nothing else, we’re good for a laugh.”

“You certainly are,” Alona says, elbowing him in the ribs. “And we need showers. See you all back at the house, whoever’s going wherever.”
Jill opts to head back to the house; Jake heads for his own place. Khan decides to go with Jill, and the rest of his family split between showering at the gym and showering at the house. By the time everyone has bathed, dressed, and found their way back to the house, Anandi and Maeve have woken enough for coffee.

“I have not felt quite this tired in…possibly ever,” Anandi admits, hands wrapped around her mug. “But I am assured it will pass.”

“It will,” Khan says, touching her shoulder. She smiles and leans her head against his wrist briefly.

“It is good to see you again, hermano,” she says softly. “Even if you do not look or sound quite as I remember you. I trust there are reasons for this.”

“There are,” Khan says. “The story is not a pleasant one, but you should hear it. As should Maeve.”

“I’m listening,” Maeve says, sitting up a bit straighter. “Tell me what I need to know, Khan.”

Khan looks around the kitchen, seeing everyone except Magpie and Jake. Jill comes over to him, touching his back under the wings, and he takes a small, private bit of comfort from it. “It actually starts in an alternative timeline,” he says, figuring he might as well go all the way back to the beginning. He explains what happened with Nero, and how it changed things for Earth and the Federation. How Marcus found their ship, brought it back to Earth. Why Marcus revived him, and although he does not want to talk about it, he tells them in brief what happened for those six weeks after he woke.

Maeve’s face tightens and Anandi murmurs something in Spanish Khan can’t quite hear. He doubts he wants to.

The rest of the story takes little time, and when he finishes he realizes he has taken Jill’s hand, his fingers curling around her warm ones. She squeezes his hand reassuringly and he doesn’t quite smile, but something eases in his chest.

“So,” Anandi says after a few moments of silence. “Do we have the names and locations of those involved in section 31?”

“We’re working on it,” Jill says. “We’ve got all their names by this point, and most of their locations, but finding a way to take them out without drawing attention to ourselves is taking more time to figure out. Cat and Bishop and Konstantin are working on that.”

“Once you and Maeve are recovered, we will need your assistance in deciphering data,” Ekaterina says. “Khan believes, and I agree, that there was a purpose to the…tests performed on him. Clearly the scientists in this time want to accomplish something, and we think it likely they want to try again, to build a new super-human. But we do not yet have all the data from section 31, and of the data we do have, we need people with more experience in medical and scientific fields to interpret it.”

“We can do that,” Maeve says. “The two of us and Bishop, I’d think.”

“Si,” Anandi agrees. “Do we have access to a laboratory?”

“Not ongoing but we can figure that out,” Jill says. “Jake has a contact at Starfleet Medical who can probably get us one of the labs there, and I think Andy has another contact somewhere in California who has a lab, but I don’t know how accessible it’d be.”
“I’m not sure,” Andy says. “It depends on what you’d need in the lab and what my contacts have. I do have a couple other contacts who have medical experience, and one of them—the guy who builds my subcutaneous bugs—has a setup I could probably wrangle access to, but the price on the latter might be more than we’re willing to spend.”

“Credits aren’t an issue, I thought,” Alona says.

“He wouldn’t want credits,” Andy says. “He’d want information.”

“Got it,” Alona says. “Yeah, that’s not likely our best bet.”

“If we have to, we have to, but let’s try to avoid it,” Jill says. “When Jake comes back we can ask him about Gabe. Then again we might want to avoid using Starfleet facilities.”

“Question here,” Matthew says, waving a hand. “We want Khan to drop off the radar, aye? But he has to stay on Earth, so how do we hide a winged man? What are surveillance systems like these days?”

“They’re fairly ubiquitous, which is actually good for our purposes because it means there’s tons and tons of data that mostly never gets looked at,” Magpie says; Khan wonders briefly when she came into the room. “It’s not that hard to hide a man in plain sight, even one with wings. Practically, there’s just no way Marcus can run a search on all camera footage to identify one person with wings. On the very, very random chance that he could find Khan via camera footage that way, we’ve got the personal jammers Andy built. That will blur him to camera and infrared.”

“I thought we ran into a bug with those,” Jill says, frowning.

“No, we fixed it,” Andy says. “The bug is that you can’t have yours on you at work because it’ll get detected. But for what uncle needs it for, it’ll be fine.”

“Marcus could still find him,” Matthew says. “I mean, it’s possible, yeah?”

“Anything’s possible,” Magpie says. “And yeah, it’s possible especially if Khan sticks around London or San Francisco. But the hope is that soon Marcus will be distracted by some of you guys and not really looking for him.”

“The long game,” Khan says.

Matthew laughs. “Fucking brilliant.”

“I thought you might feel that way,” Khan says, smiling faintly.

“Sign me up,” Alona says. “Speaking of which, we know very little about the man himself. Tell us what you know, oldest brother. What can we use as leverage against him? Friends, family?”

“He has a daughter,” Khan says without inflection. “’No wife or current romantic companion. A few friends, and he has a cadre of allies and supporters among Starfleet’s brass.”

“Can we use the daughter against him?” Maeve asks. “What does she do?”

“Weapons specialist,” Khan says. “And we likely could, but I know little about her.”

“Carol,” Jill says. “That’s her name. I don’t know much about her either, but Marcus raised her himself, I think her mother died when she was small or something.”

“I’ll log it for research,” Matthew says.
“How would you use her?” Magpie asks.

“Depends on the daughter and her relationship to Marcus,” Alona says. “We could possibly turn her against him, use her for information. Or we could kidnap the daughter and use her to pressure Marcus for leverage.”

Khan grimaces. “Nothing I have seen gives me any indication she is aware of section 31 and its projects,” he says. “If we eventually want public approval, kidnapping the daughter of an admiral would not be a way to achieve that.”

“Let’s not rule it out,” Alona says.

“Agreed,” Ekaterina says. “We never know what we may need.”

Left unspoken is the option of killing Carol outright; that would not serve any purpose Khan knows of, but he supposes they should leave it as an option in case it changes.

“Are there things you need from me or Anandi today?” Maeve asks, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Nyet,” Cat says. “We need you to be rested and in full possession of your faculties before we have tasks for you. As well, we do still need a place for you to perform your research.”

“I’ll message my friend, but I wouldn’t hold my breath,” Andy says. “He’s…capricious, and curious as anything.”

“Not a good combination given our current circumstances,” Bishop says.

“Yeah, it’s not,” Andy agrees. “Back to Jake? Where did he go, anyway?”

“Setting up things with the safe houses,” Jill says. “At least, that’s where he said he was going when he left today. I think there might have been a concern about the one in Spain, or maybe it was the one in Japan, I’m not clear.”

"Are there things needing to be sorted with his cousins?" Ekaterina asks.

“I think that’s mostly taken care of, but I’ll double-check with Jake and Eema before we scatter,” Jill says. “I don’t know either set of cousins we’re imposing on—I think I’ve met Michel and Laine once, but I’ve never met Eli and Natalia. But Eema vouches for them, and I trust her with my life.”

“We are trusting her with ours,” Cat says. “So I sincerely hope our trust is not misplaced.”

“You met her,” Jill points out. “Do you really think it is?”

Cat smiles and shakes her head. “Nyet, I do not.”

“How did you come to know Jake and his family?” Anandi asks.

“Jake and I went through the Academy together,” Jill says. “We were partners our second semester, unarmed combat. Once I threw him over my shoulder we got along fine. His parents don’t live that far from mine, so when we were on holiday break he took me home to meet them, and the rest is history.”

“Is he having the dreams Cat mentioned? The ones everyone else seems to be experiencing?” Anandi asks.

“He is but he says he never really remembers all of them,” Jill says. “Mostly he says he wakes up
knowing he dreamed about weird battles and a city in ruins, but beyond that he never remembers anything.”

“Did either of you dream last night?” Andy asks Anandi and Maeve.

“No,” Anandi says and Maeve shakes her head. “Although I was tired enough I do not remember any dreams I might have had,” Anandi amends.

“You’d have remembered these,” Jill says. “They’re hard to forget.”

“I see,” Anandi says. “Is there any kind of discernable pattern to them? Who has them most frequently? Do people tend to have dreams on the same nights?”

“See, this is why we need you, because we hadn’t tried to analyze it,” Jill says. “Khan and Andy seem to have dreams the most, followed by I’m not sure who. It doesn’t look like people are dreaming in unison except…” She trails off, thinking. “Has any couple sharing a room had dreams on the same night?”

“Now that you mention it,” Bishop says slowly. “Non, I do not think so.”

“Interesting,” Cat says. “I had not thought of that, but I agree. Kostya and I do not dream on the same nights.”

“Khan and Andy dreaming the most makes sense if the dreams are coming from the source we think they are,” Bishop says thoughtfully.

“Which is?” Anandi asks.

“We think the dreams may be related to…to Rani,” Khan says carefully. “That her spirit is out there somewhere.”

Anandi’s eyes widen and Maeve whistles. “Well, that’s unexpected,” Maeve says. “I…have no idea about that one. But why would Andy have dreams because of it?”

“Long story short, she’s my many generations removed aunt,” Andy says.


“That’s one way to put it,” Jill says.

“How else would you put it?” Anandi asks.

“Fucked up and strange,” Jill says promptly.

Anandi laughs. “Si, that too.”

“So now what?” Alona asks.

“There is little else we can accomplish today,” Khan says. “I would prefer we wait to start eliminating section 31 personnel until we are more securely hidden.”

“We can review the plans for doing so, however,” Cat says. “And we can discuss the opening moves of the long game with Marcus.”

“Yes, let’s do that,” Alona says immediately.
“I’m going to pass on this,” Jill says. “The less I know, the less I might accidentally spill later. I’m going to run back to my flat and deal with some stuff, make it look like I’ve got a personal crisis brewing.”

She stretches up and Khan leans down to kiss her briefly. “Be safe,” he says.

“Always,” she promises. “Do you need the transporter?”

He shakes his head. “No, not now. I will let you know if I do.”

“Cool. Later, everyone.” Jill slips out of the room.

“I’m also going to skip the murder planning session,” Andy says. “This personal shield is giving me fits and I’m going to figure out what’s wrong with it.”

“Were you able to get any information on defects in the parts?” Katsuro asks.

“Yes but it’s inconclusive and I’m not sure whether or not any reported defects would be causing what we’re seeing now,” Andy says. “So I am going to take it apart and rebuild it switching out one piece at a time and see where that gets me. It’s going to take a while.”

“I will help you,” Katsuro says.

“If you want, sure,” Andy says. “It’s easier with a table, though, so could we have the kitchen?”

“Bien sur,” Bishop says. “We will move to the living room.”

Magpie, somewhat to Khan’s surprise, joins the group in the living room, clearly intending to take notes. “What?” she asks when she sees him looking at her. “I’m not an engineered psychopath but I’ve nothing against a bit of sadism and murder, especially for people like Marcus and the quote unquote scientists at section 31. They’re Starfleet and they experimented on you, makes them fair game twice over in my book. Besides, you don’t have anyone else who can tell you about computer system issues the way I can, not yet, and I might have ideas.”

“Works for me,” Matthew says. “Besides, maybe you can explain stuff while we talk.”

“I can try, yeah,” Magpie says.

“Let’s start with Marcus,” Alona says, folding herself down cross-legged on the ottoman. “Do we want to make him think you’re out to kill him, that you’re in league with the Klingons, or what?”

“I think we do not want to imply I am allying with the Klingons,” Khan says. “To do so would be to push him further toward his goal of war. He could pre-emptively strike, and argue I was working against the Federation.”

“Makes sense, and I agree,” Matthew says. “So instead we play the game that you’re toying with him, that you’re going to kill him but you just haven’t done it yet for whatever reason.”

“Da,” Cat says. “And since he does not know us, we can show ourselves to him at least once and he will not think anything of it. I would not recommend we reveal ourselves to him more than once, twice at most.”

“There is a very large risk factor here,” Khan says. “If Marcus thinks I have turned on him, if we essentially tell him that, there is very little to keep him from…destroying the rest of the cryotubes.”

Silence falls in the room for a minute; then Konstantin sighs. “It is not as though we all expected to
survive our journey into the unknown,” he says quietly. “I think our brothers and sisters would understand the risk here and accept it. Stopping Marcus would be an honorable cause.”

“For those of us who care about honor,” Alona says. “But I agree. If we can prevent an interstellar war, it’s worth risking the lives of our family. We can’t save them now, but if we pull this off we might get them back.”

“It is also possible Marcus might try to bargain with them,” Bishop says. “That if we give him a way to contact Khan, he would offer them in trade for his life, or for some other price.”

“I think that unlikely, but desperate men…” Khan shrugs. “We shall see. I have the access codes to his office, his apartment in San Francisco. I have a back door to his mail, although it does not actively pull his messages. The only thing I do not have is a trace on his communicator. We can find him anywhere.”

“Were you able to bug him?” Matthew asks.

“No, I was not,” Khan says. “We did not have enough of the subcutaneous bugs, and getting more proved to be difficult. Any other kind of bug he would likely detect easily.”

“What about an internal one?” Konstantin asks. “The kind he implanted in you. We could easily take him, sedate him for a few hours, implant the bug, and return him to home.”

“I think that too risky,” Khan says, grimacing. “Let us see if we can get more of the base for the subcutaneous bugs first. If we can, we can plant it on Marcus easily enough.”

“What are his weaknesses? What does he consider inferior?” Anandi asks.

“He is somewhat of a misogynist,” Khan says. “He does not actively belittle women but he does not really see them as equals. I would not call him xenophobic but he prefers to be surrounded by men with similar genetic makeup and opinions to his own. He prefers the echo chamber to open debate, because he firmly believes he is right and thus has nothing to gain from open debate.”

“Wow, the parallels to Nikolai are kind of scary,” Alona says. “Which means it’ll be pretty easy to get inside his head.”

“Does medical technology or scientific research allow for adjusting dreams or memories?” Anandi asks. “If we could implant false suggestions, or manipulate his thoughts…”

“As far as I am aware there is no technology to do these things,” Khan says carefully. “However I am not up to date on all advances in medicine.”

“I will look into it,” Anandi says. “I would like to catch up in any event.”

“Likewise,” Maeve says. “Unfortunately most forms of manipulating thought I know of involve a willing participant or drugs I don’t know are available.”

“We can research it,” Bishop says. “But for now I think we would do best to stick to tangible means.”

“Aye,” Alona says. “Is there such a thing as regular physical mail these days or is everything electronic?”

“There is some physical mail,” Khan says. “You think we send him letters, pictures?”
“Yes, of course,” Alona says. “It makes no sense to stalk someone if they have nothing physical they can take to the cops. Or whoever. If we can send him email that self-deletes, too, that’d be fantastic.”

“We can do that,” Magpie confirms. “Anonymous sender, deletes thirty seconds after being opened and can’t be traced.”

Khan’s reminded briefly of the messages Magpie sent him after they first met and wonders what else she uses those for.

“Okay, so we’ll start working on things to send him and torture him a bit,” Alona says. “Matthew and I can do really well with that when he’s not learning computers.”

“When he is busy, I can work with you,” Cat says.

“Cool,” Alona says. “Let’s make it look like we’re always watching him, yeah?”

“Of course,” Cat says. “If we bother him at all hours, he may think himself too closely observed to give any order to destroy the cryotubes.”

They discuss more options and plans before the conversation shifts to the section 31 personnel. Khan did not know all of the information Cat and Konstantin gathered and finds himself impressed by their thoroughness. The only thing they have not been able to do is find Tara Kendrick, which bothers him. It should not be that difficult to find one orderly.

“We’ll keep working on it,” Alona promises. “Maybe she shipped out or something?”

“Possible, I suppose,” Khan says.

“Is it possible the name you had was a false one?” Anandi asks. “That she was not what she appeared to be?”

Khan grimaces, but nods. “It is,” he says.

“Do we have a sketch pad and pencils around here?” Alona asks. “If you describe her, I could draw her, maybe, and then we could have an image to go on.”

“Yeah, I’ve got that,” Magpie says, reaching into her bag. She pulls out a sketch pad and two pencils and passes them over to Alona. “I’d offer but I’m not good at working from verbal description.”

“It’s okay,” Alona says. “Okay, brother, talk to me. Let’s take this over here.” She moves to a corner of the room and Khan steps around people to get next to her. It takes a bit, but eventually they have a sketch Khan deems an accurate likeness.

They take it back over to the others and Alona hands it to Magpie. “Can you do something with this?” she asks.

Magpie scrunches up her face, studying it. “Maybe,” she says slowly. “Probably. I can’t guarantee a time frame, though. We might get a hit immediately, or we might get one in two weeks.”

“Whatever you can do,” Khan says.

Jill comes in the house then, dressed in running clothes and slightly damp with sweat. “I got bored, so I went for a run and ended up here,” she says. “What’s up?”
“Not much,” Magpie says. “Plots and plans and things.”

“Were you sketching?” Jill asks, seeing the pad. She comes over to look.

“Not me, Alona,” Magpie says. “It’s a good sketch, though.”

“It is, but why do you have a picture of Carol Marcus?” Jill asks, puzzled.

Khan abruptly loses his voice and just stares at Jill.

“What?” Jill asks, looking at him. “Why are you giving me that look?”

“Because the drawing is of the woman I knew as Tara Kendrick,” Khan says, finding words from somewhere. “Are you certain that’s Marcus’s daughter?”

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Jill says slowly. “Magpie, pull up her file?”

Magpie types quickly and soon a picture loads on her screen. It’s a solid match to the sketch Alona made, and—“And that is Tara,” Khan says, feeling stunned beyond belief.

“Hi, Tara-slash-Carol,” Jill says, looking at the picture. “Sounds like we have someone to talk to.”

“Yes,” Khan says slowly. “Yes, I believe we do.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Carol, what are you up to? *looks innocent*
Finding Carol Marcus turns to be a lot easier than finding Tara Kendrick had been. Carol Marcus has a flat in London, an apartment in San Francisco, and is currently assigned to Starfleet HQ in the weapons R&D department. She has a registered comm-link and public Starfleet email address, and after Magpie shows him the security information for Carol’s buildings, Khan thinks picking her up could be the easiest thing he has accomplished in the last six months.

“There’s—it’s weird, you’d think someone her level could be a little better about jammers,” Magpie says, wrinkling her nose and looking at the security camera footage from Carol’s apartment. “Or at least in turning off the visual monitoring of her own system.”

“She likely forgot about the latter, or presumed it was only her being herself and thought no one would ever bother to look but the security people,” Konstantin says.

“Can an admiral’s daughter really be that naïve?” Jake asks skeptically. “She’s got to know she’s a target because of Alexander.”

“It does seem a bit odd,” Magpie says. “Let me do some digging and see if any of this is false monitoring.”

“Let’s send her a message,” Alona says. “Set up a meet.”

“We can do that,” Andy says. “Where and when are we having her meet whom?”

“Tomorrow,” Khan says slowly, thinking it over. “Soon. I think in San Francisco. Jake or Jill likely know suitable meeting places.”

“There are two places I can think of,” Jill says. “How public do you want it to be, though?”

Khan hesitates, torn between opposing desires. If he asks to meet Carol in public, she will likely feel safer, less like he might turn on her. If he does, however, there’s a much higher risk of Marcus finding out.

“Right, so, I think I have a place,” Jill says when he doesn’t answer right away. “There’s a little bakery about two klicks from main HQ. They’re too far out of the way to get most of the foot
traffic but they still get people coming and going fairly regularly, _and_ it’s close enough to Federation offices that a person with wings won’t stand out that much.” She tells Andy the bakery’s name and address.

“There, at eleven,” Khan says. Just early enough to make a lunch meeting plausible. “Andy?”

“Working on it,” Andy murmurs, bringing up a dialogue box on her screen and inputting a few commands. “What do you want it to say, uncle?”

Khan considers it. “Tell her…tell her John Harrison wants to talk to her. That’s all.”

“Done,” Andy say. He studies the message one last time, nods, and hits enter. “We’ll be able to see when she reads it, but unless she’s in her apartment we won’t be able to see her or hear her.”

“Is it worth trying to bug her?” Magpie asks. “Well, can we bug her?”

“Kind of,” Andy says. “I don’t have any more subcutaneous bugs, and I can’t make the base myself. I’ve tried to get in touch with my contact but he’s not getting back to me—that’s not surprising, he drops out of touch randomly sometimes. We _could_ plant a surface bug, or one on her clothes, but it’s a lot more likely to be found.”

“Is making the base something you could teach Maeve or Bishop how to do?” Jill asks. “Or Anandi, maybe?”

Andy shakes her head. “I don’t know how he does it. Calvin—that’s my contact—he keeps it as a trade secret, but since I never showed him how to build the rest of it we considered it a fair deal for both of us.”

“When you say more likely to be found, what is the overall risk?” Bishop asks.

“So, there are two options,” Andy says, looking up at him. “One is just a fairly standard bug that we could plant on her clothes or in her apartment or something. The ones I make won’t get picked up by Starfleet standard monitoring, but if she’s got something more sophisticated it probably would. The other issue is that if we bug her clothes, if she changes her outfit we’d lose the bug. I _could_ build one we could put on her skin, but again, if she goes through any kind of scanner she’d notice it.”

“I think we should hold on actively bugging her until we find out what she was doing in section 31,” Khan says. “She was…she was not like the others. She seemed to actually be upset about what they were doing. It is entirely possible it could all have been an act, but I did not think so at the time.”

“So I guess the question there is whether Marcus knew she was there or not,” Jill says. “If he didn’t, that lends credence to the theory that she didn’t like what was going on. If he actually planted her there…” She blows out a breath. “I don’t know what to do with that, but it makes the idea of kidnapping her or killing her a little more palatable.”

“Agreed,” Khan says even though he is reluctant to do so. He hasn’t forgotten Tara’s—Carol’s—kindness to him in section 31, the way she sneaked him water or occasionally doses of pain medication. The way she tried to comfort him when he was in no mood for comfort. She had even simply stayed with him a few times, when he was beyond speech and every nerve felt scraped raw, and Khan admits to himself that her mere presence had been a comfort. To know that one person did not see him as simply a test subject, a _thing_ to be studied and taken apart—it had meant a great deal.
He doesn’t say any of this to the others, but Jill touches his wrist, and he sees sympathy in her eyes when he looks at her. “We’ll leave that as a complete last resort,” she murmurs in Russian.

Someone knocks on the front door and everyone whirs into fighting stances before Jake calls out a greeting and opens the door. “Whoa, guys, it’s just me,” he says, putting his hands up. “I mean, I could have just beamed into the room but I thought I’d be polite. Is everything okay?”

“In a sense yes, in a sense no,” Ekaterina says. “The orderly we were unable to locate, the one from section 31 Khan asked us not to kill—she appears to have been Carol Marcus using a false persona.”


“We thought so too,” Cat says. “Do you know anything about her?”

“I don’t, not really,” Jake says. “She has a doctorate based on some kind of weapons study, but I don’t know what it was in particular or what her focus is. I just know she’s assigned to Starfleet HQ in the R&D division, mostly a free agent. If I had to guess I’d say she studies whatever she feels like that Marcus lets her have access to. I don’t know what she’s working on now or anything. I don’t think she was part of the section 31 planning, at least the weapons part, but I’m not wholly certain of that. But Khan, you never ran into her, did you?”

“No, I did not,” Khan says. “And she never gave me any indication she was not Tara Kendrick, although to be fair, I was…not at my best during that time.”

Jill squeezes his hand briefly. “We’re hoping to set up a meet with her tomorrow,” she tells Jake. “I suggested Frost, the bakery in San Francisco.”

“Yeah, that’s a good bet,” Jake says. “I’ve used it myself on occasion. Plus their donuts are fantastic.”

“Yes,” Jill says. “Bring me back a red velvet donut, would you?” She grins and Khan smiles.

“I dislike the idea of you going alone,” Ekaterina says. “Kostya and I will go with you, but stay in the background unless it becomes necessary.”

“I would rather she thinks I came alone,” Khan says. “But yes, backup would be a wise idea.”

“This is all assuming she shows up,” Andy says. “Do we really think she will?”

“I think it likely,” Khan says after a pause. “If she is working with Marcus, she will want to spy on me to relay information to him. If she is not, she will want to know how I found her and what I want. But she knows I was alone. I doubt she will think I am there to kidnap her or kill her. As far as she knows, I have no allies.”

“Let’s keep it that way for now,” Jill says. “Even if she’s not working with her father, she could let something slip to him, or one of his people. And practically speaking, if anyone finds out I’m working with you—that way lies a whole lot of trouble I don’t want to land in. I don’t think they could court-martial me based on current actions but they could ship me out, or reassign me somewhere off-planet. Then I’d have to resign and it would get messy. I’d rather resign when I want to.”

“You say that as though resigning is a foregone conclusion,” Anandi observes. “Is it?”

“Pretty much,” Jill says steadily. “Khan won’t stay in Starfleet after this is all over. I wouldn’t
either in his place. The lot of you won’t sign up. And we’re plotting to take down the admiral in charge of the organization. Even if he deserves it, that’s still grounds for court-martial. I don’t feel like getting court-martialed.” She shrugs. “I’ve thrown my lot in with yours, so when the time comes, I’ll submit my resignation. What happens after that…well, we’ll figure that out when we get there.”

Cat looks at Khan. “Why the uncertainty?” she asks in Greek.

“She expects me to leave her behind when we leave,” Khan says briefly in the same language.

“Hey,” Magpie complains. “The language thing is really unfair to those of us who aren’t geniuses and can’t speak five dozen languages. If you’d rather we just not understand or overhear what you’re saying, take it to another room, would you?”

“My apologies,” Cat says. “It is an old habit of ours, to keep our proficiency in these languages.”

“Speaking of languages, when do we get to learn Klingon?” Alona asks, changing the subject neatly before anyone else can comment. Well done, Khan thinks, and nods slightly when she looks at him.

“There is a basic dictionary and grammar guide Starfleet has, and I wrote a more advanced tutorial when I was studying it,” Khan says. “The main difficulty with humans speaking Klingon is that their throats and vocal chords are constructed slightly differently from humans’, and there are certain sounds that are difficult for humans to make. The language itself is very guttural and harsh.”

“It’s a shame they’re not friendly to us,” Alona says. “They sound like a species I could get along with. Do they drink?”

“They do, but I have not tried their beverages,” Khan says. “Perhaps if we avert the war, you can spend some time with them.”

“It’s a thought,” Alona says. “Can you get us copies of the tutorials?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “We need to acquire a few more PADDs or computers, but that should be easy enough.”

“I can get you surplus Starfleet tech,” Jake says. “It’s not as nice or as fancy as anything Magpie or Andy could build but it’ll do, and I can get it without raising any red flags. How many PADDs do you need?”


“Sure, that’s easy enough,” Jake says. “I’ll get them later today.”

“What’s the word on the safe houses?” Jill asks. “Weren’t you going to check that out?”

“I was,” Jake says. “There’s an issue with Spain, it’s going to be needed. I did find a backup, but it’s in New York City. It is not with my family, but it’s not that far from them, either. So who’s going where so I know how to make arrangements?”

“Cat and Konstantin are going to Moscow to be with the cousins,” Jill says. “Katsuro? Bishop?”

“We will go to Japan,” Bishop says. “That leaves France and New York, does it not?”
“It does,” Jill says. “So where do you four want to go?” She looks at Anandi and Alona.

“Which site is likely to be closer to a medical laboratory we can use?” Anandi asks. “Maeve and I will go there.”

“Probably New York,” Jake says. “There’s tons of scientific and medical stuff in that area, including some Starfleet labs that don’t see a lot of use. I can talk to Gabe, see if we can get you access to one of them.”

“So, France for us,” Alona says to Matthew. “Maybe we’ll get some time to check out Ireland.”

“That’d be cool,” Matthew says. “Are we staying with cousins or in a safe house?”

“You’re with my cousins Michel and Laine,” Jake says. “Laine is a writer, specializes in adolescent fiction. She has a couple series published, and from what I’ve been told is fairly good and well-known in her field. Michel is a veterinarian. They don’t, however, have any pets at the moment. Their last dog passed away last year and they haven’t gotten any new ones yet. But they have visitors and guests all the time, so you’re not going to raise any eyebrows. Their house has a mother-in-law apartment in the basement, which is where you’re staying. It has its own entrance and access codes.”

“And the other cousins in Moscow?” Konstantin asks.

“Eli runs the local family jewelry business, and Natalia is a professor of Earth history,” Jake says. “They also have a mother-in-law apartment, but in their case it’s over the garage. It’s a fairly nice set up, though, and again has its own access codes and entrance. In both cases I’ve told them that you’re friends from work that need a place to stay for a few weeks while we sort out some bureaucratic paperwork. All four of them know better than to ask too many questions, or really any at all.”

“Is there any form of payment required?” Bishop asks.

“No,” Jake says. “They’re family. When family needs help, you help.”

“What about payment for the safe houses?” Alona asks.

“I’ve taken care of it,” Jake says without offering details.

“Carol opened the message,” Andy reports just then. “But she’s not home, so I don’t know where she is or what she did in response.”

“Can you monitor her comm-link and her mail to see if she contacts her father?” Jill asks.

“Right now, no, but if you give me twenty minutes I can,” Magpie says. “Matthew, if you come over I can show you how I’m doing it.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” Matthew says, moving to sit next to Magpie.

“Meanwhile, I believe it is time to prepare dinner,” Bishop says. “Anandi, do you feel up to helping me?”

“Si,” Anandi says, getting to her feet. “I am still somewhat fatigued but it is wearing off. Preparing a meal should be easy enough.”

“What are we having for dinner tonight?” Alona asks.
“I am not certain,” Bishop says. “We will see what ingredients we have. I think perhaps a risotto, if we have the correct supplies.”

“Someone can run to the store if we don’t,” Jill says. “And by someone I mean me or Jake.”

“Let us go see what options we have,” Bishop says. “I will let you know if we need a grocery run.” He and Anandi leave the room.

“Okay, so,” Alona says, stretching briefly. “Let me just make sure I have this all right. Tomorrow we nab Verity and Baker, interrogate them about what they know and why they want Khan dead, and then we kill them unless we find another use for them. Thursday we scatter to various countries. Khan is going underground sometime in the next week, likely influenced by what Carol has to say when he talks to her. The weapons Khan commissioned for us should be ready within the next week. Meanwhile those of us who need to will be studying Klingon language and culture. Anandi and Maeve will be studying the data from section 31, assisted by Bishop. What else are we doing?”

“Katsuro and Andy and I are working on a personal shield that will block phasers and other attacks,” Khan says. “And I am also working on constructing ranged weapons for those of us who do not already have them, which is everyone save myself, Anandi, and Cat. The latter is simple enough, I just need to assemble the weapons and make a few new parts.”

“I can help with that,” Alona says. “What do Anandi and Cat have that they don’t need range?”

“A very clever weapon Khan designed,” Ekaterina says, pleased. “It switches from a blade—perhaps a touch longer than a shortsword—to a ranged weapon and back. Quite clever, and is beautifully made. The Femarans forged it, once Khan explained it to them.”

“Damn, that sounds awesome,” Alona says. “I want to see it.”

“I will show you when we spar next,” Ekaterina says.

“Deal,” Alona says. “Jake, Jill, do you two have weapons other than phasers?”

“I have the blade the Femarans gave me,” Jill says. “But I don’t have a ranged weapon that’s not a phaser.”

“I am working on one for you,” Khan says. “It is mostly assembled.”

“Is it different than the ones you’re making for your family?” Jill asks.

“Yes, slightly,” Khan says. “I think it will be more comfortable for you to hold and fire.”

“Ah, so you downsized it,” Jill says with a sigh. “I hate being my size sometimes. But thank you.”

“I don’t have a ranged weapon that’s not a phaser, but I’ve got a collection of various knives,” Jake says.

“I can build you one,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jake says. “What’s the difference between what you’re making and a phaser?”

“Mine is superior,” Khan says. “Weighted better, easier to hold, more powerful, and has a longer range. Phasers, as weapons, are remarkably poor.”

“They’re not that terrible,” Jake protests. “But I’m sure yours is awesome. Do you need help
assembling them all? I’ve got free time and I’m good with my hands.”

Alona snickers at that and Matthew snorts. “Not what I meant, and how old are you again?” Jake asks sheepishly.

“Eternally adolescent,” Cat says.

“If you and Alona can assist me, we should be able to build the rest of the weapons in a day,” Khan says.

“Maybe we can start tomorrow after you meet Carol,” Alona says. “Although if we do that we won’t be able to pick up Verity and Baker. Which is more important?”

“I think the weapons, but only because Carol may have information that changes our plans toward that group of seven,” Khan says. “Let me talk to her and determine where to go next. But yes, I think tomorrow after I return we can continue building the weapons. It is fairly straightforward.”

“And the personal shield?” Konstantin asks.

“We are having a problem with it and have not identified the root cause,” Katsuro says, sounding as irritated as he ever does. “Andy and I have spent much of the last few hours changing out pieces, but have not found a difference in performance yet. We intend to do a deep dive into the code, perhaps tomorrow.”

“So much going on tomorrow,” Maeve comments. “In mundane things, I would like to do some shopping to find clothes and toiletries. I did see the things you purchased for me, but I would like to explore London a bit, find my way in this time. I’m sure Anandi would as well.”

“That should be easy enough to accomplish,” Khan says. “Magpie will have folders for you both with your ID cards and other documentation necessary.”

“I will but I can’t get it right now,” Magpie says without looking up from her screen. “Andy could, maybe?”

“Give me a minute,” Andy says absently. “I’m looking at the specs on the latest and greatest in personal tracking technology. I’m not giving up on the idea of bugging Carol yet.”

“Since we’re not going anywhere, I do not need my documentation just yet,” Maeve says. “What are you finding in your search?”

“Not much that is useful,” Andy says, scowling at his screen. “I’m—hold up.” His comm-link chirps and he answers, setting privacy mode. “This is Andy.” He listens for a moment, and snorts. “Impeccable timing as ever, Calvin.”

Calvin, her contact for the subcutaneous bugs. Interesting timing, to say the least, Khan thinks.

“Where were you?” Andy asks. “Hang on a sec.” She takes the link away from her ear and sets it on speaker. “So where have you been?”

“New Aegean,” Calvin says in a remarkably thick Brooklyn accent. “Had a job out there. What can I do you for, sugar?”

“I need more of the base for the subcutaneous bugs,” Andy says. “Enough to make a dozen more, I think. Can you hook me up?”
“Huh,” Calvin says. “Yeah, I can, but that’s an awful lot of bugs. You in trouble?”

“No, I’m not,” Andy says easily. “I want to have some on hand in case I need it in future and you’re not around. Since you tend to drop out of contact with no warning.”


“How fast can you get it to me?” Andy asks.

“I can get it to you tonight, but that’ll cost an extra thirty percent,” Calvin says.

“Fifteen,” Andy counters.

“Twenty-five,” Calvin retorts.

“Eighteen,” Andy says.

“Twenty-one, take it or leave it,” Calvin says.

“Sold,” Andy says. “You want the usual credit transfer?”

“Yeah, that works. You want me to drop them in the usual?” Calvin asks.

“I do,” Andy says. “Ping me when you’ve left it and I’ll get it.”

“You could pay me less if you told me what this is all about,” Calvin says thoughtfully.

“I could,” Andy agrees. “But I’m not going to.”

“What if I refused unless you gave me information?” Calvin asks.

“I could,” Andy agrees. “But I’m not going to.”

“What if I refused unless you gave me information?” Calvin asks.

“Then I’d get Magpie to hack your network and download a thousand viruses that would eat your systems,” Andy says cheerfully.

“Okay, ouch, not playing fair there,” Calvin says, stung. “Credits it is. But seriously, Andy, if you or the bird are in trouble?”

“We’re not,” Andy says. “Just a big job.”

“Okay,” Calvin says. “Tell you what. Make it twenty-five percent and I’ll give you enough for twenty bugs.”

“I’ll take it, but what is the rumor mill saying that has you this generous?” Andy asks carefully.

“It’s not saying anything, just that you and the bird are on a big thing that no one knows anything about,” Calvin says. “Which sounds a little sketchy.”

“We’re always on something that no one knows anything about,” Andy points out. “If you knew about it, we’d be out of a job.”

“Still, something doesn’t seem right here,” Calvin presses.

“Calvin, we’re fine,” Andy says. “It’s a tricky situation is all, and we can’t talk about it because it’s dealing with the evil empire.”

“Oh! Why didn’t you just say it was a Starfleet deal?” Calvin asks. “Now it all makes sense. So twenty-five percent extra, I’ll give you twenty bugs, and no questions.”

They hang up and Andy sighs. “He means well. Sometimes.”

“Interesting timing,” Matthew comments, glancing up. “Although how long have you been trying to reach him?”

“At least a week, maybe more,” Andy says. “Then again, we have a lot of interesting timing going on lately.”

“We do,” Jill says. “Where’s the usual place?”

“A coffee shop a block from my loft in New York,” Andy says. “I’ll use the transporter and get there later.”

“How long will it take to make the bugs to go in the base?” Cat asks.

“Not long,” Andy says. “I can actually start on that one now and if I’m careful I’ll have one ready before you go to meet Carol tomorrow.” He looks at Khan. “Couldn’t hurt, right?”

Khan nods. “Thank you.”

The rest of the evening passes fairly quietly, and Khan and Jill say goodnight and head back to the apartment building around 2100. “Share a shower with me?” she asks when they enter her apartment. “Or we could skip the shower and go right to the fucking.”

Khan laughs at that. “I see,” he says, locking the door behind them.

“Hey, it’s been days,” Jill says, smiling as he turns to face her. “And I really, really want you.”

“What do you want me to do with you?” Khan asks, walking toward her. He cups her cheek in one hand, smoothing his thumb over her cheekbone.

“Everything,” Jill murmurs. She turns her face into his hand, kissing his palm. “But tonight I really want you to play with my ass.”

“Do you, now,” Khan says, controlling his voice and his body against the spike of desire.

“I really, really do,” Jill says, swallowing.

“In that case, we are not going to skip the shower,” Khan says. “I want you clean, inside and out.”

“I’ll go start the water,” Jill says, a little breathless already.

Khan smiles and leans down to kiss her, his hand sliding down to her throat, holding her just tight enough to put pressure on her windpipe. She whimpers, arching against him and stumbling when he pulls back. “Go start the shower, kitten,” he says, releasing her slowly.

Jill takes a breath, then another one, and goes.

He gives her a few minutes before he goes after her and strips out of his clothes, slipping into the shower behind her. “What brought this on?” he asks, picking up her body wash and pouf. “Why do you want this tonight?”

“Because I like anal play,” Jill says. “And we haven’t really done much with it, other than a few fingers here and there. I thought you might like it, so…I want to play.”
“I do like it,” Khan murmurs, beginning to bathe her. He takes his time, washing every inch of her, working soapy fingers into her anus to stretch her and clean her. Jill whimpers when he does, bracing her hands on the wall and letting her head drop forward.

Finally clean, they get out of the shower and dry off. Khan spreads Jill’s towels out on the bed, nudging her to stretch out on her back while he gets the cuffs. He fastens them around her wrists and locks them with her arms spread wide over her head, raised slightly off the bed. Jill swallows a moan and shivers, pulling against the cuffs instinctively.

“I will need gloves and lubricant,” Khan says, resting a hand on Jill’s belly. “Where did you put them?”

“Purple box on the dresser,” Jill murmurs. “Bottom drawer.”

He finds the items easily enough and brings them back over to the bed, crawling over her to lean down and kiss her. “It takes so little to make you so wet for me,” he says softly, running a hand down her side and back up, twisting her nipple and making her gasp. “Had we time, I would keep you like this for days, naked and bound for me, wet and open, desperate for my touch.”

“Maybe someday,” Jill whispers, licking her lips.

“Yes,” Khan whispers back. He kisses her again, hard and demanding, until she whines into his mouth and tries to wrap her legs around his waist. “No,” he says, low and firm, pushing her legs back down.

“Please,” Jill says, arching up under him. “Please, Khan—“

“No,” he says gently. “Do you know what I am going to do with you tonight?”

She swallows and shakes her head. “I don’t.”

“You wanted me to play with your ass, and I will,” he says, kneeling up to look down at her. “I would stretch you open, tease you with my fingers until you are open for me, ready for me. Then, I think, I am going to fill you with one of your toys, and just let it stay there while I work my hand into you. How much can you take, kitten? How much will you give me?”

“Oh God,” Jill breathes, shivering all over. “I don’t—I don’t know if I can.”

“I will take care of you,” Khan promises. “If you cannot, I will not hurt you. But I think you are capable of this, pyara. I think you can give me this.” He brushes his fingers over her belly. “Do you want to?”

“God, yes,” she manages, swallowing. “Please.”

He smiles and leans down for one more kiss before moving to get the toy he wants and pull a glove onto his hand. Jill spreads her legs for him when he kneels on the bed, bending her knees. Khan studies her for a moment, then slips a pillow under her hips, under the towel. “Are you comfortable, kitten?” he asks.

“Yes,” Jill says softly.

Khan smiles and leans down to kiss her inner thigh. “Relax for me,” he says, opening the bottle of lube and drizzling some onto his gloved hand, coating his fingers liberally.

Jill takes a breath, lets it out slowly. Again, and a third time. Khan sees her relax a bit more with
each breath, and on the fourth exhale he presses his index finger into her, slow and steady. Impossibly hot and so, so tight, and she whimpers, head tossing against the pillow. “Easy,” Khan murmurs, resting his dry hand on her belly. “Just breathe.”

“I’m okay,” Jill says, licking her lips. “I’m—I’m okay.”

She relaxes a tiny bit as she says it, enough that Khan nods, beginning to rock his finger in and out of her, coaxing her body to open for him.

He takes his time, moving from one finger to two, to three, back to two and then to four for a short time before he pulls his hand back completely. Jill shivers, panting for breath, the smell of her sex thick in the air. Khan strips off the glove, tosses it in the trash, and picks up the toy, slicking it generously. “Tell me what you want,” he says, sliding a finger over her clit just to hear her moan.

“You,” she says, voice husky. “I want—I want your hand in me.”

“Yes,” Khan says, smiling faintly. “You will have it, kitten.”

But first—he lifts her slightly with one hand and slides the toy into her, one smooth steady push that makes Jill groan and arch as best she can. “Tell me how it feels,” Khan murmurs, letting her fall back against the bed.

“So good,” she says, shifting a little to get more used to it. “It’s—it’s solid, in me, and I feel—full. But it’s so good. And my cunt feels so empty now, and I just—God, I feel so damn greedy but I want you in me.”

Khan smiles and twists the toy, one hard move; Jill gasps and her hips buck up. “Oh, fuck, that’s good,” she says, breathless. “Please, Khan.”

“Could you come just from this?” he asks curiously, turning it again. “Could I make you come just like this, pyara?”

“I don’t know,” Jill manages. “Maybe.”

He considers trying to find out and decides against it; there are other things he wants more. Still, he teases her with the toy a bit longer, turning it and fucking her with it, rocking it in and out of her until she squirms under him, every breath a whine.

This time when he slides his fingers over her clit she sobs, hands opening and closing against nothing. “Please, Khan,” she says desperately. “Please, I need—please, let me come—”

Khan smiles to himself, pleased. That she asks him for permission to come…he nods, even though her eyes are closed, and pinches her clit. “Come for me, kitten,” he says, rubbing her clit hard and fast. “Come for me.”

It takes a matter of seconds before Jill wails and her hips buck against his hand. She falls back against the bed, gulping in air, flushed all the way down her chest. “Oh, God,” she manages when she can speak. “Oh. Thank you.”

“Beautiful,” Khan murmurs, stilling his hand but not moving it away just yet.

“Please,” Jill says, taking a breath and letting it out slowly. “I want—I want you in me.”

“Yes,” Khan says, shifting his hand and pressing two fingers into her, swift and sure. Jill gasps and clenches around them, head tossing. She feels tighter than usual around him, vise-close and wet as
the ocean, and if he presses just so he can feel the toy through her inner walls. When he does that, Jill whimpers and spreads her legs more.

“It’s—God, it’s so weird, and so good,” she says, breath catching in the middle. “I feel so full and so empty at the same time, and I just want more. How do you do this to me?”

“I know you,” Khan says simply, crooking his fingers and twisting them. Jill cries out, muffling the murmured “And I love you” he adds in Hindi.

By the time he gets to four fingers Jill can’t speak coherently, and her entire body is sheened in sweat. Khan knows she needs to come, sees the desperation in her face and hears it in her voice when she keens. But he says nothing, and he knows she won’t come without his permission.

“When my hand is in you, you may come,” he says finally, slowly and carefully working his thumb into her, folded tight against his palm. “As many times as you can.”

Jill shudders and whimpers, panting for breath; Khan’s not entirely certain his words registered. It doesn’t matter. What matters more is that she’s completely surrendered to him, body and mind his, and he can have anything he wants from her. Possessiveness growls through him and he takes a breath to steady himself.

Almost, he thinks, easing back for a moment. Almost. Jill moans when he twists his hand and something just gives and there. There they are.

“Now,” Khan says, twisting his wrist, reaching down with his other hand to touch her clit. “Come for me, kitten. Let me see you come.”

She screams with the first orgasm, spasms wracking her body so hard the mattress shakes. Khan doesn’t stop what he’s doing, working her clit with one hand and her sex with the other, and her second orgasm follows almost immediately. She has enough time to gulp in a couple breaths before the third hits, and after that Khan can’t tell them apart, only that Jill shudders and clenches tight around his hand and tears dampen her face.

When she collapses against the bed, sobbing, he pulls his hand away from her clit and moves to unlock the cuffs and let her relax. It’s awkward with his hand still inside her but he needs to wait for her to come down a bit before he eases back. He manages to hold her, letting her cry against his shoulder, and when the sniffles trail off into exhausted silence he starts the careful process of pulling his hand out of her.

Jill doesn’t move, doesn’t say a word. Khan wipes his hand on the covers and shifts to hold her close, stroking her hair and her back. He wonders if she’s simply fallen asleep, but after a few minutes she sighs and stirs, stretching carefully and wincing. “Oh, my God,” she mumbles in Russian. “That…oh, God.”

“Just relax,” Khan murmurs. “I have you safe.”

Jill sighs and snuggles a little closer. A full minute goes by and she stops, looking up at him. “You didn’t—I mean—”

“It is fine,” Khan says soothingly. “This was for you.”

“But—that doesn’t seem right,” Jill says, frowning.

Khan smiles a bit. “Do you really think you are in any shape to do anything about it?”
“Uh,” Jill says sheepishly. “No.”

“My point,” Khan says, amused. “Just relax, kitten. You were so good for me. Just rest, now.”

He doesn’t mention the toy still inside her and Jill either has forgotten it’s there or doesn’t want it gone. Either way she says nothing, just sighs and kisses his collarbone. “Love you,” she murmurs.

“And I you,” Khan mumbles back in Hindi.

He waits until she’s clearly fallen asleep before he slides the toy out of her; Jill murmurs something when he does but doesn’t wake, nor does she do more than snuggle into the warmth his body left when he gets up to wash the toy and clean himself up a bit.

In the bathroom, he hesitates, then decides to indulge himself for once and takes his cock in hand, working himself hard and fast, remembering what Jill looked like as she fell apart under him. He comes quickly, with a groan clenching behind his teeth, and gives himself a few moments to catch his breath before he cleans up.

Jill hasn’t woken when he goes back to bed, but her face is scrunched up tightly in distress and she makes soft little whimpers, her hand curling into a fist. Khan moves to hold her, trying to soothe her out of it without waking her, but when she cries out he curls his hand around her wrist and squeezes firmly. “Jill, wake up,” he says in her ear. “You’re having a nightmare. Wake up.”

She shudders all over and gasps, her eyes flying open. “Easy,” Khan says, not letting go of her wrist. “I have you.”

“I’m—I’m okay,” she says after a moment, but her breath still comes too quick and shallow in her throat, and her pulse beats too fast under Khan’s fingers. “Well, I will be.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Khan asks, gentling his hold on her wrist but not releasing her.

“Um,” Jill says. “No, not really.”

“All right,” he says. “Then we won’t.”

He doubts that will be the end of it, though, and after a few moments Jill sighs and moves closer to him. “It was one of those dreams,” she says, tucking her head against his shoulder. “A city in ruins, something was on fire, and I couldn’t find you. It was me and Jake, and we were looking for you and the others, but we couldn’t find you, and someone—or multiple someones—was after us, and we had to find a place to hide, but the smoke kept getting thicker and I didn’t know how we were going to get out of it.”

Khan wonders what it means, that both his dreams and Jill’s involve her and Jake being separated from the others. A portent of what is to come, perhaps, but he grimaces at the thought. If this is a sign of battle against the Klingons—well, they will figure that out before they ever go to Qo’noS. But still, he doesn’t like it.

“If this is the kind of thing Marika sees on a regular basis, I have more sympathy for her than I used to,” Jill admits. “It’s useless and stressful.”

“I do not know if it is actually useless, but at the moment it does not appear to be particularly useful,” Khan says. “Perhaps in the future it will make sense.”

“Maybe,” Jill says dubiously. “I guess we’ll find out.”
“Do you think you can sleep again?” Khan asks, smoothing her hair back from her face.

“Maybe,” Jill says, again sounding dubious. “I don’t really want to right now, though.”

“What do you want to do instead?” Khan asks.

“Have a cup of tea, I think,” Jill says. “Maybe take a shower after that, or a bath. You worked me over pretty hard and my arms are sore from being cuffed like that for so long.”

“Do you want me to give you a massage?” Khan asks, gently touching her neck and shoulders to gauge tension.

“Selfishly, yes,” Jill admits, sounding sheepish. “You have amazing hands and any chance I can get to have them on me, I’ll take.”

Khan smiles, kissing her hair. “Let us have a cup of tea,” he says. “Then I will rub your back.”

“Works for me,” Jill says, stretching against him. “You really are much better to me than I deserve.”

“No,” Khan says simply. Truth be told, there is nothing he can do for her that will pay even the slightest bit toward the debt he owes her. Eight of his brothers and sisters safe, and a plan to get the rest of them—he will owe her for the rest of his life.

But more than that—he loves her, whether or not she believes him. He loves her, and he will take care of her as long as she lets him. As he told Sarah, she needs someone who will put her first. She may not believe that, but then again, Jill is remarkably oblivious to her own needs. Possibly because no one ever told her they mattered, Khan doesn’t know.

Right now, none of that matters. Khan slides out of bed and pulls on a pair of loose pants, watching Jill as she crawls out of bed and pulls on a cami and panties. “I wonder if I have cookies,” Jill says, pushing her hair back. “I kind of want a cookie.”

Khan smiles a bit, following her to the kitchen. He puts the kettle on to heat while Jill rummages in her cupboards, emerging triumphant with a box of shortbread. “Did you buy this?” she asks, opening the box.

“No,” Khan says. “I believe Andy did.”

“Remind me to thank him later,” Jill says. “Do you want one?”

Khan shakes his head. “Not right now.”

“There may not be more later,” Jill says, swallowing the first bite. “Wow, that’s really good.” She takes another bite of the cookie and walks over to Khan, wrapping her arms around his waist and leaning her head against his chest. “Thank you,” she says softly. “For everything.”

He smooths her hair back, rubbing the back of her neck. “It is my pleasure,” he says, adding a bit more pressure as she sighs and goes pliant against him. “It is my privilege to take care of you, kitten, and I will as long as you let me.”

She says nothing to that, but he knows her train of thought. But tonight is not the night to fight that battle.

Instead, she sighs again and leans against him more heavily, letting him support her. “I love you,”
she murmurs. “So damn much.”

“I know,” Khan murmurs back. Jill laughs softly and kisses his chest.

Chapter End Notes

I was hoping to get to the meet with Carol in this chapter but Khan and Jill got porny so it didn't happen. Oh well. Do you think she's working with or against her father?
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Killing you would cause more problems than it solved.

Chapter Notes

Hello readers; whether you've been lurking, commenting, or just found me, welcome.

I need to apologize in advance, guys. Not for this chapter--I rather like this chapter--but because I've just had a death in my immediate family, and I'm really broken up about it. I'm going to continue working on this story, but I'm finding inspiration and creativity slow going these days and I don't know how long it'll take me to find a balance again. Updates may be delayed for the next few months while I try to cope. Thanks for your understanding.

In the morning Khan takes himself back to the house once Jill leaves for the archive. The time change from London to San Francisco means he has most of the day to work on the shield with Katsuro and Andy, which he appreciates. He thinks they will need all that time and then some.

The three of them settle in at the kitchen table with coffee for Khan, tea for Katsuro and Andy, and the half-assembled prototype. “I finished switching out pieces last night,” Andy says, picking up the small device. “I was able to solve the cloaking issue—it doesn’t light up when it gets hit now—but I still can’t figure out why it shuts down randomly. Code deep dive, here we come?”


Five hours later, Khan’s head aches from clenching his jaw, Katsuro actually looks frustrated, and Andy slumps in her chair, glaring at the device. “I seriously don’t know where to go next,” Andy admits, pushing her hair back. “I can see the problem, but I can’t fix it.”

“Well, what is the problem?” Matthew asks. Khan looks up, surprised to see him.

“The flow of power to the shield isn’t steady the way it should be,” Andy says. “It’s more a pulse than a constant flow, and the pulses are erratic. When too much power hits the processor, it causes it to overheat and the device shuts down, like I did the last op. If not enough power hits the processor, it goes into hibernation mode. So we know exactly what’s wrong, but nothing we do seems to stabilize the flow of energy. It’s not a defect in the parts, we switched them all out one at a time and no change. But the code looks solid and none of us can find a bug in it.”

“Is this maybe something Carol Marcus could help with?” Matthew asks, surprising Khan again. “She does weaponry, so this would be related, wouldn’t it?”

“She does and it likely would be,” Khan says. “But we need to determine if she would be willing to help us first.”
“Well, you need to leave in the next half hour or so anyway,” Matthew says. “Good time to take a break.”

“Or good time to break this thing,” Andy mutters, glaring at it some more. “God, this is obnoxious. It’d be fun if it wasn’t so frustrating.”

“Where are Cat and Konstantin?” Khan asks, standing up and stretching his wings.

“They are in the shower at the moment, just got back from a run and some time doing reconnaissance,” Matthew says. “Anandi and Maeve are in the city, Bishop is with them, and Alona’s still out running. She only left an hour ago, though, so I don’t expect to see her for a while.”

“How far does she run?” Andy asks, startled.

“As long as she wants until she gets tired or bored,” Matthew says. “She and Maeve are our two big distance runners. If she gets into the groove, she can run for hours and hours.”

Andy looks at Khan. “Can you do that too?”

“I can, but I am not a distance runner the way Alona and Maeve are,” Khan says. “But I can fly for hours if the winds are right and I have nothing else going on.”

“Jill must love that,” Andy murmurs.

Khan smiles a bit. “She does.”

“You’ve taken her up in the air?” Matthew asks quietly.

“I have,” Khan says.

“I didn’t think you’d do that again,” Matthew says, slipping into Hindi. “Not after…after Rani died.”

“I wanted to,” Khan says simply. “And she never asked me for it.”

“So you offered,” Matthew says. “Does she know how much you love her, Khan?”

“She…does not believe me,” Khan says, a tinge of frustration in his voice. “But that is another matter for another time.”

Matthew’s eyebrows shoot up but he doesn’t actually ask. “I’m for coffee,” he says instead, reverting to English. “Anyone else?”

“No, but I’ll put the kettle on for tea,” Andy says, pushing to his feet. “Katsuro?”

“I would like a cup of green tea,” Katsuro says. “Arigato.”

“Green sounds good to me, too,” Andy says. “I think I’ll make a pot. Uncle?”

“No, thank you, I need to leave soon,” Khan says. “Once Cat and Konstantin are ready, I think we will beam to San Francisco.”

“We are ready,” Cat says, walking into the kitchen. “Are we running late?”

“No, if anything we are a bit early,” Khan says. “But I would rather be there before eleven.”
“Da, of course,” Ekaterina says. “How goes the work on the personal shield?”

“Not well,” Andy says glumly. “We can see the problem but we can’t fix it.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Cat says, frowning. “Khan, do you have any idea where to go next with it?”

“At the moment, no,” Khan says, swallowing a sigh. “Perhaps later I may have a clue, but right now I haven’t an idea what else to try.”

“No problem is unsolvable,” Konstantin says. “We will find an answer to this one, it may just take some time.”

“In the meantime, let us go meet Carol,” Khan says, taking out his transporter. He tells Konstantin the coordinates and waits for him to input them. “Andy, Katsuro, we will be back. If things go completely wrong, I am sure you will hear about it.”

“Here’s hoping I hear nothing until you show up again,” Andy says. She gives Khan a quick, tight hug and kisses his cheek. “Good luck.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, touching Andy’s cheek. He looks at Konstantin, who nods, and they hit the buttons together.

The three of them materialize in a small empty alley, as Jake had described. “The bakery should be a block north,” Khan says. “Let us go.”

On the sidewalk, they see a few people. Not many, but enough that the area does not feel deserted or desolate. The mid-morning sunshine warms the air enough that Khan does not feel the need for a jacket, and the slight breeze feels good against his skin and the feathers of his wings. “Lovely day,” Cat murmurs in Russian. “We will wait and enter the bakery later. If you need us, we will be there.”

“I know,” Khan says. “Thank you.” He touches Cat’s shoulder lightly, then Konstantin’s, and enters the bakery.

Although he isn’t hungry, he orders a cup of coffee and a croissant, taking them to a table over by the wall. No sign of Carol yet, but it’s not quite eleven. Khan takes a sip of coffee, which turns out to be better than he was expecting. Another, and he settles in to wait for a woman who might not even show up.

Eleven-oh-three, she walks through the door. She looks around and sees him; color rises in her cheeks and she looks away quickly. Interesting, Khan thinks, watching as she gets herself a coffee and a donut. Not fear, but—embarrassment? Why would she be embarrassed about meeting him?

Carol adds cream to her coffee and clearly takes a couple breaths to steady herself before she walks over to Khan’s table. He gestures at the empty chair; she nods and takes a seat, setting her cup and her donut down on the table. “Hello,” she says softly.

“Good morning, Tara,” Khan says steadily.

Carol flushes again and ducks her head. “Clearly you know my real name, so…”

“Do you know mine?” Khan asks curiously.

“You, um,” Carol says, fidgeting. “You told me. The second time I met you.”
He doesn’t actually remember that, which would bother him more if he didn’t remember what happened before he’d met her the second time. “What were you doing there?” he asks rather than remember anything else. “Why were you pretending to be an orderly?”

“It’s a long story,” Carol says, looking at her cup.

“I have time,” Khan says.

Carol sighs. “It’s—my father has always given me access to whatever projects he has going that he thought I would find interesting. But he didn’t even let me know there was a section 31 until I found out by accident, and he refused to tell me anything about it. So I did some digging, and I found the archive in London, and the mail I saw was all about medical and biochemical research. That’s not my field, I don’t know much about it, but I knew enough to see that some of the research was on subjects no one should have been studying. For God’s sake, they were looking at better ways to torture people.” She bites her lip, looks down. “I didn’t want to believe it. I couldn’t believe my father was capable of that. So I forged an identity as an orderly, someone no one would pay attention to, and I got colored contacts and a wig and slipped into section 31 to find out what was really going on. I got there the day they brought you in, completely coincidental, but I saw what—they were doing to you, and I couldn’t stand it. But I couldn’t just go to Dad and demand he shut the project down, because he wouldn’t listen to me and—and I was afraid if I did that he’d just kill you.”

She swallows hard, looking at her coffee cup. “I have a really hard time believing my father is capable of this, but I’m starting to think I don’t know him at all. The man I grew up with would never have condoned what’s going on at section 31, and I don’t understand what changed.”

“All Dad ever talks about now is the war with the Klingons,” she says softly. “He wants the war. I don’t understand him. I don’t understand what’s poisoning his mind, or his soul. I have—we have to stop him. The Federation wouldn’t survive a war.”

Your father is holding my family hostage,” Khan says. “And I have no reason to think he would not simply kill them all if he thinks I am working against him.”

Carol flushes and breaks off a piece of donut, crumbling it in her fingers. “Is that really going to stop you?” she asks after a moment. “Or do you want the war?”

“I do not want the war,” Khan says. “As for the rest of it—what do you think I can do to help you? Why should I? Your father’s scientists held me captive and tortured me, experimented on me, for six weeks. Tell me, Carol, why should I bother helping them?”

“You’re not helping them,” Carol says. “You’re helping the Federation. There are billions of people on Earth alone who could die in a war they didn’t ask for. Help me, and I’ll do everything I can to ensure your people stay safe, get awakened in this time.”
“I will consider it,” Khan says. True enough. “But what do you think I can do to help?”

“You’re a genius,” Carol says. “You—I went digging, read everything I could about you. You helped unify Earth when you were a teenager. You have to have an idea that could prevent interstellar war, or something.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says, inwardly amused that the person with the idea is actually Jill and not himself.

“Please,” Carol says quietly. “I know you probably hate my father and I’m not saying you don’t have a reason to, but please. Help me.”

It’s a gamble, but…everything in Khan insists that she’s being honest with him. “What if I told you I had allies?” he asks. “That we are working on a plan to do these things? What if I told you I had already gotten some of my family to safety, awake in this time?”

Her eyes widen dramatically and she instinctively looks around, although what she’s looking for Khan doesn’t know. “How?” she says. “How did you manage it?”

“I can’t tell you the details,” Khan says. “And the less you know, the safer it will be for you. What you don’t know you cannot let slip to someone else.” Including her father, but he doesn’t say that.


“At the moment—what do you know of personal shields?” Khan asks.

“The kind that block weapons fire or the kind that block transmissions and electronic signals?” Carol asks, clearly puzzled but going along.

“The former,” Khan says. “I am working on one, but the flow of power to the processor is not smooth, so it either overheats and shuts down or goes into hibernation mode.”

Carol drums her fingers on the table, thinking. “I’d need to see it,” she says. “Take it to my lab and analyze it. Off the top of my head my guess would be that there’s a flaw in the wire somewhere, or that the code to control the flow of energy doesn’t specify the exact frequencies and speed needed. It won’t default to a smooth path, you have to code it in, and if you’re off by even a millisecond it’ll throw the whole thing out of whack. It’s why most people give up on building them, because the specifications for the code are so finicky and impossible to get right.”

“We already changed out all the parts,” Khan says, thinking about her comments regarding the code. It makes sense; it is extremely aggravating and irritating, but it does make sense.

“Then yeah, it’s a code issue when you code in the path for the energy flow to the processor,” Carol says with a grimace. “I might be able to give you more specific advice if I saw it, but I’m not entirely certain of that. I’ve never built one myself.”

Khan nods. “I was unable to find anyone who had built a successful model,” he says.

“That’s because it’s considered pretty much impossible,” Carol says, smiling a little bit. “No one’s ever gotten the code right enough for it to work reliably. If you did get it working—that’d be a hell of an accomplishment.” She sighs and takes a sip of coffee. “Or maybe not, for you, I don’t know.”

Whether or not she’s fishing for information, Khan says nothing. Carol wraps her hands around her cup and looks at the table. “You made a lot of the design modifications to the ship—the one by Jupiter,” she says. “Didn’t you?”

“Because they’re gorgeous,” Carol says and flushes. “I mean, not necessarily aesthetically, but just—the ways you modified the warp core, and the ship’s capabilities at warp, that’s amazing. I never would have thought to try some of what you did to the ship. And for you to have these ideas, when you didn’t grow up with the technology—your brain is incredible.”

“Perhaps that is why I have the ideas,” Khan says mildly. “I am not bound by conventional wisdom.”

“That’s entirely possible,” Carol says. She breaks off another piece of donut, but crumbles it in her fingers rather than eat it. “Whoever—whoever you found to help you, I’m glad you found someone,” she says hesitantly. “I wanted to try and help you, after you got out of there, but…”

“But what?” Khan asks, although he can hazard a few guesses.

“But I didn’t know if you’d believe me, that I wanted to help you,” Carol says. “I’d have had to explain who I am, and given…I didn’t think you’d believe that I wasn’t working with my father. And I didn’t know what I could do for you. And I didn’t—I didn’t want to risk Dad finding out, because…I’m not sure what he’s capable of anymore. He—he scares me, and he’s my father.”

Khan finds it interesting that Carol can’t seem to meet his eyes. She glances at him and looks away, either at her coffee cup or the rapidly growing pile of crumbs that used to be a donut. He makes her uncomfortable, clearly, but the why has so many potential explanations he doesn’t bother analyzing them.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks simply.

“I don’t know,” Carol says uncertainly. “I guess—I mean, you’ve got plans, right? So really it’s not you asking me what you should do, it’s me saying I want to help if I can.”

“Can you get information on your father’s actions?” Khan asks.

“Maybe,” Carol says dubiously. “He’s…he’s not talking to me much these days, but I can try. What do you want to know?”

“Anything you can find out about what he is planning next,” Khan says, doubting she will get anything useful but it’s worth a try. “Or what he intends to do about the Klingons.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Carol says. She bites her lip, glances at Khan again. “You don’t—do you resent me? For not telling you the truth?”

“I do not,” Khan says. Resent isn’t the right word. He understands why she left, why she didn’t tell him the truth, and he’s honest enough to admit that had she told him she was Marcus’s daughter, he wouldn’t have taken it well.

But she saw him at his most vulnerable, at his weakest, and to know now that she is Marcus’s daughter galls him. He felt that he owed “Tara” a debt for giving him what comfort she could. Part of him still thinks he owes Carol that same debt, but the idea of owing anything to one of Marcus’s family—no.

In another time, he might have killed her for seeing him as she did. He would rather not do that now, simply for all the complications it would cause, but it does not mean he has to enjoy knowing that she has memories of him he doesn’t want anyone to have.
“I’m not—you know I would never tell anyone what I saw, right?” she asks hesitantly. “Not even my father.”

Unless he asks, Khan thinks, but limits himself to a nod.

Carol sighs. “Thank you,” she says softly.

“For what?” Khan asks.

“Not killing me,” she says, managing a weak smile. “I thought—when you contacted me and asked to meet, I knew you’d figured out who I was, and I wasn’t entirely sure you’d let me walk away.”

“Why? What purpose would killing you serve?” Khan asks.

“I saw you in section 31,” Carol says, soft but steady. “I can’t imagine you wanted anyone else to see you like that, and the fact that someone did and that someone was Admiral Marcus’s daughter—am I wrong?”

“No,” Khan says, pausing for a moment. “But killing you would cause more problems than it solved. I learned centuries ago not to kill anyone to ease my pride.”

She flushes, crumbling the last of the donut in her fingers. “Well, whatever, I’m still glad,” she says. “Obviously.”

Khan says nothing, but takes a sip of his coffee, waiting to see what Carol does next.

“I don’t have a way to contact you,” she says tentatively.

“No,” Khan says. “Do you need one?”

“I…I guess not,” Carol says. “Since you don’t want me to know what you’re doing, and since clearly you can reach me if you need to. But—if I do learn anything about what Dad’s doing, how do I get in touch with you?”

Fair enough point, Khan thinks. He gives her an anonymous email address and she writes it down on a paper notepad. Smart of her.

“I should go,” she says after tucking the paper away. “I have to get back to the lab and pretend to actually be doing something. I’m not really sure I can focus, but I have to…you know?”

“Yes,” Khan says, getting to his feet as Carol does the same. She sweeps the crumbs of her donut into a napkin and dumps it in the trash, followed by Khan’s untouched croissant. They walk toward the exit, and just outside the door Khan turns to look at Carol. “For what it is worth,” he says quietly, “I did appreciate your efforts to aid me when I was in section 31.” He touches her wrist, holding it for a moment and not-so-coincidentally planting the bug.

She flushes again and ducks her head. “Thank you.”

That’s his line, but Khan doesn’t comment. He nods, watching Carol look at him one last time and look away before she leaves, hurrying down the block.

When she is out of his sight, Cat and Konstantin come out of the bakery, both holding cups of coffee. “So,” Cat says. “It went well, da?”

“I believe so,” Khan says. “We shall see if she provides us with any useful information, or whether she tells Marcus anything.”
“Do you think it likely?” Konstantin asks. “The latter, that is.”

“I think it possible,” Khan says. “And plausible. She is—despite her actions in section 31, she is not a practiced liar, and she loves her father. She will find it difficult to lie to him. However, if he does not ask the questions, she has no need to lie, and I doubt she will bring up the subject on her own. Thus, we tell her very little.”


They do, arriving to find Andy and Katsuro on the porch, sitting on the floor drinking tea. “How’d it go?” Andy asks, looking up.


“Awesome. I’ll log in in a few and make sure it’s working properly.” Andy takes a sip of tea. “I don’t suppose she had any ideas about the shield?”

“She did, in fact,” Khan says, explaining what Carol told him.

“Oh, fuck,” Andy says when he finishes. “That’s impossible. The power needs of the shield fluctuate depending on who’s using it, the weapons fire it’s going to be blocking, how long it’ll be in use…there are a gazillion variables and manually coding the power needs for each one is practically impossible.”

“I think it doable, but not without effort,” Katsuro says. “A great deal of effort.”

“And time, which I’m not sure we have,” Andy says. He sighs and pushes his hair back, getting to his feet gracefully. “I’ll start running simulations to see if I can at least get some general baselines for power needs. After I check the bug uncle planted on Carol.”

“Where are the others?” Khan asks as Katsuro also gets up and the four of them go inside.

“Bishop, Anandi, and Maeve have their heads together over some of the data Magpie decrypted from Rickman’s computer,” Katsuro says. “Magpie is helping them with the computer queries. Matthew is using a different computer to get up to speed on today’s technology, and Alona is studying Klingon. I am not certain of Jake’s whereabouts and Jill is presumably at the archive.”

Khan frowns. “She would normally be done by now,” he says. He takes out his link and sends Jill a quick message, asking where she is.

“Well, let us start dinner, at least,” Cat says. “Jill would likely have contacted you if there was anything seriously wrong.”

Unless she was unable to, Khan thinks, a thought that does not lessen even as Ekaterina forces him to help make dinner. Jill does not respond to his message, and when Andy calls her she does not answer, either. By the time the meal is ready, they still have no idea where she is or what she might be doing. “And we can’t track her, because we never actually thought to bug our own people for location trackers,” Andy says, chewing her lower lip. “Maybe we should fix that.”

The front door bangs open just then and they all turn to see Jill walking in, closing the door with perhaps more force than necessary. As she gets closer, Khan sees fury in her eyes and in her flushed cheeks, and she takes a breath before saying anything. “Sorry I’m late,” she says, clearly working for calm but not quite managing it. “I had some…things to take care of.”

“What did you have to deal with?” Khan asks.
Jill literally growls. “Remember creepy head librarian who kept trying to hit on me? Yeah, today he tried to grope me in the stacks. So I broke his nose. Then we had to file incident reports, and he tried to swear I’d assaulted him only two other women came forward saying he’d been creepy toward them although he hadn’t gone for the grope. But all evidence of their prior reports was conveniently erased from the system, and the officer taking my statement asked me if I wouldn’t agree to just admit things got a little out of hand, he’d ensure I wasn’t charged with anything, but creepy librarian’s been there for so long and he’d hate to have his career ended this way and so much bullshit I told him to choke on it. That I was absolutely filing a report for sexual assault—the fucker shoved his hand up my uniform—and if Officer Asshole didn’t get out of my way I was going over his head to argue with his CO and file a report on him for obstructing justice and trying to intimidate a victim.” She takes a breath, shakes her head as if to clear it. “So he backed down, and I filed my report and saved a few local copies to make sure it didn’t disappear, and started a search to see where the other women’s reports went, and then I came here. And I am royally pissed, and really in the mood for a spar, so I am going to go change clothes and then find someone to spar with me. And no, we are not making plans to kill this asshole because I want him dishonorably discharged from Starfleet first, I want him to lose his pension and his status, and then we can make plans to kill him but I want the killing blow.”

Khan forces back the growl that wants to escape. Somewhat. That this man had laid hands on his Jill—this will not stand, and Jill should know him better than to think it will. He follows her up the stairs, shutting the door to their room firmly. “This will not be allowed to pass, Jill,” he says coldly, furiously. “This man assaulted you.”

“I’ve had worse in bars,” Jill says, stripping out of her uniform and into workout clothes efficiently. “And I’m not saying it will be allowed to pass. I’m saying it will be allowed to pass right now, until the legal system has had its way with him and has fired him with no pension and no benefits. Then, after he’s lost that, the we kill him.”

“And what if we leave Earth before this comes to pass?” Khan asks.

“Then he lives, and someone else decides what to do about him,” Jill says. “We have more important goals, Khan, and you do not get to make this decision for me. He groped me, not you, and I am an adult with free will and agency and perfect ability to make my own choices about revenge.” She settles her shirt into place with a sharp tug and sits down to pull on shoes. “You can spar with me or you can refuse, but either way I get to decide what happens with this creep.”

Khan moves closer to her, standing over her. “I will not—” he starts.

“You will,” Jill says firmly, standing up and shoving him back a step. “You absolutely will, or we’re rethinking this entire relationship. I told you, Khan. I may not have your advantages and I may not have your intelligence, but I am an adult with my own opinions and I won’t be less than your equal.”

She shoves him again and he locks his hands around her wrists, tight enough to hold her in place, not enough to bruise. “Don’t push me,” he says softly, meeting her dark eyes.

“Don’t push me,” Jill snaps. “You want to manhandle me? Make yourself feel better because I won’t let you exercise nothing but pride and temper? Then do it, Khan, but if you expect me to roll over and bare my throat willingly you’re deluding yourself, and if you think that I’ll just forgive and forget if you go behind my back on this one, you’re blind. He’s my target, my choice, and back. Off.”

Khan tightens his grip on Jill’s wrists without realizing it, only snapping into focus when she inhales sharply. Abruptly, he releases her, so suddenly she stumbles back. “If you ever touch me
like that again, it'll be the last time you touch me,” she says evenly. “I don’t need a protector and I
don’t need a champion. I need a **partner**.”

“God knows why,” Khan says without meaning to but he is angry and the guard on his tongue has
slipped. “You want me, you say you love me, but you refuse to hear the same from me and you
refuse to believe me when I say I do not want to leave you. What in that, Jill, is wanting a partner?
What is that, if not distrust and fear? I never lied to you, Jill, not once, and I could have so, so
many times. Why do you refuse to believe I tell you the truth? Why do you refuse to believe I
could—“

“Stop it,” she says, color high in her cheeks. “That’s not—we’re not arguing about that and I am
not going to let you—“

“You forget,” Khan says softly. “You are not *my* keeper, either. You do not “let” me do anything. I
do what I will, as I will.”

“Yes, because you’ve succeeded in that so *well* up to this point,” Jill throws at him.

Khan inhales, his hand flexes at his side, and he forces himself to stillness before he lays hands on
Jill again. Instead, he turns and leaves, hurrying down the stairs and leaving the house before
anyone can ask questions. Cat calls something after him but he ignores her, swiftly finding a place
to take to the sky and blot out the last few hours.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

We will be leaving this planet once we can.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your kind words, guys, it helped. I'm slowly getting back on the writing horse, but I do ask you to be a bit patient with me as I'm still pretty depressed and grieving, and writing this is sometimes really easy and sometimes really difficult.

By the time Khan touches down in front of the house full dark has fallen, and only his sharp eyes make out Jill sitting on the steps. Khan can’t tell in the dark if she’s been crying, but something in the line of her face makes him think the answer is yes.

She stands up as he walks closer, hands shoved in the pockets of her hoodie. “I’m sorry,” she says when he gets close enough. “I was angry and I said things I shouldn’t have. That doesn’t mean I want you to do anything about creepy librarian guy, but…I’m sorry.” Her voice wobbles but doesn’t quite crack, but she ducks her head, hair falling around her face.

Khan’s remaining anger melts away in the face of her upset, and he takes the stairs to her, smoothing his thumb over her cheek and not surprised to feel damp skin. “I also ask your forgiveness,” he says. “As the insulted party, it is of course your right to decide the fate of your attacker.”

“Pax,” Jill says softly.

“Pax,” Khan agrees and folds his wings around her. Jill sniffs and wraps her arms around his waist, holding on tight. He strokes her hair, pressing his lips to the top of her head. “It’s all right,” Khan murmurs. “I am not going anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” Jill murmurs back. “I know I’m not…I’m not being fair to you. But I just—I never claimed to be straightforward and I never claimed I didn’t have issues.”

“No,” Khan says, rubbing the back of her neck. “You have always been honest with me about your insecurities, but there are some I think you do not recognize.”

“What do you mean?” Jill asks.

Khan takes a moment, choosing his words carefully. “Your parents,” he says finally. “They may love you, but they did not meet your needs. They never instilled a sense of confidence in you about your own worth as a human being. Kitten, you were a child when they put the burden of your nightmares on you, rather than comfort you and reassure you. You believe in your skills, and you believe in your own competence, but you do not believe you have inherent worth as a person. You don’t believe you are worthy of a romantic partner, regardless of who that partner is.”
“That’s not fair,” Jill says, but she doesn’t pull away. “You make it sound like I have a complete lack of self-esteem.”

“You do,” Khan says simply. “You have no lack of confidence when it comes to your professional skills, even the illegal ones. But you think I will leave you because you are not interesting enough, or special enough, or anything enough. Kitten, you gave me my family back. You offered me your help when you had no reason to and every reason to refuse, and you are continuing to help me actively work against Starfleet, the organization you have served your entire adult life. I owe you more than I will ever be able to repay, and you know that even if you dislike it. But I am not with you because I feel obligated to be so, Jill. I never saw or used sex or romance as things to be paid or calculated.”

“Then why?” Jill whispers.

“Because you are, in every way that counts, a superior human,” Khan says, lowering his forehead to her hair. “Because you are stronger than you know, because you care in ways I never could or will. You give of yourself freely, something I have never done.”

“You do,” Jill says. “You give your family everything.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But you give to anyone you think needs your help, whether you know them or not. I do not. You have a sense of empathy I do not, and you think of yourself last.”

Jill says nothing to this, but she presses her head harder against his chest. “I thought from the moment I spoke to you that you reminded me of my sisters, that you would like them,” Khan says. “That they would like you. And they do, kitten. They see what I see in you. Strength, perception, intelligence, compassion. They see your generosity, your moral code, and they approve of you. You are one of my family now, Jill, and I don’t say that lightly.”

“If—“ Jill stops, clears her throat. “If I’m one of your family, then you don’t owe me anything,” she says on the second try. “Family doesn’t have to be paid back, it’s just part of being a family.”

“It may not need to be repaid, but the debt is there,” Khan says.

“Maybe,” Jill says. She takes a breath to steady herself. “I love you so much it makes me stupid,” she says softly. “And I’m so, so scared of you leaving, because I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about you and if you…if you left when this is all over I don’t think I’d ever get over it. I’d give up almost anything to stay with you but I’m afraid to trust you’d do the same for me because I don’t want you to have to make that choice. I don’t want you to have to choose between me and your family.”

“But you are my family,” Khan says. “Your family is my family. Andy is Rani’s descendant, the only link to her I have in this time. We are all in this together, Jill, and when Marcus is dealt with, we will decide as a group what we do next.”

“All or nothing?” Jill asks hesitantly.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“I’m tired,” she says after a moment. “I’m just… I’m tired.”

“Then let us go inside and make our goodnights, and we can go to bed,” Khan says, kissing her hair.

“Yeah, okay.” It still takes a minute for Jill to pull back; Khan folds his wings back and follows her
inside.

“Hey,” Jake says, looking up from his PADD. “I have good news, the weapons are ready. Aktok would like it if everyone getting a weapon showed up to collect theirs so they can ensure everything is acceptable. Everyone in here is fine with going tomorrow morning our time, are you?”

“Yes,” Khan says. He looks at Jill. “Do you want to come as well?”

“I can’t, I’ve got to go back to the archive and argue my case,” she says. “We have a preliminary hearing tomorrow at eleven, and I have to be there.”

“Good luck,” Jake says.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” Jill says. “I go there and say he shoved his hand up my skirt after weeks of harassment and inappropriate behavior. He denies it all, and the judge figures out what next and which one of us to believe.”

“Who’s the judge?” Jake asks.

Jill shakes her head. “I don’t know. I won’t know until tomorrow.”

“I could find out,” Magpie says, looking up. “Do you want me to?”

“Sure,” Jill says. “I doubt I’ll know whoever it is, but I might as well.”

“On it,” Magpie says and turns back to her computer, Matthew right next to her.

“Where is everyone else?” Khan asks, looking around the room and not seeing Maeve, Bishop, or Anandi.

“They are upstairs, discussing some of the data from Rickman’s computer and some other data Magpie acquired for us,” Cat says. “She was able to get into one of our gang of seven’s computer and download information.”

“Which person?” Khan asks.

“Keroack,” Cat says.

“Was he one of the ones we bugged?” Jake asks.

“He was,” Jill says. “But he’s based out of San Francisco, so we haven’t been able to really keep tabs on him.”

“What is he doing in San Francisco?” Jake asks.

“Starfleet Medical,” Magpie says, glancing up. “He’s in their virology department. He is not, however, one of the ones dying.”


“Yes,” Khan says. “Our blood combined with viruses can do many powerful things.”

“Like what?” Jake asks. “Or do I not want to know?”

“We could theoretically create a virus powerful enough to kill millions,” Khan says. “Or,
conversely, the antidote to a disease that currently has no cure.”

“Could you cure Andorian flu?” Jake asks curiously.

“Possibly,” Khan says. “If we were to become infected with the virus, we would recover, but I am not certain the antibodies in our systems after would be able to cure the disease. It would depend on how much scientists know about it these days. In our original time, there were things we could not cure, such as certain cancers.”

Jill slips her hand into his and squeezes. Khan smiles a little, looking at her. “It’s all right,” he says.

“I know,” she says. “Okay. I am really, really tired and going to bed, so goodnight to all of you. What time are you leaving here tomorrow morning?”

“About eight,” Jake says.

“Then I’ll see you before I leave,” Jill says. “Night, guys.”

Khan says his goodnights and follows Jill up the stairs to their room. She undresses quickly, changing into a tank top and panties, and braids her hair back loosely for sleep. “Back in a minute,” she says, ducking into the bathroom.

Before she comes back, Khan changes as well and folds back the covers. He takes a seat on the bed, absently picking up his PADD to read through his messages, but finds nothing of interest before Jill comes back in.

She walks over to him, moving the PADD aside and standing between his knees, running her fingers through his hair and scratching his scalp. It tingles pleasantly, and Khan leans back into her hands. “Sometimes I can’t tell if you’re part cat or part bird,” Jill says fondly.

“Neither,” Khan says, resting his hands on her hips. “Or possibly both.”

“Possibly,” Jill says, leaning down to kiss him. “Are we good? You and me?”

“Yes,” Khan says although it’s not completely true. “We are.”

“I’m trying to believe you,” Jill says softly. “I’m just…I’m trying.”

“I know,” Khan says, sliding his hands around to her back and under her tank top, scratching her back. Jill groans in pleasure and arches into his hands. “I am not going anywhere,” he says, dragging his short nails down her back. “Not without you.”

She shudders, although Khan thinks that has more to do with his hands than his words. “I would very much like to have sex with you,” she says, a little breathless. “Yes?”

“Yes,” Khan says and pulls her down on the bed with him, rolling them over so she’s under him. “I want to taste you,” he says, kissing her jaw, her throat. “I want my mouth on you.”

“I’m pretty much never going to say no to that,” Jill says, gasping when he bites her.

“As I thought,” Khan says, sliding down her body, leaving a trail of kisses and bites on his way. Jill pulls off her tank top to give him more access, and he slides her panties down her legs and tosses them away. “I should shave you again,” he murmurs, brushing his fingers over the short hair between her legs. “Leave you bare and sensitive for me.”

“God, that was fantastic when you did it,” Jill says with a groan. “Maybe tomorrow or the day
“Yes,” Khan says, nudging her legs further apart. “Then perhaps I can take you to this club.”

She shivers all over and her breath catches in her throat. “If—if you wanted,” she says, her voice shaky.

“I do,” Khan says, slowly stroking her labia with two fingers, not really entering her. “I rather like the idea of having you in chains, perhaps held up so everyone could see you but not touch you. No one touches you but me. But to let them watch, to see how beautiful you are, how good you would be for me…yes. That would be acceptable.”

“What would you do to me?” Jill asks, swallowing a whimper.

“Anything I wanted,” Khan says softly. “And you would thank me for it and beg for more.”

“I always do,” Jill whispers.

“Yes,” Khan whispers back, moving to lie between her legs, spreading her open with gentle fingers. “You do.”

He licks her, tasting her with one slow press of his tongue and smiling to himself when she moans. She’s already wet for him, silk under his lips and against his tongue, growing wetter as he licks her, as he flicks his tongue against her clit and grazes it with his teeth.

He lets her come once from his mouth before he pulls back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking down at her sprawled out on the bed, flushed and momentarily sated. “Turn over, kitten,” he says, moving out of the way so she can.

Jill draws her knees up under her, resting her forehead on her crossed arms. “Fuck me,” she says. “Please.”

“Yes,” Khan says, quickly stripping out of his pants and crawling over her, kissing the nape of her neck. She pushes back against him and he bites her, holding her still with his teeth as he pushes into her.


Khan bites her again, hard enough to mark and just low enough to hide under her uniform. She cries out, fingers curling in the sheets, tilting her head to the side to give him more access to her throat. “Please,” Jill begs. “Khan, please.”

“Yes,” Khan murmurs against her skin. His hands close on her hips, enough to keep her still, and he drives into her over and over, until she’s sobbing for breath, hands clawing at the sheets, arching under him and out of her head with need.

“Please,” Jill begs, over and over. “Please, Khan, I’ll do anything, just let me come, please.”

He doesn’t let her, not until he’s about to come himself and he hears tears in Jill’s voice. “Now,” he whispers in her ear, sliding a hand down to pinch her clit. She wails when she comes, spasming around him and enough to send him over the edge, his vision whiting out for a minute.

When he comes back to himself, he’s lying flat on top of Jill, and he can feel her heart pounding—or maybe it’s his, Khan actually isn’t sure. Either way, she doesn’t ask him to move and he stays where he is, brushing a kiss over the marks he left on her throat.
After a few minutes, Jill sighs and stretches a little; Khan takes that as a sign to move off her, shifting to his knees on the bed. She murmurs something when he does, but he doesn’t catch what it is. “God,” she says, more clearly. “I’m going to feel that for a while.”

“Yes,” Khan says, possessive satisfaction humming in his veins. “You are.”

“Did you break the skin?” Jill asks, rolling onto her back and touching the mark on her neck.

“No,” Khan says. “But it will bruise.”

“It will also hide under my uniform, thankfully,” Jill says. “I like it for now, but I’ll need you to treat it in the morning.”

“I will,” Khan says, running a hand up and down her thigh. “Will the dermal regenerator help it?”

“Yeah, it should,” Jill says. “I was thinking more just the anesthetic cream, but we could use the regenerator. That’ll at least make it less noticeable if my uniform slips or something.”

Khan nods. “I think that would be prudent.”

“In the morning,” Jill says. “Right now I want to go wash up quickly and then I really do want to try and get some sleep.” She stretches again and rolls out of bed, pulling on her tank top and ducking into the bathroom. Khan takes his turn after she comes back into the bedroom, and settles into bed next to her. Jill tucks her head against his shoulder and fits herself against his side, her hand over his heart.

“Love you,” she murmurs against his skin.

The wind howls around them, sharp and cold; Khan raises an arm to cover his eyes, squinting against the storm to try and find the path. “This way,” Alona shouts over the crack of thunder. “There’s an overhang up above.”

He scrambles after her up the debris-strewn hill, watching as best he can where she puts her feet so he can do the same. This entire area trembles when the thunder booms; one solid lightning strike and it might all collapse. But they have no other options at this point.

The nine of them crowd under the stone, and it’s not much shelter but at least the wind quiets enough for Khan to hear, and his eyes stop watering after a moment. “We have two hours,” Cat says. “Khan, which direction do we need to go?”

Why she’s asking him, Khan doesn’t know; and then he realizes he can feel an inward pull, something guiding him toward Jill. “That way,” he says, turning to face it. “She’s not far.”

“Then we will take five minutes to catch our breath and go,” Cat says. “Is she hurt?”

Khan shakes his head. “No. She is…angry.”

“I’d be furious too, if I were in her place,” Alona says.

“As would we all,” Bishop says. “I think—we are in the eye of the storm. Let’s move, quickly, before the other side hits us.”

Khan takes point as they head out, following the inward pull and wondering where it came from, whether Jill can sense him the way he can feel her.

They make it off the hill just in time; lightning flashes brightly, thunder roars, and the hill shakes
hard enough to start a small avalanche. Khan glances back once and keeps moving. They don’t have much time.

He wakes suddenly and without enough oxygen in his lungs, and gulps in two breaths before he manages to steady himself. Jill sleeps peacefully against his chest, for which Khan is grateful. The last thing he wants to do is wake her.

He wonders, though, about the dream, about the link he’d felt to Jill. Empathy has never been quantified in humans, but neither have psychic powers, and they have all had enough dreams for Khan to believe their origin is psychic in nature. But dreams are one thing. An empathic link…that seems unlikely to develop now.

Still. Anything is possible.

Feeling restless and unwilling to try sleeping again, Khan carefully eases out of bed. Jill sighs and moves over into the warmth he left behind; Khan watches her for a moment to make sure she won’t wake, then slips out of the room.

When he goes downstairs, he finds Anandi in the living room, a mug of tea next to her and her journal in her lap. “Buena noches,” she says, glancing up. “The water is still hot, if you would like tea.”

“I would,” Khan says, going to make it. He settles on a green, and returns to the living room with his mug, sitting down on the ottoman. “Could you not sleep?”

“I had odd dreams,” Anandi says, marking her place in the journal and closing it. “I decided to write them down before I forgot what might be crucial details. And I have always enjoyed the night hours, as well you know. Could you not sleep?”

“I also had odd dreams,” Khan says. “The usual elements were there, but there was something different this time.” He tells Anandi about the link to Jill, curious to see her reaction.

She frowns thoughtfully, tapping her fingers against the cover of her journal. “Precognition and empathy are both psychic talents, neither of which have ever been quantified in regular humans,” she says. “As you know. If we believe the dreams to be precognitive in some aspects, it cannot be so impossible to believe that empathy could also develop. You and Jill have an intense emotional bond already. Perhaps whoever or whatever is triggering the dreams decided to assist in other ways. Do you feel any different now that you are awake?”

“I do not,” Khan says. Whatever he felt in the dream, he does not have that inward connection now.

“Then perhaps it is a sign of things to come, or perhaps it is just another mystery,” Anandi says. “I wish I had a more concrete hypothesis to give you, hermano, but there are too many variables here for me to truly develop one.”

“Tell me about your dream,” Khan says.

“An old amphitheatre under a dark purple sky.” Anandi says. “A rising storm, wind cutting sharply and lightning flashing between the clouds. The nine of us were in the middle of the theatre, waiting for our opponents to arrive. I did not see Jill or Jake.”

“Were the stands full or empty?” Khan asks.

“Empty,” Anandi says. “But I had the sense we were being watched.”
Khan nods. “Was the amphitheatre falling apart, or just old?”

Anandi tilts her head, thinking about it. “I had the sense it was very old, and not particularly stable,” she says slowly. “One lightning strike could cause half of it to fall apart.”

That fits in with the rest of the dreams. “What about time?” Khan asks. “Did you have the feeling we had little of it?”

“I did,” Anandi says. “Whatever we needed to accomplish, we had to do it quickly or it would not be a reachable goal.”

“We have little time now,” Khan says. “But we also lack a plan for our final goal.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “But…there is something. You have an idea. Tell me what it is?”

“It is not my idea,” Khan says. “I would prefer not to share it without Jill’s permission.”

Anandi raises her eyebrows. “Are there to be secrets within our family?” she asks.

Khan hesitates, torn between wanting to protect Jill’s thoughts and wanting an opinion from a more objective source. He knows he can trust Anandi to analyze the situation, regardless of her familiarity with the Klingons. “All right,” he says. “But I would ask that you not share this with the others just yet.”

“I will not,” Anandi says. “Tell me what Jill is thinking.”

“The Klingons are a warrior species,” Khan says. “They settle disputes on the battlefield, and they do not respect pacifistic species very much. Jill thinks we can challenge them to a trial by combat. The nine of us against their best warriors. When we win, we can negotiate terms of peace with the Federation. Then we can take those terms back to the Federation, and make our own demands in exchange for the treaty.”

Anandi’s eyes widen briefly and she drums her fingers against her journal again. “This…has potential,” she says, thinking out loud. “This could be a very good scenario. But why would the Klingons agree to the trial by combat? If we are not officially from the Federation, which we would not be, why would they even bother to fight us in the first place?”

“We will need to entice them,” Khan says. “They love opera, and they admire warriors. If we were to put together a demonstration for them, a show of our fighting skills with a performance, I think they would be interested enough to agree.”

“Then it is a good thing the nine of us are our best fighters and our best singers,” Anandi says. “Can we defeat the Klingons in battle?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “They are worthy opponents, but not superior.”

“Then I will support this plan,” Anandi says. “As, I think, will the rest of us. Is Jill uncertain of our reaction?”

“I think she feels uncertain about the plan in general,” Khan says. “And she is essentially volunteering us for something in which she cannot fully participate. She dislikes that.”

“I take it a regular human would not match a Klingon in battle,” Anandi says.

“If the human were sufficiently trained and skilled, it is possible,” Khan says. “Jill has the skill,
and she makes up in dexterity and speed what she lacks in pure strength. But in a tournament scenario, she would be outnumbered and her size would work against her.”

“Not necessarily,” Anandi says thoughtfully. “If we were able to engineer the rules to allow certain types of technology, she could hit and run—if we were to distract an opponent, she could come in from behind and attack. She has mentioned that she has certain pieces of equipment that allow her to essentially hide in plain sight.”

“But she cannot heal the way we can,” Khan says. “Were she to get injured…”

“You can’t protect her from everything, brother,” Anandi says quietly. “What we are attempting to do is dangerous for all of us.”

“I will not risk her life,” Khan says. “Not in that scenario.”

“You may not have a choice,” Anandi says simply. “It will be her decision whether or not she engages in the fight.”

She’s right, but Khan scowls anyway, irritated beyond measure. He also has to admit that having Jill in the fight might make him a liability—if he cannot focus because he is distracted by concern for her, things could go very badly.

“What about Jake?” Anandi asks. “Would he be able to fight?”

“If Jill can, Jake can,” Khan says. “He is less of the type to sneak in and stab someone in the back, but he is a skilled fighter for a regular human, and he fights dirty when he has to. We would need to provide him with some kind of armor, I think, something to lessen the impact of blows or weapons. Jill, too, would benefit from that so long as it does not impact her ability to hide.”

“I think we all would,” Anandi says. “How hard would it be to create?”

“I am not entirely certain,” Khan says. “The personal shield I hoped to construct may not be able to be completed before we would need it. Basic armor should be easier, since the power needs would just create a basic force field rather than something that fluctuates. We might also be able to build physical armor that would not interfere with movement.”

“I should think that already exists, does it not?” Anandi asks. “There has to be some kind of armor for security forces?”

“Surprisingly, not that I have seen,” Khan says. “I am sure the materials exist, but Starfleet does not use body armor.”

“That is remarkably idiotic of them,” Anandi says crisply.

“I do not disagree,” Khan says.

“Starfleet in general seems to have some very large blind spots,” Anandi says. “I have been reading history, to catch up on everything that happened since we left Earth. I appreciate the humans created an interplanetary governmental association, and a unified Earth is something we all wanted, but there are things I expected to see that I do not, and things that make no sense to me. The advances in medicine are impressive, however. I do give them credit for that.”

“They have achieved some impressive things,” Khan says. “But they claim to be more of an egalitarian society than they are, and they have an underbelly that they do nothing about. Have you talked to Magpie or Andy about their backgrounds?”
“I have heard some of it,” Anandi says. “And yes, that is a definite problem. A society that willingly ignores children in need…” She shakes her head. “We were not perfect rulers but at least we did our best for the vulnerable among us.”

“We did,” Khan says.

“What will we do, hermano, when this is all over? What do you see us doing after we resolve our current situation?” Anandi takes a sip of tea, studying him.

“Leaving Earth,” Khan says. “There is nothing for us here, and a galaxy to explore. I would have us see what we can find, perhaps a planet of our own to colonize, or perhaps we should just travel until we find something of interest.”

“Will Jill agree to leave Earth? Will Andy and Magpie?” Anandi asks.

“Yes, I think so,” Khan says. “Jill wants to explore for the sake of exploring. Andy and Magpie will go along because they will not leave her, and so long as the three of them have each other they will be fine. Jake I am less certain about.”

“Well,” Anandi says. “We will invite him, and he can choose whether to accept or decline.”

“Indeed,” Khan says.

He hears footsteps and looks up to see Andy coming down the stairs, dressed in a black kimono with his hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. “Is this the insomniacs club?” she asks, taking a seat next to Anandi.

“It appears so,” Anandi says. “Did you also have odd dreams?”

“I did,” Andy says. “Odder than usual. There were the usual themes—a storm, things falling apart, a battle about to happen—but everyone was on a giant chessboard, and mixed with the people were life-size pieces. I couldn’t tell what color our people were using, but the pieces didn’t appear to be moving, they were just...there.”

“Were we replacing some of the pieces?” Anandi asks.

“Yes, I think so,” Andy says.

“Were Jill or Jake there?” Khan asks.

“Jake wasn’t,” Andy says. “Jill was. I think she was actually the queen.”

“That would not surprise me,” Anandi says.

“No, me either,” Andy says. “She’s kind of the linchpin for our whole situation. Take her out, and it starts to fall apart.”

“So we will keep her safe,” Anandi says.

“Always,” Khan says quietly in Hindi.

“I think I need tea,” Andy says. “Would either of you like some?”

“I would like another cup, si,” Anandi says. “What are you going to make?”

“There’s a green-jasmine blend I like,” Andy says. “Does that appeal to you?”
“It does,” Anandi says. “Gracias.”

“De nada,” Andy says. “Uncle?”

Khan shakes his head. “No, thank you.”

Andy nods and gets up, heading for the kitchen. “A chess match,” Anandi muses. “Well, at least we play chess, even if Go is the far superior game. Does Andy play? Or Jill?”

“Andy does,” Khan says. “Jill prefers poker, or cards in general. She likes to gamble.”

“Which goes a long way toward explaining her idea regarding the Klingons,” Anandi says.

“It does,” Khan says. “Or her impulse to offer me her help in the first place. She took a gamble I was telling the truth and that I would not harm her for knowing.”

“No,” Anandi says softly. “She didn’t take a gamble there, Khan. She saw you too clearly to need one.”

“She reminded me of you,” Khan says. “And Cat, and Alona. She is sharp, she can analyze a situation quickly, and she has a short and fierce temper.”

Anandi laughs. “That does sound familiar,” she says. “And I have observed a very strong similarity to Cat myself.”

“I call her kitten,” Khan admits, slipping into Hindi. “She is smaller and younger than Cat, I thought it appropriate.”

“It is, very much so,” Anandi says in the same language. “When did you know she was yours?”

“Only a few days after we met,” Khan says. “There was a…situation.” He tells Anandi about Dante, about Jill’s reaction and his own reaction to Jill.

“Ay me,” Anandi says when he finishes explaining. “Well, better you than anyone else, I think. No one else would have been able to meet her needs.”

“That was my thought, as well,” Khan says.

“What was your thought?” Andy asks, returning with two mugs. He hands one to Anandi and takes his seat again.

“That Jill was fortunate to have Khan when she was drugged with Dante,” Anandi says. “Gracias.”

“Oh,” Andy says. “Yeah, she was. Is she still asleep?”

“As far as I know,” Khan says. “I dreamed tonight, so I doubt she will unless she has a regular nightmare.”

“Which is entirely possible,” Andy says with a sigh. “But I’ll cross my fingers not.”

Khan nods, taking a sip of his now-cool tea. “Do you get nightmares often?” Anandi asks Andy.

“Once in a while,” Andy says. “They get worse in the summer, but better in winter.”

“Why is that?” Anandi asks.
“I landed on the streets in June,” Andy says. “Those first few months were…difficult. After that I was on coke, so I didn’t notice or care as much, but the first couple months on the streets I almost killed myself twice. But the last time I ever used—well, the first time I got clean—was in December, and it’s easier to remember that.”

“Did you relapse?” Anandi asks.

“Once,” Andy says. “Well, sort of. The first time I got clean it lasted all of two weeks and then I slipped up. The second time I lasted a month. The third time I lasted years, until I slipped up once and spent a week crying on Jill’s shoulder, terrified I’d just lost everything I’d worked so hard to gain. I’ve been clean since then. I still go to meetings, and I have a sponsor I talk to regularly, and I’ll be fighting the demons the rest of my life, but I’m clean.”

“It takes a great deal of strength and courage to overcome an addiction,” Anandi says, reaching over to touch Andy’s hand. “It is an insidious disease. Are there medications to help?”

“There are but I didn’t have access to them when I got clean,” Andy says. “You don’t get a whole lot of decent medical care on the streets. Magpie’s mother died when Magpie was six, because she caught an infection and they couldn’t find a doctor to take care of her.”

“How old was she?” Anandi asks.

“Twenty,” Andy says.

Anandi closes her eyes for a moment. “Yes,” she says when she opens them. “We will be leaving this planet once we can. It has nothing to recommend it.”

“We may not find anything better,” Khan says.

“We will look,” Anandi says firmly.

“I’m up for it,” Andy says. “Always did want to get into space.”

“What about Magpie?” Anandi asks.

“She’s game,” Andy says. “So long as she has me and Jill, and we have each other, we’re okay with anything. As long as Magpie has a computer to play with, her sketchpad, and coffee, she can go anywhere.”

“Bueno,” Anandi says. “Then we will plan to leave. Surely there is a place in this galaxy we can make a home for ourselves.”

“I would think so,” Khan says.

“I think so,” Andy says. “If you want my opinion.”

“But of course I do,” Anandi says. “You are family. One should always value the opinions of one’s family.”

Andy smiles a little, taking a sip of tea. “Thank you.”

“Do you play Go?” Anandi asks.

“I don’t,” Andy says. “I’m decent at chess, though. Do you play that?”

“On occasion, although I prefer Go,” Anandi says. “Although I understand there is now a three-
“There is,” Andy says. “Would you like to learn? I have a set.”

“I think I would,” Anandi says. “Since I doubt I will sleep again tonight.”

“I’ll go get it,” Andy says, getting to her feet.

“Will you sleep again, brother?” Anandi asks Khan.

“I doubt it,” Khan says. “Perhaps I will work on the personal shield while you play chess, or sketch out ideas for body armor.”

Anandi nods. “You can give me strategy tips,” she says. “Since chess is not my strongest game.”

“Andy is quite good, both as a player and a teacher,” Khan says. “I think you will do fine.”

“Has she beaten you?” Anandi asks.

“Once,” Khan says. “But chess is my strongest game.”

“This is true,” Anandi says. She takes a sip of tea. “I spent more time than I care to think about tonight reading through data that should not exist,” she says. “They called us barbaric, but we did not experiment on people like this.”

“We did not,” Khan says. “There has to have been a purpose to the...experiments and the tests.”

“I am sure there was one,” Anandi says. “And we will find it.”

Khan nods. “Perhaps not before we leave Earth, but we will,” he says.

“If we do not find out before we leave Earth, we will have unfinished business to return for at some point,” Anandi says. “But we will worry about that when we come to it.”

Andy returns with a box, setting it on the coffee table. “All right,” he says. “Let me teach you how to beat me at chess.”

Anandi laughs. “Let us begin, then.”
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

You cannot be her white knight.

Chapter Notes

If you are in the Boston area or thereabouts, I hope you are surviving this Fimbulwinter. Meanwhile, where I am it's about 60 and sunny. Please don't hate me.

Comments, criticism, all kinds of feedback gladly welcomed and appreciated. Flames will be used to melt the snow in Boston.

The three of them stay up the rest of the night, fortified with tea and a box of cookies. Andy teaches Anandi to play 3-D chess; Khan researches options for body armor and runs simulations to determine power needs for the personal shield. Around four in the morning, Alona comes downstairs to join them, looking sleepy and making a beeline for coffee before she says anything. “I had one of those dreams,” she says around a yawn, settling on the couch next to Anandi. “We were on a spaceship, I think, just after a battle, we were all covered in blood and dirt and our clothes were wrecked, and some of us were injured.”

“Were Jake and Jill there?” Khan asks.

“Aye,” Alona says. “They were, although I don’t remember in what shape. No one had died, though, that was something.”

“Had anyone gone into hibernation?” Anandi asks.

“What is hibernation?” Andy asks.

“No one had,” Alona says to Anandi. “And hibernation is a trick we have. If we are injured badly enough, our bodies essentially shut down and go into hibernation, a sort of self-induced healing coma. We stay in hibernation until our bodies have healed enough to allow us to come to consciousness.”

“That’s handy,” Andy says. “Could you get mistaken for a corpse while doing that, though?”

“There is a chance, but I mean, we still breathe and have a pulse, just a lot more slowly than normal,” Alona says. “And we have to be really badly injured for it to happen. We can’t consciously choose it.”

“Did it ever happen to you?” Andy asks Khan.

He shakes his head. “No. It happened to Matthew once, when the wars were at their worst. He was unconscious for thirty-four hours.”
“Longest day and a half of my life,” Alona says. “We knew the theory of hibernation but we’d never experienced it or seen it personally, and we weren’t entirely certain he was going to wake up.”

Andy winces. “I’m sorry.”

“Eh, he lived,” Alona says with a shrug. “And now we know how it works firsthand.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “I always was surprised the scientists never tried to force one of us into hibernation.”

“So was I,” Alona says. “But whatever. What on Earth are you playing?”

“Three-dimensional chess,” Andy says, studying the board. “And Anandi’s about to…yes. Check.” He moves a piece.

“Hm.” Anandi’s hand hovers over the board. “Ah,” she says after a moment, sounding pleased. “And thus I am out of check.”

“You are but you’ll be checkmated in three moves,” Andy says.

“Will I really?” Anandi sighs. “Well, I am still learning. Khan, do you see a way out of this?”

Khan looks at the board and shakes his head. “No, Andy is correct.”

“Then I concede the game,” Anandi says. “And I must find a Go board.”

“And what are you working on, oldest brother?” Alona asks.

“Designs for body armor,” Khan says. “There are a few different options we have.”

“Tell me more about them,” Alona says, leaning forward.

“A force field would be possibly the most straightforward,” Khan says. “One that follows the outline of the body. It would not necessarily block all attacks but would at least absorb some of the impact. There are a few different options for armored clothing, but what I would like to design is an armored suit of clothing that also generates a force field.”

“Best of both worlds,” Alona says, nodding. “Tell me more about the options for armored clothing. Does Starfleet use body armor?”

“They do not,” Khan says. “Something I find baffling, truth be told. But there are companies that make body armor, and the materials are not difficult to acquire. Here.” He hands the PADD to Alona, showing her the research he has been doing. “I would like your input.”

“Of course you would,” Alona says, studying the screen.

“I would like more tea,” Andy says, getting up. “Anyone else?”

“Por favor,” Anandi says. “Are you making the same blend as the last pot?”

“I can, yeah,” Andy says. “Unless you’d rather something else?”

“Are there any Oolong blends in the house?” Anandi asks.

“I think I have one,” Andy says, looking up to remember. “Yes. I do have one. I can make that.”
“I would appreciate that,” Anandi says. “Gracias.”

“Alona? Uncle?” Andy looks at them both.

“Pass,” Alona murmurs. “Khan, I need a notepad and a pencil.”

“I will have tea when you make it,” Khan says to Andy. He gets up, going to the bag of Magpie’s sketchpads and other art supplies, and takes out a small sketchpad and two pencils, bringing them back over to Alona.

“Thanks,” Alona says, opening the pad to a blank page. “Okay, so…are you thinking like a one-piece jumpsuit, or a coat, or a shirt and pants, or what?”

“Either a jumpsuit or shirt and pants,” Khan says. “The latter would be easier to get in and out of, but the former would have fewer points of entry.”

“So what if you did like a tunic and pants?” Alona asks. “Overlap them, that way you get more protection for the midsection and we can still piss when we need to. Or would that be too bulky and impede movement?”

“The layers would not add substantial bulk, but they might impede movement,” Khan says. “We would need to create a sample and test it.”

“Okay, but are we going to have time to create a sample, test it, and then produce enough for all of us?” Alona asks. “The force field might be a better option just for lack of time. Or are you thinking long term?”

“I am,” Khan says. “This galaxy is not at peace, and we may find ourselves in battle in the future. The Klingons aside, there are many things we have not explored yet and I am not so optimistic to think all alien species will come in peace. For our short-term objectives, yes, the force field would be easier, unless we can solve the problem with the personal shield first. But long term, I think we would be wise to outfit ourselves with armor.”

“What is the difference between the personal shield and a force field?” Anandi asks.

“Degree of complexity and ability,” Khan says. “The force field would blunt phaser attacks but not necessarily stop them, and would stop working altogether if it were hit too many times. The personal shield, as I want to develop it, would absorb phaser blasts or other ranged attacks and use the energy to bolster its own power. The force field requires one constant stream of energy. The personal shield’s energy requirements fluctuate depending on situation, and coding in all the variables is proving to be…difficult.”

“I see,” Anandi says. “Is it an achievable goal?”

“In theory yes,” Khan says. “In practicality, I am less certain. The concept is simple enough, but there are a plethora of variables and if we miss even one, or miscalculate by a fraction, the device will not work at all.”

“You did always love puzzles,” Anandi says, smiling.

Khan smiles. “This is a bit more complex than a jigsaw.”

Andy returns with a teapot on a tray and three mugs. “Oolong as requested, and I have a bit of honey if you’d like that,” she says, setting it down on the table and moving the chessboard aside. Anandi begins packing up the board and pieces and Andy pours tea, handing out mugs. Both Khan
and Anandi decline the honey but Andy adds a bit to her mug.

“I’m surprised we haven’t seen Jill,” Andy admits. “She’s usually a founding member of the insomniacs club.”

“She was rather sound asleep when I came downstairs,” Khan says. “I am hopeful she will sleep through the night.”

“I’d love it but it so rarely happens,” Andy says with a sigh.

“Why is this?” Anandi asks.

“She’s a terrible sleeper,” Andy says. “She either can’t fall asleep at all, or she wakes up with nightmares more nights than not. Sometimes she just stays up to avoid the possibility of nightmares. Or she’s on stims and they haven’t worn off enough for her to sleep yet. She also says she resents sleep because it’s a chunk of time in which she can’t do anything, but I think it’s more likely the nightmares.”

Anandi grimaces. “Are there medications to help this, these days?” she asks.

Andy waggles a hand. “Yes and no. There are medications to help you fall asleep, or to help you stay asleep, but we’ve yet to find anything that influences REM sleep in a positive fashion. Jill avoids taking sleeping pills because she’s afraid she’ll have a nightmare and not be able to wake up.”

“An understandable aversion,” Anandi says. “I would be interested to research possible options for medication to ease her nightmares, but I would need a lab and quite a bit of time. Perhaps someday.”


Jill pads into the living room rubbing her eyes, dressed in a tank top and cotton shorts. “I woke up and the bed was empty and I heard voices so here I am,” she says, covering a yawn. “Why are you all awake?”

Khan holds out a hand for her and she comes to him, unself-consciously climbing into his lap and resting her head against his shoulder. “We all had dreams,” he says, brushing her hair away from his mouth. “And none of us felt like sleeping again. Andy has been teaching Anandi to play three-dimensional chess, Alona is looking at options for body armor, and I have been researching body armor and working on simulations for the personal shield.”

“Cool,” Jill says. “I don’t know much about body armor, but Jake knows a bit. He has an armored jacket he uses when he goes undercover, and I think boots. He offered to get me a pair of the boots but they’re custom fit and I never had a chance to go with him to get them fitted.”

“Who makes them?” Khan asks.

“Oh, I forget,” Jill says, covering another yawn. “Some group of mercenaries out near the Neutral Zone. I think they’re a mixed-species group. I’m actually not sure Jake ever told me more about them.”

Khan slips a hand under Jill’s hair, rubbing the back of her neck. She sighs and nestles a little closer to him, warm and trusting in his lap. “I should make coffee if I’m going to stay awake,” she says after a moment. “Which I probably am because it’s after five and I needed to be up by seven anyway, and you guys are leaving at…eight?”
“Yes,” Khan says. “Why did you need to be up so early?”

“Stuff,” Jill says. “And I wanted to go for a long run before I have this hearing, because I’m going to be pissed and if I run off some of this mad I might stand a chance of holding my tongue when I need to.”

“Do you want company?” Khan asks. “We could go in an hour and be back on time.”

“No, it’s okay,” Jill says. “I’ll be fine.”

“How do you define long run?” Alona asks, glancing up from the tablet.

“Somewhere around fifteen, sixteen kilometers,” Jill says. “Which I know is nothing to you, but it works for me.”

“Even among my family, most of us aren’t distance runners the way Maeve and I are,” Alona says, grinning. “Bishop comes close, but the rest of us not really, and…hm, that gives me an idea.” She picks up the sketchpad, scrawling out something Khan can’t quite see with Jill in the way.

“I, for one, prefer the sprint,” Anandi says.

“Like a cheetah,” Khan tells Jill and Andy. “Faster than any of us for short distances, but not designed for a long chase.”

“Yes, but how do you define short distance?” Andy asks.

“Under ten kilometers,” Anandi says. “Preferably five or less, but if I push myself I can go for up to eight or nine.”

“Yeah, that’s not exactly what I’d call “short”,” Andy says, laughing. “But I don’t run at all.”

“Five kilometers isn’t that long,” Jill says. “I can get a pretty good pace if that’s all I’m running, but I’m sure I couldn’t keep up with Anandi.”

“Do you exercise at all?” Anandi asks Andy.

“I do yoga,” Andy says. “I got into it when I was getting clean, and I’ve kept it up. Haven’t had much time for it lately, but I try to at least do the Sun Salutations when I wake up.”

“I enjoy yoga,” Anandi says. “I am out of practice, but it should not be that difficult to resume. Jill, do you also practice yoga?”

“I do, yeah,” Jill says. “I studied yoga and ballet when I was training in gymnastics, and I’ve long since abandoned the ballet but I still do yoga when I can. I did Pilates, too, but that’s harder to do on your own. Mostly if it’s a way to increase flexibility and core strength I’ve studied it.”

“Why did you start gymnastics?” Anandi asks; a question Khan wonders himself.

“I wasn’t allowed to watch much screen as a kid, but when I was little, I remember watching some kind of gymnastics competition. I was, mm, three?” Jill hazards. “And I just fell in love with it, and I told my parents I wanted to do that. They were in favor of my finding a sport I wanted to do, and gymnastics was suitable, or something, so I started lessons. It turned out I was really good at it, plus I was the right size for it—I’ve always been tiny, unfortunately—so I kept it up.”

“Why was gymnastics suitable?” Anandi asks; a question Khan wonders himself.
“Oh, don’t ask,” Jill says. “It was both athletic and feminine, which is stupid but my parents have some blind spots.”

“Yes,” Khan says without meaning to.

“Don’t,” Jill murmurs to him. “I don’t want to argue with you about this now.” She stretches a little and sighs. “I want coffee, but I don’t want to move.”

“Poor baby,” Andy teases. “I am not making you coffee.”

“No, because you make terrible coffee,” Jill says. “Undrinkable even by Jake’s standards.”

“I don’t drink coffee, love, I never needed to know how to make it,” Andy says serenely.

“Yes, but you spend time with me and Magpie, and we both drink lots of it,” Jill says. “So you’d think you would have picked up the basics.”

“But I haven’t,” Andy says. “Which means that if you want coffee you have to make it yourself.”

“I know.” Jill groans and stretches again, getting up. “I’ll be back.” She shoves her hair back and heads for the kitchen.

“Jill does not drink tea?” Anandi asks, taking a sip of hers.

“It doesn’t have enough caffeine,” Andy says. “She drinks tea on occasion, but if she’s trying to stay awake she goes for coffee or stims.”

“Ah, I see,” Anandi says. “Is coffee still the most efficient caffeine source?”

“I don’t know if it’s the most efficient but it’s still the most popular,” Andy says. “One of the frontier planets, I forget which one exactly, has the perfect climate and soil for growing coffee beans, so they export tons. I mean, there are tons of other options for getting a caffeine buzz or a stimulant kick, but Jill prefers coffee.”

Anandi nods. “I prefer tea, but coffee is useful on occasion.”

“I just never got the taste for it,” Andy says, shrugging. He tucks a lock of hair back behind his ear. “Neither one were always available on the streets, and the coffee we usually did have access to was so vile I generally opted not to bother.”

“When did this start?” Anandi asks. “The street brats, that is. When did this group of people come to exist? How widespread are they?”

“Most major cities or metropolitan areas on the planet have some kind of street brats,” Andy says. “I don’t know how most of them work, though. We just know they exist. I don’t know how it got started, we never really talked about that. I mean, there are always going to be runaways, or people who get kicked out, and once you fall out of the Federation safety net it’s really hard to get back in unless you have help. Most street brats don’t.”

“How do you live on the streets? Tell me about this, if you would,” Anandi says.

Andy shrugs. “Most of us were on something,” she says. “I used coke, that was popular. Heroin. This stuff from Andor that we couldn’t get often but was amazing when we could. Alcohol. Anything we could get, really. We earned money as best we could. A lot of us worked as whores, some of us sold drugs, some did both. Odds and ends. Winter was hardest, because in spring and
summer we could sleep anywhere, but winters got cold and there wasn’t a lot of shelter. A lot of people died in winter because they got sick from the cold.”

Jill returns with a mug, folding herself down on the ottoman next to Khan. “What are we talking about?”

“How many escape the streets?” Anandi asks.

“Street brat survival,” Andy says. “Or lack thereof.”

“Street brat survival,” Andy says. “Or lack thereof.”

“How many escape the streets?” Anandi asks.

“One in a million,” Andy says. “Maybe one in a hundred thousand. Almost no one, at least not for very long. Some got out for a few years but couldn’t give up the drugs and ended back up on the streets. Some get out but they’re so sick with whatever they caught on the streets they die not long after. Some people die before they get the chance.”

“You and Magpie survived,” Alona says. “You got out, you stayed out.”

“We did,” Andy says, wrapping her hands around her mug. “Barely, but we made it. Can we talk about anything else now?”

“If not, really, I’d just rather not talk about it right now,” Andy says, taking a sip of tea.

“Jill,” Anandi says. “What is likely to happen at this hearing? How does the judicial process work?”

Jill sighs and takes a drink of coffee. “We both go to the Starfleet tribunal court,” she says. “I have to be there to testify to the charges I’m filing against him, he has to be there to enter a plea. He’ll plead not guilty. The prosecuting officer will request some form of bail or collateral against dickwad not leaving the area, and the judge will set those terms and set a time for the official hearing, probably in a few weeks. That’s all that really happens tomorrow. Then we have things where I have to do an official deposition of everything that happened, including patterns of behavior, and someone will find the previous reports that went missing, and we throw that information at dickwad’s counsel. The prosecutor and dickwad’s counsel either agree or disagree on an outcome, and then it goes back to the judge. If they can’t agree—if the prosecutor doesn’t offer a deal or dickwad doesn’t take one—it goes to a closed hearing where both he and I tell our stories to the judge, and the judge decides the outcome.”

“Why a closed hearing?” Alona asks. “Why not a trial by his peers?”

“Because it’s sexual assault,” Jill says. “Sexual assault cases are never given to a jury because—I forget all the reasons, but it involves cultural attitudes toward rape and sexual violence, and not wanting the victim’s name to get leaked to the press, and some other stuff. You can request the hearing be conducted by a panel of judges, and it usually is for rape. Something like this, it’s probably just one judge.”

“Is rape common?” Alona asks.

Jill grimaces and waggles a hand back and forth. “It depends on the context,” she says finally. “Rape among Starfleet officers is almost unheard of. Starfleet can be misogynistic but there’s a very clear zero tolerance policy for sexual assault, and superior officers aren’t allowed to overrule judges for an officer convicted of rape. It is still more common than I would like it to be among the general populace, and as Magpie can tell you, there are officers who won’t lay a hand on their fellow officers but who will take advantage of people who can’t fight back.” She looks at Andy.
“You can, too.”

“Yes,” Andy says without inflection.

“What is the statistic among the general populace?” Anandi asks.

“One in twelve,” Jill says. “I’m told it was one in three once upon a time, so we’re making progress.”

Anandi grimaces, but nods. “Si, you are.”

“That’s how it is on Earth, I should clarify,” Jill says. “Other planets I don’t know as much. But there are some areas you don’t want to be in if you can help it, and some species…well, anyway.” She takes a sip of coffee. “The Federation’s Prime Directive is that they don’t interfere with any species that hasn’t found warp drive yet. My personal belief is that they shouldn’t interfere with any species that hasn’t figured out planetary unity yet. But no one asked me.”

“You would argue for unity over warp?” Khan asks.

“Fuck yes,” Jill says. “Because otherwise you get a situation where a species in civil war develops warp drive to get away from each other, or develops it to chase after each other, and the Federation gets caught in the middle trying to negotiate peace with a species it barely knows, which has no reason to trust Federation envoys, and possibly still wants to kill other members. Fuck the technology, we can teach people the science. Let’s let them unify their planets first and then we can show them technological toys.”

Khan nods, brushing a curl back from her cheek. “I would not disagree,” he says.

“The reasoning, as I understand it, is that the Federation thinks any species that’s developed enough to figure out warp has already hit the societal point of peace,” Jill says. “But that’s bullshit. The best technological advances always happen when you’re at war or preparing for war. As you would know.”

“Yes,” Khan admits. “I would.”

“War breeds necessity,” Alona says. “And those who hold the purse strings are usually less reluctant to open them when the alternative is being bombed by the enemy.”

“How is Marcus paying for all of this, anyway?” Andy asks curiously. “The ships, the weapons, this stuff isn’t cheap. How did he cook the books?”

“Starfleet Intelligence has an opaque budget,” Jill says. “Most of what he’s working on is just hidden under it. The budget’s increased in size, but I think he’s also recording things as different things and hiding other costs in plain sight. But mostly it’s just swept under the Intelligence rug. The only people who really get to see the details of that budget are Marcus and the accountants who track the numbers. Admiral…I think it was Admiral Cathcart used to run Intelligence and would also have seen the budget, but she retired about a year ago and no one replaced her.”

“Convenient for Marcus,” Anandi comments. “Would this Cathcart have known about the projects?”

Jill shakes her head. “I don’t know. My guess is she would have known some of it, possibly a lot of it, but I wasn’t intel and I was trying not to be intel so I didn’t ask. Jake would know. Cathcart recruited him personally, before she got promoted to running it.”
“We will ask,” Anandi says. “Perhaps she would be able to assist us.”

“Maybe,” Jill says. “Again, I don’t know her. But you’ll be seeing Jake in a couple hours, so he can give you the lowdown.”

“Could we prove he was tampering with the books?” Anandi asks.

“He’s allowed to,” Jill says with a shrug. “He’s in charge of Starfleet. Regs prohibit revealing the Intelligence budget details, so we have no luck there. I mean, we could probably get a forensic accountant or five to track down discrepancies, but I don’t see that getting us a lot of help.”

“I think…” Alona stops, stretches, and gets up, beginning to pace. “I think, honestly, our best tactic with Marcus at this point is to play the long game, of course, but also to ferret out who his allies and his trusted men are. Who will obey him over directives from Starfleet, and who will betray Starfleet regulations if Marcus tells him to. We need that data, or we can’t plan to counter it. We know he can’t be working alone, so we need to determine the extent of the cancer within Starfleet.”

“How do you propose we get that data?” Khan asks, curious what her answer will be.

Alona frowns. “There are a few ways we can go about getting it,” she says, running her hands through her hair. “We can watch his email and his voice calls, find out who he talks to. We can see who he schedules in on his calendar, and see who he meets when his calendar is theoretically free. Honestly, our best option is to tail him and get a comprehensive understanding of his comings and goings, and the people he interacts with. If we trade off in shifts, and we make the rotation pattern random, he probably wouldn’t notice us.”

“If he goes to Jupiter, you can’t follow,” Jill says. “That’s our weak spot. We have no one who can follow him to that station, and if he decides to get on the Vengeance and leave, we’re fucked.”

Khan shakes his head. “He won’t,” he says. “He is too arrogant, too proud to think of running away. In his mind, the Federation will fall without him to guide it. He is more likely to have the attitude that as he falls, so do we, but he will not run. However, having said that, it would be helpful if we had eyes and ears on that station.”

Jill chews her lip. “Do you have a personnel roster? Because maybe between me and Jake we’d know someone out there. I can’t swear to it but it may be the only chance we have.”

“I can get one,” Khan says. “Or Magpie can.”

“We’ll ask her when she wakes up,” Jill says.

“The down side to this, of course, is that we cannot deal with the scientific and pseudo-medical personnel from section 31 if our resources are engaged with Marcus,” Anandi says quietly.

“Marcus is the more important target,” Khan says. “The rest we can deal with at length.”

“Yes, but I don’t want us to lose sight of the seven,” Jill says. “If they’re planning things, we need to know what they are.”

“They haven’t made any moves we know of,” Andy says. “And Magpie and I keep checking the bugs, but we’re not getting anything to indicate they’re plotting. Verity and I think Baker meet occasionally, but Ikan’s completely dropped off the radar which means either he found the bug or he’s not on planet or within Earth orbit. We can still see if they know anything, but I’m not convinced going after them is the best use of our time.”
“It may not be but I’d rather not ignore them and have it come back to bite us in the ass,” Jill says. “Ugh. So many balls in the air, and I can’t shake the feeling that we’re running out of time and they’ll all come crashing down on us.”

“Cat and Konstantin will deal with Verity,” Alona says. “If she knows anything, they’ll get it out of her. When we get back from the Femarans, they’ll track her down. Matthew and I can grab one of the other six if it’s necessary. Since the seven are from section 31, and more specifically the non-Starfleet approved side of things, our science people will keep digging into that data to figure out if we need to go after anyone else. Aye?”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Matthew and Magpie are working on getting more of that data.”

“And oldest brother will go underground in the next week,” Alona says. “Which…actually means we need to find a safe house for Khan, because he’s not going to be able to stay in his flat and we’re vacating the house.”

“Yeah, and he can’t stay with me because I’m in the building,” Jill says. “Jake has a safe house in London, I’ll see if we can use it. If not, we’ll figure something out.”

“Would it not be safer for him to leave the city entirely?” Anandi asks.

“Maybe,” Jill says reluctantly. “But I can’t go with him, not until I can fake a plausible excuse for leaving on emergency business, and…can we try to keep him in London until I can book?”

Not the most prudent course of action; on the other hand, Khan echoes her reluctance to be separated, and London is at least a large metropolis. His odds of being spotted in the city or its surrounding areas are not that great, especially if he avoids going near the archive. “Honestly, London will likely be as safe as anywhere else,” he says. “I have the jammer, which should mask me from cameras, and there are enough people I should be able to go unnoticed.”

“Should,” Alona says with a grimace. “On the other hand, San Francisco is probably right out. What about New York? It’s not Starfleet central and it’s bigger than London. I think. Is it these days?”

“It is,” Jill says. “And yeah, New York could definitely be a possibility, but again—I know this is impractical and selfish and I could be risking things but if we can help it I’d rather Khan didn’t take off without me.”

Of course,” Anandi says. “It is not selfish, hermana, it is reasonable, and to be quite honest I would rather none of us relocated alone. That, I think, would be riskier than Khan staying in London.”

“Probably,” Alona concedes. “The asshole librarian complicates things, though. I’m assuming the judge would need your testimony, or at least a sworn deposition.”

“Yeah, he would,” Jill says. “I’ll tell the prosecutor tomorrow that I may have a family emergency situation shortly and arrange for him to get my deposition quickly. It won’t be as good as my actual testimony but it’ll do in a pinch. And again, dickwad is sleazy and should be dealt with but we have more urgent priorities.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “However, had he done more than try to grope you, we would not. As it stands, I dislike the idea of letting him pass, but we may have no choice.”

“It’s my call,” Jill says. “He groped me, I get to decide what happens to him.”
“Of course,” Anandi says. “I would not argue otherwise.”

“Khan tried,” Jill says, glancing at him with a quick grin.


Anandi finishes her tea and sets the mug down. “The others will be rising soon,” she says. “I will go start breakfast. Khan, you may help me.”

“If he helps you can we have crepes?” Alona asks. “Do we have the ingredients for crepes?”

“I do not know but I will check,” Anandi says.

“Or blintzes,” Alona says. “Oh, cheese blintzes would be so good.”

“What is a blintz?” Andy asks.

“It’s basically a filled crepe,” Alona says. “So yummy.”

“Yes, but I doubt we have the time or ingredients to make as many as we would need to feed everyone,” Khan says, getting to his feet. “Regular crepes may be the best we can do.”

“I’ll take it,” Alona says.

“We’ll see what we can do,” Anandi says. Khan follows her to the kitchen, where they peruse cupboards and the fridge. They do, in fact, have enough ingredients for crepes, and Anandi begins making the batter efficiently.

“What do you want to talk about?” Khan asks quietly in Italian.

Anandi smiles a bit, glancing at him. “You cannot be her white knight,” she says softly in the same language. “You may very well be that to her, but you cannot play protector of the defenseless. She is neither defenseless nor helpless.”

“I know,” Khan says, his wings stretching a little just to stretch. “But the thought of another person laying his hands on her—I would not have tolerated it with Rani, and I will not tolerate it with Jill.”

“Rani was not a fighter, not in that sense,” Anandi says, whisking dry ingredients together. “Jill is. Jill does not want you to fight battles she can fight herself.”

“Not unless she fights with me,” Khan says. He sighs. “I told Andy once I never asked for any of this. I never asked for Jill’s help, I never asked her to involve her family. I was…angry about it, truth be told.”

“What did Andy say to you?” Anandi asks.

Khan smiles faintly. “She told me I wasn’t alone anymore,” he says. “And that it terrified me.”

Anandi’s face softens and she reaches a hand up, laying her palm against Khan’s cheek. “He was right.”

“I know,” Khan says, covering her hand with his own for a moment. “Jill gave me hope, and it terrified me.”

“Does it still?” Anandi asks, returning to the batter.
“No,” Khan says. “Why would I be terrified now? I have you now. Where we had five people, we now have thirteen. Having you back, having you awake—there were pieces missing in my soul, sister, and now there are less.”

“I cannot even imagine what you went through,” Anandi says, setting the bowl aside and rummaging for a skillet. “To wake alone, so far removed from everything we knew, and to be separated from your brothers and sisters…I would quite possibly have suicided.”

“I could not protect you if I died,” Khan says quietly.

“No,” Anandi says. “But you are stronger than I am.”

“You do not give yourself enough credit,” Khan says, handing her the butter.

“I am not being modest, Khan, I speak the truth,” Anandi says. “I could not have coped with what happened to you, and I would have found a way to kill myself. Possibly after I killed Marcus.”

“I said to Jill, once, that it is amazing what one can do when there is no alternative,” Khan says. “I had none. I had to keep you safe. I am the oldest, it is my job to protect you.”

“And it is your job to protect Jill,” Anandi says. She turns on the oven to warm and swirls butter around in the hot skillet. “But not in situations where she can protect herself. With her, yes, but not for her. And it will be her decision what happens with this librarian.”

“I know,” Khan says. “We had that discussion last night.”

Anandi nods. “I expected as much, after I saw you leave. But I saw her cry, Khan. What was that about?”

Khan sighs. “I was…imprudent with my words,” he says. “And I hurt her.”

Anandi, to his relief, doesn’t ask him what he said. “Are you all right now?” she asks.

“We are,” Khan says.

“Bueno.” Anandi stretches up to kiss his cheek and turns her attention to making crepes. Khan makes more batter when they need it, and by the time they have a stack of crepes warming in the oven the others are trickling in.

Jake arrives halfway through the meal and happily devours crepes when Anandi hands him a plate. When the meal ends, Jill, Magpie and Maeve get up to deal with the dishes. “We all ready to go?” Jake asks, taking a drink of coffee.

“We will be once Maeve is ready,” Khan says. “How long will we be there?”

“Maybe a few hours? Depends on if they want to adjust anything or whatever. Plus they like you, and they’ll probably want to feed us lunch.” Jake shrugs. “Anything else come up I should know about?”


“I’m listening,” Jake says, leaning forward.

“The first is that I will need a safe house in London once I go off the radar,” Khan says. “Once Jill can leave the archive, we can relocate, but until then she needs to stay here and I would prefer to stay in the general vicinity.”
“That’s easy enough,” Jake says. “You can use the safe room I gave you the codes to. That one’s specific to my team and no one needs it. Once you relocate, where do you think you’ll go?”

“Possibly New York,” Khan says. “We need a large enough metropolitan area that I can blend in and not be noticed, and San Francisco is clearly not an option.”

“Okay,” Jake says. “I’ll look at options. Actually, you and Jill could probably just use my place. I have an apartment in Brooklyn. It’s nothing fancy but it’ll hold you, and the plumbing works great.”

“Where would you go?” Khan asks.

Jake shrugs. “I can couch-surf, or find a safe room, or take the guest room at Eema’s for a bit.”

“If anyone traces us to your apartment, though, we’re all in trouble,” Jill says, frowning.

“How long are you actually planning on using it?” Jake asks. “Because I’m getting the impression we’re on a time crunch.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to feel that, too,” Jill says. “So I don’t know.”

“So use my place and if we need to relocate again we will,” Jake says. “There’s nothing in it I particularly care about, and I’ll move the few things I really don’t want to lose to Eema’s house.”


“Anyway, we should get going if you’re done,” Jake says.

“I’m not but I’ll finish it while you guys get out of here,” Jill says. “Be safe.”

“You, too,” Jake says. “Let me know how the hearing goes.”

“I’ll let all of you know,” Jill says with a pointed look at Khan.

He doesn’t respond, but gets up and walks over to Jill, leaning down to kiss her lightly. “Be careful,” he murmurs against her lips.


“I will,” Khan says, brushing his knuckles down her cheek.

The nine of them move out to the porch and input the coordinates for the Femarans’ planet. “Let’s do this,” Alona says, grinning. “I can’t believe we’re traveling light-years in seconds.”

“It’s pretty wild,” Matthew says with a laugh.

“On three,” Jake says. “One, two, go.”

Chapter End Notes

I have a lot of thoughts about the differences between Gene Roddenberry's vision for Star Trek and my own take on it. Roddenberry was an idealist, and saw Trek as a future utopia, a society with a place for everyone. Call me a pessimist but I just can't
believe that's possible. I've really gone a different direction with this story (and the other stories I've written) and while it works for me and I think it's working for all of you, you can definitely make the argument that this is Trek AU just for societal and cultural differences.

I do, however, fully agree with Jill's opinion on the Prime Directive. Technology is such an arbitrary milestone to judge by.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

I hear that the Federation isn't sure of itself, and the Klingons grow impatient.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 50, you guys. What even is this. Thank you so much for sticking with me.

Khan materializes in the usual place, and as always the first breath tastes and smells incredible. Around him, he sees his siblings breathing in deeply. Anandi, in particular, looks delighted. “What is this?” she asks.

“We don’t know but it’s awesome,” Jake says. “We’re headed up the mountain this way, a few kilometers. While we walk, you can tell me the second thing you need my input on.”

Khan falls into step with Jake as they head up the mountain. “How well do you or did you know Admiral Cathcart?” he asks.

“Viola? Pretty well,” Jake says. “She was my mentor. She recruited me for Intelligence, back when I was in the Academy, and she was my CO for a few years before she got promoted and then promoted again to run it. She didn’t actually want to retire, but her daughter was involved in a pretty serious shuttle crash and needed a lot of rehab and care while she recovered, so Viola retired to take care of her.”

“Do you still keep in contact with her?” Khan asks.

“Yeah, once in a while,” Jake says. “Why?”

“What would her take on Marcus’s actions be?” Khan asks. “Would she support him or not? Would she be able or willing to assist us?”

Jake blows out a breath, scratching the back of his neck. “Maybe,” he says after a moment. “I think some of the projects Intelligence is working on were started under her direction. The Vengeance was planned before she retired, but work on the ship hadn’t started yet. But I don’t think she knew about some of the section 31 projects, specifically the scientific and medical parts, and that I doubt she’d support. I mean, she knew about section 31, she had to, but I don’t think she did or would condone what the scientists are researching.”

“Would she be able to assist us in gathering information against Marcus?” Khan asks.

“I really don’t know,” Jake admits. “It would depend on if she’s completely dropped out of contact with other Starfleet brass or if she still keeps in touch, or what her network of informants is telling her if they’re still reporting to her. I’m hesitant to ask her to get involved because she’s high profile, and she might attract attention we don’t want.”
“Is she officially discharged from Starfleet or on leave?” Khan asks.

“She is…I don’t know,” Jake says. “I can find out.”

“It might be worth talking to her, just to see what she knows and what she thinks,” Khan says.

“Yeah,” Jake says slowly. “I can do that. I do keep in touch with her, and I’ve met her for coffee a couple times since she retired, so it wouldn’t be out of the blue for me to suggest we meet up.”

“How is her daughter?” Khan asks.

“She’ll never walk again,” Jake says. “There was too much damage to the spinal cord.” He glances at Khan. “Is that something you could fix?”

“Likely not,” Khan says. “Were it a virus, or an infection, or a disease, we could heal her. Damage like that—I doubt it.”

“Oh well,” Jake says philosophically. “Worth a shot. But yeah, I can message Viola when we get back.”

“Did you always call her by her first name?” Khan asks.

“Sometimes,” Jake says. “Intelligence isn’t that formal and she didn’t mind unless she was yelling at me. She had plans for me, you see, and I often foiled them.”

“What did she want for you?” Khan asks.

“I think eventually she wanted me to run intel,” Jake says. “I have less than zero interest in doing that, so I kept trying to get in trouble and avoid getting promoted.”

“The trouble with being good at your job is that eventually they make you stop doing it,” Alona says, laughing. “What rank do you hold, Jake?”

“I’m a captain,” Jake admits sheepishly. “And I really, really, really don’t want to make admiral so it’s just as well we’re doing this.”

“Do you enjoy being a commanding officer?” Bishop asks.

“Eh. Sometimes,” Jake says. “But mostly I’m in it for the job itself, not to tell other people how to do the job. But I have a good team, so that makes it easier.”

“What are they doing, now that you are on leave?” Bishop asks.

“Other jobs,” Jake says. “It’s not uncommon for intel agents to take a few months off, especially if their last gig was rough. I’ve taken time off before and either my team gets reassigned to another CO or they end up with short gigs, or teaching, whatever. We keep things loose because we have to.”

“Would any of them be able to or want to help us?” Katsuro asks.

“I’ve said before, I’m leaving them out of this,” Jake says. “I’m not risking their careers and personal safety. Yes, of course this impacts them and they’ll be affected by the outcome, but I’m not pulling them into this any more than I have. One of my team is still in a coma because of this whole thing, and I’m not putting anyone else on the line.”

“Is Marika healing?” Maeve asks.
“Gabe says she is but he really can’t tell me when she’ll wake up or what shape she’ll be in when she does,” Jake says with a sigh. “We just know so little about her physiology.”

“I wonder if our blood would help her,” Maeve says. “Bishop, what do you think?”

“Honestly, I do not know,” Bishop says. “Our blood used in a non-human…” He shakes his head. “I can’t even begin to theorize without data on Marika’s medical file.”

“I can’t get you that, sorry,” Jake says. “Doctor-patient confidentiality. Gabe takes it damned seriously because if some of the details about my team got leaked we’d all be fucked.”

“What is in your file that shouldn’t be?” Cat asks.

“Mine’s clean, mostly,” Jake says. “Just some old injuries I don’t want to have to explain.”

“We all know something about that one,” Alona says and everyone laughs.

Conversation dies down as they continue to walk; Khan lets himself just enjoy the cool, fresh air and the sun peeking through tree branches. At one point, where the path widens, he lets his wings stretch out fully, giving himself a minute of sheer relief. He stays there a bit longer than he intends, but the stretch feels too good to stop and no one comments.

When they reach the top of the path, Khan sees a long table set up outside, with a row of weapons on it. The metal gleams in the sun, and he thinks he sees color in a few spots. Before he gets a chance to look more closely, Aktok welcomes them, smiling as he walks over to clasp shoulders with Jake and then Khan.

“Welcome,” he says warmly. “I am pleased you made it safely. Please, Jake, introduce me.”

Jake does just that; Aktok clasps shoulders with each of Khan’s family as Jake names them. Melcian, Dyval, and Kalma do not, but they each raise a hand in hello.

“But I know you must all be impatient to see your weapons,” Aktok says. “So. Please. Who would like to go first?”

“Konstantin would,” Cat says, making him laugh.

“Then Konstantin, please,” Aktok says, gesturing to the table. “Your weapon is the second from left.”

Konstantin smiles and walks over to it. He picks up the broadsword in both hands, moving away from the table to run through a few poses. The sword looks as intimidating as any weapon ever has, Khan thinks; the sheer size of it would make most opponents rethink their plans. “This is incredible,” Konstantin says, slowly moving through a sparring form. “The balance is exquisite, and the grip solid. The texturing on the hilt will keep my hands dry, and the weight just what it should be. I am honored by this sword, Aktok.”

“Yes, but how the hell do you hide a sword bigger than me?” Alona asks.

“Ah,” Aktok says. “As to that…do you see the blue stone in the pommel?”

“I do,” Konstantin says.

“Press it twice,” Aktok says.

Konstantin does, and the sword abruptly folds in on itself and disappears into the hilt.
“Holy shit,” Alona says, sounding stunned. “That’s fucking genius. That…I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“If you press the stone twice, it will open the blade,” Aktok says. Konstantin does, and the blade erupts from the hilt and locks into place within two seconds.

“Do all our weapons do this?” Matthew asks, sounding about as dumbfounded as Alona.

“Yes,” Aktok says cheerfully.


“Would you like to see yours next?” Aktok asks.

“Fuck yes,” Matthew says, already moving to the table. Aktok points him to his weapon, and he picks it up, moving through a warm-up form carefully. “I…this is the best weapon I’ve ever held,” Matthew says, parrying an invisible opponent. “I’ve never had anything this perfectly balanced and weighted. How do I fold it in?”

“There are two ways,” Aktok says. “You can press the green stone in the pommel twice, or—may I demonstrate?”

Matthew hands over the sword—reluctantly, Khan notices in amusement. Aktok takes it and makes a sudden sharp twist of his wrist, counterclockwise. The sword disappears into the hilt. “The same gesture will open it,” Aktok says, demonstrating. “Or you can press the stone.”

“Let me try,” Matthew says, taking the sword back. He frowns, then makes the same turn of his wrist, grinning widely when the sword folds in on itself. “This is amazing,” he says. “It practically fits in my pocket.”

“My turn,” Alona says, bouncing on her toes. “Please?” Aktok smiles and gestures, and Alona all but sprints over to take her quarterstaff. “How do I make it disappear?” she asks, tossing it lightly in her hands.

“You hit the ground with it twice,” Aktok says. “The entire flat end needs to make contact with the ground.”

Alona does just that, and the staff folds in on both ends until she holds what looks like a silver hockey puck. “I love that it doesn’t just hit the ground, that it folds in so I can keep it in my hands,” she says. “How do I open it again, though?”

“You hit one side of it twice with your palm,” Aktok says.

“This is fucking awesome,” Alona says dreamily when the staff locks into place. “And the balance and the weight are perfect, the grips are just where I need them…what else does this do?”

“It will deflect phaser fire,” Aktok says. “Adamantium in general will do that, and these weapons will all deflect the bolt if you catch it at the right angle. If you are very careful or lucky, they will send the shot back toward your opponent, but that is difficult to achieve. The best most people manage is sending it somewhere else.”

“But that could injure an ally,” Anandi says. “If you send the phaser fire in a random direction.”

“That is a possibility, unfortunately,” Aktok says. “It is not something we could leave out. Adamantium simply reflects due to the properties of the metal.”
Alona collapses her staff and tosses the disc in her hand, all but beaming. “I’m sure we’ll make it work,” she says. “Who’s next?”

They go through the weapons, each person commenting and testing the folding properties. Khan goes last, in part because he feels apprehension about having another vision, but nothing happens when he picks up his sword except appreciation for the craftsmanship. The same twist of his wrist collapses it as Matthew’s, leaving him with a hilt he can take anywhere.

“I have never, ever, seen weapons as well made as these,” Alona says. “Aktok, you and your family are geniuses.”

“We have been doing this a long time,” Aktok says, smiling. “I am pleased you appreciate your weapons. Will you join us for lunch? I would like to know more about your family. I always enjoy knowing about the people who will wield our weapons.”

“We will,” Ekaterina says before anyone else can respond. “Thank you.”

The thirteen of them gather around the long table, where platters of food have already been laid out. “Please, help yourselves,” Aktok says, passing the bread basket to Maeve. “We’re not formal here. But tell me—where did you learn to fight? I did not think humans had all that much interest in edged weapons these days.”

“We have been training since we were children,” Cat says. “There was a small school of us, a private boarding school for children without parents. The teachers were…old-fashioned in some aspects, and thought we needed to learn how to fight in every possible way we could.”

“If one is practicing to fight a Klingon, one would need an edged weapon,” Anandi says.

“In this you are correct,” Melcian says, smiling. “I would love to get my hands on one of their bat’leths, just to study it, but I doubt that will happen anytime in the near or far future.”

“Likely not,” Jake says. “Although you never know.”

“Well,” Melcian says. “Should you happen to acquire one, bring it here.”

“Deal,” Jake says. “And if you get your hands on one, call me.”

Melcian nods firmly. “Deal.”

“Would you be likely to get your hands on one?” Alona asks.

“All weapons, sooner or later, come to the weaponsmith,” Melcian says. “The Klingons aren’t allied with us, and we are allied with the Federation, so they would not seek us out for repair or new work. They would have no need. But eventually, someone will kill a Klingon and take the weapon, and eventually the weapons will find their way to us. Someone will need repair, or restoration, or an appraisal. But that process may take years.”

“If the Federation goes to war with the Klingons, it’ll be a lot faster,” Jake mutters.

“It will,” Melcian says. “And I wonder how probable that is.”

Khan looks at her sharply. “What do you hear?” he asks.

“Most gossip comes to us, too,” Melcian says. “We offer our craft to all who will pay for it and won’t insult us. People try to tell us secrets, gossip, in hopes of gaining our favor, or in hopes of
“But what do you hear about the Federation and the Klingons?” Khan asks.

“I hear that the Federation isn’t sure of itself, and the Klingons grow impatient,” Melcian says. “Common wisdom in this part of the galaxy holds that the two sides are dry tinder, and the only remaining question is where the spark lands. Either way, it bodes ill for the rest of us.”

“Our work will be more in demand during a war,” Dyval says. “But it doesn’t make up for what would be caused by war.”

“Not this kind of war,” Melcian says. “This would rip the galaxy apart. The Klingons would give no quarter and ask for none, and wouldn’t accept defeat short of death. It would turn into an endless conflict and eventual genocide.”

“You think the Klingons would lose, in the end,” Khan observes.

“I do,” Melcian says. “The Federation has more resources than the Klingon Empire, and from what I hear its technology level is better. The Federation, too, is not willing to throw lives away, so would be more cautious about engaging in full-out battle. If it came down to hand-to-hand combat, the Klingons have an advantage over most Federation citizens. But I doubt it would except in extreme cases.”

“It’s not cost-effective to lay siege to an inhabited planet,” Dyval says. “Neither the Klingons nor the Federation have limitless resources, and it’d be better spent in hit and run strikes, stealth missions, than trying to occupy a planet. All out space battles would be rare because no one would want to lose their ships. That’s not to say it wouldn’t happen on a regular basis, just that it wouldn’t be anyone’s first choice.”

“I see you have spent time discussing the situation,” Cat says, not quite asking.

“We build weapons,” Melcian says gently. “Of course we speculate on war.”

“There are outposts and stations that would make a good target for occupation,” Dyval says thoughtfully. “But anyone living on a predominantly civilian planet would likely be safe enough.”

“Something I should mention,” Melcian says. “Adamantium is stronger than the metal used in Klingon bat’leth weapons. A direct blow, with enough force, could possibly shatter the bat’leth.”

“Why would you think we would need that information?” Khan asks softly.

“Because humans don’t come and ask for our weapons,” Melcian says, picking up her wineglass. “Not for thirty knives, for two versions of a new weapon, for half a dozen other weapons Starfleet doesn’t use. No, the group of you are planning something, and something that will be exceedingly dangerous. The only thing I can think of that would require weapons like these and be dangerous in that matter would be taking on the Klingons, either in part or in whole. But humans don’t come bargain with us like this, not for this amount of work.”

“And…what do you intend to do with that information?” Ekaterina asks idly, studying her own wineglass. Khan reads the lack of tension in her body and knows it to be a lie. His own wings twitch before he forces them to stillness, and he sees Jake’s eyes flick between Cat and Melcian.

“Nothing,” Melcian says. “Do you think you are the only clients we have with plans for something secret? We hear everything, and we say nothing. To tell secrets to anyone would be to favor them, and we don’t do that.”
“The Femaran code of law, for the record, privileges weaponsmith and client discussions,” Dyval says, smiling. “Weaponsmiths cannot be compelled to divulge their client lists or work history, and cannot be forced to give testimony against a client or presumed client.”

“We don’t even have to confirm whether someone was a client or not,” Melcian says. “Our history isn’t a peaceful one.”

Khan doesn’t quite feel comforted by the knowledge, but decides they will gain nothing from antagonizing the Femarans. He feels confident in his family’s ability to win a battle against the four of them, but given the information he has, killing or antagonizing the weaponsmiths would likely bring down the wrath of the rest of the species.

Given the choice, he’d rather only go up against one alien species at a time.

Cat looks at him and he nods ever so slightly. The corner of her mouth twitches in agreement and she sets her wineglass down. “So,” she says. “On another note, what do you call this bread? I rather like it. I enjoy cooking when I have time.”

The conversation changes and while Khan knows none of them have forgotten or really addressed the tension, it lies there quietly while they talk of food and wine, all thoughts of war and Klingons pushed aside for the moment.

Eventually the meal ends, and Kalma and Dyval begin to clear away the dishes. “We have a tradition, among our people,” Aktok says as the rest of them head back outside. “A blade is not truly ready until it has been blooded.”

“You want to see us fight,” Alona says, rolling the disc of her staff around in her hands. “I want to know you are worthy of the weapons we have made you,” Aktok says.

“Katsuro,” Ekaterina says before Khan responds. “Call time. Ten minutes or until the last one is left standing.” She picks up her own weapon and swings it to the blade. “Let us see what these do in practice.”

Khan unfolds his own weapon, watching his siblings do the same, moving to a loose circle. “Please do not break anything,” Katsuro says mildly. “Five. Four. Three. Two. Go.”

It is highly unlikely, even impossible, that they will get through this without breaking something. The first smack of Alona’s staff across Khan’s ribs and he thinks he feels something crack. He blocks her next blow, sweeps her legs out from under her and doesn’t quite get his blade on her throat before Maeve dives in the way, allowing Alona to scramble back to her feet and grab her staff.

Ekaterina kills Bishop relatively quickly with a slice to the jugular that leaves him bleeding but not dangerously so. He retreats from combat, shortly thereafter joined by Alona—killed by Anandi—and Maeve, who couldn’t get the better of Khan.

Anandi cries out when Ekaterina lands a kick to her kneecap, and crumples to the ground; Bishop and Alona run forward to carry her out of the combat. Khan doesn’t bother looking to see if she’ll be all right. Dislocated kneecaps hurt a great deal but heal quickly.

Next disqualified actually turns out to be Konstantin, which surprises Khan but Matthew fights dirty and landed a slice to the femoral artery with a knife. Enough to bleed, not enough to kill him, but Konstantin limps out of the circle and out of the corner of his eye Khan sees Bishop and Maeve go to him.
Khan kills Matthew with a thrown knife that would have landed in his throat had Matthew not caught it just in time. He decides to let Matthew live, but Matthew shakes his head. “I’m dead,” he says, throwing the knife back and exiting the circle. “Almost literally, you bastard.”

“So,” Cat says, circling Khan as he does the same. “And then there were two.”

“Da,” Khan says, tossing the sword to his left hand. “Let’s make this interesting, sister.”

“Name your stakes,” she says, also switching hands with her weapon.


“I want you to make me dinner,” Ekaterina says. “Menu of my choosing.”

Which will undoubtedly involve hours of work. Khan nods. “Likewise.”

Cat folds her right arm behind her back, Khan does the same, and they dive at each other.

“A draw, I think,” Katsuro says some minutes later, when they both lie flat on the rock panting for breath and spattered in blood. “Khan, your left shoulder needs attention.”

“It’s merely dislocated,” Khan says, gauging the rest of his injuries. A few slices, nothing serious, and a few cracked ribs. His head aches but he doesn’t have a concussion and his right arm aches from being trapped behind him, but it’ll ease up.

“Then let me put it back in place,” Bishop says, coming over to him. Khan slowly shifts to his knees and Bishop fits the shoulder back into its socket, making him hiss and choke back a shout.

“Cat, have you anything needing immediate attention?” Katsuro asks.

“Nyet,” she says, sitting up. “Some cracked ribs, bruises, a cut or two.” She brushes off her hands and jumps to her feet. “Are you satisfied, Aktok?”

“You and your family heal more quickly than any humans I have ever seen,” Aktok says. “And you fight more fiercely.”

“We are…not normal humans,” Khan says, carefully rotating his shoulder before he gets to his feet. “But I think you knew that already.”

“You have wings,” Aktok says.

“Yes,” Khan says, stretching his to ease the muscles in his shoulders. “But my family do not.”

“I think two of us had tails once, but they did not survive past childhood,” Anandi says. “Someone else may have had other…modifications but did not survive past infancy.”

“Where are you from?” Aktok asks. “I thought the Federation outlawed genetic engineering.”

“It’s not where,” Khan says. “It’s when. My family and I were…created…three centuries ago. We were in cryosleep for most of that time, but…now we are here, and awake, and we have work to do.”

He knows he is taking a chance explaining this. On the other hand, he doubts how much the Femarans know of Earth history, and given what they already know he doubts he is telling them all that much they don’t know.
Aktok nods slowly. “I see,” he says. “This explains much.”

Khan folds his sword away. “Are you satisfied that we deserve your weapons?” he asks, not sure if he is teasing or being serious.

“I am,” Aktok says. “You are some of the finest warriors I have seen. I am pleased.”

“Thank you,” Ekaterina says. “As are we.”

They take their leave of the Femarans a short while later, after a round of forge water and good wishes, and walk a short distance down the mountain before transporting back to London. “Oh, hey, you’re back,” Andy says, looking up from what Khan would swear is embroidery. “How’d it go?”

“It went well,” Cat says, pleased. “What are you doing?”

“I am attempting to weave the circuitry for a new PADD,” Andy says. “I gave up on the personal shield for right now and I needed a brain break anyway, so I’m doing something that’s basically mindless labor. This isn’t difficult but the wires are tiny and it takes concentration.”

“It looks like needlepoint,” Alona says, coming to peek at it.

“I thought PADDs were based on crystals,” Khan says, frowning.

“They are,” Andy says. “But the crystals aren’t flexible, and I’m still working on developing one you can roll up. The cost of liquid crystals is higher than I want to pay for something that I hope to mass market, so I’m exploring other options. The circuitry here does almost the same thing but—“ He rolls up the “cloth” and unrolls it. “It moves.”

“What else could you use that in?” Alona asks.

Andy shrugs. “Pretty much anything that needs to be flexible,” she says. “If you wanted a wired shirt or coat, it’d work for that. You’d still need a power source, but if you fitted this in between layers of fabric you could have smart clothing. I think that was a thing a century ago but it died out.”

“So…could something like this power a force field, or some kind of body armor?” Alona asks, sitting down next to Andy.

“Oh, yeah,” Andy says. “It’d be dead easy for that. You…hm. Let me do some digging on what exists and what can be modified and I can have more options for you. I want to say there’s smart armor, like it’s a layer of physical protection but it moves around based on your movements, so like it tries to give you more oomph where it thinks you might get hit. I believe it is also very expensive and still under patent, so it might also be hard to get but it might not be that hard to duplicate. But building a layer of force into a coat or a shirt from this stuff would be easy as building a earbud comm, and I’ve made a ton of those.”

“Have you ever made body armor before?” Alona asks.

“I haven’t,” Andy says. “I generally steer away from building weapons, and no one ever asked me to build a shield or armor before. Since it’s not something I need or anyone in my immediate circle really needs, I never built it.”

“What tech would the smart armor use?” Matthew asks.
“Nano, is my guess,” Andy says. “Which has some well-developed uses in medical and scientific research but is still being examined in other areas. I think—and I could be wrong on this, I may be misremembering. But I think I heard something about the smart armor being designed in a way that it’s basically sand, with the nanobots having enough intelligence to move or solidify. So it’s not static, and it keeps moving which means it has fewer obvious weak spots.”

“That’s way cool,” Alona says. “I’d love to get my hands on a suit.”

“I don’t know if I can help you there,” Andy says apologetically. “I don’t have many contacts in the military end of things.”

“I do, but I still don’t know if I can help you,” Jake says. “I’ve heard of this, too, but I’ve never seen it in action or even in a test. I have some body armor, but it’s just a physical layer built into my coat and my boots. The coat’s long enough to cover the important bits, and the boots are tall enough to cover some of the rest, and it’s saved my life twice.”

“How easy is that to acquire?” Alona asks.

“Pretty easy,” Jake says. “The boots are custom fit and take a few weeks. They sell jackets and coats in standard sizes. You can also request other items of clothing but anything custom takes longer.”

“We should look into buying some,” Alona says, looking at Khan.

He nods. “Although I doubt they have anything to fit me.”

“Probably not,” Jake says apologetically. “And I’m not sure about Jill, either.”

“Well, we’ll see,” Alona says. “Get us information on sizing and prices?”

“Sure,” Jake says.

“This would be the short term,” Alona says, idly tossing her disc in a hand. “The medium term would be working force body armor into what we buy. The long term would be the personal shield, and possibly this nanotechnology armor.”

“What is that?” Andy asks, nodding at the disc.

“Awesome,” Alona says. She bounces to her feet, smacks the disc twice with her hand, and catches it as it expands. “How cool is that?”


“Eh, it’s not really,” Alona says. She folds it back up and slips the disc into her pocket. “Quarterstaves aren’t the best weapons in the world, but I got used to fighting with mine. You want intimidating, look at Konstantin’s sword.”


“Let’s avoid that,” Andy says quickly.

“Where is Magpie? Or Jill?” Khan asks.

“Magpie is upstairs working on something that she said required large headphones and lots of music,” Andy says. “Jill, as far as I know, is still at the archive. Or the hearing. I expect she’ll call when she has news.”
Magpie could probably hack into the court network to find out, but Khan resists the urge to go upstairs and ask for her help. She is undoubtedly working on something else to help them, and would certainly not welcome being interrupted.

Genius, he knows, requires careful handling.

“Khan,” Bishop says. “Come for a run with me.”

Speaking of which…Khan wonders which of his siblings will be next to find time alone with him to talk. It would be utterly ridiculous if it was not also comforting in a way he won’t admit. “All right,” he says. “Is anyone else coming with us?”

“Non, I think not,” Bishop says, as Khan expected. “We will be back in perhaps an hour.”

“If you hear from Jill, call me,” Khan tells Andy.

“I will,” he promises.

Khan falls into step with Bishop easily enough as they head down the street. “What is on your mind?” he asks.

“Possibly not,” Khan says. “But they take their confidences seriously, and their role as weaponsmiths—they see themselves almost as counselors. I doubt they are all that acquainted with Earth history from three centuries ago, and even if they are, what of it? Who will they tell? The Femarans keep mostly to themselves and don’t have a strong presence in Starfleet. They don’t want war with the Klingons. I should think they respect our skills enough to give us the opportunity to accomplish our goals without interfering.”

“Two people can keep a secret if one is dead,” Bishop says quietly.

“Yes, but the audience for the gossip varies,” Khan says. “The odds of our story getting back to Starfleet brass in general and Marcus in particular I find in our favor.”

“You are more familiar with this time than I,” Bishop says. “I defer to your judgment. Most of the time.”

Khan glances at him, catching the hint of a smile. “About what are you questioning my judgment this time?” he asks.

“I am not, actually,” Bishop says. “I think that given the circumstances, and the situation, your actions have been logical. I admit I was uncertain about Jill and her circle, but we could not do this without them. But there is something going on there, frere, and I would know what it is. Why did you leave the other night? Why did she cry?”

“We argued,” Khan says. He sighs, slows to a walk. “I was angry over the librarian who molested her. She, quite rightly, told me it was her decision what happened to him, that she needed a partner, not a protector. I…lost my temper.”

“The first time I lost my temper with Rani, she slapped me across the face, then burst into tears,” Khan says, remembering it. “That was also the last time I ever lost my temper with her.”
Bishop laughs. “She was good at defusing your rage,” he says. “She was good for you, period.”

“She was,” Khan says, finding comfort in the memories. “And for all I know she is continuing to be good for me somewhere... out there.”

“I would like to think so,” Bishop says. “I was never convinced of the existence of an afterlife, but since awakening in this time it is hard to refute the empirical evidence.”

“Now you sound like Anandi,” Khan says, making them both laugh.

“And what is Anandi, if not logical?” Bishop smiles and shrugs. “Things are quite different in this time than in our own. Some in a good way, some... less so. I look forward to seeing what else is out there.”

“As do we all,” Khan says. “Come, let us head back. I want news.”

“And some things never change,” Bishop says as they turn around and start running again. “Your patience, or lack thereof, has always been amusing.”

“Says the man who can sit motionless for three hours,” Khan says, putting on speed until the pace challenges them both enough that they don’t have the breath for speech.

They arrive back at the house slightly breathless and windblown, but more relaxed. Khan’s mood improves sharply when he sees Jill standing on the porch, out of uniform and with her hair cascading down her back. “How did it go?” he asks, taking the stairs to her.

“It went,” she says, making a face. “He’s released on a nominal amount of bail and isn’t allowed to leave London. The next hearing is in three weeks, at which point we’ll either have a deal or continue to a closed trial. The prosecutor would very much like to have a deal.”

“And you?” Khan asks, smoothing his thumb down the side of her face.

“I just want him kicked out of Starfleet,” Jill says, turning to kiss his palm. “Beyond that, I don’t care much. But he’s a disgrace to the uniform and shouldn’t have the privilege of wearing it.”

“You still see the uniform as a privilege,” Khan observes.

“I do,” Jill says. “Marcus dishonors it, and this creep does too, but it’s not all bad and it’s not all corrupt. There’s still a lot of good in Starfleet, and a lot of officers who serve because they feel called to do so. I’m not going to stay in it, but I’m still proud of my service.”

“As you should be,” Bishop says, leaning against the porch rail. “You served them honorably for well over a decade, and became a commander and a first officer. Those are accomplishments to be proud of.”

Jill blushes a little and ducks her head. “Well, anyway. How did it go with the Femarans? Can I see the awesome weapons?”


“Absolutely,” Jill says. She stretches up to kiss his cheek and turns to head inside.

In the living room, Khan sees Magpie but not Andy, and most of his family save Cat and Konstantin. He asks, and Alona tells him that the latter two went for a run of their own and Andy is meditating in the back garden.
“So, let me see,” Jill says, bouncing a little on her toes. “I heard about the hide in plain sight stuff, that’s amazing.”

Khan smiles at her impatience and picks up the hilt to his own weapon. A sharp twist of his wrist and Jill whistles under her breath. “That’s amazing,” she says, moving closer to look at the sword but not touching it. “It’s gorgeous. Not as beautiful as my own weapon, but it’s lovely, and the way it folds in is incredibly useful.”

“It is,” Khan says, putting the blade away. “We also learned that adamantium is stronger than the metal used in Klingon blades, and will reflect phaser fire if caught at the proper angle.”

“It’s an awesome material,” Jill says. “The next time you see the Femarans, take me with you? I’d love to meet them and thank them for my own weapon.”

“If we meet again, I will,” Khan says.

“I don’t know if we’re quite done with them yet,” Jill says. She shrugs. “Just gut instinct, really.”

“Where are they in relation to the Klingon homeworld?” Alona asks.

Jill looks up, clearly thinking. “They are not in the same general direction,” she says. “But I think—and I could be wrong, I’m not a stellar cartographer—that they are either the same distance or slightly closer than we are to Qo’noS now. So if you’re asking if we could beam from the Femaran world to Qo’noS, we could—I think. We’d want coordinates to confirm.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s possible,” Jake says. “They’re sort of maybe in the same direction? I mean, they’re not like in the opposite direction. It’s a triangle from them to us to Qo’noS.”

“Yeah, I’m not a cartographer,” Jill says. “Or a navigator. I fly the ship, someone else tells me where to take it.”

“Why are you wondering, though?” Jake asks.

“Depending on circumstances, we could find ourselves going there,” Alona says. “I’m guessing, anyway. And I’m also thinking we wouldn’t want to go directly there from here in case someone could trace us and come after us. Those transporters you built, Khan, they’re not undetectable, are they?”

Khan shakes his head. “They are not,” he says. “They are not picked up by standard scans but something looking for transwarp would get them easily.”

“Then yeah, we’ll need either a ship or a waypoint,” Alona says.

“Why are you guessing we’d go to Qo’noS?” Jill asks.

“Well, I doubt they’d come to us,” Alona says. “And if we want to avert a war, we need to negotiate with them somehow. Do you have any ideas?”

Jill hesitates, chewing her lip. “I have one,” she says slowly, reluctantly. “I’m not sure it’s a feasible suggestion, or if it’d work, but…I do have one idea.”

“Tell us,” Alona says.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

The Klingons respect battle prowess.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay on this one. I had it mostly written for the longest time and then couldn't get done. But here you are, and I hope you are all still enjoying. I'm hoping to finish before chapter 100--hell, chapter 75 would be lovely--but I really have no idea where I am in the story so this could take a while. I hope you don't mind!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jill sighs and sits down on the ottoman, tugging on a curl. “Here’s the thing,” she says, not quite looking at anyone. “The Klingons respect battle prowess. They don’t have much use for bloodless negotiations, but they will negotiate if they respect their opponent. So we have to make them respect us, which means we need to face them on the battlefield and win. Obviously, we can’t take on the entire species. That’s suicide and stupid. But if we could get them to agree to a trial by combat, their best fighters against ours…we might be able to get them to negotiate.”

“But we would not be officially negotiating for the Federation,” Bishop says, frowning. “Why would they agree to fight us in the first place?” As he asks, the door opens and Cat and Konstantin slip in quietly. Khan catches Cat’s eye and lays a finger over his lips; she nods and moves closer to listen.

“We show them what you fight like,” Jill says, looking up at him. “Trust me, they won’t say no after that, and if we get it signed in blood—I think literally—they’ll hold to their end of the deal. They won’t turn down a fight but they believe fiercely in honor, and if they tell us they’ll agree and don’t…” She spreads her hands. “So we put together some kind of video of you fighting, or something, and send it their way with a message that we want to challenge them, and we negotiate for a trial by combat, and if we succeed, we go to Qo’noS and take on the Kliong High Council or whoever they throw at us. And when we all wash the blood off, we negotiate with them for peace with the Federation. Then we take that back to the Federation and explain who has the cards.”

No one says anything for a moment. “Huh,” Alona says finally. “I know way less about the Klingons than I’d need to in order to have a good sense of whether this would work or not, but if they’re battle-crazy like you say, then yeah, this…this could be good.”

“You think we’re better than they are,” Maeve says to Jill.

“I know you are,” Jill says. “In direct combat, a Klingon is generally bigger and stronger than a human, and their biology is designed for redundancy in ways ours isn’t. They’re damned hard to kill or disable, and they fight well. But against you—no. You’d win that battle. You’re faster, you’re stronger, you’ve had decades of training, and you—all of you—you’re warriors. You’re fighters by blood, by training, by mindset. The Klingons are just another enemy, and you’re too
good for them to be anything more.”

“Flattering words, hermana,” Anandi says, smiling. “But do you mean them?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be suggesting you throw yourselves at the Klingons and see who’s left standing,” Jill points out. A ripple of laughter runs through the room. “I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but it’s doable.”

“Yes,” Ekaterina says slowly. “Yes, I think it is. Khan, you mentioned the Klingons love opera, da?”

“They do,” Khan says.

“Then this is simple enough,” Cat says. “We prepare a performance for them, song and battle, and we challenge them to match us on the field. We will need to prepare, of course, but I had been looking at scores since you mentioned it, and I believe I have two options that will suit our needs. So we will start working toward this, and preparing for battle. We will need those armored coats, and boots would not go amiss if we have time. Jake, how long will it take for those?”

“It takes about three weeks once they get your measurements,” Jake says with a grimace. “Do we have that time?”

“I think we do,” Khan says. “We will need time to gather information on Marcus, to draw out the torture. We will need time to rehearse whatever score Cat chooses, and time to supply ourselves before we send a message to the Klingons, and time to decide what to do with the group of seven, if we do anything at all. We are not going to run out tomorrow and beam ourselves to Qo’noS.”

“No, because that would be stupid,” Jill says. “I may be crazy but I do try not to be completely idiotic. Jake, how long does it take to set up an appointment to get measured for the boots?”

“I’ll message my contact,” Jake says. “If things are quiet out there we should be able to go in a couple days. If I tell them you’re my new team, they won’t ask questions. I’ve taken people there multiple times for that reason.”

“Point of order here,” Magpie says, waving a hand. “Andy and I are not fucking going to Qo’noS with you because we would like to stay alive.”

“We would not take you,” Khan states. “That would be tantamount to signing your death warrants. Either you and Andy will stay on Earth and we will reconnect after we return, or you will stay wherever we stop before going there.”

“Just so long as we’re in agreement about that,” Magpie says. “We’ll figure out the details when we get there.”

“How long have you had this idea, sestrenka?” Konstantin asks Jill.

“Um,” she says, winding a curl around her finger. “A while. It just seemed so crazy. It still seems completely batshit. But it may also be our best chance.”

“It is not mad,” Bishop says. “It is audacious, and risky, and could backfire very badly. But if we succeed…”

“How badly could it backfire?” Matthew asks.

“Well,” Jill says, drawing it out. “The absolute worst case scenario is that the Klingons not only
refuse to negotiate with us, they take it as insult and the opening they need to provoke war with the Federation. The slightly less worse case scenario is just that they don’t negotiate with us and tell us to fuck off, and we have to find another way to deal with things. There’s the chance they agree but then just kill us all when we get there. I *think* that one is unlikely because they do believe in honor, and that would be dishonorable. There is also the chance that if they agree, and if we do this, one or more of us could die in battle.” She licks her lips. “Including me, because I’ll be damned if I’m not going to be involved.”

Khan says nothing.

“Same,” Jake says. “This is our fight too.”

“It is,” Ekaterina says. “Have either of you fought Klingons before?”

“I haven’t,” Jill says. “I’ve studied how they do fight, but I’ve never matched one.”

“I have, twice,” Jake says. “I won, but I had help.”

“As you will now,” Bishop says. “We will need to practice more before we go, of course.”

“Which means we’ll need to find spaces to practice in,” Jill says. “The idea of us all beaming back to London just to use the gym seems a bit much.”

“There are all kinds of private gyms in New York we could use,” Jake says. “I’ll look into it.”

“A dance studio or dojo would possibly work better,” Bishop says.

“Got that,” Jake says. “I’ll check it out. Samuel might know of a place, but even if he doesn’t I’m sure I can find something.”

“Something we can clean easily and well,” Cat says. “As I expect there will be blood.”

“Yep,” Jake says. “I figured as much. The Femarans have some great places for sparring, but getting there and back also seems a bit much.”

“Would the Femarans be amenable to us going to Qo’noS from here?” Konstantin asks.

“Huh,” Jake says. “Probably, so long as the Klingons don’t trace us back to their planet.”

“Not possible,” Khan says. “The destination can be determined from the source, but the reverse is not possible.”

“Then I don’t see why they’d mind,” Jake says.

“What do the Femarans do for body armor?” Alona asks. “Do they have anything we could use?”

“They don’t usually use it,” Jake says. “Their skin is a lot tougher than ours. I think mostly they use metal armor when they use any, which is not so helpful for us. I don’t think they use adamantium for it. That’s just too expensive and the supply isn’t infinite.”

“Well, that sucks,” Alona says. “But the stuff you use is good?”

“It is,” Jake says. “It has some flexibility to it so it doesn’t impede movement. It’s a little heavy, so you have to get used to that, but it moves with you instead of getting in the way. The coat I have is more like a duster, and I’ve never had it catch on anything or slow me down.”
“Where is the coat? I want to see it before we order this stuff,” Alona says.

“Mine is in my apartment in New York,” Jake says. “If you want me to I can drop over there and grab it now.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Alona says.

“Back in five.” Jake punches in coordinates to his transporter and shimmers out of existence.

“So,” Magpie says, stretching her arms over her head. “Do we have any kind of time frame for when we want to start putting things into action?”

“I think at least a month from now,” Khan says, considering it. “That should give us time to supply ourselves, practice, put together the performance for the Klingons, and play the long game with Marcus as well as obtain more data from section 31. We don’t know how long the Klingons will take to respond to us, but I doubt it will be immediate.”

“But when we contact them, we should leave Earth,” Bishop says. “In case they decide to come looking for us.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Still, I think we have some time.”

“I would agree,” Anandi says. “The only case in which I could see us pressed for time would be if Marcus decides to go looking for Khan, or if we have indications he will destroy the rest of our family.”

“Which we know could happen,” Konstantin says quietly. “If he does, he will live long enough to regret it.”

“Da,” Ekaterina says. “But if we keep him distracted, he may not.”

“We can do that,” Alona says. “Andy, do you have enough bugs we can get one on him?”

“I do,” Andy says. Khan looks over at him, not entirely certain when he came into the room. “I’ve got enough to bug him and several of his men, once we identify who those are.”

“I’d have to look at assignments but between me and Jake we could probably give you at least a sense of where to start,” Jill says. “When he gets back, we’ll ask.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Does he have open enemies within Starfleet?”

Jill wrinkles her nose. “Not _that_ openly,” she says. “I know there are a couple admirals who respect him but are less certain about the direction in which he’s taking Starfleet, and I know Marcus doesn’t get along with some people but you really have to read between the lines to see the friction. I don’t know if any existing admiral would openly ally with us against him, if that’s what you’re asking. At least not now.”

“Now is not the time I would want,” Anandi says. “But after we negotiate with the Klingons, we will need an ally to speak for us within Starfleet.”

“Yes, and…I have an idea or two on that,” Jill says. “I want to talk to Jake, though, because he knows more about brass and about their quirks than I do.”

“Speaking of,” Alona says as Jake shimmers back into existence. “Holy shit, I want one.”

“This one’s mine,” Jake says, touching the smooth leather. The coat fits closely through his chest.
and arms, but the long panels that cover most of his legs split down the sides, to allow him to move. It reminds Khan of an old riding coat, to be honest; it would give Jake the same freedom while still offering protection were he on a horse.

Some designs, apparently, are universal. “Anyway, yeah, this is it, and I have a sheath down the back for a knife and I can fit one up my right sleeve,” Jake says, demonstrating both. He unfastens the coat and takes it off, offering it to Alona. “Test out the weight.”

She takes the coat, frowning thoughtfully. “It’s lighter than Kevlar would be,” she says, gauging it. “And more flexible.”

“No idea what Kevlar is,” Jake says.

“It was our version of body armor,” Alona says. “Bullet-resistant, but not perfect, and heavy and thick.”

“Also not very flexible,” Matthew says. “Better than nothing, definitely, but not great.”

“Matthew, you’re about Jake’s size, try it on,” Alona says, handing him the coat. “It’ll be a bit too big through the shoulders and chest but at least you’ll get an idea.”

“Sure,” Matthew says, shrugging into the coat and fastening the panel across the chest. “I like this,” he says after a moment. “It’s definitely not too heavy, but it’s enough to know you’re wearing something with some protection.” He walks around a bit, spinning in place and testing out the movement of the coat. “Yeah, this is quite nice.” A bit reluctantly, he takes the coat off and hands it back to Jake.

“It’s saved my life more than once,” Jake says. “It won’t completely block a phaser blast but it’ll blunt the effect, so that if you get hit you might not die instantly. Well, I wouldn’t. I don’t know what effect a full phaser blast would have on you.”

“It would injure but not kill, and it would not disable us immediately,” Khan says.

“You know, I don’t want to know how you know that,” Jake says.

“No,” Khan agrees. “You don’t.”

“On another note,” Jill says. “Magpie, were you able to get the personnel list for the Jupiter station?”

“You say that like I couldn’t have done it,” Magpie says with a pout. “Of course I have it. Dead easy.”

“You say that like I couldn’t have done it,” Magpie says with a pout. “Of course I have it. Dead easy.”

“No, I just didn’t know if you’d had time,” Jill says. “Can I see it?”

“Yes, if you’re done insulting my abilities.” Magpie sticks out her tongue at Jill and passes a tablet over. Jill makes a face back but takes the tablet, looking at it.

She doesn’t look happy, and mutters something under her breath at a few points. “Okay,” she says finally, looking up. “The good news is I know three people on that station. The bad news is they’re all people I don’t get along with at all. One of them tried to file a complaint when I got promoted and he didn’t, arguing he’d been unfairly passed over. One of them almost got a friend of mine killed. And the third almost got expelled from the Academy for cheating.”

“Were you the one who turned him in?” Jake asks.
“I wasn’t,” Jill says. “I was the one he cheated off of.”

Jake winces. “What happened in the first two cases?”

“The first one dismissed the charges for lack of standing, saying the promotion had been fairly earned and there was no bias against him. The second—it’s a long story, but there was an away mission that went badly and my friend almost died. As it was, she spent three months in rehab and had to take reassignment to planetside duty because she needs help walking.” Jill doesn’t look happy. “I wanted him brought up on court-martial charges, but I hadn’t been there and had no standing as a witness, and those who were there said the evidence was iffy.”

“Why did the third person not get expelled?” Anandi asks.

“He was put on academic probation for a year, and had they caught him cheating during that time they would have expelled him, but they didn’t so he was allowed to graduate,” Jill says. “From what I hear it’s possible he straightened out, but I punched him when I found out he’d copied my work and now we ignore each other.”

“Did you break anything?” Jake asks.

“No,” Jill says, sounding grumpy about it.

Jake snickers, and Khan hides a smile. “Let me see it,” Jake says, holding out a hand. “Maybe I know someone you don’t.”

Jill hands over the tablet and Jake studies the personnel list, absently chewing his lip. “Well, shit,” he says when he finally looks up. “I’m in the same boat you are. No one I know that well and two people I can’t stand. Was one of yours Cotton?”

“That would have been the one who almost got my friend killed,” Jill says. “What’d he do to you?”

“He’s stupid and slow and a bully and I can’t stand him,” Jake says. “He wanted on my team. First of all, he’s not smart enough for intel, and second of all, he’s an asshole. I told him multiple times he wasn’t getting in, and finally told him if a meteor crashed into HQ and took out most of my team and he was the only resource left I still wouldn’t take him. He punched me, I punched back. I won.”

“Did you break anything?” Jill asks.

“His nose,” Jake says cheerfully.

“Awesome.” Jill laughs. “Who was your other one?”

“Kumar,” Jake says. “He had a run-in with one of my team a couple years back, it turned sour, and then he tried to get my guy brought up on charges. I intervened, because I had rank on both of them, and when I looked at the evidence with the prosecutor we both agreed it was baseless, but he’s had it in for me since then. But I outranked him and then some, so that’s going nowhere.”

“He wasn’t one of mine,” Jill says. “But basically we’ve got no way to get eyes and ears on Jupiter.”

“That is about what it sounds like,” Jake says with a sigh. “It is possible someone on my team knows someone out there they get along with, but that adds layers of complexity and issues I’m not sure we want to get into.”
“We probably don’t,” Jill says. “Magpie, can we at least set up a mailbox to capture incoming and outgoing transmissions?”

“Yes, but that’ll get very noisy very quickly,” Magpie says.

“Prioritize those going to and from Marcus,” Jill says. “It’s the best chance we’ve got.”

“I can do this,” Magpie says. “Give me a bit.”

“I can help,” Matthew says, reaching for a computer of his own.

“Cat,” Anandi says. “What are these scores you have found?”

“Both are from after our time,” Ekaterina says. “I did look at options from then and earlier but was dissatisfied with the options. One is a twenty-first century opera about the Eugenics Wars, and I thought it amusingly appropriate. The other is not from Earth, but was translated into English, and I found the music powerfully beautiful. I have recordings of both, and have marked the sections I thought we should perform.”

“Have you heard either of these, Jill? Jake?” Anandi asks.

Jill shakes her head. “I don’t like opera, I’m afraid.”

“What’s the name of the non-Earth one? Where is it from?” Jake asks. “I’ve heard excerpts of the Eugenics Wars opera, if it’s the one I’m thinking of.”

“It is from Andor,” Cat says. “The English translation of the title is Heaven Burning.”

“I…yes,” Jake says slowly. “I have heard that. In Andorian, but there was a running translation. I couldn’t get the music out of my head for close to a week. It’s a hell of a show.”

“What is it about?” Alona asks.

“Old Andorian mythology,” Jake says. “They used to have a polytheistic religion, about ten different gods and goddesses who were always fighting each other. The opera is about the final war between the ten. It’s a tragedy, because all of them die in the end, but there are some amazing pieces before then.”

“What is the plotline of the one about our time?” Anandi asks.

“It is about our rise to power, and then our downfall,” Ekaterina says. “Most of the work focuses on the wars we fought to gain power. It ends with the beginning of humanity’s rebellion against us.”

Anandi looks thoughtful, absently tapping her fingers against her knee. “What are you thinking?” Khan asks her.

“Rowena,” Anandi says. “She had a daughter, one of the few among us who could bear children. Rowena loved music as much as Cat. I wonder if the passion carried on, and if Rowena’s daughter or her grandchild wrote the opera.”

“Who wrote the score?” Khan asks.

“Off the top of my head I don’t remember,” Jake says. “Let me look it up.” He grabs a tablet.

“Which one has better music?” Alona asks Cat. “Objectively speaking.”
“Objectively speaking I think the Andorian piece,” Ekaterina says. “It is more difficult, but the section I would have us sing is all ten gods and goddesses preparing for battle. It is written for ten voices, but I believe we can manage with eight unless Jake, Jill, Andy or Magpie can sing.”

“I can’t,” Magpie says without looking up.

“I’m not trained,” Andy says apologetically. “I can sing in the shower but that’s about it.”

Jill shakes her head. “I love music but as an observer.”

Jake looks pained. “I can sing,” he says reluctantly. “I doubt I have anything on one of you, though. But I can sing, and I can read music.”

“What is your range?” Cat asks.

“I’m a baritone,” Jake says.

“Well,” Cat says. “We will listen to you before we decide.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Jake says with a sigh. “Also, the opera was written by an Alex Morison. I don’t know if Alex is male or female, though.”

“Rowena named her daughter Elizabeth,” Anandi says. “Elizabeth Olivier, I think.”

“I could try to look her up but records from that time are kind of sketchy so I’m not sure I’d get anything useful,” Jake says. “Although. Hang on.” He looks down at the tablet, fingers dancing over the screen.

Khan doesn’t ask what he’s looking for, but his wings shift and ruffle impatiently. He catches Jill looking at him when they do; she smiles a bit and brushes her hand over the edge of the feathers. Khan skims his knuckles down her cheek, pleased when she turns her head to kiss his hand.

“Okay,” Jake says after a few moments. “So. Alex Morison—who is male, for reference—has parents named Katherine and James Morison. Katherine’s maiden name is Olivier. Her father isn’t listed in records, but her mother’s name is Elizabeth.”

“Rowena’s great-grandson,” Anandi says softly.

“There’s actually an article about Alex I found when I was looking him up,” Jake says. “He says he grew up hearing stories from his grandmother about the wars, and always wished he could have known his great-grandmother. The love of music got passed down, and when he had the freedom and the resources to write his own opera, he decided to do it about the wars, to honor her.”

“Then we will use this music,” Khan states. “Its composer is a descendant of ours. It is only right we pay him respect.”

“If you trace the line forward, are there any descendants still alive?” Konstantin asks.

“Hm,” Jake says. “Alex had a son and a daughter, but I’d have to do some genealogy to find out if anyone from that line is around today.”

“We would appreciate it if you did,” Maeve says.

“Who else among us had children? Who had the capability to have them, and of those, who did?” Anandi asks.
“Geoffrey,” Bishop says. “He had a son.”

“Chaim had a daughter,” Konstantin says. “But I think those were the only ones.”

“Why did the rest of you not have kids?” Magpie asks.

“We can’t,” Bishop says. “The engineering the scientists did rendered most of us sterile. Only a few of us were ever fertile to begin with.”

“Man, that sucks,” Jake says. “I mean, I don’t want kids but to not even have the option.”

“It might be reversible with today’s medical advances,” Maeve says. “But that’s a conversation for a while down the road.”

“A long while down the road,” Jill says firmly.

“You do not want children?” Konstantin asks her.

“Not for a while,” Jill says. “A very long while. And if anyone starts talking about babies with wings I’m going to punch them.”

“Duly noted, sestrenka,” Konstantin says, smiling.

“What about hobbit babies?” Magpie asks, looking up from her monitor.

“I’m going to ignore you said that because we still need you alive,” Jill says.

Magpie laughs. “Someone’s a bit touchy.”

“Someone should stop while she’s behind,” Jill says.


“Okay, okay,” Magpie says. “Going back to work now. I’ll let you know when I have something.”

“Thank you,” Jill says. “I’m going to make coffee. Anyone else want some?”

A few people say yes; Andy says he’ll make tea and Anandi asks her to make a pot. Jill heads to the kitchen, followed by Andy.

“So,” Cat says in Hebrew. “How long has she had this idea?”

“Some time,” Khan says in the same language. “She was not comfortable sharing it.”

“It is risky,” Cat says. “And dangerous. And could possibly get us all killed and begin an interplanetary war.”

“Do you have another option?” Khan asks.

“I do not,” Ekaterina says. “Nor am I opposed to Jill’s. But we must acknowledge the risks before we can plan to overcome them.”

“The main impediment will be convincing the Klingons we are in earnest,” Khan says. “How long will it take us to learn the score?”

“Learning it will not take long, but performing it correctly…this is not easy material,” Ekaterina says. “We will need to decide on what segments to record, and then get them recorded perfectly.
There is one section of the work that I thought the most powerful. It requires a full chorus, but if we layer our voices enough we can make that work.”

“What are the solo parts? What vocal ranges do we need?” Khan asks.

“A soprano, a bass, a mezzo-soprano, two baritones and a contralto,” Cat says. “I think myself, Kostya, Maeve, yourself, Bishop, and Anandi.”

“That makes sense,” Anandi says. “Do you have a recording handy? I would like to hear this.”

“I have,” Ekaterina says. “I will play it for you when everyone returns.”

“What is the section about?” Khan asks.

“Winning the final battle of the wars that brought us to power,” Ekaterina says. “It is essentially the climax of the opera, and powerful.”

“And appropriate,” Bishop says.

“What is appropriate?” Jill asks, returning with a tray. “Coffee for those who asked for it. Anandi, Andy will be out in just a moment with your tea.” She sets the tray down on the coffee table.

“Gracias,” Anandi says.

“De nada,” Jill says. She picks up her own cup and takes a sip. “So what is appropriate?”

“The section of the opera about us Cat thinks we should send the Klingons,” Khan says. “It is apparently the section where we finished the wars that put us in power.”

“That would be the definition of appropriate, yes,” Jill says. “We should be able to find a video recording of it from somewhere, if you want to look at it instead of just hear it.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “We would. For now, though, we can listen.”

Andy returns with tea and takes his seat again. “What are we listening to?” he asks.

“The opera about us we will sing for the Klingons,” Khan says. “Cat has a recording.”

“I need a computer,” Cat says. “Or one of the tablets.”

Jake hands her one. “Let’s hear this,” he says.

Cat’s fingers move over the screen, and after a few moments she nods. “All right,” she says. “Listen.”

She starts the recording and everyone goes quiet, listening. The music begins softly, but with an underlying steady bass that feels ominous to Khan, a warning of things to come. The sense of menace increases when the male voices in the chorus join in.

He doesn’t pay much attention to the lyrics, focusing on the music itself, the building energy and layering of voices. It’s well done; by the time the first women join the chorus his skin prickles with energy.

The music keeps building, growing in intensity and accelerating speed—and then cuts off on a sharp note, jolting Khan out of his thoughts. A moment, three, of pure silence. And then the soprano soloist comes in on a pure, high note, falling down the scale only to be met by the mezzo-
soprano, and then the contralto.

Softly, the chorus enters again, a background rich thrum to the soloists; Khan notes the theme change from impending battle to active combat, and thinks it well done indeed.

The male soloists enter in reverse order, with the bass coming in first, followed by the baritones. The six leads argue with each other, voices rising and falling and overlaying in a fugue. The chorus takes up the fugue and the soprano the lead, her voice soaring over the chorus. Khan can easily imagine Cat singing this part; her voice is stronger than the recording. As is Konstantin’s, Khan observes when the bass joins in.

He wonders just how many stories of them Rowena passed down to her daughter and eventually to Alex. Did Rowena talk to her daughter about their singing, their music? Rowena had loved to sing; her voice hadn’t been as strong as Ekaterina’s, or Anandi’s, but beautiful nonetheless. She played piano, a difficult thing to come by during the wars but she persisted.

Rowena never made it to the Botany Bay. She died in battle before the ship was built, leaving Elizabeth without a mother. They had wanted to take Elizabeth with them when they left, but the cryosleep technology was uncertain at best and no one knew how it would affect a small child, one who hadn’t been engineered. So Elizabeth had stayed on Earth.

Stayed, and married, and had a child. Khan finds comfort in that, in knowing Elizabeth made a life for herself after the chaos. He does want to find out if any of Alex’s descendants survived, to see if Rowena’s gifts had been passed down.

Geoffrey’s son, as well, and Chaim’s daughter. Finding them will be more difficult, and Khan isn’t entirely certain it is possible. But they will look. He only wishes that either Geoffrey or Chaim were still alive to find out; unfortunately, both of them died in cryosleep.

Khan turns his attention back to the music in time to hear the triumphant ending. “Difficult, but doable,” Cat says, turning off the recording.

“I quite like it,” Bishop says. “It will take multiple sessions to record properly, though, with the chorus.”

“Yes, but the choral parts are easier,” Cat says. “I have the sheet music.”

“Do you need an orchestral recording to sing with?” Andy asks.

“Yes,” Ekaterina says. “But I have one. I am still looking for a better one; the recording I purchased is only adequate. If need be we will find recording software to make it ourselves, but that would take more time.”

“Is it possible to record without the orchestra?” Bishop asks.

“It…is,” Cat says, considering it. “You think that would be better?”

“I think we should try it a cappella and see if it works,” Bishop says. “Is there anything the orchestra adds that is truly necessary?”

Cat considers, then shakes her head. “Nyet, I think not.”

“Then let us rehearse it a cappella,” Bishop says. “That will give us more freedom in any event, and I think will be suitable for our needs. If we decide otherwise, we have the recording.”
“Da,” Ekaterina says. “I will send out the sheet music and we can begin to rehearse within a day or two.”

“We’ll need to find a place for that,” Maeve says. “And a place to record.”

“Yeah, I’ll look into it,” Jake says. “My brother’s into musical theatre, I’ll see if he knows anywhere we could rent.”

“What vocal range is he?” Maeve asks.

“He’s a tenor,” Jake says. “A good one, too, and he’s got a bigger lower range than a lot of tenors.”

“Still, I think we should not request his voice on our recording,” Cat says.

“No, we shouldn’t,” Jake says. “Just saying he’s pretty good.”

“Ah, brotherly pride,” Jill says. “Not that you’d ever say it to his face.”

“Not unless forced,” Jake agrees amiably. “I have a reputation to maintain as the uncaring older brother to two giant dorks.”

Alona laughs. “Boy, that sounds familiar, doesn’t it oldest brother?”

“No idea what you’re referencing,” Khan says solemnly.

She throws a pillow at him. Khan dodges easily and Jill catches the pillow before it hits anyone. “Please try to refrain from projectile weapons in crowded rooms,” she says.

“I hardly think anyone in here could be injured by a pillow,” Alona says.

“No, but there’s a risk of property damage and we’re trying to leave the house in pristine shape,” Jill says.

Alona nods, conceding the point. “Then I will stop,” she says. “Even though you have to admit he totally earned that one.”

“Oh, of course he did,” Jill says cheerfully.

“I do like your Jill, brother,” Alona says to Khan.

“I’m aware,” Khan says but has to smile. He can only keep up the solemn, uncaring older brother act for so long. Sometimes longer than others, but he is amused by the interplay here.

“I think we all do,” Matthew says. “And, Jill, if you ever want to trade up brothers…”

“Pretty sure I got the best of you,” Jill says, laughing. “That is, the best of the single you.”

Matthew hangs his head. “That’s sadly accurate,” he says mournfully.

“We should begin packing and clearing out the house for Thursday,” Ekaterina says, changing the subject. “Andy, will there be a cleaning crew in after we leave or are we to do it?”

“There will be a cleaning crew in on Friday,” Andy says. “Trevor prefers it that way because they’re bonded to a certain level of service and he’d rather not get cranky if we don’t clean it to his specifications.”
Ekaterina nods. “Understandable,” she says. “And we have paid him all we owe?”

“We will on Friday,” Magpie says. “I’m not paying him the last installment until after the cleaning crew gets here and then he makes sure everything’s as it should be and nothing got broken.”

“Which it hasn’t,” Alona says.

“I know that, but he has to check,” Magpie says patiently. “This is a family home, not that they ever use it.”

"Why do they never use it?" Konstantin asks. "This seems a perfectly nice home."

“It’s not fashionable,” Magpie says, rolling her eyes. “London isn’t considered one of the ‘in’ cities right about now, so no one wants to come here.”

“Which is stupid, but also means you have a better chance of staying off the radar in London,” Alona tells Khan.

“Possibly, unless Marcus decides to look for me here,” Khan says. “But I think the odds of that unlikely. He will probably presume I have left for parts unknown.”

“Do you think he’ll think you went to Jupiter?” Jake asks.

“Not likely,” Khan says. “I could not blend in well with the existing crew and he would undoubtedly have them on high alert. San Francisco, however, is a possibility. Or even off planet somewhere,”

“Well, the Femarans would always welcome you,” Jake says. “They like you. Aktok told me you were a worthy warrior and a fine opponent, and from them that’s about the highest praise you can get.”

“We may need that at some point,” Ekaterina says. “But not just yet. For now I think we are to stay on Earth. For one thing, do communicators work over that distance?”

“Yes but no,” Jake says. “The short version is that they don’t work. The long version is that if you have a signal booster, they will. But those are a pain in the ass to get and configure.”

“Will they work with the jammers we have on our links now?” Alona asks.

Jake makes a face and waves a hand back and forth. “I don’t know,” he says. “I’d have to test it and find out.”

“Then let us not worry about that for now,” Ekaterina says firmly. “We will remain on Earth. For one thing, we cannot play the long game with Marcus if we leave.”

“For another, we have a lot of information to gather and things to accomplish that will be difficult if we leave,” Khan says.

“Da,” Cat says. “So we are to split on Thursday.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “All save myself and Jill, who will be departing for parts unknown in the near future.”

“How near is that, though?” Alona asks. “Are you going to be trapped here for weeks, months? That’s not ideal.”
“It’s not,” Jill says. “I’m working on laying the groundwork for a family emergency that will leave me out of contact for the foreseeable future. I think I’ll be able to decamp as of next Tuesday. If I can’t, I’ll decamp anyway. It’s not like I have a future in Starfleet to worry about.”

As always, the tinge of bitterness in her tone makes Khan wince.

“By Tuesday I will be able to leave,” he says. “I will move my things out of my flat on Monday and tell Marcus then I am done with his games.”

“Then Tuesday it is,” Jill says. “And we are going to…New York?”

“Yeah,” Jake says. “My apartment will be ready for you by then. I’ll get you the codes on Monday—and yes, I’m changing them for you, but I’ll change them again when you leave.”

“Of course,” Jill says. “And we will do our best not to break anything.”

“Just do me a favor and sanitize the bed when you move out,” Jake says, looking pained. “I don’t need to know or have evidence of…anything.”

“You are such a remarkable prude where Jill is concerned,” Alona says, laughing.

“She’s my sister and I don’t need to know that shit,” Jake says.

“Khan’s my brother and I’m well aware he has a sex life,” Alona says promptly. “A satisfying one, if I’m any judge.”

“I am not discussing this with you,” Khan says.

“Jill, is your sex life satisfying?” Alona asks.

“My sex life is both none of your business and out of this galaxy amazing,” Jill says.

“Point made,” Alona says, satisfied. “And I would hope it would be, sister.”

“Can we move on?” Jake asks plaintively. “Things to do in the next few days. Find a place to rehearse and record the opera, move to our scattered locations, practice fighting and start learning how to fight Klingons in particular. Did I miss anything over the next three to four days?”

“I think not,” Ekaterina says. “And you will take care of the first?”

“I’ll do what I can, and I can probably come up with something,” Jake says. “It’ll likely be in New York, since that’s where my brother is based, but we have a few people there anyway.”

“So long as it is not off-planet we will be fine,” Ekaterina says. “What is the Femaran music like?”

“It’s a lot of sung poetry and chanting,” Jake says. “They do record things, because a lot of their history is oral, so one of the jobs of the bards is to record previous historical chants and new ones so their history doesn’t get lost. They have music that’s more what I guess we’d call modern, but it’s not a huge thing and I’ve never found it appealing.”

“But they would have options for recording should we need to go there,” Cat says.

“They would, and they’d probably let us so long as we let them listen,” Jake says.

“I would have no issue with this,” Cat says. “Do you know anything about their recording facilities?”
“No, but I can find out,” Jake says.

“Please do,” Cat says.

“Sure, no problem,” Jake says. “I have to go there in the next week or so to pick up more knives for my team, I’ll ask then.”

“Spasiba,” Cat says. “Is it time for dinner?”


“I am,” Ekaterina says. “And you are helping me.”

“At least I can chop things,” Matthew says philosophically. He pushes up from his seat and follows Cat into the kitchen.

“Any word from Carol yet?” Alona asks.

“No, not yet that I have seen,” Khan says, but he looks at Magpie for confirmation.

“No,” Magpie says. “Her email’s been very quiet, just routine stuff, and she’s only used her comm link to call someone at her lab and also one of the supervisory staff for said lab. No calls to or from her father, and I’ve yet to see any messages that look suspicious. She could have an anonymous address I haven’t found, but I’ve been checking her location and haven’t seen any weird transmissions. It’s not out of the realm of possibility that she’s got one anyway but given the rest of her security I’m thinking it’s not likely.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. “Please keep watching. She may not be up to anything but she has more information about me than I am comfortable with.”

“Teach your grandma to suck eggs, wherever that expression came from,” Magpie says. “I prefer ‘teach Satan to start a fire’, but I had a twisted childhood.”

“You had no childhood,” Konstantin says quietly.

“It actually wasn’t that bad,” Magpie says. “The kids mostly got to run free until we got old enough to start being useful, those of us that survived. There were a couple older brats who taught us how to read and write and do basic math, and we learned a lot about the current civilization from being on the outskirts of it. My grasp of history and geography are fairly nonexistent, and I’m not all that widely read at all—I’m not even thinly read, really—but I don’t want you thinking it was all bad on the streets, because it wasn’t.”

“How many of you survived, though?” Bishop asks.

“Um,” Magpie says. “Within two years of my birth, back and forward, there were something like twenty babies. Twelve survived to toddler-hood, and seven survived to eighteen. No, six. Lynda died six months before her birthday.”

“This sounds wrong, but I’m surprised so many survived to adulthood,” Anandi says.

“Most of the ones who survived were born in spring and summer, when the weather was better,” Magpie says. “A baby on the streets born in winter has very little chance of surviving.”

“Is there anything that can be done about the street brats?” Maeve asks in frustration.

“Yes and no,” Magpie says. “The Federation could legally recognize them and bring them into the
social safety net. That would get them a level of care they don’t have. But the Federation has shown no signs of wanting to do this or even knowing they should, and the street brats in general are very wary of government. So even if the Federation, in its wisdom, decided to incorporate the brats into its society, there’d be a lot of pushback. It also would depend on how the Federation did it, if it was by fiat or if they tried to talk to the brats. But either case is unlikely. The Federation doesn’t recognize the brats and the brats don’t want to be recognized and everyone limps along.”

Maeve sighs, pushing her hair back. “Our rule wasn’t perfect, but at least we didn’t ignore groups of people,” she says.

“No,” Khan agrees. “But there is little we can do at this time.”

“I know,” Maeve says. “I know. Would it—would it be worth it to take a kit of medical supplies to the brats in, say, New York and try to help them?”

“Yes, especially if Andy or I vouched for you,” Magpie says. “Let me know when you have time for this and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” Maeve says.

“Anything else we need to discuss at this point?” Alona asks.

“I think not,” Khan says. Also, he wants to talk to Jill more about the hearing and her feelings on it. He will not allow this librarian to go un molested if she is truly upset or feels violated.

“Then I’m going for a run, I’ll be back by dinner.” Alona pushes to her feet. “Maeve, Bishop, you with me?”

“Aye,” Maeve says, also getting up.

“Non, merci,” Bishop says.

“Wimp,” Alona teases. “C’mon, Maeve, let’s go see how fast we can go for how long.”

“Hopefully not that fast, since we’re not Anandi,” Maeve says.

Anandi laughs. “I will go for my own run later.”

“Don’t take us, we can’t keep up,” Alona says, laughing.

“Matthew can, if he pushes himself,” Anandi says.

“Which he never wants to do,” Alona says. “Okay, we’re out. We’ll be back by dinner, if not save us plates.”

“We will,” Anandi says. “Run well.”

Alona tosses her a lazy salute and she and Maeve leave the house.

Chapter End Notes

I have literally had this idea for endgame playing out in my head for, uh, months now. Does it work for you guys?
Thursday arrives too quickly for Khan’s liking. He acknowledges that this is far from the first time his family will have been separated, and unlike previous times they have the ability to be with each other within seconds, as well as talk without being overheard. Still, he has gotten used to having all eight of his brothers and sisters within a few meters, and the idea of scattering them across the globe does not set him at ease.

For safety reasons, not all of them will go to the new locations. Jake, of course, has to go with everyone, as he is the only person with all the codes and who knows everyone. But the rest of them stay in a dwindling group in the house, until the only ones left are Jake, Jill, Khan, Anandi and Maeve. “Do you want to come to New York with us?” Jake asks Jill and Khan. “I’m sure Eema would like to see you.”

Jill winces. “I’m sure Eema has a lot of things to say to me and I’m not sure I want to hear any of them and yeah, let’s go. Khan?”

He nods.

“We’ll drop Anandi and Maeve off first,” Jake says. He gives them the coordinates and they all set the transporters. “Let’s go.”

Khan hits the button and materializes a few seconds later in a very spacious loft, open and airy. “This is one of the nicer safe houses we have,” Jake says, gesturing. “One bedroom is that way, the other is that way, they both have their own bathrooms. I forget who this used to belong to but it’s a newer building, replaced something from the 20th century or something.”

“One of these days I will stop thinking of the 20th century as current,” Anandi says ruefully. “Maeve, do you have a preference on bedroom?”

“The one that way has blackout shades, the other one has dark shades but they’re not full blackout,” Jake says. “If that helps.”

“It does,” Anandi says. “I will take the blackout shades. Gracias, hermano.”

“Any light bothers her when she’s sleeping, and she sleeps weird hours,” Maeve says, picking up
her bag. “Me, I’m out like a light.” She takes her bag to her bedroom, returning a moment later, as does Anandi.

“What else do you have to show us?” Anandi asks.

Jake shows them the security codes and system for the apartment, a few things around the place, and points out the local grocery and other stores. “And that’s it,” he says. “Call me if you run into any issues.”

“We will,” Anandi says. “Gracias. I only wish we had more information about section 31 so we can get to work.”

“Well, we couldn’t get Verity because none of us are necromancers and she’s dead,” Jill says. “And we can’t get much out of the section 31 computers because someone uploaded a self-destruct virus that even Magpie and Andy can’t counter. There’s still information out there, but getting it is going to be more difficult.”

“Do we know how she died?” Maeve asks. “I don’t remember hearing that.”

“The death certificate Matthew found said cardiac arrest,” Jill says, making a face. “We haven’t been able to get her full medical records to find out what actually happened, but there are three options. Either she died from whatever illness section 31 gave her with Khan’s blood, someone killed her, or she suicided.”

“We’re likely not going to get her medical records,” Jake says. “Security at Medical is tighter than anything else because of doctor-patient confidentiality laws. I’m not saying we can’t do it, but it’s less easy than even breaking into the facility where you all were.”

“Magpie could do it, but yeah, it’s not easy and I’m not sure it’s worth the effort,” Jill says.

“I think it is,” Anandi says. “The other six of her group scattered when she died, or so we think. If we were to find out the why and how of Verity’s death, we could find out whether her colleagues fled to avoid the same fate or whether they left because they were the cause of it. We know very little about the six remaining, and we know two of them are not even on Earth at this point. It’s possible this is all a ruse and these people have no information we need or want, but I for one would prefer to find out directly. As well, they are likely to have personal copies of information that were unaffected by the self-destruct, and Maeve and I would find those useful.”

“Point taken,” Jill says. “I’ll talk to the bird and see what she and Andy and Matthew can come up with.”

“We do have some data to start analyzing,” Maeve says. She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and looks at Khan. “And I know this is asking a great deal, brother, but if you were to tell us what happened—you said they told you the reasons for the brutality. If you were able to tell us what they told you, we would have a better grasp on the situation.”

“I know,” Khan says. He already thought of that, even before the self-destruct. He has no wish to relive those memories, and while the curse of his engineering will not allow him to forget the details, he has been able to let them slide to the back of his mind.

But they need this information. Marcus’s programs will not end with him, and if Starfleet is creating biochemical weapons, his family may be the only chance of averting that disaster.

Still. He says nothing else, but Jill quietly takes his hand, her fingers warm and solid against his own.
“Well,” Anandi says. “Let us see what we can find out on our own first. And we also have to learn Klingon language and culture in addition to the data analysis.”

“I am beginning to feel like we’re back in childhood,” Maeve says. “Endless lessons and tests. The difference here, of course, is that we’re voluntarily doing this.”

“In a sense,” Jake says. “But you’re not really doing this out of altruism, it’s for your own self-preservation. If the Federation falls, we’re all fucked.”

“Yes, and our family is arrogant enough to believe we can prevent this,” Anandi says. “And we may well be right.”

“I pray we are,” Maeve says quietly.

“Do you pray regularly?” Jake asks.

Maeve shakes her head. “Most of our family, myself included, consider ourselves agnostics. We have no evidence for a higher power, but at the same time we have no evidence one does not exist. And with everything in this time—the visions, the dreams, the way things have happened—I’m starting to think there really could be one.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Speaking of, I had a dream last night.”

“Tell us about it,” Khan says.

“An amphitheatre,” Anandi says. “Old and not in good repair, and a storm was brewing overhead. We were waiting for our enemies to arrive, and I heard a clock start tolling. Thirteen chimes, to be precise, and then I woke up.”

“There’s thirteen of us,” Jill says softly.

“Yes,” Anandi says. “Curious, is it not?”

“More than a little, yes,” Jake says. “Okay. On that cheery note, we should get going if we’re to catch Eema at a good time. You two will be okay here?”

“We will,” Maeve says. “We will likely head out to look around a bit before we begin working.”

“Sounds good,” Jake says. “Let’s go see my mom.” He gives Khan the coordinates and they beam to Brooklyn, materializing on a quiet street in front of a brick house. “Beaming directly into the house would be rude,” he explains. “Anyway, this is her house. C’mon.” He heads up the sidewalk to the wide front porch and rings the bell, Khan and Jill behind him.

A few moments later Sarah opens the door, dressed in a gray skirt and purple top, her hair hidden under a patterned scarf. “Hi, Eema,” Jake says, leaning down to hug her. “We made it.”

“Yes, I see that,” Sarah says, patting Jake’s cheek. “Come in. There’s fresh coffee and I’ll have lunch ready in about ten minutes.”

Inside the house, Khan looks around, seeing a very normal house with comfortable furnishings, a box of children’s toys in one corner and family pictures all over the walls. He sees a pair of candlesticks and a Kiddush cup over the fireplace, along with a small shelf of prayer books. In the sunny kitchen, another box of toys sits in a corner behind the table and a high-end coffeemaker has pride of place on the counter. “Please, sit,” Sarah says, getting mugs down from a cabinet.
Khan turns his chair around to not crush his wings, and Jill and Jake take seats on either side of him. Sarah brings the coffee mugs over to the table, along with a sugar bowl and small pitcher of cream although the only person to use them is Jill. Khan takes a sip and mostly avoids blinking in surprise, but he can’t remember the last time he had coffee this good.

“What did you make for lunch, Eema?” Jill asks.

“We are having grilled sandwiches with basil, tomato and mozzarella, as well as a side of couscous,” Sarah says. “I just need to grill the sandwiches, which won’t take long once the press heats.” Even as she says this, a chime sounds and Sarah gets up to go to the press. “So,” she says, setting two sandwiches on the grill and closing the lid. “Tell me what is going on. Jake mentioned you two would be needing his apartment for a bit, and he has moved some of his things back here. What happened?”

“We need to drop off the radar,” Jill says. “And we can’t stay in London or go to San Francisco. New York seemed big enough to be anonymous, even for a winged human, and Jake volunteered his place.”

“Why are you dropping off the radar?” Sarah asks.

“The longer Khan stays under Marcus’s thumb, the more risk we have of accomplishing our goals,” Jill says. “We want to keep Marcus off-balance and uncertain where the shoe will drop, and we can’t do that if Khan’s still part of section 31. And I’m going with him because I am.”

“Of course you are,” Sarah says. “What do you think the admiral will do once Khan disappears?”

“Try to pretend I never existed,” Khan says. “I think he would not be likely to start a manhunt for me unless I took direct action to provoke him, which I will not do.”

“At least not now,” Jake says.

“But what about your family still in cryosleep?” Sarah asks. “Surely Marcus would think to use them as leverage.”

“He would,” Khan says quietly. “And there is a chance that when I disappear, he will kill them all. There is a different chance that he will choose to revive another member of my family, but I think that fairly unlikely. He is not a stupid man, and he will know he can’t control us.”

Sarah sighs, taking the two sandwiches off the press and putting the other two on. “I will pray your family survives,” she says. “I don’t know if it matters to you or not, but I will.”

“I would appreciate any positive thoughts or energy you can send,” Khan says honestly.

“Not the answer I expected,” Sarah says.

“How so?” Khan asks.

“I presumed you were an atheist,” Sarah says. “You did tell me you were not religious.”

“No,” Khan says, amused that they are having the same conversation as half an hour ago. “I am agnostic, if anything, but since awakening in this time I have seen and experienced things that leave me convinced there is some force out there.”

“What have you seen?” Sarah asks.
Khan looks at Jake. “You didn’t tell her?”

Jake shakes his head.

“Tell me what?” Sarah asks patiently.

“It appears that all of us involved in this project are having similar dreams,” Khan says. “And while we can’t prove it, we think the dreams may be coming from my wife.”

“I didn’t know you had been married,” Sarah says.

“In my original time,” Khan says. “She died of cancer before we left Earth.”

“May her memory be a blessing,” Sarah says quietly.

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“What else can you tell me?” Sarah asks. She brings the sandwiches over to the table and goes back to the stove for the bowl of couscous.

“There was a group of people we were looking at within section 31, but one of them died and the rest scattered, so we’re kind of at a loss there,” Jill says. “Khan spoke with Carol Marcus, but as of now she has yet to provide any useful information, or really any non useful information. On the other hand she hasn’t betrayed us to her father yet so that could be worse.”

“It usually can,” Sarah says. “Please, eat.” She serves the sandwiches and passes the bowl of couscous to Jake. “What other loose ends do you have dangling?”

“The stupid court case,” Jill says with a groan. “And there’s a lot of data from section 31 we don’t have and could really use if we’re to find out why they gathered it all.”

“And Marika,” Jake says.

“How is she doing?” Jill asks. “You haven’t mentioned lately.”

“She’s in this weird twilight thing, where if you guide her to do things she’ll do them, so like if you put her on a treadmill and get her to start walking she’ll keep doing it. And if you put food in her hand she’ll eat it. But you have to prompt her to do anything, and she’s not mentally coherent. Gabe honestly admits he’s at a loss here, he doesn’t know what else to do to help her heal or how long this is going to last.” Jake slumps in his chair. “I went to see her yesterday, thought maybe my presence would jar something, but it didn’t.”

“And there’s no way to contact her father’s people?” Sarah asks.

“We don’t even know who they are, let alone how to contact them,” Jake says. “We have contact information for her mother, but not her father, and I believe Gabe tried to contact her mother and didn’t get a response.”

“She is continuing to improve, though,” Jill says. “I mean, first she was in a coma, and she’s been slowly waking up, so maybe she’ll get out of this.”

“I hope so,” Jake says. “I really hope so.”

“Tell me about this court case,” Sarah says. “I know very little about it.”

This time Jill slumps in her chair. “The creepy head librarian at the archive,” she says. “I told you
he kept hitting on me and being sleazy. He finally tried to grope me, I punched him, and then I filed charges. I’m scheduled to give my deposition tomorrow, which is good because we may not be around for the actual hearing.”

“I see,” Sarah says.

“It’s not really a big deal, Eema,” Jill says. “He’s a sleazeball who deserves to be dishonorably discharged, that’s all.”

“At a minimum,” Jake mutters.

Sarah sighs. “I disagree, but this isn’t my argument to have. For now, I would like to know what you need from me, or what I can do to help you.”

“I was going to ask David, but do you know a place we could use for recording music?” Jake asks.

“Now that I didn’t expect,” Sarah says, blinking. “And…hm.” She taps her fingers against the table, thinking. “The synagogue has excellent acoustics, but no recording facilities and I doubt you’d want to get permission from the rabbi to use it. I think…” She tilts her head, clearly trying to remember something. “David recorded the soundtrack to a musical about six months ago, and they used a studio in Manhattan. He said they were pleased with the result. Off the top of my head I can’t remember the name, but David would know. Why do you need a recording studio?”

“The Klingons love opera and we need to bait them,” Jill says succinctly.

“I didn’t know that,” Sarah says. “That they love opera, I mean.”

“Yeah, they give their best singers as much prestige as their best fighters,” Jake says. “Often the two are the same. Which is funny if you think about typical human singers.”

“I don’t know, I’ve seen some impressive ones,” Jill says. “The death techno people were kind of scary.”

“Okay, but they were legitimately trying to start trouble, not just make terrible music,” Jake argues. “If you look at, like, Broadway singers these days?”

“Depends on the show,” Jill says. “Wasn’t there the one where they all had axes?”

“Fake ones,” Jake insists.

“Broadway still exists?” Khan asks curiously.

“It does,” Jake says. “It’s shut down a few times in the last few centuries but the lights have been on for I think a hundred and eighty years at this point. The quality of what’s on stage varies, but doesn’t it always?”

Sarah laughs. “Who was it that said that ninety percent of everything is terrible?”

“A writer from the 1950s,” Khan says. “Specifically, he was referring to the quality of science fiction literature, but posited the theory could extrapolate to cover all kinds of content.”

“The more you know,” Jake says.

“That was a thing too at some point, wasn’t it?” Jill shrugs. “No information is useless.”

“No, but some has very limited use,” Khan says.
“This is also true,” Sarah says. “Why are you baiting the Klingons?”

“That gets a little more complicated,” Jill says, fidgeting in her seat. “If we bait them the right way, we can convince them to…negotiate with us on behalf of the Federation. Maybe.”

Sarah folds her hands on the table and looks at Jill steadily, saying nothing. Jill squirms more and looks down and sighs. “It was my crazy idea and we’re going with it,” she mumbles. “If we bait the Klingons right, we convince them to take us on in a trial by combat. When we win that, we sue for peace on behalf of the Federation. Then we take the terms back to the Federation and watch them choke and give us what we want.”

“What is it you want?” Sarah asks quietly.

“Freedom for Khan’s people,” Jill says. “Payback for what they’ve been through. The supplies we need and a ship we can use to leave Earth and go see what else is out there. And…and Admiral Marcus. For our justice.”

“Justice,” Sarah says carefully. “How do you define it?”

“You…Eema, you don’t want to know,” Jill murmurs.

“That tells me everything I do need to know,” Sarah says. She shakes her head. “Are you so convinced of his guilt that you would not give him the chance to speak in his own defense? To sentence him to death without a trial?”

“I am,” Khan says flatly. “His death is on my hands alone, and I will not apologize for taking it. Nor will I allow him a chance of escape, or exile. For what he has done, he deserves nothing more than death by my hands.”

“What has he done?” Sarah asks quietly.

“Will it change your mind?” Khan asks.

“We abolished the death penalty centuries ago,” Sarah says. “It’s not civilized, you see. And I consider myself to be a civilized person. I don’t agree with your intent, no. Surely there are other ways to punish him.”

“No,” Khan says.

“Not…not in this case, Eema,” Jake says slowly. “He’s venomous, and he bites, and the only way to stop the poison is to cut off the head. I didn’t want to believe he had no chance of redemption, but I do now.”

Sarah looks tired, and gets up from the table without a word, gathering dishes and bringing them over to the sink. Jake gets up, going to her, and rests his hands on her shoulders, leaning down to murmur in her ear. Khan can’t hear what he says, but Sarah shakes her head at first, then stills, listening.

Eventually Jake steps back, and Sarah sighs. “I still don’t like it,” she says, looking at the sink. “But there are many things about this entire situation I don’t like.” She washes her hands and dries them on a towel, turning back to them. “Jake, you and Khan can clean up,” she says. “Jill and I are going to my sewing room to talk.”

Jill all but whimpers and looks like she wants to slide under the table, but gets up obediently. “If I don’t come back, I love you,” she murmurs to Khan and kisses his cheek. She follows Sarah out of
the room and Khan gets up, stretching his wings just to relax them.

“This will honestly be easier if I just do it,” Jake says. “Eema keeps kosher so everything has to go in its own place and not mix and it’s easier to just do it than tell you where everything has to go.”

“As you like,” Khan says.

“If she ever re-organizes I’m screwed,” Jake says, stacking the washer efficiently. “But for now I know where it all goes.”

Khan sees the similarity between Jake and Sarah in their movements, despite Jake being both taller and slimmer. He wonders how similar Jake is to his father, or what his father would think of the situation. There’s no denying the relationship between Jake and Sarah, of course; from the eyes to the face to the body language, they resemble each other.

The doorbell rings, startling both of them, and a moment later it rings again. “Shit,” Jake says curtly and closes the washer, hurrying to the door. “That—hey, princess, stop ringing the bell so loud, you’ll wake up the neighbors.” He laughs and scoops a small dark-haired girl into his arms, settling her on his hip.

“Unca Jake!” she squeals, wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing tight enough Khan wonders if Jake can breathe. “Daddy said you wouldn’t be here.”

“Yes, but your daddy doesn’t know everything, now does he? But it would have been nice if he’d called first, because I have some friends visiting Bubbie and we don’t want to take away your time with her.” Jake loosens the little girl’s grip on his neck and kisses her cheek.

“We meant to call but I thought he was, he thought I was, it didn’t happen,” the woman on the stoop says. “Is it a bad time?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jake says with a wince. “Can you—tell you what. Let’s take this monster to the park for a bit, and by the time we get back it should be clear.”

“Park!” the little girl cheers. “Will you give me a piggyback ride?”

“I will, because I’m your favorite uncle,” Jake says. He sets down the little girl and goes to his knees. She scrambles onto his shoulders and Jake stands up, balancing her easily. “Oof. What are your parents feeding you, princess? You’re getting too heavy to do this.”

“Am not,” she says immediately.

“Let’s go,” Jake says, glancing back at Khan, who nods and raises a hand. Jake closes the door behind them and Khan spares a smile, amused despite the situation.

Still, now what? Jake did finish the cleanup; Khan shrugs and moves into the living room to look around more closely. He sees two bookcases of actual books on either side of the fireplace and walks over to the left-hand one to see what the Jacobs keep on the shelves.

It doesn’t surprise him that the books are almost uniformly old, possibly by centuries. The leather bindings show wear, but careful handling, and the gilt letters on the spines have faded but not to the point of illegibility. Most of them involve Judaism; Jewish history, culture, folklore, stories and novels.

Khan finds a book of collected short stories from an author he knows of but has not personally read and takes it off the shelf, turning the pages carefully. He makes it through three stories and half a
fourth when he hears footsteps and raises his head, looking to see Jill coming for him. “You survived,” he comments mildly, closing the book.


“Family showed up, and he redirected them to the park,” Khan says. “I presume it was one of his brothers although I don’t know which one.”

“Was it a little girl or a little girl and a little boy?” Jill asks.

“I only saw a little girl,” Khan says. “Jake called her princess.”

“That was David and Elizabeth and their daughter Rose,” Jill says definitively. “He calls Deborah Tinkerbell. There’s a whole story there.”

“I’m sure,” Khan says. “Was your conversation productive?”

“It was,” Jill says, wrapping her arms around Khan’s waist and leaning into him. “And it wasn’t as awful as I feared. It never is, but you never know. What are you reading?”

“Jewish humor,” Khan says, showing her the cover of the book.

“That’s Abba’s,” Jill says. “He’s the bibliophile. All the books—well, most of the books—are his, a lot of them passed down through family lines or he went to secondhand stores or wherever to find them. People give him more as presents, but it’s hard keeping up with what he already has sometimes.”

Khan nods and puts the book back in the case, brushing his fingers over the spine as he does. The tangible feel of old books, the unique and clear scent of them; he has always been a book lover. One of the things he always did when securing a new city was preserve its libraries. The information was too powerful to lose, and the thought of all the books burning caused him physical pain. Not that he ever told anyone that fact, not even Rani.

Jill smiles, looking at him. “You were never meant to be an academic, but I think in another world, you could have been happy that way.”

“No,” Khan says, although the idea does have some appeal. “No. I do appreciate books, and I appreciate knowledge for its own sake, but I have too much ambition and I am too much—as you would say it—a barbarian to be content studying the rest of my life. Knowledge is useful but using that knowledge is power, kitten, and power is what I always seek.”

“But you don’t want power for the sake of power, either,” Jill says. “You want it so you can accomplish things with it. You’re not trying to conquer the world just to conquer it, you were trying to conquer it to make it better.”

“Does the intent matter so much?” Khan asks. “Jill, I have told you before, you think me a better man than I am.”

“No,” she says softly. “No, I don’t. You’re not a good man, Khan, and I know that. But you have your own moral code and you live by it, and you’re not the monster you think you are either.”

“What defines a good man?” Sarah asks, startling both of them. Khan turns to see her, looking as composed as ever.

“Abba,” Jill says. “Abba is a good man.”
“He is,” Sarah says, smiling. “So what is different between Khan and Martin?”

“Abba is unreservedly altruistic,” Jill says. “Khan isn’t.”

“But is unreserved altruism a good thing?” Sarah asks. “Abba’s generosity has gotten him into trouble more than once.”

“Yes, but—Abba thinks first of other people,” Jill says. “He always has and he always will. He thinks of you first, then the boys and their families, then his students, then whoever, and lastly himself. He’s not motivated by self-interest, he’s motivated by wanting to help others. Khan will help, but on his own terms, and he never puts himself last unless the only other people involved are his family. I think—honestly, it’s that Abba plays by society’s rules, for the most part, and works within them to help people. Khan plays by his own and doesn’t care if he offends people.”

“He’s wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.” Sarah is clearly quoting something, but Khan can’t place it.

“Narnia,” Jill says. “Except Aslan was Christ, and Khan not so much.”

“No,” Sarah agrees. “Still, the comment holds for what it is.”

“That it does,” Jill says. She looks at Khan. “Did you ever read the Chronicles of Narnia?”

“The first one only, I think, and a long time ago,” Khan says.

“I read them all when I was a kid because my dad loved them, but when I got older I realized how religious they were and they lost some of their appeal,” Jill says. “But if you ignore the religious bits, they’re pretty good.”

“Religion has its place,” Sarah says mildly. “But if it doesn’t grow and change with the times, it is useless.”

“You cover your hair and you keep a kosher household,” Khan says.

“Some things need to be maintained,” Sarah says. “Judaism actually went through a very large bout of soul-searching at the beginning of the Federation. We argued for decades over whether our God could exist on other planets, whether the Vulcans had experienced His presence or not. What foods not from Earth could be considered kashrut. How to keep the Sabbath in space, without sunrise or sunset. There are so many details, and so many things to consider. Some arguments aren’t resolved. Many of them aren’t. The old joke—put three Jews in a room, get five different opinions. The rabbis will be arguing it for the next three centuries. In the end, it matters little to anyone not us. We don’t evangelize and we don’t actively seek to convert, although we don’t turn away those who want to join us. But we are a small group, and likely to remain such. Starfleet works with those of us who still observe and want to serve, and the rest of us keep our rituals and our laws and our traditions and fit them into our lives. We’ve done it for over six thousand years now. We have a bit of practice.”

“I never argued that religion did not have its place,” Khan says. “I just never found it all that useful in my own life. Rani, my wife—she was Hindu, and followed its teachings, and because of where I lived and ruled I paid them attention, but I did not personally believe.”

“Do you now?” Sarah asks.

“I am…undecided,” Khan says. “I believe there are things we cannot quantify, and things for which I have no scientific explanation. Whether there is some omniscient, omnipotent deity behind
it all…that I find unlikely, but I won’t rule it out completely.”

Sarah nods. “I understand,” she says. “It may interest you to know that my youngest brother is much of the same mindset. And he’s a rabbi.”

“All right,” Khan says after a moment. “I’m intrigued.”

“My brother feels that religion has its place, and he has been called to serve our people and our traditions by becoming clergy, but his own personal beliefs are more fluid than the prayers in our books, and he often wrestles with his own faith. He almost didn’t go through with it, but decided that Judaism itself was what needed serving, more than God, and that our people needed him. So he serves as a rabbi, and a counselor, and he says the prayers and he gives sermons and he does everything he should, because sometimes the formula is what matters. The traditions give people comfort, and peace, and that is something he believes in. He’s a good rabbi, and I think you would find some common philosophical ground with him if you ever had time.” Sarah shrugs. “But that’s unlikely.”

“It is,” Khan says, slightly disappointed by that.

The doorbell rings again and Sarah goes to answer it, letting in Jake, still carrying Rose; the man Khan presumes to be David, with a strong resemblance to Jake; and David’s wife Elizabeth, with short black hair and—interestingly to Khan—jeans.

“Have a monster,” Jake says, setting Rose on the floor. “A very, very heavy monster. Unca Jake is tired now.”

“I’m a princess, not a monster,” Rose protests.

“You’re a Monster Princess,” Jake says.

“Cool!” Rose giggles.

“Hi, Princess Monster,” Jill says, crouching in front of Rose. “Remember me?”

“Duh,” Rose says scornfully and skips forward to jump on Jill in a hug. “Will you teach me nastics?”

“Not today, sweetie,” Jill says, hugging back. She kisses Rose’s forehead and stands up. “Jake and I and my friend here have to leave now. But I’ll send you a letter really soon, okay?”

Rose sighs. “Kay.”

“Come on, sweetie, let’s go see if Bubbie has juice for you,” David says. “Hi, bye, see you soon Jill?” He kisses Jill on the cheek on his way to the kitchen after Rose.

“Hi, bye, maybe,” Jill says, laughing. She gives Elizabeth a quick hug and then turns to Sarah. “I don’t…I don’t know when we’re going to get back,” she says softly.

“I know,” Sarah says. “Be careful. Call me when you can.” She hugs Jill tight, murmuring something in her ear.

Jill hugs back just as hard, letting go reluctantly. “Okay, let’s go,” she says, taking a breath. “Back to…shit, I don’t know. My flat, I guess?”

“That works as well as anywhere else,” Jake says. He takes out his transporter, Khan takes out his,
they set the coordinates. “Love you, Eema,” Jake says, hugging her hard.

“Be careful,” Sarah says, hugging back. “Now go before Rose starts asking questions about the strange man with wings.”

“Going,” Jake says as Khan hits the button.

Chapter End Notes

For those who care: If I did the math right, the Jewish calendar year in 2259 is 6019. It's 2015 now and we're in 5775; it'll be 5776 when Rosh Hashanah rolls around later this year. So if I did the math right, we'll either be in 6019 or 6020 by Trek canon time.
“So,” Jill says as soon as they all finish materializing. “I realize we just got here but we’re in the wrong place.”

“And… the right place would be?” Jake asks.

“Either Andy’s loft or the nest,” Jill says. “We need to tell Magpie about the other six and the data and the medical records. But I don’t know if she’s at her place or Andy’s.” She takes out her link and calls. “Yeah, bird, where are you?” she asks when Magpie answers.

“I’m at Andy’s,” Magpie says. “She’s fixing one of my tablets, it overheated. What do you need?”

“Information, but I didn’t know if we went to you or Andy,” Jill says. “Is he up for visitors?”

“Let me ask.” Magpie goes silent for a moment. “Yeah, just knock first and bring green tea,” she says when she comes back. “He’s running low and wants a pot.”

“Did she leave me any in London? I’ll grab it before we show up,” Jill says, already walking to the kitchen.

“Andy says yes, it’s in the green canister,” Magpie reports.

Jill returns a moment later with the canister, no longer talking to Magpie. “Andy is very… guarded about his personal space,” she explains. “Sometimes she won’t let anyone over, even me or Magpie. She’s pretty… it means a lot to Andy, to have space that’s his and can be private and just as he wants it.”

“Are you sure it’s okay for us to go?” Jake asks. “I mean, you’re Andy’s family, and Khan’s his uncle, but me…”

“No, it’s okay,” Jill says. “If it wasn’t, believe me, Magpie would have told us. Andy’s not shy about saying when she needs privacy.”
“All right,” Jake says. “What are the coordinates?”

“Um,” Jill says. “I have to look it up, I don’t have it memorized. One sec.” She picks up a tablet, fingers dancing over the surface for a moment. “Okay, got it.” She reads off the coordinates and Khan enters them into his transporter as Jake does the same. Jill takes Khan’s hand and he hits the button.

They materialize on a city street lined with a mix of new and old buildings, shops and residences. Some foot traffic, not a huge crowd, but no one seems particularly startled by their appearance. “This one,” Jill says, pointing to one of the older buildings. “C’mon.”

She punches in an access code and the front door slides open, then takes them to the lifts and punches in a different code. “Security’s tight here,” she explains. “The building doesn’t have a doorman but you need two different codes to get to any of the apartments and the codes change every six months.”

The lift doors open and they get on; Jill hits the button for the twelfth floor. “Andy bought the loft about fifteen years ago,” she says. “Before that he and Magpie had been sharing space, but Andy wanted her own and Magpie wanted her own and they finally started feeling financially secure enough to do it. So Andy bought the loft, Magpie bought the nest, and everyone’s been happy since.”

“When did you buy your apartment?” Khan asks.

“I didn’t, I rent,” Jill says. “I don’t want to own a place when I’m not on Earth that much.”

“Same,” Jake says. “And if we’re leaving Earth for mostly good soon, I’m really glad I didn’t buy.”

The lift doors open and they get out, facing a hallway with one door in it. Jill rings the bell, and a moment later Andy opens it, barefoot in slim black pants and a black tunic. “Tea, as requested,” Jill says, handing him the canister.

“Thank you,” Andy says, leaning down to hug Jill. “C’mon in, I’ll show you around.”

The first thing Khan notices is the giant glass frog sitting in the foyer. “That thing’s intimidating,” Jake says, eyeing it back warily.

“He’s my guard frog,” Andy says, touching its head. “Also he’d make a fantastic weapon if I ever threw him at anyone.”

“Yes. Yes he would,” Jake says.

Beyond the frog, Khan observes dark wood floors and minimalist furnishings, everything in neutral shades. Plenty of space, and framed art on several walls that tends toward Chinese poetry and illustrations. A few more frogs scatter around the loft, and a steep staircase leads up to the area Khan presumes Andy uses for sleeping.

Easily half the loft, however, is given over to computers and gadgets, everything clearly organized and laid out in a grid. Buckets of different parts sit under one window, and the long worktable has a few focus lights and magnifiers on it. One of the lights shines down over a tablet, with a magnifier set up over its body as well. “Magpie overheated the processor,” Andy says. “I’m irritated because that shouldn’t have happened, so now I have to file a defect report with the manufacturer and find out what’s going on. But first, the ten-credit tour. That’s my workspace, obviously. This half the loft is for visitors and hanging out. The bathroom is through that door there, the kitchen is over
there as you can see, and up the stairs is my bed and yoga area. Feel free to poke around anywhere
down here, but please don’t go upstairs. And please don’t touch anything that’s on one of my
worktables. The buckets are full of broken parts or things that I’m playing with, so you’re totally
welcome to rummage through and find whatever you want.”

“How old is the building?” Khan asks out of curiosity.

“I think nineteenth century, but it was gutted and renovated about forty years ago,” Andy says.

Jake does walk over to the bins, crouching down to look at the contents. “Where do you get all this
from?” he asks.

“Some of it’s from experiments gone wrong, some of it people give me. I have an arrangement
with a couple companies to send me parts that break in non-standard ways so I can try and fix
them,” Andy says. “Or at least find out why they broke. I am going to go make a pot of tea, would
anyone like anything else to drink?”

“Do you have coffee?” Jake asks.

“I do, actually,” Andy says. “But someone not me has to make it.”

“I will,” Jill says. “I could use more coffee anyway.”

Khan follows Andy and Jill to the kitchen, mostly to see it; he finds a long space almost entirely
furnished in white, with a few touches of black and steel. Andy fills the kettle and turns it on while
Jill sets up the coffeemaker. “So is everyone settled into their new spaces?” Andy asks, measuring
tea leaves into the pot.

“I believe so,” Khan says. “I have not heard anything to indicate otherwise.”

“No news is good news, usually,” Andy says. “Do you want tea, uncle?”

“I do, thank you,” Khan says.

“Vulcans have some good tea options, but I prefer Earth teas,” Andy says. “Andor has a few I like.
Every culture has some kind of tea, we’ve learned. Tea and alcohol, two of the constants in society
apparently.”

“Do any of the frontier planets or other planets grow Earth tea?” Khan asks.

“A couple, yes,” Andy says. “No one really exports it, though. Fortunately it’s not that expensive
on Earth.”

“Even if it was you’d buy it,” Jill says.

“Of course I would,” Andy says. “Tea is an imperative.”

“Caffeine is more the imperative, I think,” Jill says.

“No, I want the tea,” Andy says, laughing. “Uncle, how are you?”

“I am fine,” Khan says.

“It’s going to be weird with everyone scattered,” Andy says, turning off the kettle when it chimes
and filling the pot. “Are you okay with it?”
“I appreciate the concern, but for most of my life my siblings and I were separated,” Khan says. “Here we can be with each other in moments. It is fine.”

“But it’s different,” Andy says. “Here you were alone, then you weren’t, then you had your family, now you’re not alone but you’re not with them, either.”

“But I still have them,” Khan says. He takes the two steps to Andy and touches her cheek. “Truly, I am fine.”

Truly, he feels off-balance and somewhat adrift, and from the look Andy gives him he knows it. “She would give me that same look,” Khan murmurs.

“Because she knew when you were full of shit,” Andy says. She pours the tea and hands him a mug. “Just like I do.”

“Seconded,” Jill says, stirring her coffee. “It really is okay to say you’re going to miss them, Khan. I am.”

“Somewhat,” Khan concedes because he has no choice. “But I will be fine.”

“Now that I believe,” Jill says. She picks up another mug for Jake. “Let’s go talk tech.”

In the living area, the five of them gather around Andy’s coffee table. “We need to locate the other six in our gang of seven,” Jill says. “And we need to get Verity’s actual medical records to find out how she actually died.”

“We tagged five out of seven, so four now,” Magpie says. “We can look, but the range only goes to Earth and it’s not completely reliable if it’s too far away. So that’s problematic, but we’ll see what we can do. Why do we need to find Verity’s actual medical records?”

Khan lays out the reasoning as Anandi had done. “Yeah, okay, that makes sense,” Magpie says. She takes a sip from a bottle filled with bright pink liquid. “I’ve never tried to hack into Medical before. Is it really that difficult?”

“Honestly I think Intelligence has less safeguards on some of its systems than Medical,” Jake says. “Doctor-patient confidentiality is a major thing.”

“Well, then, this should be a fun challenge,” Magpie says. “I may need Matthew’s help. He’s brilliant.”

“He is,” Khan says. “Much as I refuse to feed his ego, he is a hacker without peer.”

“Yes, and he learns damned fast,” Magpie says. “I’m envious. But not really because for now I’m still better than he is.”

“For now,” Jill teases.

Magpie shrugs. “I wasn’t genetically engineered to be awesome.”

“You’re still awesome,” Andy says. “What do you need me to do, while Magpie’s tracking down data?”

“See if you can get anywhere on that intelligent body armor,” Jill says. “And whatever else you were working on. At this point we’re kind of in a holding pattern until we can put together the bait for the Klingons, and we don’t need any tech built, so you’ve got some leeway. Which means
“Sometimes,” Andy says, smiling.

“Speaking of armor, have you heard back from your contact yet?” Jill asks Jake.

“I think so but I haven’t had time to read the message yet,” Jake says. “Anyone have a spare machine?”

Magpie rummages in her bag and pulls out a PADD, handing it to him. Jake’s fingers fly over the surface for a minute until he stops, reading something. “Okay,” he says. “Yes, I heard back, and yes, they’re more than happy to sell us whatever we want and can meet us…tomorrow, if we leave afternoon New York time.”

“We can do that,” Jill says. “Can you message everyone and let them know to meet—where do we want to meet?”

“My place is probably best,” Magpie says. “I’ve got the space and it’s busy enough no one would notice eleven people coming and going.”

“Coordinates?” Jake asks, already working on the message. Magpie tells him and a moment later Jake sends the email.

“And there we are,” Jill says. “Which is good, because I’ve wanted a pair of those boots for years now.”

“Why did you never get them?” Khan asks.

“For one, they didn’t meet uniform regs so I couldn’t wear them on duty,” Jill says. “For another, the points when I had three weeks to go, get fitted, wait to get them made and get them never lined up with points at which Jake had the same free time.”

“They probably could have made a pair that matched regs,” Jake says. “But we were never able to coordinate it.”

“Oh well, I’ll get them now,” Jill says. “So long as they can make boots small enough for me.”

“I’m sure they can,” Jake says. “Marika’s feet aren’t that much bigger than yours and she has them. The coat might be more of an issue. Although Andorians aren’t that tall, so…we’ll see.”

“If they have three weeks to make the boots they might be able to make me a custom coat,” Jill says.

“They might,” Jake says.

“How did you meet these people?” Khan asks.

“Through my trainer,” Jake says. “When I joined Intelligence, she took me out to introduce me to her contacts so I could start setting up my own. She had a similar arrangement with them that I do. There are other shops in the galaxy that make armored clothing and boots, but I like these guys. They’ve never tried to cheat me and their work is good.”

“Is there much call for armor?” Magpie asks. “I don’t know much about off-planet politics.”

“There is,” Jake says. “I mean, there’s no intergalactic war but there’s always a black market, and black markets by their nature are volatile. There are all kinds of skirmishes and trouble people can
get into. It’s not that different from Earth when you get out there, just change of location and species. People still kill other people, people still steal from each other, all that. Federation status is no guarantee of planetary peace.”

Khan’s reminded of Jill’s comments about the Prime Directive.

“Were there any species at war prior to joining the Federation?” Andy asks.

“Not with each other, but there have been some civil wars,” Jake says. “The Femarans, for one. The Ventraxans were at war, stopped briefly, then went back to it and withdrew from the Federation. Good riddance.”

“Yes,” Jill says flatly.

“No one’s declared war on each other since joining, though,” Jake says. “And mostly people are getting along more or less, except the Ventraxans.”

“Why did they withdraw from the Federation?” Khan asks.

“They refused to let the Federation negotiate peace,” Jill says. “So it was a kind of—they left before the Federation could ask them to withdraw. The Federation, I believe, has an open invitation to them to negotiate peace and rejoin, but they won’t take it.”

“I’m hoping they all blow each other up and we don’t have to worry about it,” Jake says.

“You and me both,” Jill says.

Khan can’t remember if Jake knows what happened to Jill or not, but doesn’t ask.

“So,” Magpie says. “When are you two dropping off the radar and do I need to do anything to help with it?”

“You already built Khan the fake identity, so we’re good there,” Jill says. “But if you could send me a couple messages in the next few days with increasing urgency about some family emergency, that would be great.”

“Easy enough,” Magpie says. “When are you leaving?”

“Tuesday,” Jill says.

“Place is ready for you,” Jake says. “All I ask is that you try not to break anything and you sanitize the place thoroughly before you leave. Or at least buy me new sheets and a new mattress.”

“Assuming you ever live there again, yes,” Jill says. “I find it terribly amusing that you clearly want to ask me not to have sex in your bed but won’t.”

Jake groans. “Images I didn’t need,” he complains. “And if I thought it would do any good, I would ask, but I know you and you’ll just ignore me. So I will put brand new sheets on the bed before Tuesday and then you can just deal with the rest.”

“You are remarkably prudish about Jill’s sex life,” Magpie says, laughing.

“She’s my sister,” Jake says. “I don’t need to hear about my brothers’ sex lives, either. As far as I’m concerned both of them have had sex twice.”

“Twice?” Andy asks.
“David has a daughter and his wife’s pregnant again, and Samuel has two kids,” Jake says.

“Do they know if it’s a boy or a girl yet?” Jill asks.

“They don’t,” Jake says. “But I don’t think they want to know.”

“I found it interesting that David’s wife did not cover her hair,” Khan admits.

“Elizabeth’s not Orthodox like Eema,” Jake says. “They’re raising the kids as Jewish but they don’t keep full kosher, and Elizabeth doesn’t cover her hair or wear only skirts. Neither does Linda.”

“Does that bother your mother?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jake says. “She’d be bothered if they weren’t raising the kids as Jewish, but both of them are. So she doesn’t care. Eema’s never said that we have to observe like she does, just that we respect her for what she does. Elizabeth was Jewish before she married David, but Linda converted.”

“I’ve thought about converting,” Jill admits. “Or rather, I’ve thought about converting for my potential future kids. Judaism has such a rich history, and it’s beautiful. But I’m still on the fence about kids anyway, and I’m not sure I really want to convert, so…eh.”

“Don’t do it just for Eema,” Jake says. “If you want to convert, great, but don’t do it because of Eema.”

“I know,” Jill says. “Which is one of the reasons why I haven’t seriously pursued it.” She takes a sip of her coffee. “I would really like a good spar,” she says. “Which would involve going back to London to change, but what good is immediate private transporter technology if we don’t use it for stuff like this? Jake, is the gym still ours?”

“It is for at least another two weeks,” Jake says. “I could use a spar myself. Khan?”

Khan nods. “Yes.”

“Then let’s go,” Jill says. “Bird, Andy, are you guys okay with what we need?”

“Absolutely,” Magpie says. “This may take some doing, but I’m on it, or will be once I go back to the nest.”

“I’m in a holding pattern, but I’m going to poke around and see what I come up with,” Andy says. “If you need anything, though, call me.”

“We will,” Jill promises. She gets up and crosses to Andy, leaning down to hug her before doing the same to Magpie.

“Be careful,” Andy says, getting up to hug Khan. “I’ve only got one uncle, I don’t want to lose him.”

“I will,” Khan says, kissing Andy’s forehead. “You do the same. I only have one living descendant.”

“I have plenty, I could share,” Jake says, setting his transporter. “I’ll meet you guys at the gym?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Jill says as Khan sets his.
They materialize in Jill’s living room and before she can go anywhere, Khan acts on impulse and
picks her up, his hands tight on her waist. Jill automatically wraps legs and arms around him and
gasps in surprise when his mouth lands on hers, hard and demanding.

“Mine,” Khan murmurs against her lips, biting the lower one.

“Yeah,” she whispers back, her fingers tangling in his hair. “Yours.”

He growls softly in satisfaction and kisses her again, pushing her up against the wall and pinning
her hands over her head. She whimpers into his mouth, legs tightening around his waist. “Let me—
let me call Jake and say later,” she says breathlessly when he releases her mouth.

“I will,” Khan says, keeping her pinned with one hand and reaching into his pocket for his link
with the other. “Something came up,” he says when Jake answers. “We will find you later.”

He doesn’t give Jake a chance to answer before he hangs up.

“Tell me what you want,” Jill says, licking her lips. “Please.”

“I want to bind you,” Khan says, biting her jaw, her earlobe. “Tie you down for me, spread you
open, and take you, make you plead for release.”

“Please,” Jill whispers. “Yes.”

“You will not come until I let you,” Khan tells her, dragging his tongue down her throat. “Do you
understand?”

“Yes,” Jill breathes. “Please, Khan.”

He carries her into the bedroom and lays her down on the bed. “Undress for me,” he says, already
pulling off his own clothes. Jill scrambles out of hers and finds the box with the cuffs, handing it to
him when he holds out a hand for it.

Khan fastens the cuffs around her wrists, checking the fit, before he guides her to lie back on the
bed, arms outstretched over her head. He locks the cuffs and Jill shivers, swallowing hard. “I have
you,” he says, running a hand down her belly, brushing his fingers over her pubis. He should really
shave her again, he thinks, but not now.

He settles a pillow under her hips and bends to kiss her thigh, breathing in her scent. Jill sighs a
little, spreading her legs wider for him. He can already feel her heat, and when he strokes her labia
his fingers come away wet and sticky. “You’re always so eager for me,” he murmurs, dragging one
finger over her clit.

“What do you want me to do to you, kitten?” Khan asks, sliding his hands up her belly to her
breasts, pinching both her nipples and twisting them.

Jill cries out softly. “Fuck me,” she says, arching into his hands. “Please. I want you inside me.
You make me feel so empty like this—please, Khan, fuck me.”

“Yes,” he says, leaning down to kiss her, hard and demanding. She moans into his mouth and
twists under him, wrapping her legs around his waist. “So beautiful,” he whispers against her lips.
“And all mine.”
“Yours,” Jill breathes, shivering.

When he enters her, she cries out and Khan groans, his head dropping forward. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to the way she feels around him, so hot and wet he can barely breathe. All that matters now is the way she writhes against him; the way her breath turns to half-choked sobs as he drives into her, over and over; her pulse beating fast when he bites her throat. “Please,” she says, over and over. “Please, Khan.”

He waits until he’s on the edge himself, until everything in his body coils tight. “Now,” he says, biting her again. “Now, kitten.”

Jill screams and Khan muffles his own shout in her neck. He doesn’t draw blood but when he manages to raise his head he sees that the mark will last a while. It might hide under her uniform; they’ll sort that out later. For now, she’s crying softly and shivering, and Khan unlocks the cuffs and pulls her into his arms, rubbing her back and murmuring to her in Russian.

After a few minutes, Jill steadies, the sobs trailing off and the shivers subsiding. “Ow,” she says absently, touching the bite mark on her throat. “You’ll need to use the regenerator on me later.”

“I will,” Khan says, stroking her hair. “Not just now.”

“No, not now.” Jill sighs and snuggles closer to him. “That was amazing,” she says sleepily. “God, the things you do to me.”

“You say that as though you don’t have a similar effect on me,” Khan says, smiling a bit. “And you know that is not true.”

“You drive me crazy but at least I’m not alone on the trip,” Jill says.

“Yes.” Khan kisses her hair, holding her close. “Relax for now, kitten. I have you.”

“I know,” Jill says. “I want a shower, though, and then I really do want a spar once my bones solidify. We have stuff to do.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “And tomorrow will be busy. What time are you meeting the lawyer to give your deposition?”

“Nine London time,” Jill says. “So I should be done in time to meet everyone at the nest to go deal with the armor and boots.”

Khan nods. “How long should it take?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Jill says. “The lawyer said a couple hours, but it might take more or less depending on how many questions I get asked. The hard part is going to be not losing my temper during it.”

“I know,” Khan says, amused despite the situation. “Unfortunately you cannot just punch the librarian and be done with it.”

“Neither can you,” Jill says, laughing. “Which I know you find irritating.”

“He assaulted you,” Khan says as matter-of-factly as he can.

“He shoved his hand up my skirt,” Jill says. “It could have been a lot worse. I’ve had worse happen in bars. No, it shouldn’t have happened, and no, he’s not fit to wear the uniform, but he doesn’t
deserve to die for it."

Khan doesn’t agree but they have already argued over this and neither of them wants to revisit it. Jill sighs and kisses his shoulder, stretching in his arms. “I really want a shower,” she says. “And then I need you to use the regenerator on this, because I don’t think it’ll quite hide under my uniform.”

“Likely not,” Khan admits, looking at the mark. He would apologize, but honestly he’s not sorry he left it.

“Barbarian,” Jill says mock-indignantly, shaking her head. “Utter savage.”

“Are you complaining?” Khan asks, raising his eyebrows.

She laughs. “No.”

“Good.” Khan kisses her, biting her lower lip sharply. “I would hate to have to prove you wrong.”

“You lie,” Jill says, running her fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp. “You’d love it.”

“Would I?” Khan rolls her onto her back, his weight pressing her down into the mattress.

“Absolutely,” Jill murmurs, tipping her head back when he kisses her throat. “The idea of showing me just how uncivilized you are, making me beg you for more—you love it. You’re possessive and you want me to admit that I’m yours, that you could do anything to me and I’d never ask you to stop.”

“You are,” Khan murmurs back, biting her jaw. “And I could.”

“Yes,” Jill whispers, her whole body jolting when he bites her. “My beautiful savage.”

He kisses her, swallowing her moan; his hand skims down her side and over her thigh, drawing her leg up and back. “Mine,” he says against her mouth.

“Yes,” Jill says softly, biting his lip.

They don't make it to the shower for another hour and a half, and by the time they get there Khan has to support most of Jill’s weight as she’s in no shape to walk on her own. She revives a little as he bathes her, enough that she manages to condition her own hair, but he ends up carrying her back to bed when her legs buckle as she dries off.

“You should rest, kitten,” Khan says, sitting on the edge of the bed and brushing a damp curl back from her face. “You are in no shape for a spar.”

“No shit,” Jill mumbles, stretching against the sheets. “I’m in no shape for anything but a nap right now. I should be okay in an hour, maybe two.”

“I will stay with you,” Khan says, resting his hand against her cheek just because it pleases him to see her turn her face into his touch, pressing a kiss against his palm.

“You have things to do,” she murmurs.

“I can work on them here,” he says.

“Okay.” Jill covers a yawn and snuggles down under the sheets. “Wake me in two hours if I’m not up.”
“I will,” Khan promises.

She seems to fall asleep almost immediately, but Khan stays where he is for another minute or two, watching her. When he’s convinced she sleeps, he gets up, going to his computer to see what he should be paying attention to.

Nothing from Magpie, or Andy, but Anandi sent him a message with questions on some of the data she has. Khan writes her back, answering her, and just as he sends the message his inbox chimes with a new email. This one is from Jake; Khan frowns, opening it.

_Viola wants to meet you, it says. Are you free tomorrow morning?_

That…could be interesting, and potentially dangerous, but Khan mostly trusts Jake’s judgment. He writes back that he is but will need to stay in London, and waits for Jake’s reply. While he does, he looks for the last mail thread from Katsuro and Andy about the personal shield, determining where they stopped so he can begin running simulations again.

He finds the thread and is about to start the simulation when his mail chimes again. _Nine local time, Jake says. The safe room I showed you._

Khan sends back an acknowledgment and acceptance and puts it out of his mind.

He spends the next two hours refining simulations for the personal shield and making slight modifications to the weapon template he used for his siblings’ weapons. Painstaking work in both cases, and in the latter more theoretical than practical; the weapons are already built and he does not intend to modify them as they exist. But all design can be improved upon, and at some point they will need new weapons.

While he works, he has the opera on in the background, letting it settle into his mind and his memory. They need to find a place to practice and record it, but that will likely fall on Jake as none of the rest of them have any knowledge of suitable places. Khan makes a mental note to ask Jake if he talked to his brother about it.

He intended to let Jill sleep, but two hours after he left her he hears footsteps and turns to see her padding toward him, dressed in soft yoga pants and a loose t-shirt. “I’m pretending to be awake,” she says, rubbing her eyes. “But I really really need coffee.”

She drapes her arms around his shoulders and leans down to kiss him. “What have you been up to?”

“That could be…either good or bad,” Jill says, tilting her head. “I wish I could go with you. Except
maybe I don’t. If it’s a bad thing, her not knowing I’m involved could be useful.”

“We will find out,” Khan says.

“Yeah,” Jill says. “We will.” She sighs, tugging on a curl. “I really did mean to get in a spar today but it’s so not happening now. Not that I’m objecting exactly but…I kind of am, because I need to be in top form to fight the Klingons and if you keep doing this I won’t be.”

“Are you asking me to refrain from sexual activity with you in favor of training?” Khan asks, amused.

“No.” Jill pours herself coffee and dumps in milk and sugar. “But kind of. Just…I know we’re not leaving tomorrow, or the day after. We’ve got maybe a month, maybe longer. But I am going to be in on the fight, Khan, and I need to be at my absolute best for it. You could manage against the Klingons even if you’re not completely at your best. I can’t.”

“Jill,” Khan says carefully. “You are a skilled fighter, and I do not mean to insult your talents, but against a squad of Klingons, you are at a significant disadvantage.”

“Yes, but I won’t be fighting them alone,” Jill says. “Are you trying to tell me I’m going to be a liability in the field?”

“To me,” Khan says quietly. “If you are injured, or…” He can’t say it. “I don’t know if I could focus with you in danger, or hurt.”

“Learn,” Jill says succinctly. “Because I’ll be damned if you keep me out of this fight. It’s my idea and it’s my fight as much as yours, and I may not be engineered for superiority but I’m not helpless and I’m not standing back to watch you risk your life while I…do what, exactly?”

Khan can’t argue her logic, but the idea of risking her life against the Klingons makes his throat close up. “If you die,” he says, his voice tight.

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“I won’t,” Jill says.

She doesn’t know that. He knows she can’t promise that. And yet, Khan crosses to her, leaning down to rest his forehead against hers, breathing in her scent and the scent of coffee. “I can’t lose you,” he says softly in Russian. “A man can only lose so much, kitten.”

Jill sets down her coffee and reaches up for him, her hands warm against his cheeks. “You won’t lose me,” she murmurs back in the same language. “I have no intention of dying for another century. I will be careful, Khan. I promise. I’m not going to be stupid about this and risk my life unnecessarily. But it’s my fight, too. You can’t take me to Qo’noS and not expect me to fight, and you are taking me—and Jake. Andy and Magpie aren’t fighters, they’re not going. Jake and I are. What Marcus is doing is a perversion of everything I took an oath to serve and honor. You never cared for Starfleet, you never saw it the way we did. I wanted my whole life to serve the Federation, and I made it, and it hurts to know what Marcus is doing, to know what he wants to make this organization. It’s my fight to make this right, Khan, and I will.”


“I care,” Jill says simply. “I may not—I won’t—have a career after this, but I can’t leave them like this.”

Khan wraps his arms and his wings around her, holding her close against him. “You cannot fight an entire legion of Klingons,” he says honestly.
“Not alone,” Jill says. “I’m not going to be the front line, Khan. I’ll be the one sneaking around and stabbing people from behind. I have some technology that allows me to hide in plain sight and I’m small and I move quietly. Depending on the situation, the Klingons might never even know I’m there.”

“Nothing I say will persuade you otherwise, will it,” Khan says ruefully.

“No.” Jill laughs. “No, and you should really know that.”

“If something happens to you,” Khan starts and can’t finish.

“It won’t,” Jill says. “I promise you, Khan. I’m going to survive this in one piece. You and your siblings won’t allow anything less.”

They won’t, as long as it is humanly—or inhumanly—possible. Khan takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “I love you,” he says. “Believe me or not, but I do, and believe me when I say that I cannot lose you, Jill. I can’t.”

“You won’t,” Jill says softly. “But I can’t lose you, either. Not like this.”

“You won’t,” Khan says, lowering his face to her hair. *Not ever*, he thinks but doesn’t say.
In the morning, he sees Jill off to her deposition and takes himself to the safe room, arriving ten minutes early to be on the safe side. He could transport into the room, but elects to go through the passcodes anyway. It doesn’t surprise him to walk into the room to see Jake leaning against the kitchen counter and a woman who could be Anandi’s mother sitting at the table, back rigidly straight and hands clasped on the table’s surface. “John Harrison, Viola Cathcart,” Jake says, gesturing between them. “Admiral, this is John.”

“An alias, obviously, but we’ll let it slide for now,” Viola says. South African, Khan notes; he hasn’t heard that accent in a long, long time. Slim, but she carries a few extra kilograms, and he sees gray threads in her close-cut hair. “Commander Harrison, isn’t it?”

“Ostensibly,” Khan says, taking the chair opposite her and turning it around to straddle it. “Thank you for meeting me, admiral.”

She doesn’t offer to shake hands and neither does he. “When Jake contacted me and asked me what I knew about Alexander’s programs, I wanted to get to the bottom of it,” she says. “And the bottom of it, apparently, is you and the Klingons.”

“No?” Viola tilts her head, looking at him. “Whose side are you on, Commander Harrison?”

“Mine,” Khan says. “Whose side are you on, Admiral Cathcart?”

She smiles faintly. “Starfleet’s,” she says. “I’ve served the organization since I was nineteen and just out of secondary school, and I’d still be in had politics and a family emergency not combined to remove me from it on what I thought was a temporary leave.”

“So you are still on leave and not retired,” Khan says.

“Technically,” Viola says, nodding. “Officially my organization reports directly to Alexander and I’d have a devil of a time getting back to active status. There’s nothing official in my way, but. Politics.”

“What do you think of Alexander Marcus?” Khan asks her.
“Why do you want to know?” Viola counters.

“We are here, are we not?” Khan has little patience for games. “The fact that you asked to meet me, after speaking with Jake, indicates you know some or all of what he is up to, what he wants to do with Starfleet. You are a black woman in Starfleet and you rose to flag rank, and more than that you ran Intelligence, one of Starfleet’s most delicate operations. You know why I am here, admiral, and you know why you are here. Will you help me or not?”

Her face tightened when he pointed out her race and gender, and a muscle ticks in her jaw for a moment. “Yes,” she says finally, after a long few moments. “Yes, I know what he’s up to, and I fought against it as long as I could until I couldn’t anymore. My daughter came first for once. Too often in her life she didn’t, and that’s not your concern, but she needed me and I could only hold out against Alexander for so long. I took the opportunity to get out with a clean slate and take care of my daughter.”

“How is she now?” Khan asks quietly.

“She’ll never walk again, but we manage,” Viola says. “Thank whatever god you believe in, but she had no brain damage. The rest is incidental.”

Viola rises from the table, pacing in quick, light steps. “There’s not much support I can give you,” she says, hands clasped behind her back. “Not officially. I’m on family leave and coming off that would…be difficult for more than me. I can make a few suggestions here and there, but really, I can’t help you on the official level.”

“What can you do?” Khan asks, watching her.

“My network of informants didn’t go on leave with me, and they still report to me,” Viola says, spinning on one heel to look at him. “Many of them report to Jake, who reports to me. We have data on the Klingons, on their outposts and stations and subject planets. We have quite a bit more data on planets that aren’t part of the Federation or the Empire. I can get you access to that. You might find another ally, or a weak spot.”

“Do your informants tell you about programs within Starfleet?” Khan asks. “I intend to take down section 31.”

“It had a purpose, once,” Viola says quietly. “I’d prefer to see it returned to that than destroyed.”

“I am not sure that is possible,” Khan says. Nor does he have any intention of letting it happen.

“It might be,” Viola says. “But yes, I have some information on that. I’ll see it gets to you.”

“What do you want in exchange?” Khan asks.

“I want the truth about who you are and why you’re doing this,” Viola says.

“I think you already know that,” Khan says. “Don’t you, admiral?”

“I was still around when they brought in your ship,” Viola says, pausing to look at him, resting her hands on the back of her chair.

“Were you part of the decision to revive me?” Khan asks.

She shakes her head. “As soon as my people determined that your crew was still alive in stasis, I got told it was above my clearance level and Alexander brought in his own people to handle the
rest. I left on leave two weeks later, three days after…” She stops, her eyes widen and she looks at Khan. “He wouldn’t have,” she murmurs. “No.”

“Was anyone else injured in the crash?” Khan asks.

Viola shakes her head. “No, it was a private shuttle, my daughter was flying it. She was a Starfleet pilot.”

“Then yes,” Khan says. “He would have, if he thought you an inconvenience in his way. What was the determination of the shuttle crash?”

“Mechanical engine failure,” Viola says. “They said a part had failed and the engine overheated, and my daughter couldn’t beam out in time.”

“Easy enough to sabotage,” Jake says quietly. “I’ll look, but at this point we may never know.”

Viola takes a breath, then another one. “I don’t want to believe he could have done it, that he would have,” she says. “But…I was arguing with him, I wanted to know why he didn’t trust me to handle your ship, and…” She takes a seat again, dropping her face into her hands for a moment. When she raises her head Khan sees tears in her eyes, but she doesn’t let them fall.

“Did you develop the scientific and medical laboratory side of section 31?” he asks. “Those labs were in place before I was brought to them.”

“I did not,” Viola says. “I handled the weaponry, the ship design, the intelligence gathering, sabotage and so on. Anything medical or biochemical was handled by Admiral Rafferty, as he ran—runs—Starfleet Medical and oversaw all things related. I argued to include Intelligence operations under my umbrella but this had been the protocol since before I took over, and I wasn’t successful in changing it. I know very little about what was happening or is happening there. And you won’t have any luck with Liam, he’s one of Alexander’s most trusted men.”

That makes Khan feel more at ease with the situation. His impression of Viola is that she wouldn’t have allowed some of those programs to happen, although that may be false. But that she didn’t know what would happen to him—she’s being honest about that, at least.

“Intelligence is kind of schizoid,” Jake says. “There’s almost no communication between the medical side of it and the rest. And why we have medical intelligence I don’t know.”

“Oh, there are valid reasons for some of it,” Viola says. “If we do go to war with the Klingons, and we have medical knowledge of the species more advanced than we do now, we could manage to build weapons that would be more effective than we have now. Klingons are damnably hard to kill. We don’t want to publicize research into every disease or condition we have going, and the Freedom of Information laws require that we publish study results for all publicly-funded studies that aren’t classified. So we sneak some things into Intelligence when we don’t want the results going public just yet, or when we think it might be an advantage in an upcoming battle or war. You know as well as I do, Jake, that the galaxy’s not a peaceful place.”

“I know,” Jake says. “How many times did you almost get me killed?”

“How many medical studies aren’t publicly funded?” Khan asks.

“Almost none,” Viola says. “After the Eugenics Wars, in the reformation of the world government, almost every country decided that what had been done to create the augments should never be allowed to happen again. The reason it had happened was due to collusion between private medical industry and public governments. The world, as a whole, decided to prioritize medical research and
publicize it so that no secret facilities could exist as had happened.”

“We did better than we thought, even when we were not here,” Khan murmurs in Russian.

“Da,” Jake murmurs back.

“That doesn’t mean your Starfleet isn’t trying to accomplish what they did three centuries ago,” Khan says to Viola, reverting to English.

“It doesn’t, and I’m well aware of the possibility—the probability,” Viola corrects herself. “Much as it pains me to admit it.”

“Does it really pain you so much?” Khan asks curiously.

Viola takes her seat again. “I remain unconvinced there is any ethical way to genetically tamper with the human genome, other than repairing it,” she says. “We can cure most genetic disabilities, and many birth defects, but what happened to you…” She gestures. “You have wings. Is that something you would wish on anyone else?”

“No,” Khan says. “But the wings are the least of what I am.”

“What you are,” Viola says, “is a very dangerous man. Do you have anything to lose in this time?”


“Men with nothing to lose have nothing to fear,” Viola says. “And that makes them dangerous. Men with things to lose will do anything to protect those things. That makes them more dangerous. A man with nothing left to lose will sacrifice his own life if he has to, because he has nothing to gain by living. A man who has something to protect will sacrifice everyone around him to keep it safe, and keep himself safe with it.”

Khan would answer her but he’s abruptly not in that room anymore, he’s standing on a battlefield, drenched to the skin and covered in blood and dirt, holding his sword in one hand and his clothes ripped to shreds. Cold rain falls on him from above and he looks around wildly, not seeing who he needs to see. “Status,” he calls, his voice hoarse and broken. He coughs, tries again. “Status.”

“Here,” Anandi says, stumbling toward him.

“Here,” Ekaterina says, doing the same, followed by Konstantin, and Bishop, and Katsuro. Maeve, Alona, Matthew, even Jake, but…Khan looks around, panic closing his throat.

“Hey, idiot, I’m right here,” an exhausted voice says and Khan whirs around to see her, bloodied and limping but there, sword firmly gripped in one hand and phaser in the other. “I’m right here.”

He snaps out of it to find himself flat out on the floor and his head pounding. “You, uh,” Jake says. “You said something in I think Hindi, your eyes rolled up in your head and you collapsed. Hit your head against the chair leg on the way down, so that probably sucks, and…are you okay?”

“Another vision,” Khan says, carefully getting to his feet without crushing his wings. His head does ache abominably but he ignores it.

“Do you get visions often?” Viola asks, handing him a blocker. Khan scowls at the pill, but takes it.

“More than I would like,” he says. “And not with any regularity or visible trigger.”
“That is problematic,” Viola says. “If I were your CO, I’d take you off field missions until you figured it out. I couldn’t have an agent who was likely to pass out in the field like that.”

“But you are not and I am fine,” Khan says.

*Anything to protect those things.* He doesn’t need a genius intellect to see where this vision came from or what he saw. But Viola doesn’t need to know that.

She looks like she wants to disagree, but says nothing.

"Vi, how much would it take to get access to the medical records side of Intel?" Jake asks.

“You can’t afford it,” Viola says. “Hell, *I* can’t afford it. Liam and I have never gotten along, and anything he knows goes straight to Alexander. If he were to find out someone had been accessing classified records, the wasps’ nest it would stir up would be…” She spreads her hands. “Officially I can’t help you there, and unofficially unless you’ve got the best hacker in the galaxy there’s no way you’re getting in.”

Jake says nothing but Khan reads the thought anyway. “Tell me more about the projects you oversaw when you ran Intelligence,” he says, changing the topic.

Viola takes her seat at the table. “My focus was on seeking out allies, or potential allies,” she says. “To gather information and possible technology. We identified three inhabited planets, and made covert contact, and of those three two I think will be candidates for the Federation when we officially get there.”

“Why not the third?” Khan asks.

“They’ve not yet developed warp,” Viola says. “They have propulsion engines, but warp is still a few decades away.”

“Would either of the other two planets be allies or enemies with regard to the Klingons?” Khan asks.

“Neither would be enemies, but I’m not sure about allies,” Viola says. “The Klingons haven’t found them yet, so I doubt they’d want to get entangled in that mess.”

It has nothing to do with the mission, but—“What do you know of the Ventraxans?” Khan asks.

Viola grimaces. “Nothing good,” she says. “It was a relief to the Federation when they withdrew. We do have an open offer to mediate negotiations between their warring sects, but I hope they never take us up on it. The Klingons haven’t approached them, either, which is also a relief.”

It is. “Were you involved in the design of the Vengeance at all?” Khan asks.

“Only in very preliminary stages,” Viola says. “It was still mostly in blueprints when I left. I’ve kept up with the construction, and it’s quite brilliant.” She tilts her head. “You did most of it, did you not?”

“I did,” Khan says. “And the torpedoes.”

“Remarkable,” Viola says. “You had no exposure to modern technology until barely a year ago, and you designed our most advanced ship and its weapons. Is there anything you couldn’t do?”

“There are fields in which I have little knowledge,” Khan says. “I am not a medical professional
nor am I an artist, for example. Given time to study, however, there is virtually nothing in which I could not excel."

“And yet you and your colleagues were forced into exile,” Viola says. “Why is that?”

“There were less than a hundred of us, and billions of humans,” Khan says. “We had people loyal to us, of course, but the sheer numbers against us made it a war we were inevitably going to lose.” He shrugs, his wings ruffling a bit. “But some of what we intended to accomplish happened anyway, even without us there.”

“One day, if we ever have time, I would like to hear the story from your perspective,” Viola says. “History books aren’t kind to you and yours.”

“History is written by the victors, and we lost,” Khan says simply.

“Do you intend to try to win this time?” Viola asks.

“That depends on the goal,” Khan says. “I intend to get my family back safely, and awake in this century. If you are asking whether or not we want to take over the Federation—no. Not at this time.” He smiles faintly. “Certainly not until the Klingons are dealt with. A civil war inside the Federation would draw them to attack.”

“Yes,” Viola says. “That it would.”

“Do you think war is inevitable?” Khan asks.

“I think it is unless Alexander is no longer in a position to ensure it happens,” Viola says. She sighs. “And I don’t see him being removed from that position in time to prevent it.”

“It is possible,” Khan says matter-of-factly.

"For you, anything is, apparently," Viola says. “But some circumstances even you can’t adjust to your favor.”

“You’d be surprised,” Jake mutters.

Viola looks at him, smiling a bit. “Spoken by one who does his own share of adjusting.”

“I learned from the best,” Jake says, smiling back.

“How much information do you have on the Klingons that I might not have seen?” Khan asks.

“I’ve no idea what you’ve seen,” Viola says. “I’ll give you access to the files I have, as opposed to the ones Starfleet has, but how much of that you’ll have seen already I couldn’t say. Do you know the language?”

“I do,” Khan says. “I have not had cause to test it against a Klingon, but from observing video and intercepted communications I believe I am passable.”

“No,” Jake says. “I’m passable. You’re fluent.”

“Almost,” Khan says. “I can’t think in it.”

“Close enough,” Jake says.

“Tell me something,” Khan says, looking at Viola. “Why did you want to meet with me?”
“Because Jake’s one of mine,” she says. “And when he comes to me and asks me for help on something dangerous, I want to know what’s going on and who’s behind it. I want to see Starfleet succeed, and I’m afraid it won’t if we start a war with the Klingons. And…you may be the Federation’s best chance at avoiding that war.”

“But no pressure or anything,” Jake says.

Khan laughs despite the situation. “I think it is possible to avoid the war,” he says. “But not without a great deal of effort and a not-insignificant amount of luck.”

“Make your own luck,” Viola says. “It’s what I always tell my boys.”

“And your girls?” Khan asks.

“They’re all my boys,” Viola says. “If they all call me sir—which they do—I call them all my boys.”

“Vi, the den mother with an adamantium fist inside a silk glove,” Jake says. “Except most of the time the glove’s off.”

“I see that,” Khan says.

Viola laughs. “Perhaps you do.”

Khan gets to his feet, stretching his wings. “Thank you for meeting with me,” he says.

“I should be saying that,” Viola says, also standing up. She just clears his shoulder, Khan notes. “I’ll send Jake my files and he’ll pass them on to you. If I hear anything else, I’ll pass it on.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. He considers, then decides to ask anyway. “If I were able to find a way to use my blood to heal your daughter’s injury, would you want it?”

“That’s a complicated question with a lot of gray,” Viola says. “There would be so much at risk if you did. If you were found out, you’d be turned into a pincushion. The ethics battles would rage for decades.”

“Would you want her to be able to walk again or not?” Khan asks evenly.

“Yes,” Viola says quietly. “Yes, I would. Do you think it’s possible?”

“I do not know,” Khan says. “But I have…access to resources that might be able to find out. If you get me your daughter’s medical records, I will see what I can do.”

“I will, then,” Viola says. She extends a hand this time. “Thank you.”

Khan takes her hand—warm and dry, with a firm grip. “You’re welcome.”

Viola squeezes Jake's hand and leaves quietly.

“Well, that went well, I think,” Jake says once the door closes behind her. “And she’s got a shit ton of information you’ll probably find useful. I couldn’t get it to you before now because I didn’t want to involve her without talking to her first. She’s my CO, and I respect her a lot. I didn’t want to give away information like that.”

“Your sense of ethics is worthy of respect if also inconvenient,” Khan says, stretching his wings again because his back feels cramped.
“Blame my mom,” Jake says. “And Viola. You want to spar with me before we go get fitted for armor?”

“I would like that,” Khan says. “Is the gym still available?”

“It is,” Jake says. “Let’s go.”

Jake ends up with a few bruises, including one on his ribs Khan didn’t intend to leave. On the other hand, Jake successfully cracks two of Khan’s ribs and dislocates his shoulder, so Khan considers it a fair trade.

“If you—there,” Khan says, breath rushing out of him when Jake sets his shoulder back in place. He takes a couple moments to breathe, letting the pain subside, and nods when he feels steady. “Well done.”

“I’ve been practicing,” Jake says, giving Khan a hand to his feet. “Have to, if we’re going to fight the Klingons. And no, you’re not keeping me out of that.”

“I had this same conversation with your sister,” Khan says, rolling his shoulder. “But I had hoped you would be more likely to see reason.”

“I’m a good fighter,” Jake says. “I do it for a living. One on one, a Klingon has the advantage of a human. In groups, the advantage is lessened, and with our group of people, my odds are pretty good. I’ll tell you what I’m sure Jill told you. This is our fight. Starfleet is our organization and we’re fighting for it as much as anything else. I can hold my own, Khan, and I will.”

“And if you don’t?” Khan asks.

Jake takes a breath and lets it out slowly. “Then you tell my mom I died fighting for the right cause, and that we negotiated peace with the Klingons, and it was worth it.”

“Was it truly?” Khan asks.

“We’ll find out when we get there,” Jake says. “But now I want a shower and then we have to head out to meet Marveek and his crew.”

“Yes,” Khan says. They shower quickly and change into fresh clothes. Just as Khan finishes getting dressed his link chirps.

“Hey,” Jill says when he answers. “I’m done. Where are you? I’ve got the transporter so I’ll meet you there and then we can head to New York.”

“I am at the gym,” Khan says.

“Be there in thirty seconds,” Jill says and hangs up. Khan and Jake make it to the front desk just in time to see Jill materialize, out of uniform and in practical clothes. She has a knife up her sleeve, Khan notes, although most people probably wouldn’t see it. He can’t see the one in her boot but is certain she has one there, as well.

“How’d the deposition go?” Jake asks as soon as she’s solid.

“It wasn’t terrible,” Jill says. “And then Magpie messaged me with a very well-timed emergency, so I was able to leave with the impression I might not come back. The hearing itself is set for three weeks out, so we’ll see where we are at that point. I did find out that the prosecutor found the previous reports from the two women who filed complaints, so at least there’s that.”
“Did you help with that?” Khan asks.

“I pointed Magpie toward it and she did it,” Jill says. “It wasn’t that difficult. The reports were there, they’d just been filed under a different category and hidden in plain sight. Starfleet never completely loses paperwork. Ignore it, yes, misfile it yes, pretend it doesn’t exist, sure. But once something’s filed in the system it will be there somewhere. Bureaucracy at its finest.”

“We had less paperwork in our time than you do now,” Khan observes.

“Yeah, but you ruled by fiat, not democracy,” Jill says. “You didn’t have to justify your actions to anyone.”

“Except my wife,” Khan says, smiling at the memory. “And my siblings. But moreso with Rani.”

“She wasn’t afraid of you? Not even at first?” Jake asks.

Khan shakes his head. “Never. She did not trust me, and at first she did not like me very much either, but she never feared me or my siblings. It was, in truth, one of the main reasons I fell in love with her.”

Jake looks at Jill. “What about you?”

“I didn’t fall in love with Rani,” Jill says pertly.

Jake makes a face at her. “Were you scared?”

“No,” Jill says. “Why would I have been? Khan tried to warn me away from him, but that wasn’t encouraging me to be afraid of him, that was him protecting himself from what I could do to him. I knew the first night I met him that he could easily kill me if he wanted, but he’s not the type of person to kill indiscriminately or without a really good motive, and I didn’t have one of those.”

“Is that why you love her?” Jake asks Khan in Hebrew.

“One of the reasons,” Khan says in the same language. “She is very different than Rani, and yet similar.”

“Hey, English or Russian please,” Jill says, poking Khan and punching Jake’s arm lightly. “And we should get to the nest.”

“Remind me the coordinates again?” Jake asks, taking out his transporter. Jill reads them off and Khan sets his own transporter as she does.

Jill slips her hand into the crook of Khan’s arm and he hits the button.

The three of them arrive in what feels to Khan like a living rainbow. Color everywhere, from the purple and green walls to the primary colors of the furniture; colored glass mobiles hang from the ceiling and scatter rainbow reflections through the large room. Even Magpie’s many computers have colored cases or cords. Magpie herself sits on a big, bright yellow floor pillow, scribbling on a tablet with a blue stylus. “Welcome to my aerie,” she says, looking up when they arrive. “The rest of your family should be along within the next ten. You can look around and poke into things, I don’t mind, but if a computer has a password screen up don’t touch it.”

“Of course,” Khan says. He does walk around, curious about Magpie’s home. It doesn’t surprise him to see clutter, all sorts of jewelry and crystal figurines and colored blankets haphazardly draped over things. He identifies Magpie’s main workspace by the half dozen coffee mugs stacked
around it and the pile of silver rings and bracelets that he presumes she takes off when she does intensive typing.

“Let me show you something,” Jill murmurs to him in Russian. She takes Khan’s hand and leads him into the kitchen, an open area decorated in yellows and blues. “Remember how I said we’re all fucked up, the three of us?” Jill asks. She opens a door in the corner of the kitchen and gestures. “Welcome to Magpie’s neuroses.”

Boxes and boxes of food; canned goods, nonperishables, protein bars and instant heat soups and dried meats and fruits. A bag of rice that reaches almost to Jill’s waist, and at least two dozen boxes of various pasta. “Her freezer is almost as bad,” Jill says, closing the door. “The fridge less so, because Andy makes her go through it every couple of weeks and throw out anything bad. Andy and I both make her go through the hoard every six months and donate things that are reaching their best by date. Or we make her throw out things that have long since passed their use.”

“And yet she has to be reminded to eat,” Khan says softly in Russian.

“She’s afraid that if she gets used to eating regularly, something will happen and she won’t be able to,” Jill says with a sigh. “And she doesn’t recognize her body’s own hunger signals.”

Khan shakes his head. “She would benefit from some cognitive behavioral therapy, I think.”

“Oh, yeah, but she won’t go,” Jill says. “The three of us made a deal a long time ago that we wouldn’t push the others into therapy. We could all use it but none of us want to do it, so we don’t push.”

Khan doesn’t disagree that the three of them would benefit from therapy. But he recognizes a lost cause when he sees it, and he has no interest in provoking Jill’s temper.

Instead he hears voices from the living space, and goes to see who has arrived. It turns out to be Matthew, Alona, Maeve and Anandi, and they just finish appearing when two more figures beam in. Those turn out to be Katsuro and Bishop.

“And as always, we’re waiting for Cat,” Alona says. “But she and Konstantin should be here in a couple minutes.”

“Is she usually late?” Jake asks.

“She’s either half an hour early or fifteen minutes late,” Alona says. “We haven’t figured out how this happens, but it always does. Even when she met with her government, she couldn’t manage to be on time. Then again, it’s not like they could have done anything without her.”

“What about Konstantin?” Jill asks. “Can he not manage to arrive on time either?”

“Konstantin is always with Cat,” Matthew says. “So if she’s early he’s early, and if she’s late he’s late.”

“And here they are,” Anandi says, moving out of the way.

“Welcome to the party,” Alona says when Ekaterina and Konstantin finish materializing. “Late as always.”

“We are not late,” Ekaterina says indignantly. “We said one o’clock, and it is five til.”

“You know, she’s actually right,” Matthew says, looking at the clock on Magpie’s wall. “This is a
first, Cat. You got here five minutes early, not half an hour. I’m impressed.”

Cat *hmphs* at Matthew, but says nothing else.

“Okay, so, we ready?” Jake asks quickly.

“Oui,” Bishop says. “To where are we beaming?”

Jake gives them the coordinates and everyone plugs them into their transporters. “We’ll land behind the shop,” he says. “No one will notice, or at least they won’t say anything if they *do* notice.”

“We’ll be back,” Jill says to Magpie. “Try not to break anything.”

“I won’t break anything unintentionally,” Magpie says, grinning.

“Best I’ll get, so I’ll take it,” Jill says.


Colors swirl around them and Khan dissolves into light.

When he finishes beaming, he looks around to see a run-down street, dark clouds in the sky obscuring whatever sun there might be. A few streetlights glow weakly, but do little to illuminate the area. The air tastes metallic in his throat and smells of acrid smoke.

“Charming place, isn’t it?” Jake asks, seeing the looks on everyone’s faces. “It gets better inside, I promise. This way.” He leads them around the corner to a large building, likely used as a warehouse from the size of it, and lays his hand on a palm scanner to the left of a solid slab of metal.

A moment later the scanner flashes green and a video screen appears in the door. “We made it,” Jake says. “Safe to enter?”

“Yeah,” a gruff voice says. “C’mon in.”

The door slides open and the eleven of them walk inside to a wholly different atmosphere. Here, the lights shine brightly and illuminate everything in the cavernous room. The air smells of leather and hot metal, and a group of five people get to their feet from an area of overstuffed couches and chairs. The people range in shape and size from the largest being almost as big as Konstantin to the smallest who Khan estimates as a few centimeters taller than Alona. All of them have dusky skin, and only two of them have hair. “Marveek,” Jake says, crossing to the second-tallest man and extending his hands. “As always, it’s good to see you. You look good.”

Marveek—one of the two with hair—clasps Jake’s hands and bows his head briefly as Jake does the same. “As do you,” he says, his voice beautifully melodic. “Introduce me to your teammates?”

Jake names everyone, each person raising a hand briefly as Jake introduces them. “Your turn,” Jake says.

“Shayna on my left, Abros behind her, Stavenick is the giant over there and this is my daughter Elyria,” Marveek says, pointing each of them out. Elyria is the shortest, and the other one with hair. Each of them bows their head as Marveek introduces them. “Come, sit and we’ll talk business.”
They all move to the couches, although Khan elects to remain standing due to the wings. He gets a couple curious looks from Abros and Shayna, but neither of them ask. “Would any of you like a drink?” Elyria asks. “We have water and tea, and ale for once we finish our business.”

“I would like tea, please,” Cat says. “As would my siblings.”

“Of course,” Elyria says. “I’ll go get the tray.” She hurries off toward the back of the room.

“Ten of you,” Marveek says, studying each person in turn. “We’ll need at least three weeks to make the boots, and that’s with expedited work. The coats will be easier, as we can fit nine of you without anything needed but minor alterations. Khan, however…I am not entirely certain we can make a coat for him.”

“I was doubtful myself,” Khan says.

“We could make you a pair of tall pants,” Abros says slowly. “We’ve done that before. The waistband would come up to your chest, stopping just before the base of your wings. But they would not offer as much protection as the coat, because in order to keep your movement free we would have to decrease the protection in the pants.”

“If we made him the tall pants, though, we could fit them closely to his legs and design the boots to go over them,” Marveek says. “That would give him cover, and then we could build in extra protection for the midsection and lower back. His wings already protect a lot of his back. The only thing we’d have to consider is the lack of protection for his arms and his chest.”

“If we made gauntlets?” Shayna suggests.

“That we could do,” Marveek says. “Doesn’t solve the chest armor, though.”

“Overalls,” Jake suggests suddenly. “Make him a pair of overalls and a set of gauntlets. That’d give him cover through the chest, and the overalls would fasten to his shoulders, so he wouldn’t be restricted by straps or anything.”

“We’ve never made overalls before,” Marveek says, sounding pleased at the thought. “But that would work very well.”

“Could you make something similar for the rest of us?” Alona asks. “The boots, and then the coats similar to what Jake has but a pair of close-fitting pants under them?”

“Yes, but no,” Marveek says. “We could do it. But the weight of all three items would encumber you. We’d have to custom make everything to adjust for that, and it would take at least two months.”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Jake says. “So that’d be a no.”

Elyria returns with a large tray floating along next to her. She hands out cups to everyone and takes a seat, the tray gracefully lowering to the table. “Anti-grav technology,” she says, seeing the curious looks. “We developed artificial gravity, of course, for our ships. But in the process we found a way to turn gravity off under certain circumstances. It is remarkably convenient sometimes.”

“Thank you for the tea,” Cat says, taking a sip. She smiles in delight. “Khan, this is very similar to chai.”

“Is it really?” Khan takes a careful sip of his own and smiles; he can’t help it. “So it is,” he says. It
may actually be *better* than chai, but he hasn’t had actual chai in so long his memory may not be accurate.

“What is chai?” Elyria asks.

“A spiced tea on our planet,” Khan says. “Served hot or cold, often with milk. This is remarkably similar to it. It is very popular where I come from.”

“Then I am glad we can remind you a bit of home,” Elyria says, smiling.

“A bit, yes,” Khan says. “The overalls you suggested, Jake. Those would have to be custom made. How long would it take to make them?”

Marveek studies him thoughtfully. “If we prioritized it, it would take three weeks, about as long as the boots. It’s not a complicated design, and we have the materials in stock.”

“You can make ten pair of boots, nine coats, and a pair of overalls in three weeks?” Alona asks.

“Yes,” Marveek says. “Because the coats are already made and we just have to tailor them to you. That takes little time. The boots are custom, but we have the materials. Each pair of boots takes about two days from start to finish.”

“How many days are in your week?” Ekaterina asks.

“Eight,” Shayna says.

“All right, so three weeks for you is three and a half for us, but still I think it reasonable,” Cat says.

“If you have the time to spare today we can fit the coats to you and you can leave with them,” Marveek says.

“I would like that,” Anandi says. “As would my siblings, I am sure.”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Then let me get my measures,” Marveek says, getting up.

The five of them work quickly; Marveek and Abros start with Konstantin, while Shayna and Stavenick begin with Ekaterina. Elyria takes notes, writing down measurements as they get called out to her. Within an hour everyone has been measured for both coats and boots, and Elyria and Stavenick hurry off to get the rack of coats.

“Interestingly, the hardest person to fit—other than Khan, of course—is Maeve,” Marveek says, looking at the notes.

“Why is that?” Maeve asks. “I’m not particularly tall, short, skinny or fat.”

“No, but you are particularly…endowed,” Marveek says delicately. “Most people we design coats for are either men or have small breasts.”

Maeve groans and hangs her head. “There is that,” she says with a sigh.

“I thought I’d be the hardest to fit,” Jill admits.

“No, not at all,” Marveek says. “It is much easier to make something smaller than it is to expand it. You are smaller than most of our customers, but not by as much as you might think.”
“That’s oddly comforting,” Jill says.

Marveek laughs. “I am glad to be a comfort.”

“Not that this has anything to do with the subject at hand, but we do need to talk money,” Jake says, sounding reluctant.

“Standard rates,” Marveek says easily. “With an additional twenty percent on one item for the overalls and gauntlets.”

“Fifteen percent,” Jake counters. “And don’t I get a volume discount for bringing in more than six?”

“Seventeen percent, and that’s included in standard rates,” Marveek says. “So it’s ten percent off the overall order.”

“So it’s ten coats—with an additional seventeen percent on one—ten pair of boots, and ten percent off the total of that?” Jake asks.

“Yes, exactly so,” Marveek says.

Jake looks up, mentally calculating. “Okay, that’s fair,” he says after a moment. “Half down now, the remainder due when we get the boots.”

Marveek nods. “That’s fair.”

Jake takes out his tablet and a credit stick, plugging the stick into the tablet and adjusting it briefly. “There you are,” he says, handing the credit stick to Marveek.

“Thank you,” Marveek says, tucking the stick away inside his shirt. “And here are Elyria and Stavenick.”

“Over here, please,” Elyria says, gesturing to an open area of the warehouse. She taps her foot on something in the floor and two round platforms rise up a few centimeters. “Jill, if you would stand here, and—Anandi, I think, if you would stand here.”

Curious as to how tailoring works in this century, Khan moves over to stand by Jill’s platform. Elyria and Shayna help Jill into the coat, which fits better than Khan had expected but still needs to be taken in.

Neither woman takes out scissors, or thread. Khan can’t actually tell what they do use, but it looks seamless. Elyria runs something around Jill’s wrist and a few centimeters of leather fall to the floor, but Khan can’t see a cut, and the sleeve looks as it did a moment ago. Meanwhile, Shayna works to take in the coat through Jill’s shoulders and chest; again, Khan sees leather peel away from the coat but can’t tell where it came from.

It takes remarkably little time before both women step back, studying the coat. Elyria taps her foot again and the platform rises higher into the air. “Jill, does it feel comfortable?” Shayna asks, walking around the platform. “It should feel close through the chest and arms but not constricting.”

Jill stretches and twists in the coat, bending backwards and swinging her arms around. “It’s good,” she says. “It doesn’t feel too heavy—it’s enough that I feel protected, but it doesn’t weigh me down. Can I get down from here and try to move some more in it?”

“Of course,” Elyria says, lowering the platform to the floor. Jill jumps off and tucks into a
Somersault, coming up and launching into a tumbling run. The coat moves fluidly with her, its panels staying close to her body even when she turns a cartwheel followed by a handspring.

“Oh, this is fantastic,” Jill says happily when she finishes, brushing off her hands. “It’s got just enough weight that it doesn’t flap around all over the place, but it doesn’t get in my way at all. This is brilliant.”

“I’m pleased you like it,” Shayna says, smiling. “I think I want to make a small adjustment to the collar. It should be a bit higher to protect the back of your neck. Turn away from me, please?”

Jill does, holding her hair out of the way. Shayna picks up one of the lengths of leather that had been trimmed away from Jill’s coat and does something with it and a small device in her hand, adding a couple centimeters of height to the collar. Again, Khan sees no seam or thread to indicate anything had been changed. He does want to know how they manage it, but that can wait for another time.

The rest of the tailoring takes little time. Khan appreciates efficiency, and Marveek and his people clearly have this process down to a science. Even after watching them tailor the coats, however, Khan still can’t identify how they adjust the fit without actually cutting or sewing anything. He sees bits of leather fall to the floor and sometimes get added back in, but he doesn’t see how it happens.

“Okay,” Alona says, watching Marveek adjust Matthew’s coat. “I have to know. How the hell do you do this without needles and thread or scissors or—what the heck are you using?”

Marveek laughs and holds up his hand, showing a small black circular gadget in his palm. “It works on a molecular level,” he says. “It either separates the molecules and then seals the edges, or it fuses them together and then seals it. The leather we use for our coats is too strong to be cut by regular knives or scissors, and we don’t have a needle and thread capable of sewing it. We developed these specifically for the leather, and it only works for this material. That way it cannot be misused or turned into any kind of weapon. Theoretically you could change the programming to use it on other things, but we don’t allow anyone to look at them that closely.”

“That is fascinating,” Ekaterina says, moving over to study it. “Do you have a similar device for the boots?”

“We do, because they’re made of the same leather,” Marveek says. “In part, at any rate. The shoe has a metal alloy sandwiched between two layers of the leather, and then the shaft of the boot is also a sandwich of the leather, in the middle is a more flexible synthetic compound. The alloy we use in the shoe is not flexible enough for the shaft of the boot.”

“They mold to your calves,” Jake says. “Feels like wearing awesome socks, honestly. If socks could help you climb a mountain and store a knife in the back.”

Alona laughs. “I suppose it’s possible for that to happen.”

“We will need twenty-three days to make all the boots and Khan’s overalls,” Elyria says, studying her notes. “It’s possible we could be done sooner but not necessarily likely.”

“We’ll contact you when they’re ready,” Marveek says. “Have you time for a glass of ale before you leave?”

“Yes,” Jake says immediately. Khan looks at him and he grins. “Their ale is fantastic.”

“Then we definitely have time for a glass,” Alona says firmly.
The ale does, in fact, live up to Jake’s praise, and by the time they finish Khan feels fairly pleased with the day so far. “We’ll see you in a few weeks,” Jake promises. “Thanks for everything today.”

“Anytime,” Marveek says.

The eleven of them head back outside, into the gloom and dreary. “Back to the nest?” Jill suggests.

“That makes sense,” Ekaterina says.

“See you there,” Jill says. She tucks her hand into Khan’s arm and he hits the button.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

This is a significant advantage.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings for this chapter:** A lot of frank discussion about rape and coerced consent. Nothing *happens* but there’s a lot of talk of past experiences.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They arrive in the nest to loud music, something upbeat with quite a lot of percussion. “Oh, hi, sorry,” Magpie says as soon as she sees them, diving for a remote and hitting a button. The volume drops dramatically and she tosses the remote over to Andy, who sits on a green floor pillow. “How’d it go?”

“It went really well,” Jill says. “Is that new, the music?”

“It’s Ando-pop,” Magpie says. “Not sure when they released it, but I only got access to it a couple weeks ago. I like it, though.”

“What is Ando-pop?” Ekaterina asks.

“Popular music from Andor,” Magpie says. “It’s pretty popular over on Earth. Andor, meanwhile, adores a lot of older Asian music. They went crazy for a lot of Japanese pop music they got access to a while back.”

“By older you mean…” Cat raises her eyebrows.

“Early twenty-first century, I think,” Magpie says. “Maybe mid-twenty-first. I’m not sure. It’s very…bubblegum. Ando-pop is similar, although with more percussion and less vocals. But it’s fun music to turn on and bounce around to.”

“What is popular music like these days? On Earth?” Alona asks.

“It varies,” Andy says. “A lot of stuff is still fairly localized to country or region. In North America, the big thing right now is a cappella groups, either all female or all male. They kind of played out the synthesized stuff last century and there’s been a big focus on more…pure stuff, I guess you could call it. Either all a cappella or all with actual instruments and orchestras, not recordings and synths. Europe is similar, although they’re starting a trend of a cappella groups that mix rap and song. It’s kinda neat, but I prefer instrumental music if I’m working. Orchestras died out of favor and have been revived over the last seventy-five years or so, and I’ve seen some really good performances. I have season tickets to New York’s symphony orchestra and I go to the theater a lot, and some of it’s revivals but there’s been some good stuff in the last maybe fifteen years.”
“Is radio still popular, or in use?” Alona asks.

Andy laughs. “It depends on what you mean. The technology for old-style radio isn’t in use anymore. But there are still streaming stations for different types of music, and some for news and weather and traffic, and the Federation has a few official channels and they get some stuff from off Earth but it’s usually on a delay.”

“Where is the best place to get official news of Starfleet and the Federation?” Matthew asks, moving to take a seat on the blue couch.

“Of Starfleet, that’s station seventeen,” Jill says, folding herself down on a striped pillow. “Screen or streaming. That’s official news, and it’s boring as fuck, but you’ll learn more about administrative changes and poll numbers that mean nothing. If you want the actual truth about Starfleet that’s station sixty-two, and it’s very unofficial but they know everything before it happens. Except I was listening to them and I never heard anything about section 31.”

“They likely don’t know or decided it wasn’t worth risking their safety to report it,” Magpie says. “I’m leaning toward the former, since I provide sixty-two with some of their data and I didn’t have anything.”

“What about the Federation?” Alona asks, perching on the couch arm next to Matthew.

“Station three for official news, station forty-nine for unofficial,” Magpie says. “Station three often buries the lede, so you get important stuff but it doesn’t sound like anything important. Forty-nine will actually tell you what’s important and why.”

“I am surprised the unofficial stations exist,” Khan admits.

“Freedom of press and freedom of speech,” Jill says. “Two big concepts from the US that the Federation incorporated when they built it. The press isn’t entirely unbiased these days but there are a lot of independent journalists out there who do a good job of telling the truth, and the Federation’s laws prohibit censorship unless it’s a direct public threat. I believe Starfleet’s lawyers have taken station sixty-two to court more than once over revealing what they argued was classified information that could put officers at risk, but they never won.”

“They’ve gone to court seventeen times in the last six years,” Magpie says. “And they were denied every time.”

“How many of those seventeen times were you involved?” Matthew asks, laughing.

“Sixteen,” Magpie says promptly. “But I never got subpoenaed. I was shielded as an anonymous journalistic source they didn’t have to reveal.”

“That’s handy,” Alona says. “Would you even have testified had they found you?”

“Oh, hell no,” Magpie says. “They didn’t even have my real name, or rather my legal one, so they couldn’t have found me to subpoena me, but even if they had I wouldn’t have gone. That way lies all sorts of criminal charges and I like not being in jail.”

“We like you not being in jail, too,” Jill says. “You being in a rehab facility would be problematic, to say the least.”

“Yeah, it really would,” Magpie says. “But speaking of criminal charges, I have sort of good news. Matthew and I successfully got Verity’s medical records.”
“Why is that only sort of good?” Khan asks.

“Because the records are encrypted and it’s taking a while to get through the decryption,” Magpie says, making a face. “I’ve seen similar encryption before from Starfleet, but this is more complicated and I think there’s at least one self-destruct in here, so we’re being careful so we don’t trigger that.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Jake says. “I told you medical records probably have the toughest security of any of Starfleet’s files.”

“You did,” Magpie says. “Actually getting the records wasn’t that awful, I’ve faced worse. But being able to read the files is tricky.”

“What about the other six people?” Jake asks.

“Ikan’s bug isn’t active, so either he’s off-planet or he found it,” Andy says. “Two of them are in San Francisco—I think that’s Keroack and Campbell. Baker is still in London, and Garcia is still off-planet. I have a program set to alert me if two of the bugs get within half a kilometer of each other, but so far it hasn’t triggered. Even for the two in San Francisco. We could try to find them and question them, but Magpie and I are monitoring their mail and their links, and we haven’t seen anything to indicate they’re planning anything with each other. I mean, they’ve almost certainly got accounts and links we haven’t found, but this isn’t looking like a promising hunt.”

“We should interrogate Baker, at the least,” Anandi says. “He might have answers to some of our questions.”

“Let’s wait until we can analyze Verity’s medical records first,” Alona says. “Then we’ll have a better idea what to ask.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Magpie, do you know how long the decryption will take?”

“I don’t,” Magpie says apologetically. “I’m working on it, but it’s like peeling an onion and I don’t know how many layers until I hit the bottom.”

“It is fine,” Anandi says. “I would rather have the data than rush it and have it destroyed.”

“We all would,” Matthew says.

“Speaking of data,” Jake says. “I have to download some. Magpie, do you have a spare computer I can use that can download large amounts of data locally?”

“Define large amounts,” Magpie says.

“A few terabytes,” Jake says. “Maybe more, I’m not sure.”

Magpie looks around her room, considering. “If it’s less than ten terabytes, you’ll want the computer with the blue cover on that table,” she says, pointing. “It’s clean, I just reimaged it last week and haven’t done anything with it. If it’s more than that, I’d need to make space somewhere.”

“It’s probably less than ten,” Jake says. “It depends on how compressed some of the video files are.”

“Then yeah, the blue one should work,” Magpie says.

“Thanks.” Jake heads over to the table.
“What is he downloading?” Ekaterina asks.

“We met with Viola Cathcart this morning,” Khan says. “She agreed to share her personal files on the Klingons and what she knows of section 31, as well as information about non-Federation allied planets, and anything else she thinks might be useful.”

“Bueno,” Anandi says. “Does she have information on the medical side of section 31?”

“That she does not,” Khan says. “Apparently Intelligence is split into two sides, medical and biochemical on one side and information, weapons, ships, etc. on the other. She ran the latter. Liam Rafferty runs the former.”

“He’s a dick,” Jill says, making a face. “I’ve never met him formally and I’m really okay with that.”

“Why do you say that?” Cat asks.

“Someone I knew was assaulted pretty badly on a mission,” Jill says. “The physical injuries healed, but mentally they were a wreck. PTSD, anxiety, everything. They filed for disability, and Rafferty tried to block it, saying this person was exaggerating and was competent for work.”

“What was the outcome?” Andy asks.

“Rafferty lost,” Jill says. “But not without a really ugly legal battle and my friend was a wreck when it was all over.”

Khan wants more details, but refrains from asking. “Would he have paid for me?” Magpie asks instead.

“No,” Jill says. “But he’d have sent his minions to arrest you and hassle you.”

Magpie makes a face. “So he’s that kind of asshole.”

“He’s all kinds of asshole,” Jill says. “If he runs medical Intelligence, we’re not going to get anything from him or anyone close to him.”

“Why did he try to block the disability claim?” Ekaterina asks, frowning.

“It gets a bit complicated,” Jill says. “The short version of what happened to my friend is that they were on a planet for shore leave, and my friend had a couple drinks with a local. The local came on to my friend, who politely declined. The local didn’t take it well, and you can fill in the rest. Rafferty tried to argue that this hadn’t been a clear cut case of rape and assault, that my friend had consented to some of it and all kinds of rape apologist bullshit. My friend—who is female, I guess that’s safe to say—became pregnant, and had an abortion, and Rafferty also tried to argue that she was having a difficult time mentally because of the abortion so it was her own fault.”

A low growl runs through the room; Khan doesn’t know which of his siblings originated it or if it was himself. Either way, he sees cold anger on all their faces, matching Jill’s. “So if he were to die, it would be no great loss,” Maeve says thoughtfully.

“You’d be right about that,” Jill says.

“Abortion is legal in this time, is it not?” Anandi asks.

“It is, with varying restrictions based on where you live,” Jill says. “The Federation works to make
sure everyone has access to effective birth control so it’s not necessary except for cases of birth defects or whatever, but nothing’s perfect, including birth control.”


“I don’t know what that is so I’m going to say no,” Jill says.

“It was a virus in our time,” Maeve says. “It attacked the immune system. People who had it didn’t die from the disease, but died because they had no immune system to fight off other diseases. It was transmitted sexually and through bodily fluids.”

“Yeah, we don’t have anything like that,” Jill says. “We have other viruses, but that one I haven’t heard of.”

“I think I’ve heard of it,” Andy says. “It was transmitted by dirty needles, too, right?”

“Yes,” Maeve says.

“Yeah, then I have heard of it,” Andy says. “There are other diseases you can catch from dirty needles these days, but not that one.”

“Did you—forgive me for asking, but did you catch any?” Maeve asks.

“I did,” Andy says. “But I was fortunate in that it’s something curable, and once I got clean and got access to medical treatment I got rid of it. There were a lot of ways I could have died on the streets, but what I caught wasn’t one of them.”

“Which is good for all of us,” Katsuro says.

Andy smiles a little and stretches, getting to her feet. “I would like tea,” she says. “Anyone else?”

She gets a few affirmative responses and nods, heading to the kitchen. “I’m following you because I want coffee,” Jill says, bouncing up to her feet. “Jake? Anyone else?”

Alona and Matthew ask for coffee, and Jake nods. Jill turns a cartwheel and then a one-armed cartwheel, disappearing into the kitchen.

“This is going to take a bit,” Jake says, looking up from the computer. “And some of it I have to decrypt before you’ll be able to read it. At least I know how to do that and I have the codes.”

“Do you know how much of it we already have?” Khan asks.

“I don’t,” Jake says. “Right now I’m just grabbing everything. Once I get it, I’ll decrypt it and extract the compressed files. Then we can sort through it and figure out what we already have.”

His link chirps as he says this and Jake frowns, taking it out. “This is Jake,” he says, answering and setting privacy mode. A second later, he smiles. “Hey, dork. What’s up? Sorry we—yeah, it just wasn’t a good time. Yeah.” He listens for a moment, and his eyebrows go up. “I am, yeah,” he says. “Okay. Where is it? Okay. And—uh huh.”

Jake gets up, pacing around the table. “This sounds too good to be true,” he says. “Seriously, David, what’s the catch?”

Khan wonders what they’re discussing, but Jake isn’t looking his way. “Yeah, absolutely I want it,” Jake says. “When can I meet him? Tomorrow’s good. Hell, later today is good. I’m in town and even if I wasn’t, I’d get into town for this. Okay. Yeah, okay, call me back as soon as you know
“When. Thanks. You, too. Kiss your kid for me.”

“What was that all about?” Cat demands impatiently as soon as Jake hangs up.

“That was fate being really awesome to us,” Jake says, still sounding a bit nonplussed. “David’s an actor, and Eema had mentioned to him that we were looking for a recording studio and place to rehearse. Long story short, through various connections David knows a guy who has a small private theater and recording space that’s just sitting empty right now because it needs some renovations and the guy hasn’t had the time or money to deal with it. If we pay him for it, he’ll let us do whatever we want with the space. It’s got recording equipment in the theater, so we’d get theater acoustics, and the stage is big enough that it sounds like we could use it for sparring, too. And it has hologram scenery, so we could record ourselves fighting or singing or both with whatever background we could program in.”

“This really does sound too good to be true,” Matthew says. “What’s the catch?”


“That’s easy enough,” Magpie says. “And for this how long do we have use of it?”

“As long as we want,” Jake says. “Like I said, this is too good to be true. And David said it does need some renovation, so we’ll have to check it out and see if there are serious issues. It’s a basement theater, so we might have water damage or mold or stuff, and we’d need to check the HVAC system and the like. But if it works out, this could solve a few of our problems. I told David to let me know whenever the guy’s available to meet and go over there. It’s in Brooklyn, not that hard to get to.”

“Katsuro will go with you when you go to inspect it,” Ekaterina says. “He is an engineer at heart and will be able to identify any major problems.”

“Apparently I will go with you,” Katsuro says to Jake.

Jake laughs. “Works for me.”

“Is ten million a large amount of money these days?” Konstantin asks.

“Depends on what you’re talking about, but it’d be out of reach for an average Starfleet officer,” Jake says. “Or the average family. I get paid more than the average Starfleet officer and I make money when I’m in the field that I don’t always report back and even so, without access to some of Magpie’s accounts I couldn’t finagle ten million.”

“Yes, but I have access to all the money ever,” Magpie says cheerfully. “Some of it’s even mine.”

“You also laundered some credits, did you not?” Cat asks Khan.

“I did,” Khan says. “I am not that wealthy but my alternate ID has a few billion credits.”

“Oh, is that all,” Alona says, laughing. “Today has been a good day. I would very much like to spar before we call it quits. Do we still have access to the London gym?”

“We do,” Jake says. “We’ll lose that in two weeks.”

“Then after we have coffee and tea, we can go and spar and test out the new coats,” Alona says. “Aye?”
“Da,” Cat says.

Ten of them do just that; Magpie and Andy stay in New York, and Jake begs off to work with the files he got from Viola. Everyone else heads to the London gym to spar.

They learn quickly that even the adamantium knives will not pierce the leather of the coats. Cat calls a halt to the spar and takes her coat off; Matthew and Konstantin hold it up against the wall and she throws three knives directly at it. All three of them land and bounce off, falling to the floor. “That…is impressive,” Ekaterina says, gathering her knives and putting her coat back on. “And the Klingon bat’leths are not as sharp as the adamantium, are they not?”

“They are not,” Khan says.

“Well, then,” Cat says. “This is a significant advantage. But for now, no knives the rest of this spar. Let us not waste our energy. Tomorrow we can work with the weapons the Femarans gave us to practice with them.”

Khan focuses on Jill for the remainder of the spar, surprised by just how much of an advantage the coat gives her. He knows she’ll have a few bruises from the spar, and by the time it’s over they all lie on the floor, sweaty and breathless, but he hadn’t been able to call a kill on her. Next time, he tells himself, he will not hold back quite so much. The Klingons certainly won’t.

“One downside to the coats,” Alona says tiredly. “We’re going to have to worry about overheating. These do not breathe well.”

“No,” Jill agrees. “Which could be good or bad on Qo’noS, because their weather varies drastically. They have a very tilted axis, so their weather’s unpredictable to say the least.”

“Tell us more about their homeworld,” Ekaterina says. “Geologically, that is.”

“One continent, one very large and very turbulent ocean,” Jill says. “The weather is wild. Once it settles into a season it’s not that bad, but the change of seasons is insane, and each season has its own violent storms. It can get as cold as Antarctica in winter, and as hot as parts of Africa in the summer.”

“What season is it over there right now?” Alona asks.

“Summer heading into fall,” Jill says. “Which is really good for us because fall is cool there, like winter in London or parts of the mid-Atlantic US. It’s also one of the calmer seasons. Summer brings all kinds of hurricanes and tornadoes and things, but fall is quieter.”

“That is convenient,” Bishop says. “Is all of the continent inhabited?”

“I don’t know,” Jill says. “Jake would know better than I. It might be in the files he has, so we’ll check with him and ask.”

“Do they have a moon?” Anandi asks.

“They do,” Khan says. “Somewhat.”

“What do you mean by ‘somewhat’?” Anandi asks.

“It…was partially destroyed some months back,” Khan says. “It still exists, but is much smaller and the mining station that had been on it is gone.”
“Your work,” Bishop says.

“Oui,” Khan says.

“Do they know that?” Alona asks.

“No,” Khan says. “No one was left alive to identify me, and I left no evidence that could point back to the Federation. Of course they suspect it was us, but they have nothing to prove it, and have made no accusations.”

“Well, that’s something at least,” Matthew says. “Hard to negotiate when they think you destroyed their moon.”

“It would be, yes,” Khan says. He pushes himself to his feet, needing to stretch his wings and his back.

Jill bounces up when her link chirps. “Calastinova,” she says, grabbing it and setting it to privacy mode. “Oh, hey. Hang on.” She switches it to speaker. “Go for it.”

“Eleven New York time tomorrow morning I have a meeting with the theater guy,” Jake says. “His name’s Will, for the record, and we’re meeting for coffee first and then going to see the theater. So Katsuro, if you’ll meet me tomorrow around ten-thirty, we’ll head over. I told him I was bringing a friend with me.”

“Of course,” Katsuro says. “Send me the coordinates and I will meet you there.”

“Already did,” Jake says. “Bishop, you’re welcome to come along too if you want.”

“Merci,” Bishop says. “I would like that.”

“Sure,” Jake says. “Khan, meanwhile, I downloaded all the files and sent you the decrypted ones, but the rest are going to take me a bit of time to unlock and extract. But what’s there should give you a bit of time to get through anyway, even for you.”

“What is in the ones you sent me?”

“Mostly that’s about the non-Federation planets,” Jake says. “Some stuff on internal Starfleet politics, and a lot of stuff you probably don’t need about ship design and weapon design, but it was in there so I’m passing it along.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. “I will review it when I get back to my flat.”

“No,” Jill says. “Look at it at my flat. I don’t trust yours, even with all the jammers.”

“She’s got a point,” Jake says. “Anyway, you should be making plans to disappear soon, yeah?”


“I wish I could see his face,” Jill says wistfully.

Jake laughs. “I’m sure you can imagine it.”

“Well, yeah,” Jill says. “Khan, are you going to bug him before you vanish?”

“Yes, if possible,” Khan says.
“I’m sure you’ll make it possible,” Jill says. “We’ll sort out how you’ll do this later. Right now I want a shower and food and then we can start going through the data, and everyone else should probably scatter and do their own thing.”

“Da,” Ekaterina says, rolling fluidly to her feet. “We will coordinate for tomorrow once we find out what is going to happen with the theater. But we will need to spar, if nothing else, and I think Konstantin and I should make plans to interrogate Baker once we analyze Verity’s medical records.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Maeve and I will look at those once they are decrypted.”

“I’ll call Magpie once I’ve showered,” Matthew says. “Maybe Alona and I will go back there tonight and work on it.”

“Sounds good,” Jake says. “I’m going to go, but I’ll see some of you tomorrow. Probably all of you at some point.”

“Likely, since you will need to spar with us,” Cat says.

“Yeah, there is that,” Jake says. “Catch you all later.” He hangs up and Jill puts her link away.

Some of Khan’s siblings elect to shower at the gym, but Khan and Jill say their goodbyes and beam themselves back to Jill’s flat. “Share the shower with me,” Jill says, peeling out of her coat and laying it over the back of the sofa. “Yes?”

“Yes,” Khan says, following her to the bathroom, his own clothes hitting the floor in a trail the way there, same as hers. By the time they get to the bath, both of them are naked and Khan can see a bruise on her side and another one on her left shoulder. “Did I do this?” he asks, brushing his fingers over the bruises.

“Honestly I don’t know,” Jill says, turning on the water. “It’s not a bad bruise, though, it’ll fade in a couple days.”

“The coat provides you with a much bigger advantage than I had anticipated,” Khan says. “With the high collar I could not get in to snap your neck, and since blades will not go through the material...”

“Still think I can’t take on the Klingons?” Jill steps under the spray and holds out a hand for Khan.

“I remain unconvinced it is a wise course of action,” he says, kissing her hair. “But I also remain convinced I will be unable to persuade you of this.”

“Wise man,” Jill says, slipping her arms around his waist. “I’m in this same as you, Khan. The coat is a huge advantage, and the boots will be another one, and I can do this. Jake can do this.”

“We will see,” Khan murmurs, leaning down to kiss her. “Let me bathe you.”

“Anything you want,” Jill says, stretching in his arms.

He washes her slowly and thoroughly, from the tips of her hair to her toes, taking his time to touch her, feel her smooth skin under his hands and hear her sigh with pleasure. When his fingers brush between her legs he feels her heat, and when he sinks to his knees and presses her against the wall she shivers and her fingers tangle in his hair.

Khan drapes her legs over his shoulders and makes sure she’s balanced between him and the wall.
before he licks her, slow and deliberate. Jill’s breath catches in her throat and her fingers tighten in
his hair, pulling just a little. “Mine,” Khan murmurs against her clit, teasing it with his tongue.
Mine, he thinks as she moans, when she rolls her hips against his face and shivers against him.

He lets her come once, considers going for two and decides that can wait until they’re out of the
shower. Jill pants for breath, leaning against the wall when Khan lets her down, and doesn’t offer
to help as he washes himself quickly.

They get out of the shower and dry off; Jill still looks a bit dazed, and leans into Khan on the way
to the bedroom. She moves through her post-shower routine automatically and sprawls out on the
bed as soon as she’s done, closing her eyes.

“Tired, kitten?” Khan asks, sitting down on the edge of the bed and running a hand over her hip.

“Mm,” Jill mumbles. “Yes, but I want food and we need to go over the data Jake sent you and I
want you to fuck me at some point.”

He smiles. “You want many things,” he says. “Are all of them possible tonight?”

“Give me five minutes,” Jill says around a yawn. “Okay, no, wait. You go put food together or call
in an order for something, and I’ll be out when it’s ready. Then we can go over the data. Then you
can fuck me before we go to sleep.”

“I can?” Khan laughs this time. “Which of us gives the orders, pyara?”

“You say that like you don’t want to have sex with me,” Jill says, making a face at him. “And you
don’t always give the orders.”

“You enjoy it when I do,” Khan murmurs, sliding his hand up her side to cup her breast.

“I really do,” Jill says, stretching a little under his touch. “But food first. Otherwise I’m going to
fall asleep on you.”

Khan smiles again and leans down to kiss her lightly. “I will go see what you have for dinner,” he
says.

He finds enough to make a meal; not much more, but they won’t be using this flat much longer.
Fully expecting Jill to be sound asleep by the time the pasta finishes cooking, he gets surprised
when she pads into the kitchen wearing an oversized t-shirt and nothing else. “Told you I only
needed a few minutes,” she says, pushing at her hair. “What’s for dinner?”

“Rigatoni,” Khan says. “You do not have much food, but I found a meal’s worth.”

“Well, I won’t be here much longer,” Jill says. “At least you found a meal’s worth. And I like
rigatoni. I’ll set the table. We might as well look at the data while we eat, so I’ll grab a computer.”

They do look at the files Jake sent over the meal, but a first glance reveals nothing of note. The two
un-allied planets Khan notes for possible future contact, or alliance, but neither of them are likely
to be useful in their current situation. Jill understands more of the Starfleet politics than Khan, but
says she doesn’t see anything that might help them, and most of the ship and weapon designs are of
no use.

“All the Klingon stuff is likely encrypted,” Jill says, wrinkling her nose. “But so far, I don’t see
anything useful.”
“Nor I,” Khan says, setting the tablet down. “Are any of the political files at all useful?”

Jill tilts her head, thinking about it. “We _might_ be able to use some of it as leverage against Barnett or Tsonga, but I’m not wholly certain. And I’m not sure what we’d need leverage against them _for_. I doubt we’d have the time to build up a case against them, and I’m hopeful that if we reveal what Marcus is doing they’d just flat out help us.”

“I see,” Khan says.

“There’s also a question of how current this data is,” Jill says. “Some of the timestamps are almost a year ago. I’m not sure the information in them is valid. Some of it is still, I guess, but there’s nothing saying the folks involved haven’t done something about it.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Perhaps there is more current data in the other files.”

“It’s possible,” Jill says. “We’ll find out when we talk to Jake. I wish Admiral Cathcart could give us more than this, though.”

“As do I,” Khan says.

“How did the meeting go, anyway? You didn’t give me a lot of details,” Jill says.

“There were not many to give,” Khan says. “She gave Jake permission to share her personal files, but admitted she has little influence over Starfleet politics these days. It is—the timing of her daughter’s shuttle crash is suspect. It is possible, and honestly I think it likely, that Marcus caused the crash, or gave orders to have it done. The shuttle accident happened just before I was revived, and she was arguing with Marcus over how to handle my ship and my crew.”

Jill winces. “It’s…shit,” she says. “I…don’t want to believe it but after what he did to you, I do. He’d think nothing of it. Was the admiral’s daughter the only one injured?”

“She was, although I would not put it past Marcus to have injured more people had it been necessary,” Khan says.

“No,” Jill says reluctantly. “Neither would I. Is there _anything_ he wouldn’t do?”

“No,” Khan says and then thinks better of it. “I do not think he would actually rape someone,” he amends. “Give orders to have it done, perhaps, but not him personally.”

“Giving orders to have it done is worse,” Jill says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “It is.”

She reaches over, covering his hand with her own. “At least they didn’t go that far with you,” she says softly.

“Small mercies,” Khan says.

“It’s not that small,” Jill says. “I’ve almost been there.”

“Closer than you even know, I think,” Khan says.

Jill frowns at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“How many times did you agree to sex when you did not want to?” Khan says. “Coerced consent is no better than lack of it.”
“That’s—we’re not even talking about that, and it was a long time ago, and I never—I was never raped,” Jill says. “I mean, there were two guys I dated that were really big mistakes and all, but they didn’t rape me.”

“Did they convince you to have sex when you did not want to?” Khan asks simply.

“I said yes,” Jill says. “And it was a really long time ago, and one of them was a total asshole and I punched him harder than he hit me and I got him expelled from the Academy, so it was fine. And the other guy it—why are we even talking about this? I’m not—I’ve never been raped. I came close, with the—with the Ventraxans, but nothing ended up happening, not like that.”

“I don’t agree,” Khan says.

“And who gave you all this insight into my sexual history?” Jill asks. “Why are we even talking about this?” She gets up abruptly, collecting dishes. “Can we go back to Marcus being an asshole and Admiral Cathcart not giving us a lot to work from?”

“We can,” Khan says but he doubts that will soothe her temper.

“Seriously, who—no. I know who. Why did you even ask?” Jill asks. “Why did you ask Andy and Magpie about that?”

“Do you remember the disagreement we had the morning after you revived Bishop and Katsuro?” Khan asks.

“I don’t,” Jill says.

“You told me very clearly that although I had won your submission, you had the absolute right to refuse,” Khan says. “I did not know why you felt the need to specify that so clearly. I had never given you any indication I would pressure you into something with which you did not feel comfortable. So after you left that morning, I asked Andy and Magpie if there had ever been a time where you felt pressured into something.”

“Now I remember,” Jill says. “I also remember you said we’d talk about it later and we never did.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Now appears to be later.”

Jill sighs and loads the washer. “There was the asshole at the Academy,” she says. “And yeah, there were a couple times with him where I didn’t really want to have sex but he was persistent and I said fine, okay, whatever. But I consented, Khan, I said yes.”

“And the other man?” Khan asks.

“It wasn’t anything much,” Jill says. “I met a guy some years back, and we played for a few months, and he was a mediocre Dom but I hadn’t played in a while. But he was—it was all about him, and he was shitty at after-care, and there were a couple times we played that I wasn’t really into it. But it wasn’t rape, Khan. Neither of them were.”

“Coerced consent, Jill,” Khan says softly.

“No,” Jill says. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Would you tell that to Andy? Or Magpie?” Khan asks. “If they came to you with the same situation, would you tell them it was all right?”
Jill stops, her mouth works, but she says nothing. She closes the washer with more force than it needs and looks at Khan, still wordless.

“As I thought,” Khan says.

“I don’t understand why we need to talk about this now,” Jill says finally. “It was over and done with years ago. Decades ago in one case.”

“It still influences you,” Khan says.

“So do a lot of things,” Jill says. “I like having sex with you. I’m not going to stop wanting to have sex with you. That doesn’t mean I don’t have the right to say no if I don’t want to have sex at that moment.”

“Of course,” Khan says. “I would never pressure you into something, kitten. Surely you know that by now.”

“I do, of course I do,” Jill says. She sighs and comes over to him, leaning against the table to face him. “I’m pissed that you went behind my back to talk to Andy and Magpie about my previous boyfriends, though.”

“I needed information and you weren’t giving it to me,” Khan says, taking her hand. “You would have done the same thing in my place.”

“Yeah, but I’d expect you to be pissed at me now,” Jill says but she smiles a little ruefully. “You are the most demanding lover I’ve ever had. The best one, but the most high-maintenance, demanding, impossible one, too.” She leans down and kisses his cheek. “And yet I still love you.”

Khan reaches up, laying his palm against her cheek. “You are not exactly the most undemanding partner, kitten.”

He’s not quite sure how she’ll take that but to his relief she laughs, covering his hand with her own. “I’m impossible,” she says. “I’m high strung and high maintenance and moody and I have a lightning fast temper and…I never claimed I was easy to be with. Most guys give up on me after a few months.”

“I will not,” Khan says softly.

Jill turns her head, kissing his palm. “Let’s not talk about it now,” she says. “Right now I would like to have sex with you.”

Khan’s actually surprised about that one, but decides not to question it. He gets up, lifting Jill into his arms and kissing her as she wraps her legs around his waist. “Then let us go back to the bedroom,” he says, biting her lower lip.

Later, he watches her sleep in the darkness of the bedroom, a faint bit of light shining through the blinds. He brushes a curl back from her face and she sighs, but doesn’t wake. The covers come up to her ribs, exposing her torso and the curve of her breast, pale skin even in the low light.

Curious about something, he nudges the covers further down, exposing the line of her back. Jill makes a grumbling sound and rolls onto her stomach, which is actually exactly what Khan wants. Here, he thinks, brushing his fingers over the small of her back, just above the curve of her buttocks. Here, he would leave his mark on her, black against her pale skin, perhaps a stylized lion.

Jill grumbles again and Khan pulls the covers up around her, drawing her back in against his body.
for the warmth as much as the contact. He makes a note to himself to look for potential images tomorrow or the next day when he has a free moment.

Perhaps Magpie could sketch him something. That idea holds appeal, actually, and after Khan is sure Jill sleeps soundly he quietly gets out of bed to send Magpie a message and ask her about it, explaining what he wants and why.

He doesn’t expect to get an answer back, but within a minute his inbox chimes softly. *Give me two days and I’ll have something for you. M.*

Khan smiles and goes back to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Jill lies to herself a lot, have you noticed that?
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Let the game begin.

Chapter Notes

For some reason this chapter took a while to complete. I don't know why, but I apologize for the delay. As always--if you've just found me or have been following along for a while, welcome! I'm so glad you're here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday comes both too quickly and not quickly enough. Khan moved his few things to Jake’s apartment over the weekend, and nothing remains of his presence in the rented flat but the books he doesn’t bother to take with him and the detritus of a life partially lived. Nothing will give Marcus or his men any indication where he has gone, what he is doing. He doesn’t bother removing fingerprints and DNA; he did live here, after all. Jill has arranged for her flat to be cleaned and sanitized on Tuesday, which should remove all traces of him from her place, but Khan thinks it unlikely Marcus will put pieces together anyway.

He locates Marcus easily enough in his office at HQ—security cameras are useful on occasion—and sets the coordinates of his transporter. “Remember,” Jill says, sitting on the back of the couch. “Don’t kill him yet.”

“I know,” Khan says, amused. “I will see you at Jake’s.”

“Yes. Come kiss me for luck.” Jill holds out her hands and Khan walks over to her, leaning down for a kiss. “Go twist his tail,” she murmurs. “Have fun. God knows you’ve earned it.”

Khan laughs. “I will give you a full report when I see you.”

“You better,” Jill says. “I’ll need Andy’s friend to beam me over there, but I should be at the apartment by two local time.”

“I will see you then.” Khan kisses her again lightly and steps away. Game time, he thinks, and hits the button.

He doesn’t particularly care whether or not anyone else is in Marcus’s office, but for once Marcus is alone. Khan materializes and Marcus looks up in complete surprise. “Hello, Alexander,” Khan says silkily, closing the door behind him and walking over to Marcus’s desk.

“What are you doing here, Harrison?” Marcus asks, looking up at him but not getting to his feet.

Khan stretches his wings, knowing they discomfit Marcus and shallowly pleased when he sees Marcus flinch. “That isn’t my name, Alexander,” he says softly. “It was never my name, and it is
“no longer my name. If you are going to talk to me, have the courtesy to address me properly.”

“What do you mean, it’s no longer your name?” Marcus blusters.

“It means I have grown weary of this conceit that you established, this fiction of my being a Starfleet officer,” Khan says. “I will not play by your rules any longer, Alexander. Now you get to play by mine.”

This time Marcus does stand up, resting his hands on the desk and leaning forward. “I think you’re forgetting who has the power here, Khan,” he says in a low voice. “I could kill your family.”

“Death would be preferable to the existence you constructed for me,” Khan says bluntly. “And they would welcome it. Are you that much of a petty man, to kill six dozen helpless people because one person defied you? I take that back. I know the answer.” He also leans forward, almost nose to nose with Marcus. “You thought me alone and powerless,” he says softly. “You thought me under your control. I am none of those things, Alexander. I never was. You forget who you revived. You are the head officer of a military organization. I fought wars, Alexander, more than one, and I ruled a quarter of the planet. Did you honestly think I would sit tamely by and allow you to use me? No. No longer.”

“This isn’t your time,” Marcus says. “You don’t have power.”

“More than you think, and you have less than you believe,” Khan says. “You have your allies. I have mine, and in the end we shall see whose side wins. I fought my own wars, Alexander. I will not fight yours. I will not aid you in provoking it.”

“Are you aiding the Klingons, then?” Marcus asks. “Are those your allies?”

Khan curls his lip. “So black and white,” he says in contempt. “There are more sides than two in this conflict you want to escalate. I won’t help you, and you think I will help them? No.”

“You don’t belong in this time,” Marcus says. “You don’t have money, you don’t have access to —“

“Do you really think I haven’t made plans? Do you really think I am incapable of that? You forget who you deal with,” Khan interrupts him. “I have everything I need. We will meet again, Alexander, and on that day I will end your life. I promise you that. Even if I don’t succeed in my goals, even if you bring about this war with the Klingons, I will kill you with my own hands.”

“In ten seconds I’ll have armed guards in this room and they’ll kill you first,” Marcus says, hand reaching for the button on his desk.

Khan clamps a hand around Marcus’ wrist before he gets there, taking satisfaction when Marcus pales in pain. “No,” he says. “And in ten seconds I will be gone. Look to your own officers, Marcus, for not all of them are as loyal as you believe.” He presses the button on his own transporter. “You won’t see me again, not until the end,” he says before he dematerializes. “But I will see you.”

He smiles, seeing fear on Marcus’s face, and lets go of his wrist as he dissolves into light.

When he materializes in Magpie’s nest she already has the camera footage pulled up. “Goddamn that was fun to watch,” she says cheerfully. “You put the fear of you into him, that’s for certain. Within about five minutes I expect your Starfleet credentials to be terminated, but you’ve got me so you don’t need them anyway.”
“Where is Cat?” Khan asks.

“Exactly where she should be,” Magpie says. “She’ll get the bug on him within ten minutes if he does what you said he would. Which so far he is. I’m impressed.”

“I know how he thinks,” Khan says, moving closer to look at the camera footage. As he expected, he sees Marcus heading directly for security, a scowl on his face. Also as he expected, and as they had planned, he sees Ekaterina come around the corner, dressed in a red uniform Jake supplied. She trips, stumbles, and collides with Marcus, and immediately turns red and begins apologizing profusely, even as she trips again trying to right herself. The scowl on Marcus’s face grows, but he doesn’t lay into her, just irritably dismisses her and keeps going.

“It’s on his wrist,” Magpie murmurs, pulling up another screen. “Inside of his wrist, and he didn’t even notice.”

“Nor will he,” Khan says, pleased. “If only we could get audio from it.”

“We probably could if we screwed with the bug, but that might make it easier to detect or notice,” Magpie says. “I can ask Andy.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Khan says. “We can know his location, at least, and tap into whatever cameras or surveillance around him to see what he does.”

“And it’s not like we’re not going to be following him personally,” Magpie says. “Well, you won’t, but everyone else will.”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“And…there go your creds,” Magpie says, looking at another screen. “He—now, that’s interesting. I had expected him to issue an all points search for you, but he’s not.”

Khan shakes his head. “He won’t,” he says. “He does not want to call attention to me, unless I do something to provoke him. If he issues a directive to have me found, it would begin raising questions about what I was doing and why I disappeared, and Marcus does not want publicity of that sort. He will, I believe, ask his men to look for me, but nothing else.”

“It looks like…” Magpie trails off, looking at her screen. “Okay, so he’s gotten security to pull up the camera feeds of the building, trying to see where you got in and out from. Which is stupid because he saw you beam in and out, but maybe he thinks you had an ally or something. And—oh, I see, one of the security guys is looking at the transporter logs. And now it looks like Marcus is going back to his office, and I expect once he’s there he’ll contact his goons to have them search your flat in London and wherever else he thinks you might be or have been.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I almost regret not leaving him a surprise at my flat.”

“Yeah, except collateral damage,” Magpie says. “Which would not be ideal.”

“No, it would not,” Khan agrees. “Jill did insist on no civilian casualties.”

“She does that,” Magpie says. “Me, I don’t care, but she has more ethics than I do.” She stretches her arms over her head, fingers linked and palms upturned.

“I am not sure if more is the right word,” Khan says, watching her. “Different, I think.”

“No, Jill cares more about people than I do,” Magpie says honestly. “Me, if you’re not one of mine
—and that circle is very small—I honestly don’t care whether you live or die. The galaxy has too many people in it anyway. I have no use for people who don’t provide some kind of value to my life, and my standards for adding value to my life are pretty high. Andy and Jill are the only two people in my life I’d drop anything for, do anything for without question. Anyone else…” She shrugs. “You can take care of yourself. So can your family. If you need something from me, yeah, I’ll probably do it because Jill loves you and I don’t want to disappoint her, but there might be a cost later down the line.”

“Your ethical code is remarkably similar to my family’s,” Khan observes. “Practicality and self-interest.”

“Nothing’s free,” Magpie says. “Learned that lesson before I could toddle. The Federation keeps trying to move away from a money-based economy, right? They want to do away with capitalism and have an economy based on personal interest, or some shit. It’ll never happen. It might be nice in a few centuries, but I don’t see it happening in my lifetime or the next. Humans aren’t so nice they’re willing to share and share alike just because the government says they should.”

“No,” Khan says. “I agree with you. When I ruled, I established a baseline for my people, a standard to which they would all be provided. Shelter, food, water, heat. But anything more than that was up to them to procure, and they did.”

“You didn’t have homeless? Or street brats?” Magpie asks.

“I can’t account for every single person within my borders, but I believe I was successful,” Khan says. “But not all of my family were. Ekaterina considered it her greatest failing as a ruler, that she could not guarantee all of her people were provided for.”

“The fact that she was willing to try is more than a lot of what the Federation’s done,” Magpie says. She stretches again and gets up from her seat, shaking out her hands and arms. “Earth’s government mostly ignores the people it doesn’t think it has to care about.”

“Do they know of your existence and just turn a blind eye?” Khan asks. “Or do they not know?”

“I think they don’t want to know,” Magpie says. “I’m making coffee, do you want any?”

“Please,” Khan says.

“Follow me, then,” Magpie says, and Khan follows her into the kitchen. “I think the Federation didn’t realize who or what the brats were when they started, and since then they’ve chosen not to look under the rock. It’s willful ignorance. They choose not to educate themselves. At this point I don’t think the brats would accept help even if the Federation offered, though, it’s a point of pride. Brats don’t have much but we’re proud of what we do have, and we’re proud of our survival.”

“Even though many of you do not survive,” Khan says.

“Most of us don’t,” Magpie says. “But everyone dies eventually. Even you’ll die someday.”

“I will,” Khan says. “But I don’t know when that will happen.”

“Join the club,” Magpie says. “I figure if Andy and I survived this long, we’re in it for the long haul. Human lifespan’s about a century and a half these days, in case you were curious. Street brat lifespan’s about twenty years, but hey, I’m still alive.”

She hands Khan a mug and dumps sugar into hers, stirring it briskly. “So now what? Who’s where and what are we doing with them?”
“Cat and Konstantin should have taken Baker into their custody by now,” Khan says, looking at the chrono. “We have not heard from them, but that is no cause for concern.”

“Is he going to survive the interrogation?” Magpie asks.

Khan takes a sip of his coffee. “I doubt it,” he says honestly. “It is possible, of course, but I think it unlikely.”

Magpie shrugs. “If you’re expecting me to object, I don’t.”

“I was not,” Khan says. “You have no objection to murder and you don’t romanticize life.”

“I don’t,” Magpie says. “I do stop short of getting people evidence they need to murder other people, though. Not because I dislike it but because I have absolutely no desire to go to a rehab facility and if I were to get caught, I’d be fucked.”

“Practical of you,” Khan says.

“My overriding motivation is self-interest,” Magpie says, grinning.

“Not always,” Khan says. “Not where Andy or Jill are concerned.”

“No, of course not,” Magpie says. “But that’s different. That’s family. You know something about that.”

“I do,” Khan murmurs.

“Speaking of family,” Magpie says. “I have something for you to look at.” She crooks a finger at him and he follows her back to the main area of the loft, where she goes over to her worktable and picks up a sketchbook. “I have three options,” she says, flipping pages. “Two of them are based on your ideas. The third one is based on my knowledge of you, her, and the situation. Let me know what you think.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, taking the sketchpad. The first two images are a lion’s head and a bird of prey, respectively; both outlined in heavy black lines, the lion’s mane thick and full and his teeth showing in a snarl. The bird of prey also has its beak open in a scream, its wings extended and talons outstretched as if it is landing on something. He likes both of them, possibly the bird more, but either one matches what he had in mind.

Then he turns the page and just stares. The black dragon’s scales shimmer with iridescence, and the underside of its wings remind Khan of fire opals. It rears back, its tail coiled and wings lifted, and its muzzle opens but it isn’t breathing fire. Khan doesn’t think it needs to be. It’s absolutely stunning.

“How would this fit on her back?” he asks Magpie, looking up from the sketchpad.

“The tail starts just at her tailbone, and it covers pretty much her whole back, with the tip of one wing hitting the top of her right shoulder,” Magpie says, coming over to him. “Its head would be on her left shoulder. Do you want to know my reasoning for this?”

“I do,” Khan says.

“All the tattoos Andy and I have are dragons, so it seemed in keeping with our theme,” Magpie says. “Black was an obvious color choice, with the hidden shifting colors. And this will hide the scars on her back. She says she doesn’t care when they draw attention but she lies.”
“It’s gorgeous,” Khan says, meaning it. “But surely this would take a long time to do and have heal?”

“Not as much as you’d think,” Magpie says. “I forget exactly where we got the technology, but some planet out there is really into tattooing and developed a lot of awesome technology for it. What happens now is that you go to the parlor and they paint the image on your body, and then they—it’s almost like a branding iron, but it’s not a brand, it just kind of...stamps the image into your skin. It hurts a lot, sure, but they give you anesthetic beforehand, and a sedative. Once that’s done, it takes about two days for everything to stop hurting, depending on how quickly you heal. I have a specific artist I work with in New York who I would trust to do this, if she wanted it. The work would take probably about eight hours.”

“And you think she will like it,” Khan says.

“She’ll love it,” Magpie says. “I promise. You…you mean a lot to her, and she wants a permanent reminder of that. You and I both know the second half of that thought is so she’ll have the reminder when you leave, but I don’t think you will.”

“I won’t,” Khan says. “Eventually she will believe me.”

“She’ll get there someday, I promise,” Magpie says, smiling a little. “Assuming we don’t all get killed by Starfleet or Klingons before then.”

“One hopes not,” Khan says. “Although if any of us are likely to survive, it would be you and Andy.”

“Yeah, well, we’re like roaches, we always make it,” Magpie says. “But it wouldn’t be much fun without Jill-Bear around or anyone else. So stay alive.”

“I will do my best,” Khan says, amused at the difference between Andy’s concern and Magpie’s almost indifferent attitude.

Magpie laughs. “I’ll take it. I wanted to show you something else, because it’s nothing I’m familiar with but thought you might know somewhere.” She sets her mug down and picks up another sketchbook, flipping through pages before she brings it over to him. This sketchbook is larger than the last, enough that she needs two hands to hold it and hand it over. “Have you seen this place before?”

Khan looks at the image and inhales sharply. She captured it perfectly, down to the carvings on the columns and the long windows along each wall. The dais, everything. “It was mine,” he says, tracing a finger over one of the columns. “It...this was where I heard audiences, met with my people.”

“Then, uh, don’t turn the page,” Magpie says, but Khan does before she can grab the book back.

The throne room again, but destroyed in a storm; the roof is gone, the columns shattered. An eerie purple tone in the sky—the only color, Khan notes—and lightning flashes; in between the flashes and half hidden by a cloud he sees a dark figure, a shadowy outline of menace. “You are...very talented,” he says after a moment. “Was this a dream?”

Magpie nods, taking the book back. “I was there, and it felt like I was supposed to be there for some reason. But between one moment and the next the storm came and tore it apart, and I ran for shelter and then I woke up. But it felt like one of those dreams, you know? Something I should remember, so once I stopped shaking I drew it.”
“The figure in the sky? He was there, too?” Khan asks.

“Someone was watching me,” Magpie says with a shiver. “I couldn’t tell if they had good intentions or not, but I felt eyes on my back. And I thought I saw eyes in the storm.”

Khan looks at the picture again, wishing he could have been in Magpie’s dream to see this. She’s talented, unquestionably, and she captured details he wouldn’t have thought her to remember, but...if he’d been there, if he could see for himself, maybe he would notice something she hadn’t.

“Have you dreamed lately?” she asks, closing the book.

“No, not in the last few nights,” Khan says. Magpie’s dream, though, raises more questions than he has theories. They have all been dreaming of an unknown city, an unknown planet, old and in disrepair. Why would Magpie dream of somewhere from the past? Khan has no idea if that building exists any longer and to be honest, doesn’t want to find out. Why would Magpie dream of a place he used? Andy would make sense, but Magpie?

Magpie clears her throat and pokes him in the arm and Khan realizes she’s been talking to him. “I asked if Jill had had any dreams,” she says when he looks at her. “Or even any nightmares.”

“She woke Saturday night shaking,” Khan says, remembering. “She did not sleep again until close to dawn, but she didn’t say what it was about. I don’t know if it was a nightmare or one of these dreams.”

“Possibly both, it’s not like these dreams are all that comforting,” Magpie says.

“There is that,” Khan admits.

His comm-link chirps and he answers it. “Hey, I’m hopping on a shuttle to New York,” Jill says. “Jake’s with me, because reasons I will explain when we get there. We’ll meet you—where do you want to meet? Where the fuck are you now?”

“Magpie’s nest,” Khan says. “If she does not mind, you should come here.”

“We’ll swing by Jake’s place first and then find you,” Jill says. “Did it go well?”

“Better than I could have hoped,” Khan says, smiling a bit.

“Beautiful.” Jill laughs. “Tell me about it later. Right now I have to argue Jake into letting me pilot.”

She hangs up and Khan puts his link away. “You want to tell your family to gather here, too?” Magpie asks. “Might as well only have to tell the story once.”

“Yes, if you would not mind the company,” Khan says, taking out his link to send the message.

“I never do,” Magpie says. “Not unless I have a really big job to deal with. I like people. Andy likes to hermit now and again, and Jill needs either a lot of space or no space at all. I like people, I like company. You can use my kitchen to put food together, but I’m not much use at cooking.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

Over the next few hours, the others drift in. “Nikolai in truth,” Cat says when she sees Khan. Her lip curls and she spits to the side. “He stank of corruption and greed for power. I could have killed him twice over and he did not even get my name.”
“I told you he would not,” Khan says.

She scowls and mutters a few curses in Arabic toward Marcus and his lineage. “Where has he gone since I bugged him?” she asks, taking the mug of coffee Anandi hands her.

“Nowhere much,” Magpie says. “Back to his office, to a couple meetings within Starfleet, that’s about it. He’s…let me check, but yeah, he’s somewhere in the main HQ building now.”

Ekaterina shrugs. “Well, the bug will be of use later,” she says and takes a drink of coffee. She frowns, looks at her mug, and takes another very careful sip. “Who made this?”

“I did,” Anandi says complacently.

“So am I to die in five minutes?” Ekaterina asks.

“No, but you might fall asleep for a bit,” Anandi says. “I wouldn’t have done anything that involved actual death or bodily fluids on Magpie’s floor. Just playing around with some new drugs.”

Cat sighs and hands her mug to Konstantin. “Then I shall sit down first.” She folds herself down on Magpie’s couch, covering a yawn. “Was it on the mug or in the coffee?”

“In the coffee, but specifically I doctored that mug,” Anandi says. “The rest of the coffee and the tea are untouched.”

“If you drug my tea we’re going to have words,” Andy says darkly, hunched over his mug.

“I would not, of course not,” Anandi says. “You cannot heal as one of my siblings can. I would never poison you, Andy.”

“She only poisons either those she loves or those she absolutely hates,” Alona says.

One more knock on the door and Khan goes to get it; the only ones missing are Jake and Jill, and he’s not surprised to see them both standing there in civilian clothes. “Hi,” Jill says, jumping up to kiss Khan’s cheek. “We took a shuttle because it played into the family emergency thing I’ve got going, and allowed me to bring clothes and shit. And Jake helped because I voluntold him he would.”

“That is apparently my role in life,” Jake says. “What did we miss?”

“I can show you the security footage,” Magpie offers. “Was waiting until everyone got here.”

“Yes,” Jill says immediately, all but running over to Magpie. “Show me show me show me.”

“Here,” Magpie says. “I’ll project on the wall.” One section of wall, Khan noticed earlier, is painted pristine white and completely undecorated; a moment later Magpie’s computer screen shows on it brightly. “Quality of the footage isn’t brilliant, but there’s only so much I can do,” she says, hitting a few keys. “And…there.”

Khan watches, curious what it looked like from the outside. Now, with distance, he can appreciate Marcus’s reactions more: the flushed cheeks that pale with pain; the glower in his eyes and the way
his hands fist on the desktop. “Oh, you put a knot in his knickers indeed,” Matthew says when Khan beams out of the room and Marcus shouts in anger, reaching for him. “Also, why the fuck is the military leader fat with an obvious heart condition?”

“Are you really going to tell him to do fifty push-ups and run five kilometers?” Jake asks, gesturing at the screen. “Cause I ain’t.”

“No leader should be above the physical requirements of his men,” Bishop says.

“Yeah, that’s good in theory,” Jake says. “But I’m not about to challenge Marcus on his ability to run the Starfleet obstacle course.”

“Neither is anyone else,” Jill says. “Which is part of the problem. No one’s going to challenge him on pretty much anything.”

“Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal,” Maeve murmurs.

“He’s forgotten that,” Jake says simply.

“How often do officers have to run the obstacle course?” Matthew asks.

“Every year,” Jill says. “Have to run the obstacle course, fight an opponent hand to hand, run five kilometers under a specified amount of time, and qualify for general marksmanship. Scientific tracks have to take exams in their field every three years, but they also have to take continuing classes between. Engineering keeps trying to argue that their continuing education takes place while they’re fixing the fucking ships, but they have to repair various things in the lab—timed—and take an exam every two years.”

“Medical?” Maeve asks.

“Same guidelines as science,” Jake says.

“Do Intelligence operatives have to do this too?” Cat asks.


Cat laughs. “Nyet, I am just curious. This is actually something where I approve of Starfleet. How difficult is the obstacle course?”

“It depends,” Jill says. “There are three versions of it. One is for officers under forty-five, one is for officers over, and one is if you go as a pair. The solo one is slightly easier, but you get extra credit if you complete it as a two-person team. The obstacle course isn’t timed exactly, but you get points on it based on how you get through it and how quickly you get through it, and you have to get a certain amount of points to pass. You’re allowed to retake it twice, and then you have to do remedial classes until you pass.”

“Jill and I took it as a pair for a few years, when we could,” Jake says. “It was a lot of fun, actually.”

“And we set the record,” Jill says cheerfully. “Highest score for a team since they started recording the scores. They haven’t broken it yet that I’m aware of.”

“Have you seen the course?” Cat asks Khan.

“I have not,” Khan says. “I have actually only been to San Francisco once since I was revived, and
that was today. For obvious reasons, Marcus did not want me close to HQ."

“Yeah, he probably thought you were going to blow it up or something,” Jake says.

“He underestimated my patience,” Khan says. “And overestimated the value of Starfleet to me. I would not destroy it, simply because of the power vacuum that would result. I have no wish to see it in pieces. Only Marcus.”

“You changed your mind,” Jill says softly. “When I met you, you didn’t care. You wanted it razed to the ground.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “But the fact is, creating a hole at the center of Starfleet would derail any hope we have of reaching peace with the Klingons.”

“Which you didn’t care about either,” Jill says.

“I did not,” Khan admits.

“What changed, brother?” Konstantin asks.

Khan merely looks at him, raising an eyebrow. Konstantin smiles and shrugs. “As I thought.”

Jake looks about to ask, looks at Khan, then Jill, then Konstantin, and shuts up. Jill, for her part, ducks her head and goes to sit on the couch.

“Your flat’s been invaded,” Magpie reports. “Three of them. They’re being very secretive about it, they didn’t even stop by to tell the manager they were there. Used a very very small and discreet explosive to take your door down. Barely made a sound.”

“Will they find anything of use?” Alona asks.

Khan shakes his head. “My prints, my DNA, surely, but Marcus already has those. I took the jammers out when I moved my things, and Andy smoothed over the security recordings. There is nothing left in that flat that Marcus can use to find me or anyone else.”

“He doesn’t know who your anyone else is,” Matthew points out. “Does he?”

“How could he?” Khan asks. “If Marcus knows the eight of you are awake, we have considerably bigger problems than we thought. Jill and Jake are officers in good standing of Starfleet, and he has no reason to think either of them would collude with a man they shouldn’t even know exists. Andy and Magpie have no known ties to anyone else in this room, and again, they shouldn’t know I exist let alone help me.”

“You do have very interesting and useful connections,” Alona tells Jill.

Jill smiles and shrugs. “I like people.”

“But how did you even meet Magpie or Andy in the first place?” Alona asks. “I didn’t get that story.”

“Um,” Jill says. “So I took up being a cat burglar for a couple years between the Olympics and the Academy, and Magpie was hacking one guy’s security system the same night I was there to steal a thing from him, and she found me, and later messaged me to say we should team up, and later she introduced me to Andy when I needed to steal something for him.”

“You finished the Olympics and decided what the hell, you might as well steal things?” Matthew
laughs. “I love it. I fucking love it.”

“I was bored,” Jill says, blushing. “Really, really bored.”

“Did you ever get caught?” Alona asks.

“No, never,” Jill says. “Although a lot of that was Magpie and Andy.”

“No, a lot of it was you,” Magpie says. “We helped, though.”

“Well, at least that explains why you were so confident of sneaking into the facility where we were held,” Alona says.

“It was the most complicated job I’d ever pulled only because I’d never taken out other people with me before,” Jill says. “Let alone people just waking up from cryosleep. I seriously didn’t know if we were going to make it out with Bishop and Katsuro. Bishop’s heavy.”

“My apologies,” Bishop says.

“Anyway,” Magpie says. “Yeah, they’re not finding anything in your flat. Now they’re making it look like a break-in and trashing it. Oh, you left the tea behind. Andy will be upset at its loss.”

“I will because I put it there,” Andy says, making a face at Khan. “Unless you moved it to Jill’s place first.”

“I left two canisters behind,” Khan says. “Needs must.”

“Needs must never involves destroying tea,” Andy says indignantly.

“Are you at all British? Because that’s a very British thing to say,” Matthew says.

“I’m not,” Andy says. “I’m Chinese and Indian, the two main sources for tea.”

“Yeah, okay, that works too,” Matthew says. “Still sounds more British, but I’ll buy that.”

“What else did they destroy?” Jill asks Magpie, ignoring the byplay.

“They tore the couch apart, probably looking for the bug Andy removed,” Magpie says. “I don’t have visuals in the bedroom but from the chunks of mattress being thrown through the door I’m guessing they did the same to the bed. Although someone’s a book lover, because they’ve leafed through each book but just boxed them up, didn’t destroy them.”

“Interesting,” Ekaterina says. “Surprising, too. Why do you think they would do that?”

“Physical books are not all that common in this time, everything’s digital,” Jill says. “Whatever Khan paid for them, they’re probably worth quite a bit even if they’re not in great shape. My guess is that if they’re trying to make it look like a burglary, the books are worth the most of anything in the flat.”

“Was there anything valuable among them?” Cat asks Khan.

He shakes his head. “They were all used, some in less good shape, and none were particularly rare. Mysteries, all of them, I found them in a secondhand shop.”

“Any you’ll really miss? We could steal them back,” Alona says.
“No,” Khan says, both to the question and the idea. “We have quite a bit to deal with that does not involve stealing back used books.”

“Yeah, true,” Alona says. “Still, it’d kind of be fun, assuming we could trace where they take the books.”

“Probably back to Marcus, but then they’ll likely be destroyed,” Jake says.

“We will need to start playing games with Marcus, though,” Matthew says. “How difficult would it be to get into his apartment, house, whatever?”

“With the transporters, not at all,” Khan says. “However, his security systems would detect an intruder quickly, and he could mobilize Starfleet security to try and apprehend one.”

“Yeah, but he wouldn’t catch us,” Matthew says. “Would he?”

“No,” Khan says. “The transporters I built work more quickly than standard beaming. By the time a phaser could lock onto you, you would be gone. But he would have images of you on his security cameras, and would remember your face.”

“So we shadow ourselves, and disguise our voices, and use the jammers so his security feeds don’t pick us up,” Alona says. “The tech for the first two existed in our time, it damn well better exist now.”

“It does,” Jake says. “It definitely does, I’ve used it a lot, and if you’re going to beam into Marcus’s apartment to use it I want in.”


“Because I can’t find anything on the crash that injured Viola’s daughter,” Jake says. “I can’t even find the original accident report. Starfleet doesn’t delete anything, it’s all there somehow, but I can’t find it. Someone swept the whole thing under the rug not very well, and it’s pissing me off because the less I find the more convinced I am that Marcus engineered it. So, yeah, I want in on the whole stalking thing.”

“Deal,” Alona says.

“I think,” Khan says, “that our first goal should be to unsettle him in public. When he is in San Francisco, he routinely walks through the Starfleet atrium in the morning and again at lunch. It would be child’s play to plant a note on him.”

“It would,” Alona says. “Do we have a uniform that would fit me?”

“You can use one of mine,” Jill says. “You’re not that much taller than me that it won’t fit, and my boots probably would too, or close enough.”

“Thank you,” Alona says. “I’ll plan for tomorrow morning unless anyone objects.”

“What will the note say?” Matthew asks.


Khan considers it, and smiles. “I will need a suitable medium for the note,” he says.

“I have…do you want actual paper, or something else?” Magpie asks. “I have a lot of different
“Do you have origami paper?” Anandi asks.

“I do, actually,” Magpie says. “Andy took it up a while ago and bought paper, and I ended up storing some of it here. She taught me but I’m better with pencils. Why?”

“There is a bird I can fold,” Anandi says. “If a thousand cranes bring you a wish, a thousand of these…will bring ruin to your enemy. I began folding them as a teenager, and finished my thousandth bird the day the humans sued for peace. We haven’t time to fold a thousand of them now, of course, but if Khan were to write the note inside the bird, we could use it from now on, until Marcus responds to even the sight of it.”

“If you teach us, we might get to a thousand between the thirteen of us,” Jake says.

“I will teach you,” Anandi says.

“What color do you want for the bird?” Magpie asks, getting up. “I have pretty much any solid color you can imagine.”

“Black,” Khan says. “What else would it be?”

“Good point.” Magpie gets a stack of black origami paper and brings it over to her worktable, along with a pen. The paper is white underneath, and Khan considers his words carefully before he picks up the pen and writes the note.

*If I wanted you dead, you would be now.*

He hands the paper to Anandi, who takes a seat at the table and begins folding it carefully. When she finishes, a bird of prey sits on her palm, wings outstretched and small beak open in a scream.

“Appropriate,” she says.

“Yes,” Khan says, smiling. “Let the game begin.”

Chapter End Notes

Let the games begin, indeed. *steeples fingers together and smiles evilly*
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

I can't wait for people to see this.

Chapter Notes

Oh, lord. I am so, so incredibly sorry for the massive delay in posting. Life happened all over me, as it so often does, and for various reasons I've just not had time or energy to write at all lately. This chapter was about 2/3 complete back in June, and I just got stuck.

I'm hoping that I will have more time and energy and focus now, and that I can do a better job of updating regularly. Wish me luck?

Also, for those who didn't see it, I wrote a tiny little Khan snippet here: Wake Up Call
This is set before either this story or Flying Free, but fits into both storylines.

They give Marcus one, two, a dozen hawks, all black, all with messages inside, over the next three days. They leave the hawks on his desk in San Francisco, on a conference table before he has a meeting, on his sink for him to find in the morning, on his bed before he comes home for the night.

Khan doesn’t actually expect Marcus to sleep that night, but he does, and while he sleeps Alona and Matthew beam into his apartment, shadowed figures waiting at the foot of his bed for him to wake. When Marcus doesn’t immediately rouse, Alona gets impatient and runs a nail up the sole of his foot, hard pressure and enough to send the man bolting upright in bed.

“Good evening, admiral,” Matthew says, his voice deep and distorted from the modulator. “Have you enjoyed our presents?”

“Khan,” Marcus hisses, reaching into a drawer for a phaser.

“No,” Alona says, her voice a little lighter but still unrecognizable. “He did tell you he had allies, admiral. We’re not him.”

Marcus’ hand stills; he takes out the phaser but doesn’t aim it. “Who are you and what do you want?” he asks, his voice low and tense.

“Many things, admiral,” Matthew says. “If you’re worried we’ll kill you, don’t be. Khan claimed that and we’re not about to argue him out of it. You will die, but by his hand, not ours.”


“To deliver a message,” Alona says. “That we are here, and watching you, and we will be watching you from now on. If you want to live to see next week, you’ll leave those cryotubes alone, admiral. You’ll go nowhere near that building, nor will you have anyone else do so.”
It’s a calculated gamble; telling Marcus this could result in the deaths of the rest of his family, and Khan knows it. But...

“If you destroy those cryotubes, you will die within twelve hours,” Matthew says. “And it won’t be particularly pretty.”

Marcus says nothing, but his hand flexes on the phaser.

“A parting gift,” Alona says and tosses a hawk at him; larger, this one, and white. “Wherever you see the hawks, admiral, you see us. Or you don’t, really, but we see you. We’re watching you. If Khan wanted you dead by our hands you’d no longer be breathing now, but he didn’t. Therefore, you live, for now.”

“Sleep well, Alexander,” Matthew says cheerfully. “Sweet dreams.”

They beam out just as Marcus fires the phaser.

“I have not seen a grown man throw a temper tantrum quite this extensive in, ever,” Andy observes from Magpie’s nest, watching the video on the wall. “My mother would have smacked the shit out of him long before now.”

“Your mother hit you?” Anandi asks, frowning.

“She swatted me a few times when I was out of line,” Andy says.

“More than a few,” Magpie mutters.

“Hush,” Andy says. “Not the point.”

“What did we miss?” Alona asks, pulling off the hood that disguised her body and voice. She hands it to Jake, as does Matthew.

“One really toddler-ish tantrum,” Magpie says, pointing at the screen. “It—yes. He’s calling up security logs to see if he can…” She tilts her head. “I think he’s calling up security feeds to see if he can identify the source of the transport.”

“Not possible,” Khan says. “If he were to try and identify the destination from when Alona and Matthew beamed out— if he had transwarp monitoring and if it were configured to pick up this signal, it would be possible, but I doubt it.”

“Still, that’s why we didn’t come directly here,” Matthew says. “Even if he finds out where we went, all it’s going to do is point back to your old flat.”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Which, by the way, is trashed,” Alona says. “I didn’t see any sign of forensics but I don’t know what that would look like in this century. I’m guessing dusting for prints is a forgotten technology.”

“We take digital pictures,” Jake says. “Modern forensics doesn’t leave that much evidence behind. Was there either blue or yellow tape somewhere?”

“Not that we saw, but we didn’t look that closely,” Matthew says. “Yellow crime scene tape?”

“Yellow tape indicates local cops, blue tape is Starfleet,” Jake says. “I would have thought Marcus would at least call in his goons to make it look like something.”
“Maybe he did; we weren’t there that long,” Alona says. “Just long enough to confuse the transporter signals before we beamed back to here.”

“Remind me again why we did that?” Matthew asks Khan. “I know you explained it but I didn’t catch all of it.”

“Beaming to and from Marcus’s apartment from my old flat will make him think you started there,” Khan says. “And so many transporter signals within a short time will confuse any scanners he has. He won’t be able to detect where you went from my flat, and that is assuming he has the ability to figure that out.”

“It’s a logical starting point,” Bishop says. “Even if it is trashed.”

“Think like Marcus,” Cat says, pacing thoughtfully and juggling two knives. “What would he think you would do? Where would he look for you?”

“San Francisco,” Khan says immediately. “He would think I was there, to keep an eye on him. I expect…yes. I expect him to start searching mail and messages from his subordinates, to see if he can find any sign of collusion.”

“I have an idea about that,” Jill says, grinning. “Every Starfleet officer has an avatar, a personal profile picture. How about we take a few people we don’t like and change theirs to hawks?”

“Say the names,” Magpie says, flexing her hands. “That is ridiculously easy.”

“Change Marcus’s,” Jake says. “And his favorite men.”

“Do you know who those are? Because I don’t,” Magpie says.

“Yeah, I think I can point you to them,” Jake says, walking over to her. “Even if I can’t I can point you to people I don’t like.”

“That’ll work,” Magpie says. “Jill, you have anyone you want implicated?”

“Nah, not right now,” Jill says. “Maybe later.”

“Where in San Francisco would he look for you?” Konstantin asks.

“Anywhere near him,” Khan says.

“There’s an apartment for rent a building over from him,” Andy says thoughtfully. “We could take it and make it look like we’re spying on him.”

“We could take it and actually spy on him,” Alona says. “Or—actually, no, you’re right, it’d be better if it was a front.”

“Why?” Andy asks.

“Because it’s too obvious for him to find us, and we’re not going to let him find us until we’re ready,” Alona says. “If we set it up, we could lead him on, or at least leave him a surprise when he does storm the door. Maybe a hawk with explosives inside.”

“It is doable,” Khan says.

Anandi looks up from her seat, a growing pile of origami birds next to her. “I must say, of all the skills I thought would be useful in this century, my ability to fold paper was not one of them,” she
“Many of your skills are useful in this century,” Jill says. “Speaking of, have you poisoned any of the birds yet?”

“No, I will do that when we determine which ones need to go where,” Anandi says. “The poison decays once it is exposed to air; I would not have it wear off too quickly. As well I would not want any of you to touch it and become ill.”

“It wouldn’t kill us, though,” Jake says. “At least, that was the original plan.”

“It still is,” Anandi says. “There is no lethality in this poison. Just enough to cause gastrointestinal distress for twelve to twenty-four hours.”

“Define distress,” Jill says.

“I would not recommend being more than a meter or two from a toilet,” Anandi says serenely.

“Ouch,” Andy says. “Keep me away from it.”

“I promise,” Anandi says. “I will wait to poison the birds until they can be delivered without harming the messenger or any bystanders.”

“Thank you,” Andy says. “I dealt enough with bodily fluids on the streets, they’re not something I enjoy at all.”

“Most people would agree,” Alona says. “I can deal with blood, sweat, semen, tears, and brain jelly without batting an eyelash. The rest I make Matthew clean up.”

“Yes, thank you so much,” Matthew says drily.

“Back to Marcus,” Ekaterina says, tossing a knife to Khan. “Do you think it likely he will destroy the cryotubes now that we have expressly warned him against doing that?”

Khan catches the knife and tosses it back. “Honestly, I am not certain,” he says. “I think he is likely to increase security around them, but if I had to hypothesize I would say that no, he will not destroy them. He likely thinks he can still use them as a bargaining chip.”

“Security is of no matter, since we are not going to revive anyone else,” Cat says.

“Indeed,” Khan says. “I think…if we openly provoke him, more than the long game, he might be likely to destroy them. If he thinks we—I, I should say—ally with the Klingons, he will find a way to interfere, to bring about the war he wants, and he will use our family in the process. But so long as we don’t openly move against Starfleet or the Federation, he has no justification for destroying the cryotubes, and the possibility that I will be willing to bargain for their safety.”

“He knows you have allies now,” Alona points out.

“He does,” Khan agrees. “But he has no way of knowing who those allies are, how many I have, or what our eventual goal is. I am sure he thinks I have suborned Starfleet officers, but again, he has no way to identify who they are.”

“And it wasn’t you suborning us so much as us volunteering,” Jill says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Which he would not expect or think of.”
“My guess is he’ll start with the people you worked with in section 31,” Jill says. “Smythe, in particular, since Cruz is kind of dead.”

“I would agree,” Khan says. “But I doubt Smythe is in any immediate danger. He knew very little about me. The one danger there is that Smythe met Andy, and was introduced to her as my nephew.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t know my full name and that’s nowhere in official records,” Andy says. “I mean, our relationship isn’t. I’m not worried about Smythe finding out who I actually am. I’m not all that worried about him finding out who you actually are, either.”

“If he does, he does,” Khan says. “I have more pressing concerns.”

“As do we all,” Bishop says. “Let us discuss them.”

They spend the night talking, laying out plans for the game with Marcus, for the demonstration they will send the Klingons. The next few weeks will be busy, Khan knows; between sparring, singing, tormenting Marcus and anything else that happens to come up they will be lucky to have enough downtime to rest.

Still, it feels satisfying to have things in motion, to have a goal they are all working toward, and from the way his siblings sound they feel that as well.

By the time they call it a night, Khan considers their plans well made. Cat and Konstantin take the bag of poisoned birds, with intent to deliver them to their specified targets. Alona and Matthew will be keeping tabs on Marcus, to see what he does and if he goes near or orders his men to go near the cryotubes. The rest of them…will see how things play out, while preparing for and readying for the battle against the Klingons Khan has started to consider inevitable.

“Jill-Bear,” Magpie says, after everyone has left but Khan, Jill, and Andy. “I have something for you.” She hands Jill a rolled piece of paper. “I designed your tattoo. Trust me.”

Jill gives Magpie a skeptical look. “You know I said I didn’t want any, I couldn’t find anything I wanted on my body. Even things you drew.”

“Trust me and look at it,” Magpie says patiently.

Jill unrolls the paper and her jaw drops. “I take it back,” she says. “I take it all back. This is…it’s perfect. Andy, come look.”

Andy comes around to peer over Jill’s shoulder. “It is perfect,” she says. “It’s Khan. As a dragon. It’s him.”

“It…” Jill stops. She looks at the sketch, at Khan, and back at the sketch. “Even the color of his eyes match, and the underside of the wings match his eyes, only better, and…fuck me, Magpie, this is brilliant and I love you and I want it on my skin yesterday.”

“I thought you’d say that so I made you an appointment to go tomorrow,” Magpie says. “Be there at nine in the morning, be prepared to stay all day and honey, it’s going to hurt. A lot. I know your pain tolerance and I’m telling you it’s going to hurt like nothing else.”

“Tomorrow? Do we have plans for tomorrow?” Jill asks.

“We do not,” Khan says. “Nothing that requires our attendance, at any rate.”
“Then we’ll be there,” Jill says. “And I’ll live with the pain. I want this.”

“It’ll go over your back, most of your back,” Magpie says, walking around behind Jill. “The tail coils down and its lowest point will be here, right at your tailbone, and then the wing will go up your neck and his head will be on your shoulder.”

“You are a genius,” Jill says. “And brilliant. And inspired. Where did you even get the idea?”

“Khan asked me to design something,” Magpie says. “His guidelines were very different, and I made two sketches that I sort of liked, and then I was like ‘No, I can do better’ and this resulted.”

“I don’t know what the other sketches were but this is better,” Jill says.

“They were okay,” Magpie says. “A lot smaller, though. I could have made this one smaller but this way it hides the scars. And yes, you can safely tattoo over them, I checked.”

“I figured you could but thank you for checking,” Jill says, giving Magpie a hug.

“I checked years ago, back when I thought I stood a chance of convincing you to get dragons for me and Andy,” Magpie says. “Does this one mean I stand a chance again?”

“Presuming we ever have time in the next whatever to find a reputable tattoo artist after all this is said and done, yes,” Jill says. “It’s not like…well, anyway. Nine tomorrow. Got it.”

“You know where it is, right?” Magpie asks.

“I’ve been with you,” Jill points out. “Yes, I know where it is.”

“Do you want me to meet you there?” Magpie asks. “For moral support or something?”

“If you want,” Jill says. “I mean, I thought Khan was going with me? Are you?” She looks at Khan.

“I intended to,” Khan says.

Magpie shrugs. “I’ll drop by at some point,” she says. “This’ll take a while, and I want to see it before he stamps it into your skin, just so I can make changes if he doesn’t get it right.”

“How difficult is that?” Khan asks.

“It’s not,” Magpie says. “Before the image gets stamped, it’s basically paint on skin. Easy to clean up and redo.”

“How does the technology work?” Khan asks.

“Oh, I used to know this,” Magpie says. “Okay. So. Tattooing used to be about injecting ink into the skin with a needle. Right? Close enough? Basically, about a century ago some scientists invented a way to do the entire injection at once. So you just do all the painting, the artwork, on the skin and then the machine works like the needle and puts it on your skin permanently. It hurts like fuck, so there are still old-school tattoo artists out there for wimps or people who can’t handle the machine, but for something like the dragon it’s the only way to get it done without repeat sessions with the artist.”

“Does it work on all humanoids?” Khan asks.

“It does but it works better the thinner your skin is,” Magpie says. “Humans have pretty thin skin,
comparatively. Vulcan skin is thicker and coarser on the surface—makes sense, protecting them from desert storms and all.”

“I don’t think Femarans can get it done,” Jill says. “Their skin’s too tough.”

“I thought you told me they didn’t really have skin, they have natural armor,” Magpie says.

“That’s what Jake tells me,” Jill says. “I’ve never met a Femaran. I hope to someday.”

“You will,” Khan says, resting a hand in the small of her back. If his idea works, the Femarans will host their entire group for a short time.

“Hopefully before we need them to give us sanctuary,” Jill says, leaning into him. “Because they could hate me and kick us off the planet.”

“Plan B is in progress,” Andy says, making herself another cup of tea.

“What is Plan B?” Khan asks.

“I have a strange thought of birth control but damn if I know why,” Magpie says.


“Okay, how the hell do you know that?” Magpie asks, blinking in surprise.

“I did a research project in the Academy about the history of contraception,” Jill says. “And how it factored into women’s rights and social evolution.”

“What’d you argue?” Magpie asks.

“Do you really care?” Jill asks.

“Humor me, I’m curious,” Andy says.

“Oh, lord,” Jill says, pushing her hands through her hair. “It’s a little hard to explain, but—so, did you know that the first female Starfleet officers weren’t allowed to deploy for longer than three months at a time?”

“What was the restriction on men’s deployments?” Andy asks.

“One year,” Jill says. “So you can see how this wouldn’t have worked. Six months after they instituted that rule, some doctor whose name I’ve forgotten gets approval for the first method of female hormonal birth control that can suppress ovulation and menstruation for up to two years, rather than the four months it had been. Three weeks after this new method of contraception starts being prescribed, Starfleet changes the rules and now women can deploy for a year.”

“Wait,” Magpie says. “Wait. They were limiting women’s deployments because oh my God, women might bleed?”

“Correlation does not prove causation,” Jill says, grinning. “But damn, it’s convenient, isn’t it?”

"If that's true it's incredibly stupid,” Magpie says. “I mean, Jesus. Even on the streets we found ways to deal with it.”

This really has nothing to do with what Andy mentioned but Khan finds the conversation interesting. Still, though. “Andy mentioned Plan B,” he says patiently. “And I sincerely doubt she
was referring to birth control.”

“I really wasn’t,” Andy says. “I was talking about the sort of plan we’re working on to find a way to and from Qo’noS if the Femarans refuse to help us.”

“Do we have anything in that plan?” Khan asks.

“Sort of but I’m not ready to talk about it yet,” Andy says. “Here’s hoping we won’t need it anyway. What’s the plan for talking to the Femarans?”

“We will go to them, once we are ready, and request their aid,” Khan says. “We are waiting until we are ready in case word slips out, but before we send the message to Qo’noS.”

“Sounds reasonable enough,” Andy says. “Do we think they’ll help us?”

“I believe so but nothing is guaranteed,” Khan says. “Jake will talk to Aktok before we go there, to try and gauge the situation.”

“I think it’ll come down to whether they see themselves as neutral or allies,” Jill says. “They belong to the Federation, yeah, but they may not want to risk openly allying with us for fear it might send the Klingons after them.”

“True,” Khan says. “But the Femarans consider themselves warriors in much the same way, and the risk in this situation I think relatively minimal. The Klingons will not be able to trace our transporters back to the Femaran planet, and the Femarans are not likely to tell anyone of our actions.”

“You bought weapons from them, and are using those weapons in pursuit of our goals,” Andy says. “Don’t they have a thing about privacy between weaponsmiths and clients?”

“They do,” Khan says. “They view it the same as between doctors and patients. How would you have us get to Qo’noS without them?”

“I’m not ready to talk about it yet,” Andy says, looking at his tea. “It’s…a bit complicated and I’m not ready for input or sharing it.”

Curious, Khan thinks, but drops the subject.

“We should get going anyway,” Jill says. “Magpie, do I shower tonight or tomorrow morning?”

“It doesn’t matter much,” Magpie says. “He’ll disinfect your skin first, obviously. Whatever you do through just don’t put on lotion or body oil in the morning. Tonight is okay but not tomorrow. Your skin needs to be clean and bare.”

“Okay,” Jill says. “Then I think I am going to take my Khan-dragon and go back to Jake’s flat and get some sleep.” She hugs Magpie tightly. “Thank you,” she whispers in Magpie’s ear, just loud enough for Khan to hear. “Thank you so much. It’s beautiful. I love it.”

“You’re welcome,” Magpie says, hugging back. “I’m going to work up designs for me and Andy although hell if I know when you’ll have time to get them.”

“We’ll figure that out later,” Jill says. She hugs Andy next, leaning into her for a moment. Whatever she murmurs to Andy, Khan can’t hear, but Andy smiles and kisses Jill’s forehead.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Andy says, letting go. “I want to see the dragon when it’s done.”
“Me, too,” Jill says. “Love you both.”

Khan kisses Andy’s forehead and earns himself a hug from him, and Magpie blows Khan a kiss before he and Jill leave.

They take the subway back to Jake’s, neither one of them saying much on the way. Khan punches in the alarm code and unlocks both locks on the door; Jill resets the alarm once they get inside and locks the door again.

“So,” she says, pulling off her boots. “What was your initial idea for a tattoo for me?”

“It’s on the second page Magpie gave you,” Khan says.

“I didn’t even realize there was a second page,” Jill says. She unrolls the papers and looks. “Oh, I like that,” she says. “But it’s nowhere near as brilliant as my dragon.”

“It is not,” Khan agrees. “Had I realized you wanted something as large and detailed as the dragon, I would have considered other options.”

“I didn’t realize I did until Magpie showed me the sketch,” Jill says. “I mean, it’s huge. I was always self-conscious about showing my scars, but this—I can’t wait for people to see this.”

She sets the papers down carefully, covering them with two books to keep the pages flat and unwrinkled. “Would you get one for me? Can you even get tattooed? Wait, I know you can, I’ve seen Konstantin’s, and Matthew’s.”

“I can,” Khan says. “Would you want me to get a tattoo for you?”

“Maybe,” Jill says. “Probably. If I’m getting one for you, I want you to have something similar, a way to remember me.”

“Why would I need to remember you when I am not leaving you?” Khan asks mildly.

“Because even if you don’t you’ll likely outlive me,” Jill says. “And I want you to have a physical reminder of me when you need one. Can I ask Magpie to draw something for you?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jill says. She walks over to Khan and stretches up on tiptoe, leaning up to kiss him. He settles his hands on her waist and lifts her, letting her wrap her legs around his waist and tangle her hands in his hair.

“Mine,” Khan murmurs against her lips, one hand tugging on the band in her ponytail. He can’t quite get it and tugs harder; the band snaps and Jill’s hair falls all over them both.

“Yes, and that was a waste of a perfectly good hair band,” Jill says, biting Khan’s lower lip. “But I’ll let you get away with it this time.”

“My thanks,” Khan says, kissing her again, hard enough she whimpers and squirms against him.

“I want a shower,” she says when he pulls back; she’s a bit breathless and her cheeks are flushed. “I want you to share said shower with me, and fuck me until I can’t walk.”

Jake’s shower is barely big enough for them, but they’ll make it work. “Yes,” Khan says softly, kissing her and beginning to carry her to the bathroom.
By the time they get out of the shower they’ve run out of hot water and Jill can’t stand without assistance. Khan carries her to the bedroom and lays her down on the bed, where she closes her eyes and doesn’t move for a solid five minutes. He’s almost starting to get concerned when Jill sighs, stretches, and opens her eyes.

“God, you’re amazing,” she says, sitting up slowly. “That…was exactly what I needed.” She stretches again and gets up carefully to go through her post-shower toilete. “I love you, you know,” she says, smoothing moisturizer into her skin.

“I know,” Khan says, watching her. He refrains from saying anything else.

Jill laughs softly and pulls on a tank top. “You don’t have to spend the whole day in the tattoo shop, you know. It’ll take several hours.”

“I know,” Khan says. “I will stay. I want to see this.”

“If you’re sure,” Jill says.

“If I am needed elsewhere, I will go,” Khan says. “But failing an emergency, I will stay with you.”


“What kind of story should I tell you?” Khan asks, slipping into bed next to her and drawing her in against his body.

“One about dragons,” Jill says, tucking her head against his shoulder.

Khan smiles and brushes a curl away from his mouth. He starts talking, his voice quiet and steady, and within five minutes Jill’s out cold. He continues the story for a little while, to ensure she sleeps, but when it’s obvious she’s sound asleep he turns off the bedside lamp and lowers his lips to her hair.

All dragons need a princess, he thinks, caught between amusement and a bittersweet ache in his chest. He can only hope no wandering prince shows up to ‘rescue’ his.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

This is going to take a while.

Chapter Notes

Still trying to get back some of my writing mojo, but we're making progress. I'm trying, anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the morning, Jill braids her hair into a coronet around her head and pulls on a halter top with very little back. “I doubt I’ll want anything on it when it’s done,” she says, finishing her coffee. “Although Magpie says it hurts like a bitch but then when that fades it’s fine.”

“You should eat something,” Khan says, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“Yeah, probably,” Jill says. “Wouldn’t want to interrupt the artist with my stomach growling. Do we have eggs? I could go for scrambled eggs.”

“Let me see,” Khan says. Jake’s fridge does have eggs, and turkey sausage, and his bread box has English muffins. He assembles a quick breakfast for both of them and they eat quietly.

Jill cleans up after the meal, washing her hands when she’s done. “Are you ready?” she asks, drying her hands on a dish towel.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Are you?”

“Maybe?” Jill laughs. “Yes. Let me just get the sketch and we’ll go.”

“Where is this place located?” Khan asks.

“It’s in Chelsea,” Jill says. “They’ve been there for almost a century now. I have the coordinates, so we can just beam there and skip the subway.”

Khan gets the transporter, along with his wallet, comm-link, and a knife up his sleeve. Jill inputs the coordinates and takes his hand, and seconds later they materialize on a fairly busy sidewalk. Fortunately, no one bats an eye at the two people appearing out of nowhere.

“It’s on the top floor,” Jill says, pointing at the building. “Let’s go do this.”

Since Khan hasn’t been to a tattoo parlor in centuries, and even then only briefly, he doesn’t quite know what to expect of the place. What he finds is a bright, immaculately clean open space with white walls and restored hardwood floors. Pictures of sketches and tattoos cover the walls, and the skylights allow in enough sunlight that no artificial lights are needed.
“I think…yes,” Jill says slowly, walking over to a section of wall. Khan follows her, curious. “This is Zach’s work,” she says, indicating a set of pictures. “This one is Magpie’s dragon for me, I think you’ve seen it, and the one next to it here is Andy’s dragon for me.”

Similar, but not the same, Khan notes. The same gold and red colors on both dragons, but Andy’s is a bit bigger and poses differently. “What is this one?” he asks, indicating a large dragon in shades of blue, green, and purple.

“That’s Andy’s five years clean dragon,” Jill says. “She was so proud of it.”

“As he should be,” Khan says. “Would you get dragons for them, too?”

“Of course,” Jill says. “The sketches Magpie did for me a while back were both dragons. The one for Magpie is silver with rainbow shimmers, kind of like the underside of the wings of your dragon, and Andy’s is blues and greens.”

"Where would you put them?" Khan asks.

“On my arms,” Jill says. “One would circle my arm above the elbow and go up to my shoulder. The other would start on the back of my hand and go up my forearm. I just couldn’t decide and I didn’t think Starfleet would let me get away with tats that obvious.”

Khan nods. “And you are certain you want to do this today,” he says, not quite asking.

“For the fifth time, yes,” Jill says, smiling. “I told you a while ago I’d get a tattoo for you, and this is the most beautiful one I’ve ever seen, and I want it permanently on my skin.”

“I think that’s my cue,” a tenor voice says; Khan turns and sees a short, slim man with bright green eyes and tattoos covering almost every centimeter of exposed skin except his face walking over to them. “I’m so thrilled you finally decided to get one. I’ve told you for years you had great skin for it.”

Jill laughs, giving the man a hug. “Regulations, love,” she says. “John, this is Zach. He’s a tattoo genius. Zach, this is John, the inspiration for my tattoo.”

“I can see why you got inspired,” Zach says, grinning. “Hi, John.” He extends a hand and Khan takes it, careful with the strength he uses. “Are you going to stay and watch?” Zach asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Unless that is a problem.”

“No, not at all, but this is going to take a while,” Zach says. “So Jill, darling, if you need to pee please do it now. The bathroom’s through that red door.”

“Be right back,” Jill says and darts off.

“How long do you expect this to take?” Khan asks, curious.

“Somewhere around eight hours,” Zach says. “Maybe less, if things go well, but definitely not less than seven. Do you have anywhere you need to be?”

“No, I don’t,” Khan says.

“Cool,” Zach says. “There’s a cooler of sodas and drinks in the little kitchenette near the bathroom, and a couple vending machines for food if you get hungry. Help yourself. We also have terrible coffee, and a kettle if you want tea. We’ll probably break for lunch at some point, though.”
“Thank you,” Khan says. “I am fine, but thank you.”

“If you change your mind, it’ll still be there,” Zach says. “You won’t disturb me if you and Jill talk, and I might join in the conversation once in a while, but mostly I’m going to be focused on painting. This is pretty intricate and I don’t want to fuck up.”

“I understand,” Khan says. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Nineteen years,” Zach says. “I started as an apprentice, worked my way up, bought the shop four years ago. We have four artists here now, and two of them will be in later today, but each of us has his own room so we won’t be disturbed.”

Jill returns then, bouncing on her toes. “Let’s do this,” she says cheerfully.

“This way,” Zach says. He shows them down the hall into his room, similar to the front room with its walls of artwork, but in the center of the room sits an adjustable table and next to it stands a large cart of art supplies. “I need you to strip down to pretty much nothing,” he says. “It’ll be easier for me and more comfortable for you in the end. I can cover parts of you with a blanket to keep you warm but I need access to your skin.”

“I figured that,” Jill says, already taking off her boots. Zach politely looks away as Jill quickly scrambles out of her clothes and lies down on the table, pillowing her head on her arms. “Is this how you want me?” she asks when Zach turns around.

“Almost,” Zach says. “Hang on.” He gets a soft blue blanket from a cupboard and drapes it over Jill’s legs, careful to set the edge just below her hips. “Okay, so, I need you to get absolutely comfortable because you’re not going to move for a while. Let me get you a pillow, and…” He settles a pillow under Jill’s forehead and adjusts her arms, letting her rest them on an armrest under the table. “How do you feel?” he asks.

“I’m good,” Jill says, a little muffled by the pillow. “A little cool, but I’ll be okay.”

“The table’s heated, so I’ll turn that up a bit,” Zach says, adjusting a couple controls. He also raises the table, fiddling with bits of it until he has Jill the way he wants her. “Okay. There we go. Don’t move. I’ll give you breaks now and then, but I really need you to stay as still as possible.”

“I will,” Jill promises.

Zach flips on a bright light directly over the table and moves to a computer at the foot of the table, typing in a few things. The outline of the dragon appears on Jill’s back, a meticulous sketch that has all details but color. “Jill, if you look down you’ll see a screen with the image,” Zach says. “Is this positioned where you want it?”

“I think…” Jill trails off. “Is it centered properly?”

“It is,” Zach says. “Do you want it to be bigger, smaller, moved one way or another?”

“I’m not sure,” Jill says. “John, what do you think?”

Khan studies the image on her back. “I think if you move it a centimeter higher, it should be fine,” he says.

“Like so?” Zach adjusts the image slightly.

“Yes,” Khan says, pleased with how it looks.
“Okay, that works for me,” Jill says.

“All right, then,” Zach says. He taps a few things on his screen. “Let me glove up and get started.”

Khan walks over to Jill, brushing a finger over the tight braids wrapped around her head. “It really will be beautiful,” he murmurs in Russian.

“Mm-hmm,” Jill murmurs back. “My dragon prince.”

“Should mine be reds and golds, too?” Khan asks. “Like Andy and Magpie have?”

“It’s your tattoo, so your decision,” Jill says. “Where would you put it, anyway?”

“Here,” Khan says, touching the inside of his left wrist. “Possibly circling my forearm. I honestly haven’t given it much thought.”

“Well, we’ll see what Magpie thinks,” Jill says. “She often has good ideas.”

“Where did the dragon theme originate?” Khan asks. “Why dragons?”

“Because they’re beautiful and powerful and no one fucks with them,” Jill says. “Dragons don’t need to be protected, dragons are the ones you need protection from.”

“Does any planet have any kind of dragons?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jill says. “Oddly, most planets have stories about dragons, or the local equivalent, but no one I know of has found a real dragon.”


Jill hisses in a breath when the cold wipe touches her skin and jumps a little, but stays still after that. Zach wipes down her entire back, from neck to buttocks, along with her upper arms and thighs. “Okay, so, here’s how this works,” he says, throwing out the used wipe. “First I’ll use the projected sketch on your back to sketch in the outline of the dragon. I’ll stamp that into your skin, because I need a baseline to work from. That won’t hurt much, it’ll be like a first degree burn. Once that’s set, I’ll paint in the dragon, and that’s the part that’ll take forever. We’ll break a couple times for your sake and mine. Once it’s fully painted in, I’ll let you see it and tell me if you want to change anything. Then we’ll stamp it into your skin and hopefully you’ll pass out from it because it’ll hurt a lot.”

“Yeah, so I’ve been told,” Jill says. “Magpie’s stopping by at some point too, isn’t she?”

“I’m going to call her a little bit before I think I’m done painting, so she can come here and critique it,” Zach says.

“Sounds good to me,” Jill says. “Is it okay with you if I fall asleep?”

“I would honestly prefer it if you did,” Zach says. “If you’re asleep, you’re less likely to move around and screw up my work. I won’t take it personally if you conk out.”

“Good,” Jill says. “Because I only had one cup of coffee so far today and I’m tired.”

“It’s fine,” Zach says, stripping off his gloves and putting on new ones. “Your boyfriend and I can talk. Is he going to get a tattoo for you?”

“Probably if Magpie can design one he likes and if we have time,” Jill says.
“Magpie can design one, I'm sure,” Zach says. “I haven’t seen her create a bad dragon yet.”

“No, neither have I,” Jill says.

“Do you design tattoos?” Khan asks Zach.

“I do,” Zach says, opening a gray box and taking out something that looks like an old-fashioned pencil. “My own stuff tends more toward geometric designs, or dot work or shading. But I’ll tattoo anyone’s design if the client wants it and I don’t think it’s innately hideous.”

“What happens if they want something that’s innately hideous?” Jill asks.

“I politely suggest they talk to a different artist,” Zach says. He takes out another pencil, studies both of them, and decides on one. “I won’t tattoo anyone who’s under the influence, I won’t tattoo anyone underage, and I won’t tattoo anything that could qualify as hate speech or be considered obscene. It’s legal, don’t get me wrong, but I have my own rules. I had someone come to me a few months ago who wanted a Nazi flag on his shoulder. I showed him the door.”


“Really,” Zach says. “On the other hand, I just did a family last week. Mom, Mommy, and twin daughters. All four of them got ladybugs in various locations for the grandmother, who had passed away a few months back. Apparently the grandmother loved ladybugs, so they all got one for her. Okay, please try not to move. The pencil’s not that easy to correct.”

“Not moving,” Jill murmurs, and she doesn’t. Khan watches Zach trace the outline of the dragon onto Jill’s back, focused and careful. “This tickles a little,” Jill says softly when Zach gets close to her ribs.

“If you think you’re going to laugh tell me,” Zach murmurs, changing pencils.

“I’m not,” Jill says. “I don’t think.”

“Well, if you change your mind,” Zach says. He shakes his pencil briefly before continuing.

“What is the strangest request you’ve ever had for a tattoo?” Jill asks curiously.

“I had someone want a tattooed penis,” Zach says. “Well, I’ve had multiple people want that. I won’t do it and neither will most other artists I know. Too risky and I’m not getting sued for making someone impotent.”

Jill laughs softly. “What about boobs? Will you tattoo those?”

“Breasts, yes, nipples no,” Zach says. “They’re too sensitive for the stamp.”

“What about the strangest artwork you’ve ever done?” Jill asks.

“I’ll show you the gallery later,” Zach says. “I have a whole album of weird requests.” He studies Jill’s back, nods, and steps back to switch off the projection and strip off his gloves. “John, what do you think? Jill, if you look down at the screen below you you can see it.”

Honestly, it’s beautiful even as an outline, and Khan says as much. “Yeah,” Jill agrees. “It’s gorgeous. ‘Is the outline dark enough for you to see, though?’

“It’ll be darker when it’s stamped,” Zach says. “Make absolutely certain you don’t want me to change anything else.”
“No, I don’t,” Jill says. “John?”

“No,” he says. “It looks perfect.”

“Awesome,” Zach says. “In that case. John, please come back here, and Jill, please don’t move.”

Khan moves back to the far end of the room with Zach, who strips off his gloves and punches in some commands to his workstation. A large device lowers from the ceiling, stopping about a third of a meter above Jill’s skin. “On three,” Zach says. “One. Two. Three.”

A very bright light flashes twice and Jill hisses in a breath, but doesn’t move. “You okay?” Zach asks.

“Yeah,” Jill says. “Stings, but yeah, I’m okay.”

“Yeah, it’ll do that,” Zach says. He taps a few things and the machine rises silently back to the ceiling. “Give yourself a minute to settle, stretch, go pee if you need to or get a drink. I’m going to get a drink, do you or John want anything?”

“I’ll stretch at least,” Jill says, hopping up and doing just that.

“I would appreciate a glass of water,” Khan says.

“Flavored, plain, fizzy?” Zach asks.

“Plain,” Khan says. “Not fizzy.”

“Be right back,” Zach says, ducking out of the room.

Jill rolls her head around and rotates her shoulders. “I really probably am going to fall asleep,” she admits, walking over to Khan and wrapping her arms around his waist. “I’m tired. I had weird dreams last night. Not nightmares, but weird.”

“You can sleep here,” Khan says, brushing his knuckles over her cheek. “I can find ways to occupy my time.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Jill says. She laughs and kisses his chest.

When Zach returns, Khan finally elects to take a seat, straddling one of the visitor chairs in the room. Jill settles onto the table, and about twenty minutes after Zach picks up his paintbrush Khan hears her snuffle, sound asleep.

“I’ve got a bunch of ebooks,” Zach says absently. “I don’t have a screen in here because it’s distracting, but I have a whole virtual bookcase and a couple readers if you want.”

“I am fine, thank you,” Khan says. “Perhaps later.”

“It’s over there,” Zach says, pointing with his paintbrush. “Or you can just watch me do this, if it interests you.”

It does, actually, and Khan doesn’t mind spending time just quietly observing. Zach is a meticulous artist, fastidious about details and utterly focused on his work. Centimeter by centimeter, the dragon takes on color and shape, its black scales gleaming with hints of iridescence and the underside of its wings opalescent. Khan knows it’s all paint and yet he would swear some of it is more than that.
Zach stops every now and then to get a drink, hit the bathroom, etc. He wolfs down a sandwich at one point, and offers Khan one but Khan isn’t particularly hungry. Jill doesn’t wake up.

“Okay,” Zach says after about seven hours. “Time to call the Magpie so she can come here and see it before it’s done. Actually, can you do it? If I do I have to scrub up again and get new gloves and everything.”

“I can,” Khan says. Magpie answers quickly and says she’ll be there in fifteen minutes when Khan lets her know the situation.

“Perfect,” Zach says absently, studying Jill’s back. “Hey, sleepyhead, time to wake up.” He slaps Jill’s hip lightly.


“It’s about five,” Zach says. “I’m pretty much done, waiting for Magpie to get here to make any last minute final adjustments.”

“Oh, man,” Jill says, yawning again. “I slept through everything?”

“You did, it was great,” Zach says. “You didn’t move or anything. Easiest session I could have asked for with art this involved.”


“I am and I am not,” Khan says. “Zach is remarkably talented. I have enjoyed watching him work.”

“Thank you,” Zach says, a bit sheepishly. “I’m going to go get some fizzy water. Back in a minute.”

“So how does it look?” Jill asks Khan.

“It is incredible,” Khan says honestly. “If I did not know otherwise, I would think it reflects light, or that it could move. If I touched it, I would expect to feel scales.”

"There was a fad of 3-D tattoos a few decades ago, but the technology was kind of hit or miss,” Jill says. “Sometimes it worked great, sometimes it went very seriously wrong. The practice got outlawed after someone had to have his arm amputated from a 3-D tat gone south.”

“Why was it so unreliable?” Khan asks.

“It used nanotech to build the tattoo, and even today we’re not that fantastic about nanotech,” Jill says. “It didn’t react well to some people’s physiology.”

“That’s an understatement,” Zach says, returning with a glass of something bright pink and carbonated. “I never did it, because I didn’t trust the tech. A couple people I know did try it, and lost their shop when one went wrong and the client sued.”

“Ouch,” Jill says. “That doesn’t seem fair. It wasn’t their fault the tech was faulty.”

“I know that and you know that, but their insurance policy didn’t agree and neither did the court,” Zach says. “They shouldn’t have lost in court, because the customer had to sign a release indicating she knew the tech was in early adopter phase and thus there could be other risks, but the judge was
an asshole. They weren’t found guilty of anything but the settlement bankrupted them.”

“I’m here, I’m here,” Magpie says, hurrying into the room. “Sorry, I—oh, my God, Zach, you’re a genius.” She runs over to the table, studying Jill’s back, hands clasped tightly behind her back as if to prevent her from touching it. “Oh, wow. It’s even better than I thought it would be.”

Zach grins and takes a sip of his drink. “I haven’t sealed it or stamped it yet,” he says. “So if you want to make any changes, now would be the time.”

Magpie frowns, studying the dragon. She walks around the table, then again, occasionally framing a piece of it with her hands. “I…one thing,” she says finally, motioning for Zach to come stand by her. “The scales on the ridge of his tail, I think the outline could be a bit sharper. These two, specifically.”

“Hm,” Zach says. “Let me glove up and see what I can do.” He scrubs his hands—Khan’s lost count of how many times he’s done that—and pulls on a new pair of gloves before picking up his brush and palette and moving around the table. “You think a bit more of the black?” he asks.

“Yeah, just around the edge,” Magpie says. “And then a really small bit of the silver, just to reflect.” She watches Zach work, carefully editing the dragon’s scales, and nods. “Perfect. It’s perfect, Zach. I knew you could do it.”

“You give me the best designs,” Zach says, smiling. He sets down his tools and moves to a cabinet, pulling out a yellow spray bottle. “So the next bit is the not-fun bit,” he says. “First we seal the tattoo, just to prevent the paint from running or melting or whatever. That’s not the problem. Then I dope you up on sedatives and painkillers and stamp it into your back. A design this intricate and big and dark, I’m going to need to do it three times, and believe me, you’re not going to want to do the second and third.”

“No, but I don’t have a choice,” Jill says. “So let’s do this.”

“Magpie, John, if you could move over there,” Zach says, putting on a face mask. “The sealant stings if you breathe it in. Jill, you’ll be fine, the table has a filter in the face cradle.”

“Cool,” Jill says.

Zach sprays the sealant over Jill’s back, quickly and evenly; Khan can smell it in the air, bitter and acrid. Magpie doesn’t notice or comment, though, and neither does Jill, so Khan says nothing.

“Okay, now we let that sit for five minutes while I dope you up,” Zach says, pulling off the face mask and gloves. “How’s your sedative tolerance?”

“Higher than you normally deal with,” Jill says. “The sealant is really cold.”

“Yeah, it is,” Zach says. “Sorry, I should have warned you.”

“It’s okay,” Jill says. “You’re just lucky I didn’t jump.”

“Eh, it wouldn’t have done anything really,” Zach says. “But yeah, I should have warned you. I always forget.” He loads two hyposprays and brings them over to the table. “Sedative in one, paralytic in the other,” he says, showing her the injectors. “The sedative won’t put you under, I’m not allowed to dispense anything that would cause unconsciousness. But they’ll make you feel pretty close. The paralytic is a painkiller and paralytic, it’ll take the edge off the stamp but more importantly for my purposes it’ll keep you still. If you move when the machine works, you’ll fuck up the whole thing. I can also restrain you, if you’re comfortable with that.”
“Do you offer to tie up all your customers?” Jill asks, laughing.

“Only the ones I like,” Zach says with a grin.

“Magpie, what do you think?” Jill asks. “Do you think I should opt for the non-medical restraints?”

“I do,” Magpie says. “Because we don’t know how well the paralytic will work on you.”

“Good point,” Jill says. “Okay, Zach, tie me up.”

“Let me give you these first,” Zach says. He injects Jill with the hypos and tosses the injectors in a recycle bin before reaching under the table for padded restraints. They look comfortable enough, Khan presumes, and Jill doesn’t say anything or complain when Zach ties her to the table. Then again, between the two drugs she’s likely not in any shape to voice an opinion.

“We need to move over here,” Magpie says, motioning Khan to come stand by the control panel in the wall. “And—here.” She leans over into a bin and pulls out two pair of dark glasses. “We’ll need these.”

“Yes,” Zach says, coming over to them. He takes his own pair and sticks them on his head, tapping commands into the control panel. “Okay, Jill, machine coming down now,” he says, watching the device lower from the ceiling. When it stops, Zach makes a slight adjustment and nods. “Okay. First stamp in three. Two. One.”

Khan put on his dark glasses while Zach counted, but even through the tinted lenses he has to close his eyes against the searing light. It lasts an agonizingly long three seconds, then shuts off, the room feeling pitch-black with its absence. Jill makes a pained sound, half a whimper. “You okay, sweetie?” Magpie asks. “Grunt once for ‘I’m in pain but I’m okay’. Twice if you’re just not okay.”


This time Khan hears Jill cry out in pain, and when the light blinks out she whimpers a little. “I know,” Magpie says. “I know, honey, but it’s just one more, okay? Do you need a break?”

“No,” Jill says thickly. “Do it.”

“Three. Two. One.” Khan closes his eyes against the light and sets his jaw against Jill’s scream. They end together, the room echoing with sudden quiet and lack of light.

“You were awesome,” Zach says, hurrying over to Jill. “Let me undo these and then I’ll put some numbing spray on your back, it’ll help. I promise.”

“Okay,” Jill mumbles; Khan hears the pain in her voice but doesn’t know if he can go to her yet. He waits, watching Zach unfasten all the restraints and put them aside before getting a blue spray bottle. The mist he sprays on Jill’s back has a green tinge, and she chokes on a groan when it hits her skin.

“Oh, fuck, that’s better,” she manages after a moment, her voice still heavy and slurred from the drugs. “What is in that? Can I get a bottle?”

“Yeah, it’s just Vulcan aloe mist,” Zach says. He glances up at Khan. “Vulcans live on a desert planet. Lots of burns, wind and sun and fire and stuff. They have a plant we call Vulcan aloe because it’s basically the equivalent, only stronger. It’s an amazing topical anesthetic.”
“I’ve used it before but it didn’t feel this awesome then,” Jill says, her voice starting to clear.

“If you weren’t using it on a burn, it probably wouldn’t have,” Zach says. “It’s a good general topical, but it’s heaven against burns. And since I essentially just burned a picture into your skin…”

“This is lovely,” Jill says, sighing.

“I’ll send you home with a big bottle,” Zach promises. “Have John spray it onto the tat every so often—basically, if it starts hurting or itching, spray it. It probably won’t do much of either after the first twelve hours, but it doesn’t hurt anything to spray the aloe mist on every six to eight hours for the first few days anyway. Vulcan aloe is antibacterial anyway, so it’ll help keep everything clean. I can give you a separate bottle of actual antiseptic if you want it but the odds of you actually needing it are next to nothing.”

“I’m sure Magpie has it,” Jill says.

“I do, and you probably have some of your own in your medkit,” Magpie says. “It’s just the basic stuff.”

“I’m sure if I need it we will have it,” Jill says. “Can I sit up yet? Can I see it yet?”

“Yes and yes,” Zach says, stepping back. “Let me get the mirrors.”

Jill stands up carefully and immediately dives for her panties and her jeans. “Christ it’s cold in here,” she says, scrambling into them. “I think I could dial a phone without my hands.”

Magpie giggles. “Your nipples are a bit…perky.”

“Stop staring at my tits, woman,” Jill says, swatting Magpie’s arm. “I mean, okay, they’re right there but still.”

“Okay,” Zach says, pointedly not commenting on the conversation. “Stand here, look there, tell me what you think but if you hate it you’re fucked.”

“I don’t hate it,” Jill says after a moment of stunned silence. “I…no. Hate is not on the list.”

“What is on the list?” Zach asks carefully.

“Amazement,” Jill says. “Just…Christ, Zach, you put a dragon on my back and now you can’t really see my scars because there’s a giant dragon covering them and he looks like he’s going to either fly away or eat you, I’m not sure which. But he’s beautiful and perfect and I feel like I could touch his scales if I tried hard enough. I’m half afraid he’s going to come out of my back and come to life.”

“We haven’t yet mastered that technology,” Zach says, grinning. “So you like?”

“I love it,” Jill says. “Love isn’t even strong enough. I adore it. I am in love with it. It’s…it’s perfect. It’s just perfect.” She studies the dragon again, grinning, before she jumps on Zach in a hug.

“Oh,” Zach says, sounding a little strangled. “Could you, um, put a shirt on?”

“You really don’t like boobs, do you?” Jill asks, but kisses his cheek and ducks away to find her shirt.

“For tattooing, they’re fine. For having them randomly smashed against my chest, no, sorry,” Zach
"Ace or queer?" Jill asks, tying her shirt.

"Mostly ace," Zach says. "I see so many body parts every day I’m kind of over them."

"But orgasms are amazing," Magpie says.

"Yes, and I didn’t say I was anti-orgasm," Zach says. "I’m just...anti-non-professional nudity. I feel like if I could have sex with someone who never took off his clothes I’d be sold. Otherwise I’d just be staring at him and thinking about the art I could make on his skin."

"Zach, you are very strange," Jill says. "There. My tits are hidden, can I hug you now?"

"Yes," Zach says and Jill dives on him again.

"How much do I owe you for this?" she asks, finally pulling back.

"You don’t," Zach says. "I made Magpie a deal a long time ago, if she ever came up with a design you wanted badly enough to have me do it, I’d do it for free. Because we were kind of convinced it’d never happen."

"I have to pay you something," Jill says. "This was hours and hours of painstaking work."

"It’s a walking advertisement for me," Zach says. "I mean, I signed it and everything."

"Is that common practice?" Khan asks.

"Master artists have the right and practice to sign works they consider one of a kind," Zach says. "It’s not done commonly, because we don’t want to fuck up the artwork, but if we do something we think is one of our best and we won’t do it again, we can sign it. You can—see, by his tail, the silver streak? It’s subtle, but it’s there."

"I see a Z," Khan says, looking at it. "And a number?"

"Z-ten," Zach says. "I was the tenth master artist certified."

"That year?" Jill asks.

"No, ever," Zach says. "Master artists—so, did Magpie never explain this to you?"

"No," Jill says. "How does this work?"

"Tattoo artists start as apprentices," Zach says. "They learn by watching, and a little doing. Then they make it up to journeymen, which is where the majority of artists are, somewhere in that spectrum. Artists who really want to do more than that study more, take classes, and end up as senior artists, and that’s a big deal in and of itself, and then when a senior artist decides to become more than that there’s a whole review of his body of work and he has to create something new and unique and incredibly special that can’t be replicated, and if the jury of artists agree he gets certified as a master. The whole process got put into place about sixty years ago, and there are currently fifteen certified master artists on Earth. I was the tenth, they’re up to I think eighteen now. Most people don’t do it, because it’s a lot of work and effort and frankly, most customers don’t care if you’re a master or a senior or even a journeyman. I cared."

"What was your masterwork?" Khan asks.
“It was something I dreamed, a long time ago, and it stayed with me,” Zach says. “When I thought about applying for mastery, it was the only thing I could think of doing, because wherever it came from, it was mine and it’s been mine for years.”

“But what was it?” Jill asks.

Zach moves over to one of the walls. “This was the concept drawing for it,” he says, pointing at a large sketch. “It changed some between here and the actual work but the main points are the same.”

Khan moves over to look at it and feels a shock of recognition. The roofless temple—he doesn’t know it, its columns and stones and half-hidden carvings worn by time. It doesn’t look familiar to him. And yet he would swear he’s seen it before, that the carvings mean something if he could only make them out.

“When did you dream this?” Jill asks.

“Oh, hell, years ago, like when I first started as an apprentice,” Zach says. “It doesn’t look as impressive as some other stuff but the shading I built into it, and the little hidden stuff, is a lot harder than it looks. Not all of it came through in the concept sketch, though.”

“I see it,” Khan murmurs, almost to himself. “What language are the carvings?”

“I don’t know,” Zach says. “I really don’t. I talked to a guy who studies linguistics, back when I was designing it, and he said it baffled him. He showed it to one of his professors and they came up blank. The closest anyone got was that it has some similarities with cuneiform, and when I wrote out a larger sample for them they said some of it had a weird resemblance to Hindi, of all things, which I don’t speak and don’t know a damn thing about. There ended up being a whole argument over it and someone argued it was similar to Greek instead of Hindi, but since I didn’t know what any of it said they couldn’t translate to figure it out.”

“Could you write it out for me?” Khan asks. “Do you remember it?”

“I doubt I’ll ever forget it,” Zach says. “I dreamed of this place for years.” He gets a sketchpad and pen and studies the sketch for a moment before writing down a line of script that Khan knows to his bones and yet can’t place. “Whatever this is, I kept seeing it in my dreams,” he says, handing Khan the pad. “The whole line, like it means something.”

“It does,” Khan says softly, studying it. Not Hindi but close—and not Greek, but Russian, for Cat and Konstantin, styled right to left because Anandi had the best handwriting and was left-handed and always wrote backwards. Not a single language, no; an amalgamation of them, a pidgin speak they’d all been told to forget centuries ago.

“What does it mean?” Jill asks. “Where do you know it from?”

“This line,” Khan says, the memories coming back more strongly, more vividly. “It’s—a declaration of brotherhood, of family. A statement of unity against those who would divide us.”

“How does it mean?” Jill asks. “Where do you know it from?”

“Us,” Zach says. “What the hell is this and where do you know it from?”

Khan takes a moment to breathe. “My family,” he says, looking at the script. “We created our own language, ages ago, because we felt that anything external would only serve to divide us, and we were determined to be one, to be a unified whole against anyone who sought to tear us apart. We were made to abandon it, to forget it, but…here it is. This was our creed, our belief. We were—we are—one unit, and always will be.”
“Do you know the temple?” Magpie asks softly.

“I don’t, but…” Khan looks at it again. “What changed from the concept sketch to the final work?”

“More of the carvings, and there was a storm building,” Zach says. “The storm showed up in my dreams before I started the sketches for the actual painting, and I thought it was important. But—I mean, where were you? When was this?”

“Three hundred years ago, in India,” Khan says.

“I’ve never been to India,” Zach says. “And I don’t understand how I dreamed about a language you and your family made up centuries before I was born. Are you absolutely certain?”

Khan takes the pen and writes three marks on the paper. “Do these look familiar?” he asks, showing them to Zach.

“Yes,” Zach says numbly. “Especially the second and third, I always saw them together. What are they?”

“My name,” Khan says, touching the first mark. “My sister Cat, and my brother Konstantin. They were inseparable from the time Cat first opened her eyes. We based her name-sign off the Russian word for cat, but drew it similar to the Hindi transliteration of that word. Konstantin, of course, was the wolf.”

“And you?” Magpie asks.

Khan barely smiles. “The lion.”

“Leader of the pack, at—how old?” Jill murmurs, taking his hand.

“Always,” Khan murmurs back in Russian.

“Zach, what’s your family background?” Jill asks. “We have found some…odd connections.”

“Oh, shit, I don’t know,” Zach says. “Seriously, I don’t, most of my ancestry and the records got wiped out in the hundred years’ war. I grew up in Boston, and I think if you trace it back you get to somewhere in Western Europe, but fuck if I know where. I can go back to my great-grandparents, and they were from Canada. I’m generally American with a generic Western Europe history but I really have no idea where in Europe, or how far back you have to go. There’s no one for me to ask, either.”

“Russia or India,” Khan says. “Those would be the places of connection.”

“Yeah, that’s a no on both,” Zach says. “Maybe Russia if you go back far enough but I’m not sure.”

“Maybe it’s just one of those things,” Jill says. “Was the temple as important as the carvings?”

“No,” Zach says. “No, the temple was very much just the framework for those, like it was important I get them right but also make them semi-hidden, so I designed a ruined temple around them because it made sense.”

“What other carvings were there?” Khan asks.

“That was most of it, the line I wrote,” Zach says. “There were thirteen smaller symbols that I scattered around the temple. Three of them were the ones you showed me.”
Khan doesn’t let himself think before he starts writing the others. Bishop, Katsuro, Anandi, Alona, Maeve, Matthew—that’s nine. But he doesn’t know who the remaining four might be.

“Yeah, that’s them,” Zach says numbly when Khan finishes.

“What were the other four?” Khan asks.

Zach blows out a breath and takes the pen back. He writes four symbols and hands the pad back to Khan.

“I don’t know these,” Khan says. He remembers the ones for his family now, all of them, and these four aren’t part of that set.

“Translate them, what do they mean?” Jill asks.

Khan studies the pad. “Soldier,” he says, touching one. “Artist. This one—“ He studies it more carefully, trying to remember all the elements they added into their pidgin-speak. “Counselor,” he says slowly. “I think—it might be Seer, I’m not sure. And…” He stops, looking at the last one.

“It’s us,” Jill says when he says nothing. “Soldier is Jake. Artist is Magpie. Counselor or Seer, either way it’s Andy, but what am I?”

“The queen,” Khan says.

“Of course you are,” Magpie says. “What else would she be?”

“There’s more to it, though, isn’t there,” Jill says, studying Khan’s face.

“The sign is comprised of two words,” Khan says, looking at it. “The Russian word is queen, and the Hindi part is lioness.”

“That also makes perfect sense,” Magpie says.

Jill licks her lips. “Maybe it does,” she says, not looking away from Khan. “It’s interesting, your memories of this aren’t as clear. Why?”

“We were young when we started the pidgin language,” Khan says, looking away from her. “I was perhaps three. Cat was still in diapers, and Alona still in the nursery. We adapted it, and grew with it, and it grew with us, but when I was six or so, the…people around us decided this was unacceptable, and forced us to stop the practice. Memories from that long ago are not photographic, not the way my memories as an adult are.”

“Was there ever anything about those thirteen symbols that you saw in your dreams or in the picture?” Magpie asks Zach.

Zach sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t remember. I saw—I saw that one line, in my dreams, over and over, and so in the artwork I wrote it into the base of the stones and the tops and anywhere else I could fit it in, but sometimes parts of it were missing or hidden. I saw the thirteen symbols a lot and I included them all in the work, but if you’re asking if I ever saw like some overall picture with the quote and the symbols I didn’t.”

“I don’t think it matters,” Jill says. “I just wish we could trace back the connection. Anyone in your family have weird dreams or visions or anything?”

“No idea,” Zach says. “We never really talked much and when I took off for New York I kind of
left that world behind. I never fit in it.”

“Were you—were you a street brat?” Jill asks.

Zach shakes his head. “By the time I went to New York I’d done a year of apprenticeship, so I was able to find a place here to let me continue,” he says. “It was a bit tight for a few years, but I was never on the streets.”

“Okay, so here’s a question,” Magpie says. “Who did you apprentice with, or learn from? Who did you buy the shop from?”

“They’re all the same person,” Zach says. “Her name was Rubeena. She died three years ago. She was ill when I bought the shop, it’s why I did it—I didn’t want to own the shop but she wanted it to continue and she was dying, and so we worked out a deal because she didn’t trust anyone else to own it.”

“Rubeena is an Indian name,” Khan says quietly.

“She was, yeah,” Zach says. “She’d moved to New York when she was fifteen rather than get married, and fell into tattooing. Her specialty was—it wasn’t henna, because it was permanent, but she did those types of designs. She had the most amazing work on her hands and forearms.”

“Did you do any of it?” Magpie asks.

“I didn’t,” Zach says. “I did some work on her shoulders, though, this really delicate design across the top of her shoulders and a little down her arms. That was actually the work that passed me to senior artist.”

Jill shivers a little and moves closer to Khan; he puts a wing around her, holding her close to share his warmth. “I could really use a glass of wine and a big meal,” she says. “Could we maybe go get those and then continue this discussion? If there’s anything to discuss?”

“I have to clean up and turn over the room,” Zach says. “I’ll see if I can look up Rubeena’s full name, or anything about her family, but she rejected that whole thing pretty emphatically. She never used her surname because she said she wasn’t part of that family. But I don’t think she legally changed it so it’s probably on the documents.”

“Call me or something, if you find anything,” Magpie says. She gives Zach a tight hug and murmurs something in his ear. Zach laughs and murmurs something back.

“You are a genius and I love you for it,” Jill says when Magpie lets go. “Thank you, Zach, so much.” She hugs him again, kissing both his cheeks.

“Just take care of it,” Zach says.

Khan studies Zach for a moment. “Thank you,” he says, extending a hand.

“It’s what I do,” Zach says. “And, uh, if you ever want to tell me more about the language you made up that I dreamed, I’d be all into that.”

“If we have time,” Khan says, releasing Zach’s hand.

Jill shivers again. “Change of plans, let’s go somewhere I can put on more clothes, I’m cold.”

“Yes, darling, let’s go,” Magpie says.
They get a bottle of the aloe mist and head out into the late afternoon sun, Jill turning her face up to it as soon as they get out of shade. “So that was a wild ride,” she says, turning a cartwheel. “I have no idea what the connection is there.”

“Neither do I,” Khan says quietly.

Something to discuss with the others, when they get a chance.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think the connection is?
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Maybe karma will go easy on us for once.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay, guys. Health and real life have conspired against me, and I'm working on it but haven't had much time to write lately. I promise I am working on this every chance I get, and I've got a couple bits that will get added in later on, but it's just been slow going.

When they get back to Magpie’s nest—the default meeting place these days—Khan takes a piece of heavy sketch paper, a fine-tipped brush, and a pot of black ink, and carefully draws what Zach showed them in the shop. The family creed on the top of the page, bold and defiant, and under it… he considers for a moment, then begins drawing thirteen symbols in a circle. Himself at what would be twelve o’clock, with Cat at eleven and Jill at one, and the others filled in around. He can’t put a finger on what impulse made him do this, but it feels right.

When he finishes the last mark, he studies the page, wondering what message it holds that it’s not telling him. He doesn’t know, but for a moment he thinks he can smell jasmine, and a brush of something too brief to be real passes over his cheek.

“You look angry,” Andy says quietly, looking at him. “Or no, not angry. Hurt. Magpie told me about this, the language. Where am I, and what does my name mean?”

“Here,” Khan says, showing him the symbol, at six o’clock. “It either means Seer or Counselor, and I am honestly not sure which.”

“Well, that’s interesting,” Andy says, moving closer. “Why am I at six?”

“Because you face me,” Khan says, slipping into Mandarin. “And the lion should always have the person who sees him most clearly opposite him.”

“Do I do that?” Andy asks softly.

“You do,” Khan says. “My siblings, they have known me from their births, and their knowledge of me is tempered by the weight of years and memories. You have known me a very short time, but you see me, Andy, in ways no one has since Rani. You see me and you don’t hesitate to tell me the truth, even when I do not want to hear it.”

“Then tell me the truth, uncle,” Andy says, moving a bit closer. “Tell me why you look hurt.”

“This makes no sense,” Khan says, studying the page. “If Rani is the connection—but there is no biological tie to Zach, none we can find, and even there were, the language was decades before I
knew her. I never taught it to her, not more than the basic symbols for my name and my siblings’ names. And I…” He stops. “I am tired of this, Andy,” he says after a moment, quietly and still in Mandarin. “I am tired of discovering Rani’s ‘work’, or what we presume to be Rani’s work, every time I turn around. How many more connections and coincidences are there? What has she been doing for three hundred years? Why is she doing all this in the first place? I grew used to not having her ages ago, and this…every time I turn around I smell jasmine, and I see her hair, and it aches. This is damnably indirect and vague and I want an actual answer, not more mystery.”

“Sometimes things have to happen the way they happen,” Andy says, an eerie resonance in her voice. Khan looks at her more closely and isn’t entirely certain what he sees in her face. “Sometimes there are no answers, just clues and signposts on a very dark road, and maybe all she did, is doing, is to light those for you. Maybe she doesn’t know why, or can’t say, or can’t communicate directly. Maybe this is all she can do.”

“Do you believe that?” Khan asks, not entirely certain who he’s talking to.

“It’s not me who needs to believe it,” Andy says. “What hurts more, uncle? That she’s helping you or that she won’t tell you why?”

“That is not necessarily an either-or proposition,” Khan says. “What dreams have you had lately?”

“Clocks,” Andy says. “I’ve been in a Salvador Dali painting. Clocks everywhere with no hands, or with spinning hands, or running backwards, or something. No two clocks ever tell me the same time and I feel like the obvious interpretation is that we’re running out of time, but I don’t think that’s right.”

“What do you think it is?” Khan asks.

“I can’t put my finger on it yet,” Andy says. “I need to meditate on it a bit more. I get—I don’t know how to describe it but when I figure out an interpretation of my dreams or something that might actually be accurate, but—I get a feeling, like puzzle pieces locking together in my stomach. Right now they’re not locked.”

“What has given you this feeling so far?” Khan asks.

Andy shakes his head. “It’s hard to explain and I don’t think I have the right words. Just that I’m dreaming about clocks but the answer isn’t that we’re running out of time.”

Jill comes over to them, carrying two wineglasses. “I have a really, really lovely Andorian wine here,” she says, handing one to Khan. “This is similar to what we drank the second time we went to dinner. It’s not quite wine but it’s not hard liquor, either. What it is is delicious.”

“I remember,” Khan says, taking a sip and smiling at the taste. “That is quite good. Where did it come from?”

“Jake brought over a few bottles,” Jill says. “Andy, there’s plenty if you want a glass.”

“Not right now, love, but thank you,” Andy says. “Do I get to see the masterpiece though?”

“Oh, Jill, it’s incredible,” Andy says softly, moving closer to her. She traces the line of the dragon’s back, from its head to the tail; Jill shivers, and Andy immediately flattens her palm on Jill’s back. “Sorry.”
“It’s okay, it’s just still a bit sensitive,” Jill says, pulling her shirt back on. “But it’s so, so amazing. Now I just have to find time to get the dragons for you and Magpie on my arms.”

“Is there a rule for how long you have to wait between tattoos?” Khan asks.

“Six weeks,” Jill says. “It can be as little as two weeks depending on the size and location, but for something like this dragon I need to wait six weeks. But I can get both tattoos done in one session. But who the hell knows where we’ll be in six weeks, so…”

“We might still be on Earth,” Andy says. “I’m not…I was telling Khan that I don’t think we’re running out of time yet. I think time is on our side for now.”

“What gives you that idea?” Jill asks.

Andy explains the clock dreams. “Huh,” Jill says, taking a sip of her drink. “I guess that’s…well, I’m not sure what that is actually.”

“Yes, I don’t know either,” Andy admits. “But it’s not as disturbing as fighting skeletons with purple lights in their eye sockets, or a city falling apart while you run through it.”

“Not many things are,” Jill says.

“What have you dreamed lately?” Andy asks.

Jill shakes her head. “I haven’t. At least, not that I remember. I’ve had a few nights waking up panicked, but I don’t remember why.”

She moves to fit herself against Khan’s side, and he puts a wing and an arm around her, holding her close. “Cat says everyone should be here and dinner will be ready in about fifteen,” she says. “I don’t know what she’s making but it smells amazing.”

“That is often the case,” Khan says. “Did you tell her about the language?”

“All I told her—and everyone else—was that we’d discovered a new connection, a very unexpected one, and the rest would wait for the meal. She almost threw a knife at me.” Jill seems pleased by this. “But I didn’t want anyone else finding out before anyone else except Andy, and I knew you’d tell him.”

“Am I that predictable?” Khan asks.

“Never,” Jill says. “I made an educated guess based on my knowledge of both of you.”

“In some things, maybe,” Jill admits. “Where family is concerned, Khan, you’re predictable only in that you love them and you’ll be honest with them. And given Andy’s name-sign, and everything, I figured you’d want to talk to her when we got back.”

“I did,” Khan admits. “Is Jake here? I had questions for him about some of the information from Viola Cathcart.”

“When did you review that?” Jill asks. “I don’t remember going through it all with you in detail.”

“You slept for eight hours today and I can multitask,” Khan says. “I read through all the files Jake provided me. Most of it was not really relevant or useful to our situation, but there were some details about Klingon society I wanted to ask him about.”
“Hi, I’m here, what’s up?” Jake asks, coming over to them. “I avoided the knife fight in the kitchen and came this way.”

“There is a knife fight in the kitchen?” Andy asks.

“Not an actual fight but Cat was juggling and I decided to stay away lest she change her mind about juggling in favor of testing my reflexes,” Jake says.

“Yeah, that’s a wise decision,” Jill says. “Knowing her, she probably would have.”

Khan considers it and nods. “Likely.”

“No offense or anything but your sister’s a bit psychotic,” Jake says cheerfully.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Surely you knew we all are.”


Khan smiles at the deliberate misphrasing. “The files you sent me,” he says. “How much do you know about the Valkor entries?”

Jake looks up, thinking. “That was the section on Klingon politics, wasn’t it? Wait, no, there was more than that but Valkor in specific—leadership challenges?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“I don’t know much,” Jake says. “I didn’t collect the data myself and I didn’t take the report from the person who did. I’ve read through them, and they seem logical and reasonable and I don’t see any major gaping holes in them, but if you’re asking me if I know more details, I don’t.”

It’s disappointing, but not surprising. “What was the premise of those sections?” Jill asks.

“The Klingon way of gaining a promotion is to challenge the officer above them to a duel,” Khan says. “Whoever wins gains or keeps the higher rank. They are quite often to the death, although the report had a note that fatalities were decreasing as the Klingons obviously realized they were killing good officers.”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Jill says slowly. “If we challenge their leadership, and we win…”

“Precisely,” Khan says, smiling a bit.

“Everything depends on us winning,” Jake says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Do you think we will not?”

Jake shakes his head. “No. I think we will. I just don’t know the cost we’ll pay.”

“There always is one,” Khan says quietly. “And like you, I know it not either.”

“I don’t think any of us do,” Jill says. “Maybe karma will go easy on us, for once.”

“We can always hope, but I’m not counting on it,” Jake says. “Somehow I never seem to be that lucky.”

“Speaking of nothing at all related, how is Marika?” Jill asks. “I don’t like her, but I’d like her to
be alive and healthy.”

“Well,” Jake says. “She’s still in this twilight thing, but now she has bits where she starts speaking. The problem is that no one knows what she’s saying. It’s her father’s language, and I’m the only other person who speaks that we know of. But I can’t get there to listen to her. Gabe’s sent me some recordings that I’m supposed to try and translate.”

“How did you learn it? And why did no one else?” Khan asks.

“I learned it through psychic transfer,” Jake says. “It happened spontaneously the first time Marika touched me. We shook hands, and the next thing I knew it was two hours later and we were in Medical. We determined that I picked up that language, she picked up Russian and Hebrew, and we could never really figure out if we’d traded memories or not. She has no idea how it happened, and it’s never happened with anyone else. She did try to teach other people the language, but it’s tonal and some of the inflections are not easy to hear for humans, so it’s difficult to learn. I can hear it because of the way I learned it, but we found out that regular humans have a really hard time.”

“Cat would love to hear this,” Jill says. “Could we listen after dinner?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jake says. “I don’t think they’re confidential or anything.”

“Even if they were, would it matter?” Jill asks.

Jake snorts. “Yeah, okay, point.”

“Theory says that two people can keep a secret if one of them is dead,” Jill says. “And we’re asking thirteen people to keep some pretty big ones.”

“Yes, but it’s not the same,” Andy says. “None of us has anything to gain by divulging our secrets, and everything to lose. A group of people can keep secrets in pursuit of a goal, so long as the group stays united.”

“Also, whoever wrote that theory hadn’t met Khan’s family,” Jake says.

“Also true,” Jill says. “I’m pretty sure they’re the exception to a lot of rules.”

“Most of them,” Khan says. “Even the ones we created ourselves.”

“Come to the table,” Cat calls, her voice easily carrying to them. “Dinner is ready, and I will not have you waste my efforts by letting it go cold.”

They assemble around the table, created by clearing two of Magpie’s worktables and pushing them together, and settle in for the meal. Khan waits until everyone has food before he straightens and coughs, once.


Khan takes out the paper. “The tattoo artist who painted Jill’s dragon,” he says. “He had recurring dreams, has had them for years. Of these symbols, and this phrase.” He hands the drawing to Katsuro, on his left, letting it pass around the table.

“That’s not possible,” Maeve says when she sees it. “That’s not…how? We never taught anyone, and to have not only our own symbols but four more? Four we never created? How?”
“I don’t know,” Khan says. “There is no biological link we can detect. There may be a link back to Rani from Zach’s mentor, but we can’t prove that right now, and even if we could, I never taught her.”

“You taught her the name-signs, though,” Bishop says. “You taught her our creed, and our signs, so she would recognize them in case of danger.”

“I did,” Khan says. “But I did not teach her the logic behind the language, not more than the very basics.”

“It might have been enough to make the four signs, though,” Bishop says. “None of them are all that subtle.”

“Neither are ours,” Alona says.

“What do yours all mean?” Jill asks.

“Each name sign is based on two words and written to be expressed as a combination of those words,” Khan says. “Konstantin is the wolf in two languages. Cat, you know, is the cat but also the wolf, Konstantin’s mate. Bishop is a healer and a general. Katsuro is a fighter and a builder. Alona’s sign comes from the Russian word for scout and the Hindi word for thief. We mostly used Russian and Hindi for the names because they were distinct and different from each other, so we could create signs that were unique.”

“Mine is scout and thief, but reversed languages from Alona’s,” Matthew says. “Maeve is healer and assassin, which we all thought was appropriate. Anandi is a scientist and a poet. And Khan, of course, is our lion and our king. But it’s been centuries and I don’t remember all the details, so remind me what the new signs mean?”

“Jake is the soldier,” Khan says. “Crossed with brother. Andy’s sign we aren’t sure if it means Seer or Counselor, and it crosses with creator, in the sense of an artistic creation. Magpie is the artist—visual artist—and crossed with scribe, and Jill is…well, what one would expect.”

“She’s the lioness, and the queen,” Maeve says softly, looking at the paper. “And Andy’s sign means both, but it’s more complicated than that. Andy’s sign is actually the most interesting on here because it derives from Hindi, Japanese, and Russian. The Hindi is Counselor, the Russian is Seer or foreteller, and the Japanese is really, really old. I think—I’m not sure—that it’s actually closer to poet than artist, but it could be either. We usually only stuck to Hindi and Russian, so the Japanese is interesting.”

“Let me see,” Katsuro says, moving over to Maeve’s shoulder. “I don’t recognize the word. It’s archaic, but the etymology would indicate artist, I think.”

“Either way it means Andy is a person who sees a great deal, provides good counsel, and builds things of beauty,” Maeve says, glancing up to smile at her.

Andy blushes, ducking his head; his hair falls around his face and he doesn’t push it back.

“Why am I the scribe, though?” Magpie asks.

“Because there’s no word for hacker in archaic Russian,” Jill says. “You convey data, and information. That’s what scribes did, write everything down for everyone else. The scribes were often really powerful because not everyone was literate, so if they didn’t write things down properly, no one would know.”
Not entirely accurate but Khan lets it slide, and Magpie looks pleased with the comparison.

“Out of curiosity, as the paper has not made it to me yet, do the languages for Jill’s name-sign match up with the languages for yours, brother?” Cat raises an eyebrow at him, leaning back in her chair with her wineglass.

“Yes,” he says quietly.

“Mm.” She takes a sip of wine and sets her glass down abruptly, pushing to her feet. “You and I will talk,” she says, gesturing to the balcony. “Outside.”

Nothing bodes well when Ekaterina has that look on her face and Khan does the only thing that won’t lead to a fight; he follows her from the table, out onto Magpie’s balcony, high enough no one will see them clearly from the street.

“So,” she says, closing the door behind them and facing him directly. “Another connection to Rani, and yet Jill is your queen.”

Khan waits patiently for her to get to the point. “Does Jill accept the truth in her name-sign?” Cat asks.

“She wants to,” Khan says. “Whether or not she does, entirely…” His wings shift in uncertainty.

Cat growls. “The woman is more stubborn than you, my idiot brother.”

“Oh, no,” Khan says, finding humor in it. “She’s Russian. She is more stubborn than you.”

“That is impossible, but I will grant you she is almost as stubborn as I am,” Cat says, smiling a bit. “Tell me something, though. Why have you not asked her to marry you?”

“We are operating outside laws and legality,” Khan says. “It seems a bit incongruous.”

“Bah.” Cat smacks him upside the head, which he mostly expected. “A marriage is not a legal system. A marriage is a covenant. You know laws meant nothing to Konstantin nor myself and yet we married as early as we could. You married Rani. You should marry Jill.”

“And I will,” Khan says. “But if I ask her now, she will refuse me.”

“So she is stupid and stubborn,” Cat says.

“No,” Khan says. “She…is uncertain. It was easy for you, sestra, and for Konstantin. You always had each other, you never had to doubt. With Rani, she knew I loved her, wanted her. She trusted that, she didn’t know if she trusted herself with me. She wanted proof I would value her people as much as I valued her. Jill…expects me to leave her. Rani had a much higher sense of self-worth than Jill does. Rani knew her value to me. Jill does not.”

“Stupid,” Cat mutters and sighs. “Take me flying, brother. I am tired and frustrated of a day spent banging my head against insufficient data.”

“Let me just let the others know,” Khan says. He pokes his head back into the loft, lets Andy know he and Cat are going out, and closes the door behind him. It’s easy enough to pull himself up to stand on the railing, and Cat takes his hand and lets him swing her up into his arms.

He steps off the railing and they fall until Khan’s wings snap open and he carries them up into the sky.
Neither of them talk; Khan feels Ekaterina’s breathing even and slow and wonders if she’s actually dozing, trusting him to keep her safe. He holds her a little tighter and spirals up, catching a breeze that takes them over Central Park.

Eventually, he lands, not from fatigue but because it’s getting late and he feels Cat shiver a little in the cold air. They touch down on the roof of Magpie’s building, landing gently, but Cat doesn’t immediately drop to the ground.

“Did you ever wonder, what it would have been like had it been you and me, and not me and Konstantin?” she murmurs in Russian.

“No,” Khan says honestly. “He was always yours, sister. He was always your mate, and I will always be your older brother. I love you with all my heart, Cat, but we would kill each other as a mated pair.”

She laughs softly. “True enough. And were you my mate, we would not be in this situation now.”

“We would not,” Khan agrees.

“It could have been you and Kostya,” Ekaterina says thoughtfully.

Khan laughs. “Nyet. You need him to balance you.”

“Da, well.” Cat drops to the roof then, stretching a bit. “Thank you for this, Khan. I needed it.”

“Any time,” Khan says, touching her cheek. “You have only to ask.”

“I know.” She covers his hand with hers. “Let us go make plans, or learn what the others have decided in our absence.”

Nothing much seems to have been changed from the plans they already established, but Jake expresses interest in working with Khan and Katsuro on weapon design and armor. Andy mentions he has some ideas for the personal shield—a line of thought Khan is starting to consider a lost cause, but he says nothing. Alona and Matthew intend to trade off with Cat and Konstantin for shadowing Marcus and his flunkies, and Anandi, Maeve and Bishop will be studying all the medical records and other data they can access.

“A friend of mine—well, a couple friends of mine just got back from a deployment out by the Neutral Zone,” Jill says. “I’m going to try and look them up and see what gossip I can get.”

“Please do not forget we are meeting at fourteen hundred tomorrow to rehearse,” Cat says.

“Which is when Jake and I are taking over surveillance because we’re not part of the performance,” Jill says.  

“Da,” Cat says. “After the music, however, you both should be there to spar. At 1700.”

“We will,” Jake says.

“Did you listen to the recordings yet?” Khan asks.

Jake shakes his head. “You want to hear them?”

“I would like that, yes,” Khan says.

“Let me set it up.” Jake takes a memory chip out of his pocket and plugs it into a portable speaker,
grabbing a tablet and stylus before he presses play. “I can’t guarantee any of it will make sense,” he says. “But let’s see what Marika has to say.”

As before, Khan’s reminded of harp music, precise and clear. Marika doesn’t say much, a few sentences if he’s any judge, before Jake presses pause. “That…huh, okay,” he mutters to himself, scribbling notes on the tablet. “She’s talking about—honestly, I’m not sure. Shadows?”

“What is the exact translation?” Cat asks.

Jake studies his notepad. “Word for word it doesn’t make sense because the sentence structure is different,” he says. “The syntax of whatever this is is wholly different from anything else I know. But the best translation I can give you…” He studies the tablet again. “The displaced hide within the shadows, but the light comes from them. Darkness comes from beyond and may—I’m not sure of the word here, I think it’s consume—it all.”

“That’s kind of useless,” Magpie says.

“Gabe says there’s more,” Jake says. “So let’s see.” He hits play again. This time he gets a bit more, and stops the speaker looking confused. “She says ‘The lions roar behind the gate and the gladiator raises his sword. The lady waits at the top of the tower. A step either way means death for all, but to stay still means destruction.’ There’s—the last word is ambiguous. I’m not sure it means destruction.”

“What would it mean instead?” Cat asks.

“I am not waiting at the top of anyone’s fucking tower,” Jill mutters under her breath in Russian.

“I’m not sure what it means,” Jake says. “The language is heavily contextual, and sometimes words mean different things based on everything else around them. If I had to guess, I’d say it either means destruction or transformation. It’s like the Death card in tarot, I guess. Symbolizes change, not actually death.”

“Just so long as we don’t get the Tower,” Maeve says.

Jake looks at her. “You read tarot?”

“I do,” Maeve says. “I haven’t in quite a long time, and I would need a new deck, but I used to read the cards. Perhaps I should acquire a set.”

“I have one you can use, unless you’d rather buy a new set,” Andy says. “A...someone I knew gave me her cards a while back, and I don’t read tarot so I never used the cards. They’re an old set, and she told me they’d been passed down in her family but she didn’t have a daughter to give them to. I told her I wouldn’t use them, but she said I wasn’t meant to, that I’d pass them on someday. She told me she’d cleansed the cards, and protected them, and they’ve been wrapped in silk in my dresser ever since.”

“What is the artwork on them?” Maeve asks.

“It’s—I think it’s Celtic, or at least Celtic-inspired,” Andy says. “Lots of faeries and some elves and things.”

“I would very much like to see these,” Maeve says.

“What did you do with your cards, when we left Earth?” Matthew asked her.
“I cleansed the deck and took them with us,” Maeve says. “As far as I know they’re still on the ship.”

“But if your deck had somehow made its way back to you, that would be layers of wrong,” Alona says.

“Quite,” Maeve says.

“If you’ll give me a moment, I’ll go get them,” Andy says, pushing to his feet. Maeve nods and Andy shimmers out of existence.

“The next translation, Jake?” Ekaterina asks.

“Yeah,” Jake says, distracted. “Hang on. It’s—this one’s weird, and I don’t understand it at all. She says…she says the lions bow to no one, and the soldier dies by his own sword. The emperor takes the lady for his own, and she kisses him to death with bloody lips. Only the—word I’ve never come across and don’t understand even in context—can save her from the emperor’s curse, and if she is lost, so is the war. Darkness falls.”

“Does that mean darkness falls if the war is lost, or just that it falls?” Anandi asks carefully.

Jake shakes his head. “I don’t know. That’s literally all there was in the last sentence, ‘Darkness falls.’”

“Is there more on the recordings?” Cat asks.

“One more,” Jake says, hitting play.

It disturbs Khan to hear Marika’s laugh, and he sees on his siblings’ faces that it disturbs them, too. Jake grimaces, but writes, and shuts the speaker off firmly when he’s done. “Darkness falls,” he says, looking at the tablet. “The graveyards grow to cover the skies, and the soldiers battle beyond the death, skeletons at war for a cause that died with the emperor. The corpses bury the sun and the lady weeps blood, her tears poison to all but the—same word I don’t understand as earlier. Then she laughed, which is fucking creepy, and said it’s not lost yet. Light battles shadow, and if the something can protect the lady…then it cuts off.”

“I don’t want to know what I just missed based on the looks on your faces,” Andy says, returning with a carved wooden box. He hands the box to Maeve and sits down. “My friend—Avery, that was her name—she just gave me the cards wrapped in silk, but I put them in the box because I didn’t trust it to stay safe. That’s the only time I touched the cards, and I never touched them, just the silk wrapped around them.”

“I’m sure it’s fine, Andy,” Maeve says, smiling. She slides off the lid of the box and takes out a deep blue silk scarf, unwrapping it carefully to reveal the tarot deck. Khan can see the back of the cards, deep green with gold and silver patterns, and thinks it looks familiar, but Maeve gasps. “This is—this isn’t my deck, but it’s done by the same artist,” she murmurs, carefully looking through the cards. “I would recognize her work anywhere. And this is an old, old deck.”

“Do a reading with it,” Alona says.

Maeve shakes her head. “Not tonight,” she says. “I’ll want to cleanse the deck and learn it a bit more. Still.” She shuffles the deck, hands managing the oversized cards easily, and sets it down on the table. “Khan, cut the deck and pick a card. Think of your question, don’t tell me.”

He does, and his question is simple. Will we succeed?
“Six of swords,” Maeve says when he turns over the card. “A journey.”

“What kind of journey?” Khan asks.

“Generally a pleasant one,” Maeve says. “Do you want to pick another card?”

“Yes, I think I do,” Khan says. He draws another card, holding a question in his mind, and turns over the card.

“King of swords, this time, interesting,” Maeve says. “And he’s reversed, signifying a tyrant or dictator rather than a just king. So long as that doesn’t mean you, we’ll be all right.”

“I don’t think it does mean me,” Khan says. “I don’t wish to draw more cards.”

“That’s fine,” Maeve says. She shuffles the deck again, wraps it in its silk, and puts it back in the box. “I’ll play with these a bit when we get more time.”

“You say that like it will happen,” Alona says. “When have we ever had more time?”

“True, aye, but I’ll make time for this,” Maeve says. “But speaking of time, I think we should return to our own places to spend the night.”

They make their plans to rendezvous the next day and depart.

“What were your questions?” Jill asks when they’re in Jake’s apartment. “The second, I can guess, but the first?”

“What do you think I asked?” Khan asks, reaching out to unbraid her hair.

“I don’t know,” she says. “You could have asked any number of things.”

“Honestly I just asked if we would win,” Khan says, running his fingers through her hair, coaxing the curls apart.

“Mm.” Jill tips her head back into his hands and he scratches over her scalp and down the back of her neck; she shudders, and Khan smiles, leaning down to kiss her.

“My lioness,” he murmurs against her lips.

“My dragon,” Jill murmurs back, reaching up to tangle her hands in Khan’s hair.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

This one will take a while.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings for this chapter:** References to past sexual assault, and this chapter contains themes that may bother some people, including sex under the influence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Over the next two weeks, they continue the game with Marcus. He begins to lose weight, his hair looks more disheveled, and his temper—never a long fuse to begin with—becomes almost impossibly short. Khan takes pleasure in watching him shout at a hapless subordinate, but the real enjoyment comes when Marcus orders the officer out of his office and turns back to his desk to see a black hawk on it.

At that, Marcus’s face goes from beet red to almost stark white, and he stumbles before he sits down heavily. He reaches out for the hawk, then hesitates, clearly not sure whether it’s safe to touch or not.

In the end, though, he picks it up, turning it over in his hands and studying it before he begins unfolding it. The white side of the paper does have writing on it, but nothing anyone will recognize; it’s name-signs from the pidgin speak. Specifically, this hawk has Khan’s sign and Jill’s, and a line underneath in the language that just says “Your life belongs to me.”

Marcus frowns, looking carefully at the paper, but Khan left nothing else on it and wore gloves while handling it, as did everyone else who touched it. Marcus won’t get anything from it and from the scowl on his face, he knows it.

He begins shredding the paper, bit by bit; Khan smiles and turns off the video feed. He doesn’t need to see anything else right now.

“He hasn’t made any move toward the cryotubes,” Magpie says, looking up from her computer. “He hasn’t even gone to the facility, or sent anyone else to do it. Do you think he will at all?”

“No, I don’t,” Khan says. “He is scared, and presumably thinks he can still use the cryotubes as a bargaining chip if it comes to that. But if we push him too far, he might think it worth the risk.” He stretches his wings a little, hiding a wince as they pull on sore muscles. Apparently not everything has healed from the earlier, strenuous, sparring session.

“Hey, I have good news,” Jake says, appearing in the living room. “All our boots and Khan’s overalls are ready.”

“That’s faster than we expected, isn’t it?” Alona asks.
“A bit, yeah,” Jake says. “But that’s not a bad thing. Can we go there tonight to pick it all up?”

“I don’t see why not,” Alona says. “Let’s check with everyone when they get in.”

“Speaking of which, where is Matthew?” Magpie asks. “I wanted to talk to him about something.”

“He stopped on the way here to buy tea for Andy,” Alona says. “He’ll be here in a few. Where’s everyone else?”

“Konstantin and Cat are in San Francisco, or were,” Magpie says. “They were running surveillance on Marcus, and after they were done with him they were going to stop by the apartment we rented to see if anyone’s taken any kind of bait. The science trio are sciencing things back in Maeve and Anandi’s apartment, Katsuro is on the roof meditating, and the rest of us are here.”

“No, we’re not,” Jake says. “Where’s Jill?”

“She said she had to run an errand,” Magpie says. “She didn’t say where, or what exactly, just that she had to talk to a friend and would be back by 1900.”

“Did she tell you what she was doing?” Alona asks Khan.

“No, I was working with Katsuro on weapon design,” Khan says. “I saw Jill at the sparring session, but after that Katsuro and I went to the bunker and she stayed in New York.”

As if on cue, the door to Magpie’s nest opens and Jill walks in, followed by Matthew, Cat, and Konstantin. “They followed me home, can I keep them?” Jill asks, laughing.

“Probably, no one else will,” Alona says. “What were you up to?”

“I had to meet a friend,” Jill says. “She just got back from being shipped out, and I hadn’t seen her in almost a year. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell her anything she could let slip.”

Khan gets the sense there’s more to it than just meeting a friend, but lets it slide. “Anyway, what did I miss?” Jill asks.

“Shoes are ready,” Jake says. “We can leave once everyone gets here, Marveek will feed us.”

“Awesome,” Jill says. “I can’t wait to get mine. My only concern is heat—the coats are seriously warm, and I would prefer my feet not overheat too.”

“They won’t,” Jake says. “The boots—the material doesn’t breathe, but they put in air vents. Mine keep my feet comfortable and dry in almost all temperatures. You do need socks with them but thin ones are fine. Believe me, you’ll never want to take them off.”

“Well, we’ll find out in a little bit,” Jill says. “Do you need to send Marveek a message and let him know we’re coming?”

“No, I talked to him when he told me everything was ready,” Jake says. “They’re expecting us anywhere from now to three days from now because I wasn’t sure when we’d be able to get there.”

“But what if we show up while they’re asleep or something?” Alona asks.

“They don’t sleep,” Jake says. “Marveek’s people, I forget exactly why but they don’t sleep. They meditate, or something, and get about four or five hours of quiet time but they don’t actually sleep. So we could show up in the middle of the night and it’d be fine. They always have someone on watch anyway. The worst that happens is we show up and wait for the others to wake up and find
“So let’s go,” Jill says.

“We will,” Jake says. “Once everyone gets here.”

It doesn’t take that much longer. Jake invites Andy and Magpie to go with them, but they both decline, citing work. Andy, apparently, has decided to go back to the personal shield Khan and Katsuro have both set aside for the time being. As exercises in frustration go, they have better ones.

So eleven of them go, and spend a satisfying two hours with Marveek and his people.

The trouble starts when they return.

“Andy left just after you did,” Magpie says. “He had a meeting with Lorenzo, a supplier she used to work with a while back. Lorenzo specializes in hard to find esoteric parts and apparently Andy thought he had something. Anyway, he said he’d be back in an hour. I can’t reach her, I can’t find her because he’s got the jammer on him and we never coded them to allow our own people access, and he’s not back yet.”

“It’s not like Andy to do that,” Jill says, chewing her lip. “I can’t even remember the last time that happened.”

“That’s because it doesn’t,” Magpie says, pacing. “Andy never does this. If he’s going to be five minutes late I get a message.”

“Do you know where Andy was meeting Lorenzo? Could you find him?” Cat asks.

“Lorenzo runs out of the West Village, but beyond that he moves around a lot. I cannot identify one specific life sign somewhere in the West Village, that is just impossible,” Magpie says. “I don’t have a biometric for him.”

Jill shoves her hands through her hair. “Khan, is there any kind of locator tag we can use for the transporter? Andy had it, I know.”

Khan takes a moment, considering the options. “Possibly,” he says slowly. “But I can’t promise I will be successful, not with the jammers.”

“Well, just—try,” Jill says, shoving the transporter at him. Magpie hands him a computer and Khan takes both objects over to one of the tall worktables, starting to work.

If he modifies code so, and sets the location sense to active…and suddenly it doesn’t matter because Khan feels the energy of a coalescing transport and turns to see Andy appearing in the middle of Magpie’s nest.

He materializes on his hands and knees, and falls over on his side as soon as he’s solid. Everyone runs for her, but Jill, Magpie, and Khan get there first. “Baby,” Jill whispers, touching Andy’s hair and face. “Andy, honey, what happened? Are you okay?”

“No,” Andy says, and Khan realizes she’s shivering, trembling through her clothes. He touches the inside of Andy’s wrist and the heat makes him wary. “Wasn’t—it wasn’t Lorenzo, it—he got double crossed by someone looking for me,” Andy mumbles. “It was me they wanted.”

“Who wanted you, honey, and why?” Magpie asks, stroking Andy’s hair. “You’re burning up,
Andy, what happened?”

“Delachiara,” Andy says, voice husky. “He thought…he thought he had a chance.”

“Oh, God,” Magpie breathes. “Oh God. Oh, Andy—oh, no, tell me he didn’t, tell me—”

“Cinnamon,” Andy whispers and hunches in on himself.

“Who is this Delachiara?” Khan demands.

“He’s a pervert,” Magpie says, swallowing. “He’s wanted Andy ever since we were on the streets. Andy never—she turned down his money, even when it meant he blocked her from getting coke for a few weeks. He was scared of him, and had a right to be—Delachiara collects pretty people, and they’re not pretty anymore when he’s done.”

“So he thought he could kidnap Andy, dose her with Dante, and…?” Jill closes her eyes. “Andy, how much did he get you with?”

“Two sprays, right in my face, he had one guy hold me down and I couldn’t—“ Andy shudders. “They thought I had a bad reaction to it, I faked having seizures, so they dropped me and I activated the transporter.”

“There’s no antidote to Dante,” Jake says softly. “Only time, but you have to survive it first.”

“I know,” Andy says dully.

“What is Dante?” Matthew asks, pushing through the front rank of people.

“It’s a rape drug,” Jill says bluntly. “It makes you want to have sex—no, need to have sex—until either your heart gives out or you come down. I got a dose of it not that long ago and…and it was hell.”

Khan doesn’t say what he’s thinking. Jill had him. Jill wasn’t afraid of sex, only afraid of hurting him, of making him think he coerced her. Andy…Khan can’t offer, but who can? And who would Andy trust enough for this?

What Khan doesn’t expect is that Jake kneels down next to Andy. “You can hate me in the morning, but if you want me to help, I can,” he says, very quietly and in Mandarin.

Andy swallows hard and pushes up to sit on the floor, wrapping his arms around his knees. Before he answers, Matthew crouches in front of her. “Let me,” he says. “Please. You can never speak to me again, or whatever, but I just—I can’t stand the thought of you suffering through this alone.”

“Why do you both think I would never talk to you again or something?” Andy asks, baffled. “Am I that horrible a person?”

“No, but you have consciously chosen not to have sex for the last couple of decades,” Matthew says. “This is a new and unwelcome situation that might override that choice, and there’s no guarantee you’ll want to be around me afterwards. Or Jake, but really, I’m the better choice.”

“Hey,” Jake protests. “That was a wholly unnecessary jab.”

“No, just logic,” Matthew says, grinning. “Genetic engineering has some really awesome side effects.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard,” Magpie says, studying Khan.
“Stop perving on my dragon,” Jill says, throwing a pillow at Magpie. “Get your own augmented sociopathic trained killer.”

“You make it sound so appealing,” Magpie says with a snort.

“Well, she does get points for accuracy,” Maeve says.

“We’re not classically sociopathic,” Alona points out. “We’re more psychopathic. Sociopaths are more impulsive and disorganized. Psychopaths are the charmers, the ones who you think love you until they cut your throat.”

“But we are not even classically psychopathic because we can form attachments and emotional bonds to others, we just often don’t bother,” Bishop argues.

“Which is all lovely but beside the point that Magpie needs to stop lusting after Khan and Andy needs to decide who he’s going home with tonight,” Jill says. “If anyone. None of the above is a valid choice.”

Andy rubs his hands over his face. “Can it not be my loft?”

“You can use the panic room here,” Magpie says immediately. “I’ll go get it ready.”

“Panic room?” Alona asks.

“It’s a bedroom with a bathroom and tiny kitchenette all behind a soundproof and almost indestructible barrier,” Jill says. “Came with the loft. Magpie uses it mostly for guest quarters because she doesn’t need an actual panic room, or hasn’t lately.”

“There were times,” Andy murmurs. “God, Jill, I never even thought—Lorenzo’s never had any dealings with Delachiara before. But apparently Magpie and me dropping off the radar got him interested—him being Delachiara—so he left word with his usual goons that if I showed up anywhere, he’d pay solid money to whoever could get me to show up at a location. Lorenzo isn’t the one who snitched on me. One of Delachiara’s guys heard him talking to someone about the parts he’d gotten for me and got more information because Lorenzo didn’t think it was secret, and…there you go.”

“You had no way to predict this,” Jill says fiercely. “Absolutely none. And once we know you’re going to be all right, Delachiara and his men are going to have a reckoning to pay.”

“Don’t kill him until you make sure he doesn’t have any pets,” Andy says. “Save them. Then chop his head off and serve his balls to him.”

“You care about his dog?” Jake asks.

“Maybe, but no, that’s what he calls the…people he picks up,” Andy says. “He always has a couple. He keeps them and plays with them until they die or break, and then he throws the bodies away and gets someone new.”

“Why did you and Magpie never take him down?” Jake asks.

“We couldn’t,” Andy says, licking dry lips. “We’re not omnipotent and when we were starting out, we didn’t have the leverage or the influence. He’s…he’s really well connected among the underworld. Magpie and I would have to call in a lot of favors to get it done and I’m not entirely certain we could anyway.”
“And none of this matters,” Jill says. “Andy…it’s your decision.”

“This is really not how I wanted to be doing this,” Andy says, finding the ghost of a laugh in it. He looks at Jake, then at Matthew, and licks his lips again. “Jake, thank you, but Matthew, if you could…if you could stay with me tonight I would be grateful,” he says, not quite looking at Matthew.

“Of course,” Matthew says. “Can you walk?”

“Maybe,” Andy says, carefully getting to her feet. It looks like it takes her most of her focus, but she walks across the main living area, back the way Magpie had gone. A door swings open in a wall Khan hadn’t known concealed anything; Andy and Matthew enter, and a moment later Magpie comes out. The wall closes seamlessly and Magpie taps something into the screen on the wall.

“They’re on their own HVAC system in there, so we won’t get bleed off of anything,” she says. “Soundproof, and I’ve triggered the lock so that we can’t get in unless they let us. I don’t know how long it’ll take for the drug to wear off, or how long it’ll take for Andy to feel better later, but consider them in another dimension until then.”

“So,” Cat says, studying one of her knives. “Where do we find this Delachiara, and what kind of security does he have?”

“He’s likely gone to hole up,” Magpie says, moving over to her computer. “He has a safe house—well, he thinks it’s safe—in midtown. The location’s hidden, but I can find out where he is. I’m—he’s going to have a lot of defenses, both security systems built into the house, and his own people. I can hack into the systems, I think, and tell you what you’ll be up against but Andy and I never scouted his house for anything and we had—I thought—a sort of détente, that if he left us alone we’d leave him alone. He broke that, so I will do whatever I can to make sure you can feast on his intestines.”

“Forgive me, but I don’t understand why you left him alone,” Maeve says. “Given what you said about him. What Andy said.”

Magpie looks up from her computer. “Because he scares us,” she says. “Because he terrified the living crap out of Andy for months. Every time he came around he’d try to get him, and every time Andy pushed back Delachiara took revenge somehow. Before Andy got clean he would block the dealers from selling to him, and after she got clean Delachiara found other ways. He would make it hard for him to get parts, or block people from working with her, or find ways to try and get Andy to use coke again. We couldn’t take him on when we started, not and win, and the thought of losing to Delachiara kept Andy up at night. And…and he backed off, as the years went on. He did his thing, we did ours, and we knew about him and we avoided him but he avoided us, too. He’s a known evil in the underworld and there are worse than him.”

“But he threatened Andy,” Cat says softly. “He has injured one of our own. He will not live to see another sunset.”

“What about sunrise?” Alona asks. “It’s only 2100.”

Cat flashes teeth. “This one will take a while.”

Khan feels it, as they all do; the surge in blood, the predatory outlook that settles over them. “Focus,” he says. “We will not go off unprepared. Let us identify his defenses and his weak spots. Then we will…deal with this man.”
Jill looks at Jake, who nods. “If you think we’re not in on this you’re insane,” he says.

“Of course you are,” Cat says. “Do not be stupid. I have no time for idiocy.”

“I’m going to get my catsuit,” Jill says, taking the transporter from Khan. “And my tech. We’re going to need it, and with my stuff I can sneak better than any of you.”

“That seems unlikely,” Anandi says.

“No, I think it accurate,” Khan says. “I am unsure any of us but Alona could have pulled off the mission to revive us.”

“I said sneak, not fight,” Jill says. “I’ll be back.” She disappears into spiraling notes of light.

“I claim the death blow,” Khan says evenly. “Andy is my descendant.” He doesn’t truly expect argument but their blood is up, and Cat—as he thought, she snarls, but gestures in agreement.

“There had better be more than one person there,” she mutters, twirling one of her knives around.

“There will be,” Magpie says absently. “But Khan, Jill gets rights to the death blow before you do. Andy’s your descendant but he’s Jill’s sibling, and Jill’s known him longer than you.”

Khan suppresses his own snarl. Andy is his and he will have revenge on this person who has harmed her.

“Don’t growl at me, I’m saying it because it’s true and Jill won’t hesitate to stab you if you try to keep her from killing the slug,” Magpie says, fingers flying over her keyboard. How she manages to talk and code at the same time, Khan isn’t sure, but admires her ability to do it, respect cutting through rage.

“Jill may wish to revisit that idea,” Cat says, knife stilling in her hand.

“Enough,” Khan says sharply, realizing how out of control this could get. “Cat, calm yourself. Magpie is right. Jill has a prior claim to the death blow and if she wants it I will not challenge it.”

Handling Ekaterina with her temper up is a delicate matter, and often ends in broken bones and furniture. From the way she snarls at him and balances her knife, he wonders which it will be.

“Katya, enough,” Konstantin says, putting a hand on her other arm. “Pax. We have work to do.”

“I am going to the roof,” Cat says after a tense moment. “Someone come tell me when there is data to move on.” She shoves her knives back into their sheaths and stalks toward the door.

“I will go with her,” Katsuro says. “She’ll need an opponent.”

“At least with you we’ll only have to worry about her broken bones,” Alona says philosophically. “Be careful, we need her in one piece.”

“I know,” Katsuro says, following Ekaterina out of the nest.

Jill reappears a couple minutes later, dressed in her catsuit with her hair braided close to her skull. “Where did Cat and Katsuro go?” she asks.

“To spar and work off some temper,” Alona says. “Cat was displeased at the idea of you challenging Khan for the death blow on this Delachiara.”
“There’s no challenging,” Jill says. “It’s mine, and Khan should understand that.”

“I yield to your claim,” Khan says; he’s not happy about it, and the bloodlust in him objects vehemently. But Jill’s right. As is Magpie.

“I promise there will be more people for you to kill,” Jill tells Khan, rising on her toes to kiss him lightly. “Delachiara survives because he surrounds himself with security and most people don’t have the resources to take them all on. Magpie and Andy aren’t fighters, guys, this isn’t their battle to win. This is for us to do.”

“And we will,” Alona says.

Over the next few hours, they gather data, analyze it, build a plan. Four layers of security to get through before they can get into the house itself, and Magpie can’t guarantee any data from within it. “There are false plans and information, and I can’t filter it on this short notice,” she says, frustrated. “I can get you in the front door, and I can give you a probability of what you’ll find beyond that but I can’t guarantee it. As you go and get there I’ll try to get more data for you.” She pushes her hair back, looking frazzled. “I wish I had Andy. He knows enough of Delachiara to know what’s likely, plus things would be easier if I had a second pair of hands here to grab data.”

Jake takes a breath. “I can stay and help,” he says. “I’m not as good as Andy and I’m not as good as Matthew, who would likely be your second choice, but I’m good at quick analysis and I’ve got some hacking skills of my own. Don’t get me wrong, I really want to get there and kill some people, but you need someone else here and I think I’m the only one left who can volunteer.”

“It’s either you or—no, it’s pretty much you,” Alona says. “Our only other hacker—at least on a level Magpie needs—is Khan, and that’s clearly not an option.”

“It is not,” Khan says.

“No, I don’t want to find out,” Magpie says. “The fewer people who know, the better chance you have of getting it right. Plus it’d slow us down, and I think we’re on track to have you guys leave within the hour.”

“We’d better be, or Cat is going to break things,” Alona says.

“Just remember, we don’t have time to play until we get to Delachiara’s personal guards,” Jill says. “We can keep him from beaming out but we can’t keep him from running away if he spooks.”

“If he does, we’ll find him,” Cat says. “Let him run. It will be more exciting in the end.”

Jill has been working on something Khan has not quite been able to figure out for the last hour, something with black straps. She finally unrolls it and he realizes she was modifying the back scabbard for her blade. “There we are,” she says, sheathing the blade in its scabbard and swinging it onto her back, fastening the straps in place. She twists around, does a cartwheel, and shakes herself all over. “It’ll do.”

“I didn’t know you sewed,” Jake says.

“I don’t,” Jill says. “But I’m really good at cutting, and this fabric seals to itself when you put it together and heat it. Note my mini torch.” She holds up a small black oblong. “This blade needs to be bloodied for real,” she says. “Killing Delachiara will work.”
“I should hope so,” Cat says.

“I’m not saying no one else gets a piece of him,” Jill says. “I just want to be the one who takes his life.”

“So bloodthirsty,” Alona teases.

Jill shrugs. “I’m good at killing people and I like it, which is something that probably should bother me more than it does.”

“Conscience is overrated,” Alona says, laughing.

“Some people don’t deserve life,” Ekaterina says.

“This is very true,” Maeve says. “We do need to look for any innocents, though.”

“He likely has a couple,” Magpie says. “My guess is they’d be on the lower level of the house but I can’t confirm that. But they’re probably young street brats. Not too young—Delachiara’s a pervert but he’s actually not a pedophile. He prefers his pets to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty-five.”

“And yet he still wants Andy,” Anandi says. “Who is somewhat older.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Magpie asks. “Andy is a rare thing, beautiful and special and unique. It’s more than physical, it’s—Andy is special, he always has been. And he doesn’t look his age, really, but it’s not even about physical appearance for Delachiara. It’s because Andy refused him, again and again, and Delachiara was never able to break her. She’s the one who got away, and he won’t stop looking for her.”

“Moby Dick,” Bishop murmurs.

“Something like that,” Jake says.

“Totally not getting the reference,” Magpie says. “I don’t care, though.”

“Was he the one to get Andy hooked on coke?” Maeve asks.

Magpie shakes her head. “He wasn’t. That was…that was my fault.”

“It wasn’t,” Jill says. “Bird, you know it wasn’t.”

“What happened?” Maeve asks.

“I was ten,” Magpie says, looking at her screen. “Hadn’t started whoring yet. There were three men who thought I’d be a little fun. Andy intervened, and I didn’t know what she said to them but they left. Later she went out alone, and when she came home she was high. I found out later he’d gotten them to leave me alone by offering himself up in my place, and when he went to keep his end of the deal they offered her coke to make it easier. She accepted.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Jill says again. “Andy was in all likelihood going to use anyway, and you know it.”

“In my better moments I know it,” Magpie says. “In my less happy moments it’s still my fault.”

“You were ten,” Jill says fiercely. “You had nothing to do with Andy’s decision.”
“She’s right,” Jake says, surprising Khan. “One of the guys on my team got addicted to hakeesh a couple years back. It’s an off-world drug, gives you purple gums and a really potent high. Easy to come by if you do what we do, and I beat myself up over not noticing until it was too late to save his liver or his career. It was his decision to take it and keep taking it. I still hate that I missed it, but I had nothing to do with him getting addicted.”

“I was actually wondering about that,” Anandi says. “I found it interesting that there are undoubtedly more exotic drugs out there than existed in our day, yet Andy used an extremely old Earth drug.”

“Cost and availability,” Magpie says. “Off-world drugs are always harder to get. Coke is relatively cheap and easy to come by. It’s existed for centuries because it works. Most of the ‘classic’ Earth drugs are still available on the black market, a couple approved for medical use, and I think one or two available recreationally.”

Jill snorts. “You mean legally.”

“Whatever,” Magpie says. “Okay, so, this is either good or bad and I can’t tell which because I don’t know if the data is reliable.”

“Assume it’s not,” Jill says.

“Then it’s a good thing for us,” Magpie says. “If it is accurate he’ll have mined the front yard between the street and his house. I am leaning toward thinking it’s not accurate because he has people coming and going a lot, and it would be a pain to maintain, plus he wouldn’t want to blow up the neighbors. On the other hand, he could just be that dickish.”

“We’ll find out, but I think it unlikely,” Khan says. “Mines are unreliable.”

“Andy would know more about it,” Magpie says. “But.” She slumps. “Andy’s bigger than Jill, but got a higher dose probably, so…I don’t know. I just don’t know what to hope for.”

“Hope that Andy gets through this in one piece,” Jill says. “And that we can take Delachiara out without causing a fuss.”

“Yeah,” Magpie says softly. “Yeah, I guess.”

Forty minutes later they’re as ready as they’re going to be. They decide to beam themselves to a block away and move in from there. Everyone has earbud comms linked to each other and to Magpie and Jake, set up with their own computers.

“Let’s do this,” Jill says softly.

Khan nods and hits the button.

Chapter End Notes

Once again my apologies for the delay. I was hoping to finish this story this year; that’s looking unlikely now but I promise I’m sticking with this until it’s done. Please don’t give up on me?
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

It would do no harm to take a day of rest.

Chapter Notes

Happy 2016. Happy chapter 61 to me, good grief. I really wanted to finish this last year; I didn't. I really want to finish it this year. Wish me luck?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She swings with enough force that while she doesn’t take his head, it’s a close thing. Khan avoids most of the blood, but Jill gets spattered and when she turns to look at Khan, she has smears of blood on her face.

He has the sudden, primal urge to wrestle her to the ground and lick the blood off her. His mouth actually waters at the imagined taste of blood and Jill’s skin, and he takes a breath, steadying himself.

“It’s done,” Jill says flatly, kneeling to clean her blade on Delachiara’s tunic. “All except for the pets.”

“Maeve and Bishop are with them,” Khan says.

“Let’s go.” Jill brushes past him, but before she can head down the hall Khan pushes her up against the wall and kisses her, brutal enough she gasps. He gentles his mouth, pulls back, but can’t restrain himself from licking a line of blood off her cheek.

“My lioness,” he murmurs, stepping back.

“My dragon,” she says, flashing him a smile. “Now let’s go find the others.”

But when they get there, Bishop shakes his head sadly. “There was nothing to be done, but put them out of their misery,” he says. “They asked for mercy, and we gave it.”

Maeve kneels by one of the cots, head bowed. “Is he dead?” she asks without looking up.

“Yes.” Jill sheaths her blade. “Quite.”

“Good.” Maeve stays where she is, though, and Khan goes to her, crouching next to her and enfolding her in a wing. “They were children,” she whispers into his shoulder. “Barely more than children.”

“I know,” Khan murmurs, holding her. “It’s done. He’s dead.”

“I need a minute,” Maeve says.
“Of course,” Khan says.

It isn’t much more than a minute later that Maeve sighs and nods. “I’m all right.” Khan folds his wing back and gets to his feet, and she rises, brushing off her pants. “Where are the others?” she asks.

“Running clean-up,” Khan says. “They said they would radio if they found anything, if not we are to meet them outside the back door.”

“I guess let’s go there,” Jill says. They all gather fairly quickly, except Alona. “Where the devil is she?” Maeve murmurs when fifteen minutes pass without her.

Khan touches his earbud. “Alona, report.”

“Five minutes,” she answers. “Maybe less. Everything’s fine.”

“Well, isn’t that just lovely to hear,” Cat says, scowling. “Hurry it up, Alona. I do not wish to linger here.”

Alona finally comes out the door, carrying an extra backpack. “I went through his safe and took everything that looked valuable and a few things that didn’t,” she says. “Then I went through the house looking for things I could carry.”

“Did you—this is going to sound weird, but did you see an old-fashioned necklace anywhere? Like a velvet choker with a charm on it?” Jill asks.

“I did, yeah,” Alona says. “It was in the top part of a really lovely jewelry box. I took most of the jewelry, I think including that. Why?”

“The charm is a frog, and the necklace is Andy’s, and Delachiara stole it a long time ago,” Jill says. “Delachiara stole a few other things of Andy’s, too, but the necklace is the one I knew for certain.”

“If I didn’t get all of Andy’s things this pass we’ll come back,” Alona says. “I promise.”

“I believe you,” Jill says. “Now let’s get the fuck out of here.”

They get back to Magpie’s nest eventually, but all of them stop at their home base apartments first to clean up and change. It takes slightly longer than that for Khan and Jill, mostly because he has her up against the wall as soon as they beam into the place and when it’s over she takes a solid fifteen minutes to recover before she can even get into the shower.

“You have no idea, the way you looked in Delachara’s room,” Khan says after the shower, watching her get dressed. “Fierce and deadly. I wanted to pin you to the ground and lick the blood off your face.”

“I bet you did,” Jill says, smiling. “Mostly because I looked at you and wanted to ride you like a stallion.” She pulls on a t-shirt without bothering to put on a bra. “Should killing really turn us on?”

“It is a primal feeling, the taking of a life,” Khan says. “It is unquestionably a rush. Why shouldn’t it?”

“Point,” Jill says. “I, however, am starving so let’s go back to Magpie’s and forage.”
By the time they get back to Magpie’s, Cat and Maeve have set out a buffet of small plates. “We were hungry,” Maeve says, handing Khan a plate. “But we couldn’t decide on food so we made everything.”

“Almost everything,” Cat says. “I am sure there are a few dishes we neglected to prepare.”

“Not for lack of wanting, though,” Alona says. “Andy and Matthew are still sequestered. What time even is it?”

“Approximately eleven in the morning,” Magpie says. “Jake and I passed out around seven, which was right after you left the premises. I’m expecting most of you will want to sleep after eating this very large meal.”

“It would do no harm to take a day of rest after last night’s exertions,” Cat says, sounding downright mellow. Khan snorts to himself; his sister may not have a tail, but he does think she has a few genes in common with big cats.

“Well, my place is open to all, but if I get a signal from Andy they’re ready to emerge I’m kicking everyone out until Andy tells me it’s okay to have company,” Magpie says. “Other than that, though, take your time, hang out, whatever. I get antsy when it’s quiet.”

“I’m not going anywhere for a bit, since Khan and Jill have my flat and my secondary accommodations are not conducive to rest,” Jake says.

“Are you actually staying at Eema’s?” Jill asks, surprised. “I thought you had a spare place, or knew someone who did.”

“No, I’m not staying at Eema’s, but I’m staying right above a couple that is very loudly breaking up,” Jake says. “Day or night, screaming and shouting and broken glass. I’m about to stay at Eema’s out of self-preservation.”

“You can stay here, seriously,” Magpie says. “I have another bedroom in addition to the panic room and mine. Even if I didn’t I have big couches that are super comfy.”

“Thanks, I will then,” Jake says. “I’ll grab my stuff and come back.”

“Also,” Magpie says. “Nice work last night, cutie. You’ve got some skills. Did you ever do anything unorthodox? Like in high school?”

“What makes you think that?” Jake asks, but he sounds cautious.

“I have a photographic memory for how people hack,” Magpie says. “I’ve seen your style before, around the time I met Jill. I can’t for the life of me remember why, but I know I’ve seen you or someone really like you before.”

Jake looks sheepish, scratches the back of his neck and ducks his head. “Yeah,” he says. “You didn’t know me, because I wasn’t convinced you existed and we never met for you to disprove me, but I got into some stuff back then. Nothing major, but I poked around a few times. Mostly I was trying to get access to classified Starfleet reports. I wanted Intelligence long before I went to the Academy, and I wanted the truth of what it actually did to make sure I did or didn’t actually want it.”

“Did you get anywhere?” Magpie asks.

“Yeah, I got access to a few mission reports,” Jake says. “Used it as proof they should hire me
when they came looking for the source. They took me up on it, and I got tagged for Intelligence early on.”

“That’s one way to win a job interview,” Alona says.

“Intelligence likes it when you can poke holes in their cover, so long as it doesn’t actually expose anything,” Jake says. “Most of the guys on my team got there because they’d gone poking around where they shouldn’t have. Anyway, I am going to go grab my stuff and come back.” He sets down his coffee cup and shimmers out of existence.

“He always wanted the Academy,” Jill says when he’s gone. “Everything he did in school was geared toward getting in. Including that. If they’d told him it was proof they couldn’t hire him he’d have been pretty devastated. Fortunately, they like spunk in Intelligence. Less so in the rest of the outfit.”

“I really have trouble seeing you as someone who doesn’t rock the boat,” Alona says. “How the fuck did you survive?”

“I broke the rules a lot,” Jill says. “Starfleet will often let you get away with that if the end result is worth it. If it’s not—like if your attempt to rescue crew members ends in everyone dying, or at least one death, you’re going to get reprimanded and possibly demoted. If your attempt ends in miraculous rescue and everyone surviving, you’ll get a commendation. Not that these both have ever happened to me.”

“Who died the first time?” Maeve asks softly.

“One of the security guards,” Jill says. “That wasn’t so bad, though. He was someone who died before I even got there—the reprimand was about something else. No, the bad one was when two of them died in my arms and I got a commendation out of it. I almost quit after that. I did take six months off.”

Khan moves closer to her, resting his hand in the small of her back. She sighs and leans against him. “I’m sorry, I’m a little short-tempered because I’m coming down and I’m exhausted. Cat, would it be horribly rude if Khan and I packed up plates and went back to our place?”

“It would not at all,” Cat says. “Stay put. I will deal with it.”

“Who are you and what did you do with Ekaterina?” Alona wonders.

“She had a very successful hunt and now a full belly,” Katsuro says. “So she is content and satiated and feeling generous.”

“Yeah, there’s no way there’s no feline DNA in hers,” Magpie says.

“It’s why she always held negotiations with prisoners after she had eaten,” Konstantin says. “We would fight, to take the city, and when the battle was over she and I would retreat for an hour. We claimed it was to allow us to calm our blood after the battle. In reality, it was a chance to do that and eat something.”

“That’s not stupid,” Magpie says.

“My thanks,” Cat says with a snort. “And if I am part feline, so what of it? Does it matter or change anything?”

“No, of course not,” Bishop says.
“Besides, I would rather have some of the practical advantages of a cat were I to be part one,” she says. “Claws, and better vision, those would be useful.”

“Jake would say he knows where you can get those things but let’s avoid it,” Jill says.

“Quite,” Ekaterina agrees. “I have no need to modify my genome at this time.” She comes over to them and hands Jill two containers. “We will see you tomorrow morning,” she says. “Unless anyone objects, the remainder of today is declared free. No training, sparring, or other rehearsal. Do with it as you wish, we will reconvene here tomorrow morning presuming we are allowed access to the apartment.”

A couple of them start talking about options; Khan slips his arm around Jill’s waist and holds up the transporter. “Ready?”

“Let’s go,” she says, leaning into him.

Back in Jake’s place, Jill kicks off her shoes and sprawls out on the couch, tugging Sarah’s blanket over her. “I am crashing so hard it’s not even funny,” she says. “If you want to go out or something, that’s fine, but between the all night fighting and then the sex, I’m done.”

“Let me put you to bed,” Khan says.

“No, this is fine,” Jill says. “It’s comfortable and I get fewer nightmares when I’m sleeping in a not-bed. But if you want to go out, I promise I’ll be fine. The worst that happens is I have a nightmare and go make Magpie snuggle with me.”

In truth, he does want to go out. He can’t risk being too public simply because of the wings, but if he takes to the air, he can go anywhere he wants. So long as he avoids public air traffic routes…

“Go,” Jill insists. “I’ll be fine.”

“Call me if you need me,” Khan says.

“I promise I will,” Jill says.

Khan spends hours that afternoon flying, drifting on the winds and circling higher and higher. It’s an exercise he has not had time for in centuries, but it may come in helpful on Qo’noS and even if it doesn’t, flying is always how Khan has found peace. No one talks on the wind, no one demands or lectures or argues. He sees the occasional bird and they see him, and in every case they tacitly avoid each other, and he keeps himself high enough aloft that passers-by on the street won’t really register him.

He lands just past sunset, muscles aching but feeling looser than they have in centuries, mind at peace for once. He gives himself a moment or two to just be and enjoy the feeling of calm, then takes out his link to call Jill.

“Yeah,” she says when she answers.

“Where are you?” Khan asks.

“I’m still at Jake’s place. I woke up a while ago but didn’t want to go out, so I’ve been doing laundry and making lists of gear we’re likely to need,” Jill says. “Do you want to come find me or do you want to go find your siblings and a meal?”

“No, I want you,” Khan says, the statement true on multiple levels.
She laughs. “Then come find me, dragon.”

He enters the apartment to find Jill sitting on the couch with her knees bent and feet braced against the table. She has white cotton sandwiched between her toes, and looks to be giving herself a pedicure. “This relaxes me, and today has been about relaxation,” she says, looking up. “I took a really long shower, did all kinds of girly stuff, worked through yoga for a while, and now I’m finishing my pedicure. Don’t worry, this stuff dries in five seconds.”

Khan smiles, watching her finish painting the her left foot. She caps the bottle after that and sticks her feet out in front of her. “There we are,” she says.

“Blue this time,” Khan observes. “Do you do this often?”

“The polish lasts up to a month but sometimes I just take it off and leave it off for a while,” Jill says. “So once in a while?” She shrugs and pulls the cotton out from between her toes, tossing it into the wastebasket. “I needed today,” she says, getting to her feet and walking over to Khan. “I think we all did. We accomplished a necessary goal last night and today we took to unwind. We’ll all feel great tomorrow.”

“Yes, I think so,” Khan says, resting his hands on her hips. She smells of sandalwood, stronger than usual; impulsively, he lifts her, leaning in to inhale along her throat. Jill laughs and wraps around him, although she does playfully smack his head.

“I keep telling you I’m not a toy,” she says, tugging on his hair. “You can’t just do this to me whenever you feel like it.”

“You are not and yet,” Khan says, brushing his lips over her pulse. “I want you.”

“Do you,” Jill says; he hears the laughter in her voice and smiles against her throat. “Well, I suppose you can have me.”

“You sound so enthusiastic,” Khan says, but he smiles again, kissing the spot behind her jaw and biting her earlobe. “Perhaps I should leave you to your relaxation.”

“You are my relaxation,” Jill says, tugging his hair again. “Shut up and kiss me.”

“You don’t sound very relaxed,” Khan observes but kisses her, pleased when she makes a soft sound into his mouth and her hands tighten in his hair.

“Tell me how you want me,” Jill murmurs, shivering all over when he bites her gently. She tips her head back and he bites again, harder this time but not quite enough to leave a mark.

“I want your mouth on me,” Khan murmurs back, scratching his nails down her back enough to make her groan and twist under his hands.

“You have to put me down for that,” Jill points out, kissing his jaw.

“Eventually,” Khan says, distracted by the taste of her throat, the way her pulse quickens under his lips. He backs her against the wall, letting it support her while he peels her out of her tank top.

“This is not getting to my mouth on you,” Jill says, tossing the fabric aside. “I mean, I’m not exactly complaining except I really do want to suck you so could you turn me into a puddle after I get to do that?”

Khan has to laugh this time, enough that Jill snorts, then snickers, then starts giggling. By the time
they both calm down Jill is panting for breath and Khan’s ribs hurt slightly.

“I love you,” Jill says breathlessly. “I love you and I love that in the middle of this fucked up mess we have, we can still laugh like this. You don’t laugh nearly enough and I love it when you do.”

“I have not had much to laugh about,” Khan says honestly.

“No, I know.” Jill cups his face in her hands and kisses him lightly. “But I’m a firm believer that if you can take time to laugh, you’re all right.”

“Before I met you, I had not laughed since I left Earth, in my time,” Khan says softly, leaning his forehead against hers.

“I know,” Jill murmurs. “Marcus didn’t give you much room for humor.”

“No,” Khan says. He closes his eyes, stretching his wings to fold them around Jill, hold them in their own little bubble.

“I love it when you do this,” Jill admits. “I feel incredibly safe. Sheltered, really. It’s…yeah.”

“I want to promise I will keep you safe,” Khan says. He brushes his fingers over her cheek. “But you wouldn’t accept it even if I did.”

“I wouldn’t,” Jill says. “I’m not a princess to stay safe in the castle. I’m the rogue who sneaks through the battlefield to stab the villain in the back.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But normally I am the villain you would be stabbing.”

“No,” Jill says. “No, you’re the conflicted man of mystery who has his own agenda, shows up to help the good guys, and disappears with the rogue to further his own goals.”

“I see,” Khan says. “But who are ‘the good guys’, then?”

“Good question,” Jill says. “Let me get back to you on that. We’re kind of lacking in the pure at heart. Although what defines a good guy?”

“’We had this discussion with Sarah,” Khan says. “Altruism.”

“Yeah, we did, and yeah, you’re right,” Jill says.

“Which, by definition, makes you the good one,” Khan says, considering it. “You offered to help me out of altruism. You had no self-interest in mind.”

“I’m a rogue,” Jill says. “By definition they’re not really good.”

“The closest we have,” Khan says.

“Well, all right.” Jill laughs and kisses Khan. “You need to put me down.”

In truth he’d almost forgotten he was holding her. The sexual tension has lessened—between them, it’s never quite gone, but he doesn’t think either of them actively want sex at the moment. So he sets Jill down gently, unsurprised when she pulls on her tank top. “We should eat something,” she says. “If I’m remembering right, there’s an amazing Cuban place that delivers here.”

“Or I could cook,” Khan says, actually interested in the idea.
“By all means,” Jill says. “Jake goes food shopping, so see what he has.”

Jake turns out to have a very well-stocked pantry and freezer; the fridge has almost nothing in it, but that doesn’t surprise Khan. He considers his options then begins assembling ingredients. “Tell me about the equipment you were researching,” he says, glancing at Jill before he reaches for a knife.

“Survival gear mostly,” Jill says. “I don’t know what conditions will be like on Qo’noS or what we’ll be expected to survive or go through when we’re there. Our options are pretty extensive but there are things we won’t need, but I don’t know what those are and I won’t until we get more details.”

“Which supposes they agree enough to give us those,” Khan says.

“Yes, but I’m being optimistic,” Jill says. “I just don’t know what they might ask of us or what we might have to be prepared for.”

“Tell me what you think we will need,” Khan says.

Jill sighs and pushes her hands through her hair. “Survival gear, mostly. Stuff to climb, or rappel. Medical supplies. Stims and food bars. Stuff for extreme weather conditions, because Qo’noS weather is unpredictable. There are a few things we used last night that I want to replace before we go out again. There’s a standard Starfleet pack for wilderness exploration that I want to use as a base and modify, but even that has differences based on the climate you’ll be dealing with.”

They continue discussing equipment while Khan makes dinner, and over the meal the conversation turns to odds and ends. They need to train and prepare but they also need to remind themselves they are human, and a day to relax and pretend they are ‘normal’ will only do them good in the end.

“All right, my dragon,” Jill says when the dinner clean-up has finished. “You said you wanted something, earlier. Do you still?”

“I do,” Khan says, his smile matching hers.

“Then come into my parlor,” Jill says, crooking a finger.

He laughs and follows her to the bedroom.

In the morning, he wakes feeling as though he dreamt and forgot something important, but when he tries to remember it all he catches are shades of gray and mist, with…a forested trail. More than that, though, escapes him. Frustrated, he decides to take a shower in hopes of both clearing his head and remembering more.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Jill asks sleepily, sitting up.

“Strange dreams I do not remember,” Khan says. “I feel as though I forgot something important. Perhaps a shower will clear my head.”

“If that doesn’t do it I’ll go make you coffee,” Jill says, climbing out of bed.

“Thank you,” Khan says. He catches her wrist and draws her in for a kiss before she pushes him away, laughing.

“Go on,” she says.
Khan smiles and goes to shower. The hot water helps clear his head, but his memories of last night’s dreams remain stubbornly elusive and patchwork. He sighs and shuts off the water. Either he will remember, or he won’t, and in either case he can’t do anything about it now.

“Hey,” Jill says, handing Khan a mug when he steps out of the bathroom. “While I was making coffee Magpie tagged me, let me know that Andy has returned to the land of the living. Magpie suggested we come over early to talk to him and Matthew before she lets everyone else get there.”


They do take a couple minutes to finish their coffee first, and Jill pours a second mug into a travel cup, before they transport themselves to Magpie’s nest. They find Magpie in her big red chair, working on a tablet; Matthew sprawls on the blue couch, appearing to nap; and Andy, wrapped in a black kimono with white embroidery, curled up on a couple of floor pillows.

“Hey, baby,” Jill says, making a beeline for Andy and kneeling on another floor pillow. “You okay?”

“That’s a relative question but I think so,” Andy says. She takes a sip from her own mug of tea. “I passed out around three in the morning, for the last time.”

“Yeah, it hit you a lot harder than me,” Jill says. “It was out of my system in like eighteen hours, hangover included. It took you—what, a day and a half?”

“A little less but yeah,” Andy says. “There were a couple points in there where I passed out for a while, though. But let’s never, ever do that again.” He smiles, a little shy. “But the sex was amazing.”

Jill laughs. “Can I hug you?” she asks.

“Of course.” Andy sets the mug aside and Jill hugs her, hard. Andy murmurs something else in Jill’s ear and Jill answers, but Khan can’t hear what it is. He decides to leave them to their conversation and goes to find out how Matthew is.

“I second Andy’s plea to never do that again,” Matthew says without opening his eyes. “I mean, I’m not swearing off sex, or even sex with Andy—although that’s his call—but let’s avoid the Dante. That stuff is nasty.” He drops into Irish. “If you get too much of it, like I think Andy did, it blocks the victim’s ability to orgasm, so there’s this driving need but no release. It took far too long before that wore off, and I almost knocked her unconscious before it happened.”

“I understand,” Khan says. “Jill didn’t have that, but she had a lesser dose. Or reacted differently, either one. The drug is new enough there is not much data on it.”

“I want to set Anandi and Maeve to make a counter,” Matthew says. “It’s just…no one should ever be dosed with this stuff. It’s in some ways worse than roofies, because you know exactly what you’re doing but you can’t help it, and when it’s over you still have the memories of what you did. And I firmly believe that anyone consenting under the influence of Dante has mostly lost the ability to provide informed consent.”

“Even Andy?” Khan asks, sticking to Irish.

“Even Andy, and I’m rationalizing that by saying it was an emergency and no one else could have helped,” Matthew says. “But it doesn’t mean I’m happy about what happened. I wanted Andy to choose me, you know, but not like this. Not at all like this. And I don’t know if he’ll want to try again without the drugs.”
“Did you talk about it?” Khan asks.

Matthew shakes his head. “I told Andy to give it a couple days to recover, see how she felt, then
talk to me. Honestly I need the time. I acknowledge the necessity of my actions but I need a chance
to clear my head and deal with the guilt.”

“I thought you didn’t do guilt,” Khan says, smiling a bit.

“I normally don’t, but.” Matthew sighs and finally looks up at Khan. “That having been said, the
sex was incredible.”

“You can stop there,” Khan says. “In fact, please do.”

“Always the prude,” Matthew says, but he smiles and his face looks lighter.

“I am Andy’s uncle,” Khan says. “I don’t need to know.”

“Which doesn’t counter my point,” Matthew says. “Although I’ll grant you the uncle thing.”

“Speaking of, I should go talk to my niece,” Khan says, looking over to see Jill on the purple
couch, studying a tablet.

“Yes, do,” Matthew says. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“I’m okay,” Andy says as soon as Khan approaches. “I’m…well, I’m getting there. But I do need
more tea, so come with me.” He pushes up from the pillow and Khan follows him to the kitchen.
He says nothing, watching Andy reheat water and measure out tea leaves, but studies her closely.
Shadows under her eyes, which he expected, and Andy’s skin looks paler than usual, but his hands
are steady.

“Tell me,” Khan says finally, when Andy has tea and has taken the first sip.

“It…wasn’t how I wanted it to happen,” Andy says. “It was just—even when I was in withdrawal
from coke, it wasn’t that awful. I mean, maybe it was and my memories have blurred but I just
couldn’t control anything, and I hated it. But…I’m grateful Matthew was there, because I think
without him I quite literally might have died.”

“It’s possible,” Khan admits.

“Yeah, so.” Andy sighs and takes another sip of tea. “Now the question is what happens next.”

“What do you want to happen next?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Andy says, looking at his mug. “I don’t know. I feel like I can’t treat Matthew like
nothing happened but I don’t know if I want it to continue, either. I mean, I kind of do, but…every
time I thought about trying to have sex, or have a relationship, in the last two decades I couldn’t
find someone who didn’t try to force me into a binary box. I’m…I don’t know if he will or not but
I’m wary. And I don’t know if I’m ready to have sex again, or if I ever will be, and that seems
unfair to him.”

“Let Matthew decide for himself what is fair and what is not,” Khan says. “You have to decide
what is right for you, Andy.”

“I know, and I don’t know what that is.” Andy sets her mug down on the counter and moves to hug
Khan, resting her head against his shoulder. Khan holds him, arms and wings, and says nothing.
Eventually Andy steps back and picks up her tea. “Matthew told me to take a few days,” he says. “I think that’s a really good idea. I just don’t know how many days it’ll be.”

“As many as you need,” Khan says. “This is not ideal timing—we are under stress, pressure, a time constraint and an uncertain future. But that does not mean you should rush into anything. It will likely never be good timing.”

“Probably not, knowing us and our lives,” Andy says. “I think… I think I’m going to go back to my loft for a bit, get a really long, hot shower and do some yoga. I’ll find you all later. The hell of it is that I never did get the parts I wanted, so now I have to find a way to get them that doesn’t involve Lorenzo or anyone who might…well, you know.”

“Are they really that urgent?” Khan asks.

“This shield thing is irritating me,” Andy says. “I want to make it work. I have rarely run into a hardware problem I can’t solve and I’m determined not to let this one be it. I think if I can get the right kind of cooling fan into it, we might be able to avoid some of the coding issues. The problem is that it doesn’t handle power surges gracefully. The result though is that it overheats the processor. If I can super-cool the processor, it might handle the surge more gracefully and actually work when it gets hit with something.” She shrugs. “Or it might freeze the whole thing and it’ll explode.”

“Well,” Khan says. “Given our luck so far, I would not lay odds on either. Do you have another contact for the parts?”

“I have to do some digging to find one, but I should be able to get them,” Andy says. “So I’m going to go do that.”

Khan kisses his forehead. “Be well,” he says quietly.

“I’m working on it.” Andy leans into him for a moment, then brushes past as he goes to get his things.

When Khan returns to the living room, he sees Anandi and Maeve, the latter dressed in running gear. “Going out or just coming back?” he asks.

“Going out,” Maeve says. “Nandi and I were up most of the night working on poisons, and I need to clear my head. You want to join me?”

“Not this morning,” Khan says.

“Okay, but you only get one refusal,” Maeve says. “Tomorrow you’re coming with me. I’m insisting on this—everyone, including Jill and Jake, needs to start running longer distances. We only have so much time to prepare.”

“No, you’re right,” Jill says. “But physically speaking I’m not sure Jake and I can keep up with you.”

“We won’t make you run at our pace,” Maeve promises. “But we do need to work on it.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jill says. “We need to start training more intensively than we’ve been doing. Not that we’ve exactly been taking it easy, but we need to do more.”

“Just so long as we don’t over-train,” Anandi says.
“Yes, we will have to be careful about that,” Khan says.

“How is Andy?” Maeve asks. “I did not see her.”

“She is all right,” Khan says. “He went back to his loft to shower and change and unwind.”

“A good idea,” Anandi says. “We will find her later.”

“What are we doing today?” Maeve asks. “I intend to be out for a few hours, so I’ll call later and find out where I’m supposed to go, but an idea would be nice.”

“The theater, I think,” Khan says. “Either that, or here. Do we need to plan or train?”

“Train,” Jill says. “Time enough to plan supplies once we find out the terms of what we’re allowed to bring. I’m pretty sure the Klingons won’t allow us to just carry whatever. If we go to the theater, we can spar and you guys can practice the vocals.”

“This makes sense,” Anandi says. “Once everyone comes here, we will go there.”

“I’m staying here, in case you cared,” Magpie says. “I’m working on some things. We took out Delachiara but we didn’t take out his web of ick, so I want to work on that a bit. Gossip’s already running rampant about who did take him out, but I haven’t heard anything about anyone tracing it back to us. Yet.”

“Is it likely?” Anandi asks.

Magpie chews her lip and waves a hand back and forth. “It depends on if rumors get out about what he did to Andy,” she says. “If that happens then yeah, they’ll think it was me. If no one talks about it, then it’s a lot murkier. Delachiara had a lot of enemies, and I’m not really known for payback.”

“Even if they do think it was you, they have to know you did it with help, and does anyone know about us?” Jill points out. “Because I didn’t think so.”

“No, no one does, but…I just—so there’s a balance among the underworld, the bad guys and the really bad guys and the gray guys. Andy and I are mostly in the gray to dark gray zone, and we avoid the really bad guys and some of the lesser ones. But with Delachiara gone, the whole balance is shifted and there are going to be a lot of turf wars until it gets settled. I’m fairly well insulated from the damage because no one wants to get on my bad side, but Delachiara had allies and enemies and I just don’t know how it’ll go.” Magpie pushes her hands through her hair. “I’m kind of scared.”

“Magpie, do you need protection?” Khan asks. “Is there a chance someone could come looking for you?”

“Eternally, which is part of the reason why I have the panic room,” Magpie says. “And it’s possible. I haven’t heard anything to indicate I’m a target but you never know. I’ll keep an ear out. I’m just…Delachiara was always our boogeyman, you know? The monster in the closet or something. And now he’s gone and it’s weird.”

“He had to die,” Jill says. “You know that.”

“I’m not wishing he was still alive, Jill-Bear,” Magpie says, making a face at her. “Just that things are going to shift now.”
"As often happens when there is a vacuum," Anandi says. "We will be careful. If one of us needs to stay with you, we will."

"We’ll see," Magpie says. "Anyway, right now it’s not a bother."

"What is not a bother?" Cat asks, materializing in the middle of the room with Konstantin.

"Nothing," Magpie says. "Andy went back to his loft. The plan is for you guys to go to the theater. I’m staying here for now."

"All right," Cat says agreeably. Khan looks at her curiously, and she laughs and shrugs. "I am in a good mood this morning," she says. "Having a concrete target to take out always improves my attitude."

"Way to cheer Cat up, kill things, got it," Jill says.

Ekaterina shrugs. "I don’t apologize for how I am."

"None of you should," Jill says. "But we can’t always murder people when we’re cranky."

"Technically, we can," Magpie says. "We just shouldn’t."

"Sometimes it is not logistically feasible," Jill says.

"That doesn’t mean it’s impossible," Matthew says around a yawn. "But let’s cut down on the random murder."

"Killing Delachiara was not random," Cat points out. "But. Maeve, are you going running?"

"I am, and I’m leaving now," Maeve says, getting to her feet. "I’ll find you later. Matthew, are you up for joining me?"

"No," Matthew says. "I’m really not. I realize this means I should go anyway but not today."

"We will give you a pass this once," Ekaterina says. "Is Andy all right?"

" Mostly," Magpie says. "She will be."

"That is, I think, as good as we can expect," Konstantin says. "Is there coffee?"

"If there isn’t, feel free to make some," Magpie says.

"I will check," Konstantin says, touching Cat’s shoulder before he heads to the kitchen.

The others filter in, some transporting and some knocking on the door. Alona, to Khan’s surprise, says she has other plans than the theater. "Someone should keep an eye on Marcus," she says, tossing the disc of her staff up and down. "I don’t trust him and I don’t want us to lose track of him in the goal of the Klingons."

"You know, that’s a really good idea," Jill says. "And…I’ll go with you."

"You will?" Alona blinks. "Why?"

"Because I can’t spar with you against each other, it’s not fair to anyone," Jill says. "You’ll hold back more than you want to so you don’t break me, but that’s not how you should fight each other. Jake and I will fight you, we promise, but not in the everyone for himself matches you normally
do. I want to get to Qo’noS without broken ribs, because mine don’t heal that fast.” She shrugs. “Also, I can’t sing, but I have still active Starfleet credentials and a totally plausible reason to show up at HQ and deal with some paperwork, should you want to take a gander at the place.”

“Oh, I like you,” Alona says, grinning. “All right then. We’ll need your transporter and mine, and I’ll need a uniform.”

“Yeah, you might just fit mine,” Jill says. “Although gold isn’t your color.”

“It’s not yours either, honey,” Alona says, laughing.

“That shade of gold suits no one well,” Jake says. “It’s why I prefer staying out of it in the first place.”

Khan hands the transporter to Jill before she can ask for it. “Be careful,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss her.

“I will,” Jill murmurs back. She bites his lip, sharp and playful, and pulls away to give Alona the coordinates for her apartment. Khan wonders how many of her things are actually there, and how many are split between London and places in New York at this point.

It would bother him more if he didn’t think it didn’t matter to her.

Jill and Alona disappear, and Matthew pleads exhaustion. Honestly, Khan thinks he needs the mental break more than the physical one, but does not begrudge him either. No one does, and so Magpie drapes a fuzzy green blanket over Matthew and he turns himself into a motionless lump on the couch. “He’s art,” Magpie says, patting some part of Matthew. “I could probably take pictures and sell them for millions.”

“He would love that,” Ekaterina says. “I think you should.”

“I will, then,” Magpie says. “When I get a moment. If I hear from Andy I’ll pass it on.”

“Please,” Khan says.

The remaining eight of them transport to the theater. “The vocals will have to wait until we have Maeve,” Cat says, walking about on the stage. “Alona would do, in a pinch, but Anandi’s voice is all wrong.”

“Lo siento,” Anandi says. “To be fair, so is yours.”

“Well, da,” Cat says. “We need the middle range. I would prefer not to rehearse it without her.”

“We can wait,” Khan says.

“Sparring instead?” Katsuro inquires.

“Yes, but not to injure,” Ekaterina says. “Let us test our control today.”

They do this sometimes; spar while holding back, barely touch the opponent with kicks and punches. It teaches control as nothing else could do, and Khan appreciates the practice.

"Should anyone break a bone, the person who caused it is out,” Ekaterina says. “A bruise counts as a disable for the person who inflicted it. Jake, please call time. Ten minutes or until there is no one left.”
“Am I in on this?” Jake asks.

“Do you want to be?” Cat asks.


Chapter End Notes

Originally I was trying to write the adventure at Delachiara’s and got hopelessly stuck. I tried about four times to write it and finally just accepted I had to move on in order to progress. My apologies to any of you who were anticipating it. In apology, I’m working on a bit from Matthew's POV about the events with Andy as a missing scene. I’ll post it here when I finish it.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Soon. It’s coming soon and he knows it.

Chapter Notes

I think this story is picking up speed as we approach the end. I’m really pleased by that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Over the next few weeks, they settle into a rhythm. Not a routine; they stay unpredictable enough to avoid surveillance, but their lives become defined by Marcus, research, training, rehearsal and preparation. Jill and Jake spend hours playing their version of tag; Khan runs what feel like endless kilometers and spends hours more in the sky, both to practice and to get some peace.

Soon. It’s coming soon and he knows it. Soon they will send their message to the Klingon High Council, and what follows next…will follow.

Not yet. Not today, not this week necessarily, but soon. Khan can taste it in the air, the prickle of anticipation.

Anandi works with Maeve and Bishop on poisons, antidotes, enhanced medical supplies. They make infused bandages, designed to treat pain, infection, and bleeding all in one. Stimulants, a small supply of sedatives, anything else they think of. The bandages, actually, are a very clever idea and Khan is moderately surprised no one has thought of it before now.

Perhaps they’ll market it later.

Maeve also draws pints of blood from all of them save Jake and Jill. Blood storage technology has advanced sufficiently she can stockpile it and they can bring it with them to Qo’noS without having to worry about refrigeration. Alona calls her a vampire and Katsuro grimaces as he holds out his arm, but they all donate over a period of ten days, until Maeve has twenty pints of blood.

“What do you want to do with that much blood?” Jake asks. “I mean, I get that we might need an emergency transfusion, but twenty pints seems extreme.”

“There will be eleven of us going to Qo’noS,” Maeve says, writing Anandi’s name on the last bag and the date. “Less than two pints of blood per person. I don’t know if we’ll have time to perform a transfusion, but I don’t want to end up in a situation where we need one, have the time, and don’t have the blood. And in a pinch, our blood will keep you and Jill going. It isn’t pleasant, but a direct transfusion of our blood to a regular human acts as a powerful stimulant.”

“By unpleasant she means you’ll have a migraine the size of Jupiter while you keep going, and if she’s not careful with the transfusion it’ll give you a heart attack,” Matthew translates. “But in a
pinch, it really does work.”

“It is…possible,” Bishop says slowly. “That if we did a slow enough transfusion, of enough blood, you could acquire some of our abilities, for a time.”

Jill looks at Jake and they both grimace. “We’re not necessarily saying no,” Jake says when Jill gestures to him. “But one, you need your blood. Two, there’s no guarantee it would work. Three, Jill and I are comfortable in our bodies now. We know our strength and our speed and we’re good at that. To change any of that would throw us off, and we can’t afford that.”

“Nyet, you are correct,” Cat says, sitting on a clear edge of table. “It may be something we research for later, to see if we can do this and if so how it would best work. But against the Klingons, you are right. We do not have the time or the evidence to do this.”

Bishop nods. “Oui. Still, we will look.”

“We will,” Maeve says. “Speaking of looking, Bishop and Katsuro should be back soon.”

“Good,” Jill says. “When they get back I’m calling tonight a free night. We have been working, training, nonstop for the last three weeks and we badly need a break. Marcus is in San Francisco through the weekend and I want to go dancing.” She falls backward into a somersault, coming up and turning a cartwheel. “There are a bazillion clubs in New York, none of us have gone out, and tonight we are.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Cat asks.

“Anyone who wants to come,” Jill says. “There will be lots of loud music, and alcohol, and whatever else we find. There will invariably be some kind of fight because someone will try to literally pick me up off the ground and I’ll have to drop him, but if we’re lucky that won’t be until the end of the night.”

“I’m in,” Magpie says. “But only if we get slush.”

“Oh,” Jill says in a tone of happy anticipation. “Fuck yes. I haven’t had slush in—when was the last time we had it?”

“Two years ago,” Magpie says. “We found the guy at the third club we went to, and it was brilliant.”

“What is ‘slush’?” Alona asks.

“It’s a frozen candy with mild intoxicating effects,” Jill says. “It’s like—it’s kind of like pot brownies, but mostly it just makes you silly and happy and relaxed. Safe, not addictive, you can’t overdose, and it’s amazing.”

“Did you ever use marijuana?” Alona asks Jill.

“Yeah, sometimes,” Jill says. “I used it when I was in gymnastics training, for pain, although the opiates were easier to manage. It’s legal these days—restricted to some extent, but it’s legal, and once in a while I use it, but you’re not allowed drugs while on active duty obviously so it’s been a while since I’ve had anything but alcohol. But now I really want slush.”

“I’ll see if I can find where it’ll be tonight and we can go there,” Magpie says. “Andy, are you in? I don’t know why I ask. You never are.”
“Slush isn’t my thing,” Andy says. “But I might go out with you. I’m also feeling the cabin fever.”

“How certain are you it’s not addictive or able to be overdosed on?” Matthew asks.

“It doesn’t create dependency and it doesn’t build tolerance,” Jill says. “So no one overdoses because there’s no need. They deliberately tried to overdose people with it and what happens is that if you take too much, you throw up everything in your system and pass out for twelve hours to wake with a terrible migraine. But you have to take a lot for that to happen. Like, standard slush is three candies, and these people ate, like, a hundred.”

“Did you ever use it on the streets?” Anandi asks.

“No,” Andy says. “It didn’t do enough. It really does just make you happy and giggly, and none of us were all that interested in laughing most of the time. What we loved on the streets was spice, which is from Andor and got its name from some old Earth book. It makes you see all kinds of things, which is where the name came from—that and it’s found in the desert—and the high is like nothing I’d ever experienced before or since. The best part of it is that when it kicks in it’s got a paralytic effect, so you lie there in euphoria but your body won’t move so you don’t break things or people. No one could afford enough of it or get it regularly enough to develop a true habit for it, but oh, man, that was good stuff when we could get it.”

“I did spice once,” Magpie says. “It was the only drug I ever did on the streets, and I did it exactly once because I was recovering from almost dying, everything hurt, and no one had pain meds other than heroin or cocaine, which I didn’t want. Andy gave me a dose of spice and for nineteen hours I was in heaven. Then it wore off, but by then I was doing better.”

“Is spice legal?” Matthew asks. “It sounds like something I’d like to try, to be honest.”

“It is technically a restricted drug and only available from certain doctors for very specific conditions,” Jill says. “But if you go to Andor, they sell it all over the place, and the black market has a very healthy trade in it.”

“I can get you some if you really want to try it,” Magpie says. “You can OD on it, though. If you take too much it stops your heart and your breathing, but you don’t realize you’re dying because you’re high.”

“That pesky paralytic effect,” Andy says. “It’s a weird combination of a depressant and a stimulant; physically depressing but mentally stimulating.” He sighs and pushes his hair back. “Damn, now I want it.”

“No you don’t,” Jill says, walking over to Andy and leaning down to hug her. “You want to go dancing with me and the bird and whoever else and maybe have some wine or some slush.”

“I think you’re right, I do,” Andy says, hugging back. “How dressed up are we getting tonight?”

“Well, our slush friend will be at XO,” Magpie says. “So not what we’re wearing now, but we don’t have to wear fancy dress either.”

“No, but it means I have to spend an hour on makeup,” Jill says. “So I’m going to run to my apartment in San Francisco where my dancing clothes are, and I’ll be back here in two hours and we can go out.”

“You don’t have to spend an hour on makeup,” Andy points out. “You just like the attention it gets you.”
“Yes,” Jill says. “Yes, I do. And it often gets me free drinks.” She grins, takes the transporter from Khan, leans up to kiss him on the cheek, and disappears.

“Count me in, but I also have to go change,” Jake says. “I’ll pass on the slush, though.”

“Your loss,” Magpie says. “Scary super people, who’s in?”

Khan declines, as do Bishop and Katsuro when they return. Konstantin shakes his head, and Ekaterina hesitates but decides to stay in. The other four opt to go out, which doesn’t surprise Khan in the least, and he wonders if Cat will change her mind before everyone leaves.

“We haven’t clothes for dancing, though,” Alona says. “At least, I don’t think we do.”

“Come into my parlor,” Magpie says, getting up from her worktable. She walks over to a section of wall separating the loft from the kitchen and taps a quick pattern on a blue splotch of paint. The wall slides up into the ceiling, revealing a veritable costume gallery. “I have enough makeup for a theater troupe, and enough clothes for a musical,” she says, gesturing. “It ranges in size from small enough to fit Jill to big enough to almost fit Konstantin. I say almost because I’m not convinced I have anything to fit him. Anyway, help yourself.”

“How did you wind up with all of this?” Alona asks, immediately plunging into the racks.

“I’m friends with a lot of theater people,” Magpie says. “Ever since I got the money and a place of my own, I told them I’d buy their old clothes, costumes, whatever. This way I have enough options to cover anyone should we need it in an emergency, or a non-emergency. And I like makeup, so I buy a lot of it so I can share stuff I like without worrying about bacteria. The makeup stuff is around the corner. For XO, you want fun but not too fancy. Showing skin is good, and if you don’t show skin at least make it tight. Colors or black, doesn’t matter.”

“What will you wear?” Alona asks.

“I don’t know,” Magpie says, considering it. “I’m going to go raid my closet and see what looks appealing.”

Khan looks at Bishop, amused. “I feel very staid,” he says in French. “And boring.”

“This is not your idea of a good time,” Bishop says in the same language, shrugging a shoulder. “Will Jill mind if you do not go out with her?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, she will not.”

“Then let them go out and have their fun,” Bishop says. “You and I can sit and talk, or play chess.”

“Or something,” Khan says, returning to English. “Surely there is a restaurant in this town that would suit us for an evening meal.”

“I can recommend a few,” Andy says. “But then I have to get changed and figure out what I want to look like tonight. What type of cuisine would you like?”

“Japanese, I think,” Bishop says, glancing at Katsuro, who smiles. “Something suitably adult.”

“I know exactly the place,” Andy says. “Let me work my magic and get you a reservation for… five? Four? Who’s going?”

“Four,” Cat says. “I think I am going to go dancing.”
“So four very pretty men dressed up for a night out,” Andy says. “I can work with this. Let me make you a reservation. It’s going to be jacket and tie, though.”

“We can manage that,” Bishop says. “At least, if Khan can.”

“I can,” Khan says.

“Give me three minutes,” Andy says, picking up his link. He calls someone, setting privacy mode, and smiles when they answer. He exchanges pleasantries with the person in Japanese; Khan sees Katsuro’s eyebrows raise at Andy’s lack of accent. “No, not for me,” Andy says, still in Japanese. “Four friends of mine. Can you get them in tonight? As a favor to me? No, for the tasting menu, I think. I know, I know it’s last minute, I am very sorry. But I did just fix your environmental system.” She laughs. “Thank you, Hiro. I am very grateful, and I owe you a favor.”

“Tasting menu?” Katsuro asks when Andy hangs up.

“The chef is amazing,” Andy says. “And very…particular. There is a regular menu for those who don’t want the tasting experience but it’s never, ever as good. The chef has a lot of fun with the tasting menu. It’s six courses with sake pairings, and almost impossible to get reservations less than two months out.”

“So how did you manage to get four people in for tonight?” Bishop asks.

“The chef’s son, who manages the restaurant—that’s Hiro, the guy I was talking to. I’ve done work for him before, still do on occasion,” Andy says. “He likes me, and they always hold a couple tables back for things like this. Either that or he’s about to call someone else and ruin their plans, I don’t know which. But he’s good at fitting in last minute requests. And…there. I’ve sent the location to your links, and now I am going to run back to my loft and find suitable clothing. You’ll need to be at the restaurant a little before eight to be seated on time.”

She picks up her bag, her own transporter, and shimmers out of existence.

Over the next two hours, people come and go, leaving to change and returning once suitably dressed for the night’s plans. Jill, to Khan’s lack of surprise, is the last one to return, but when she does he sees why she took so long. She straightened her hair; it comes almost to her knees, and is in fact longer than the very short silver dress she wears. Khan looks at the dress and wonders if she can dance in it without breaking local nudity laws.

“Okay, that is a fucking lot of work to do for a night out,” Alona says, looking at the smooth tresses. “Why did you do it?”

“Because guys—and girls—love it,” Jill says, sweeping her hair over her shoulder. “Also this.” She turns and Khan inhales sharply, seeing the dragon against her skin; the dress has no back, and every centimeter of the dragon is revealed against her skin. “I’m actually going to braid it into a coronet, but I was running late.”

“I lay odds on six,” Magpie says, finishing her own makeup.

“Only six? I think more like eleven,” Jill says, taking a careful seat and beginning to braid her hair. “Andy?”

“In that dress, with that tat…I say fourteen,” Andy says.

“What are you betting on?” Alona asks.
“How many guys are going to try and pick me up,” Jill says. “I’m short, reasonably attractive, and showing a lot of skin. It’s just a question of how many.”

“Guys only?” Alona asks.

“There could be some women, or non-binary, in there,” Jill says. “But guys are more likely, and we’re not going to a queer club.”

“Clubs still segregate by sexual orientation?” Alona asks. “That’s not too surprising.”

“Some are more diverse than others,” Magpie says. “XO is a slightly older crowd, by which I mean people around Jill’s and my age rather than barely legal. Music tends to stuff like Ando-pop, which is fun to dance to. But the majority of people going there are hetero or mostly hetero, and pretty much all human. If you want a truly alien experience, we can take you to Synth after, but that’s very much an anything goes club, and I mean anything. If you can afford it you can buy it there.”

“Murder?” Matthew asks.

Magpie nods. “Sex, drugs, murder, the only thing they draw the line at is rape and that’s questionable depending on who’s behind the bar. I have safe passage through that club, and anyone I take with me can get a pass of safe conduct, but otherwise it could get nasty. But if you want a fight…”

“Not tonight,” Alona says, mildly surprising Khan. “How legal is it?”

“If legality is in San Francisco this club’s on Qo’noS,” Jill says. “I went once. It was an… interesting experience.”

“I’ve heard of it, I’ve never been,” Jake says, dressed up himself in slim black pants and a black shirt that shimmers when it catches the light. His hair has a similar shimmer to it, and he has iridescent studs in his ears.

“I know the owner,” Magpie says. “Well, I know his online identity, we’ve never met in person. But all the illegal clubs know me, and all of them give me safe passage because otherwise they know I will bring down their networks and expose their secrets.” She grins in satisfaction, flexing her hands. “Because I’m a bitch that way.”

“No, just practical,” Jill says. “They wouldn’t hesitate to take you out otherwise.”

“True,” Magpie says. “Do you want a crown for your braids?”

Jill snorts. “Are you actually serious?”

“I have a tiara I think would look good on you,” Magpie says, getting up. Her own clothes sparkle in shades of silver and purple, although they cover more of her than Jill’s dress does. “Let me find it. We could always convince someone you were royalty for the night.”

“That didn’t work so well the last time we tried it,” Andy says.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I had a great time,” Jill says, laughing.

“Did you actually have sex with him?” Magpie asks.

“Um,” Jill says. “I don’t actually remember.”
“How do you not remember if you had sex? It’s not like flipping a light switch,” Matthew says. “Or leaving the gas on.”

“There was a lot of alcohol involved,” Jill says. “I woke up with my shirt on but without pants, and the guy in bed next to me had an undershirt and a sock on, and we couldn’t find any physical evidence we’d fucked but we weren’t entirely willing to say we hadn’t, either. It’s my Schrödinger’s fuck.”

“Did you actually have sex with him after that?” Alona asks.

“I did,” Jill says. “He took me for a lovely four-day vacation in Barbados and we spent it either fucking or swimming.”

“Yes, now tell them how old you were,” Andy says.

“Um,” Jill says. “Seventeen?”

"Okay, that’s accurate,” Magpie says. “If you’d said twenty I was going to throw something at you.”

“You were seventeen and you disappeared to Barbados for four days with a random guy?” Matthew’s eyebrows wing up. “Not to be the prude here, but what about your parents?”

Jill shrugs. “I told them I was going to a retreat with Jake for a few days, they bought it, I had my link so they could call, Jake didn’t blow my cover. And he wasn’t that random. He was the son of my gymnastics coach’s ex-wife.”

“I’m missing how this translates into convincing someone you were royalty,” Maeve admits.

“It gets really complicated,” Jill says. “And the royalty thing was due to a job, and yeah, anyway, let’s not go back there because I want to go out, not stay in reliving past glories all night.”

She slips her shoes on, carefully, and when she stands up Khan blinks. “How high are those heels?” he asks.

“Five inches,” Jill says. “But about two inches of that is platform. These are super comfortable to dance in.” She extends a leg, studying the glittery black shoe on her foot. “Also in a pinch the heels come off and they make great ballet flats and the heels make a good improvised weapon.”

“Okay, now you’ve sold me,” Alona says. “Can you show me?”

“No, because it’s only designed to do it once and then the shoes are done for until you get them fixed,” Jill says. “And I really like these shoes as they are.”


“We certainly are,” Bishop says. “Magpie, is it acceptable to you if we reconvene here later?”

“Yeah, of course,” Magpie says. “Mi casa es su casa, or whatever.”

“Close enough although your accent is atrocious,” Anandi says, laughing.

“Sorry,” Magpie says. “I’ve never been to Spain.”

“It is lovely,” Anandi says with a wistful smile. “Sunny and warm and oh, the beaches. I miss it.”
“But you ruled South America, didn’t you?” Jill asks.

“I did,” Anandi says. “I ceded Spain to Bishop, as part of Western Europe, and went to South America. My capital was in Brazil, actually. Fortunately I speak Portuguese.”

“Who had North America?” Jake asks.

“His name was Erich.” Khan says. “He…did not always agree with us, and we all thought it best if he went somewhere that was more geographically isolated, rather than the closeness of Europe or Asia. He died in the beginning of the humans’ rebellion against us. It was a strange thing, a sickness that his body could not fight off. We were never able to get his body to test, and we never heard of it again, but it was…disturbing to know that illness had felled one of us.”

“I can see that,” Jill says. “You can tell me more about him later, but now, it is time to go dance and have slush and some alcohol and a lovely time.” She walks over to Khan and leans up to kiss him lightly. “Have a good dinner, my dragon.”

“I will,” he says, brushing his knuckles down her cheek. “Be careful.”

“I usually am,” Jill says. She turns away from him, deliberately posing to let him study the dragon on her back for a moment. Khan smiles and almost wishes they were staying in, but that can wait for later.

Those going to the club head out on foot. “Shall we, brothers?” Konstantin asks. “We can transport ourselves a few blocks away easily.”

“Let us, then,” Khan says, setting his own transporter with the coordinates Konstantin gives him.

They find the restaurant easily enough, and Katsuro moves forward to speak with the host. “My friend Andy called in earlier,” he says politely. “I believe there is a reservation in his name.”

“Yes, of course,” the host says, smiling. “I’m the one she spoke to. Please, follow me.” He does gives Khan’s wings a slightly dubious glance. “I certainly hope our chairs will be comfortable for you, sir.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Khan says politely.

It is, especially since they have a table in a corner where he can let his wings relax a bit without worrying he’ll knock into someone. Hiro hurries off and returns with tea and glasses of water. “The first course will be out shortly, along with the sake,” he says. “Michiko will be your server tonight, if there’s anything she can do please do not hesitate to ask.” He bows briefly and leaves them.

“It has been a long, long time since the four of us had a meal like this,” Bishop says once Hiro is gone, using Russian.

“I don’t think we ever have,” Konstantin says. “It was always the five of us, and we have not had a meal together since Rani died.” He reaches over, touching Khan’s hand.

“It’s all right,” Khan says. “I miss her, I always will, but things are different now.”

“Things are very different now,” Bishop agrees. “Is that entirely a good thing?”

“No,” Khan says and laughs. “And yet, Bishop, I feel alive again.”

“As do we all, I think,” Katsuro says. “We are not, I am afraid, designed for peace, for the easy
way out."

“We keep the peace,” Konstantin says. “That means we must be ready to spill blood.”

"Are we ready?" Katsuro asks.

“Almost,” Khan says at the same time as Bishop.

“Not yet,” Bishop continues. “Soon. Another week, perhaps two.”

“I think that all the time we likely have,” Khan says. “Marcus is up to something and I do not yet know what it is but it is unlikely to advantage us.”

“He may…” Bishop trails off as the first course arrives. “He may be finding a way to destroy the cryotubes without letting on that he has done so,” he continues after Michiko has left. “We must be realistic. The odds of us recovering the rest of our family are low.”

“Yes, I know,” Khan says. He sighs, takes a sip of quite good sake. “In truth I never thought to have you all back. The eight of you is more than I ever hoped for, and if we…if we lose the rest, we will survive.”

“They aren’t dead yet,” Konstantin says. “Let us not mourn until they are.”

“No,” Khan agrees. “We have no cause to mourn.”

“Once we had a planet against us,” Katsuro says. “Now it is we who are against an empire.”

“Our odds are better this time,” Bishop says.

“Yes, they are,” Khan says. He smiles a little, shakes his head. “All because she thought I looked…sad.”

“Brother,” Konstantin says, but stops.

“Ask,” Khan says.

“Is it possible that Rani influenced her, just a bit? Just to draw her attention to you?” Konstantin asks.

More than an objection, the idea makes revulsion twist in Khan’s stomach. “No,” he says before he finds breath to explain why. “No. Rani and Jill are very separate people, and whatever Rani may be doing now, there is no evidence she can influence anything more than dreams and visions. Jill is perceptive and curious on her own, and impulsive enough to do exactly what she did. Rani may have set things in motion years ago, with Andy, and perhaps with Magpie, but she did not influence Jill. I can’t explain why but I know that.”


“It’s because everything hinged on that,” Katsuro says. “Because whatever Rani set up, she couldn’t see past that point. Had Jill not seen you, none of us would be here. Had Jill seen you and done nothing, the same. Rani could not influence her actions, because it was so critical to everything that followed and Jill had to have the free will to choose.”

Khan tilts his head, studying his brother. “You sound as though you have given this a lot of thought.”
“Some, perhaps,” Katsuro says. “I think that Rani, in some fashion, has seen this eventual scenario approaching, and has done her best in whatever fashion she can to aid us. But I don’t think she can influence our actions directly. She can’t take away free will.”

“I would agree, but I’m curious why and how you came to that conclusion,” Khan says.

“She has sent us dreams,” Katsuro says. “Visions. Cryptic messages we can only hope to interpret correctly, and we know not whether what she intends us to see and what we see are the same thing. The only person who has actually interacted with her is Andy, and there is a biological tie there. Even then, though, she did not stop Andy from anything. She talked to Andy, and convinced him not to shoot up, but she did not actually stop him. I don’t think she could have.”

“Do you think her message is getting lost in translation?” Bishop asks.

“I think it possible that the message we have been receiving is not what she sends,” Katsuro says. “It is, in my opinion, an imperfect translation from what Rani wants us to dream. As such, they are often confusing and alarming, but while I think Rani would want us to be on guard, she would not want us to be frightened.”

“She had no fear,” Khan murmurs. “She feared nothing and no one. She made me afraid for her, but she…”

“That’s not true,” Konstantin says. “She was afraid of losing you. She almost never slept when you were traveling, and she rarely slept when you were on patrol. She hated that she couldn’t be there with you, and she feared for your safety and your sanity without her.”

Khan looks at him, honestly dumbfounded. “I never…she never told me any of this, nor did our people,” he says, reverting to Hindi out of shock. “I would call her, when I was away, and she would admit she missed me, but that she was relaxing and taking care of household details. The times I called her at night she even sounded like she had been sleeping. She…” He shakes his head, unsettled all over again.

“She was the lion-tamer, and the lion-tamer never shows weakness to the lion,” Bishop says. “She didn’t fear you, Khan, but she loved you, and it is natural to fear losing what you love. As I think you would know.”

Khan says nothing to that, but takes a drink of sake.

“In my dreams it is Katya who I can’t save,” Konstantin says. “There is always something, and I reach her in time to hold her as she dies.”

“Six times,” Katsuro says. “I have so far dreamed Bishop’s death six times.”

“I stopped counting, they all felt similar,” Bishop says. “Did you think it was just you, brother?”

“Actually, I did,” Khan says slowly. “The few times we discussed them, you had mentioned seeing Jill’s death, or her being missing. No one had mentioned anyone else’s death, and so I thought she was the key, not the…not a partner.”

“Well and she is, in a way,” Bishop says. “I have also dreamed of us needing to find her. I have not dreamed her death, but she has been missing in many of my dreams. The only person I have seen die is Katsuro.”

“I see you die,” Konstantin says to Khan. “Not as often as I see Katya, but I see both of you in my dreams.”
“I only see Jill,” Khan says. He looks at Konstantin and isn’t quite sure what to say.

“I knew you first,” Konstantin says in Russian. “I loved you first. I love you both, and I need you both, and to lose either of you would be to lose half my soul, for I have not one that isn’t part of you or her.”

“And now the Russian sentimentality gets to us, three courses of sake in,” Bishop says to ease the moment.

Khan smiles a little and reaches for Konstantin’s hand. “Kostenka,” he says. His own name, as Kostya is for Ekaterina. “You and she were the ones I knew I had to free first.”

“The unholy trinity,” Konstantin says, smiling back. “But I am not surprised you do not dream of our deaths.”

“Why is that?” Bishop asks before Khan can.

“Because he already lost us,” Konstantin says. “In his time awake, before Jill, and then before Jill woke us, he did not have us. He had to learn to live without us, so he knows that it is possible. Dreaming of our deaths is nothing new to Khan, and living without us is something he knows all too well. There is no purpose in his dreaming of it now.”

“We always forgot he was the smartest one in the room until he actually opened his mouth,” Bishop says. “Then we sat there and marveled again at his brilliance.”

“But—on that note, although I agree,” Khan says. “You think these dreams are meant to evoke some kind of emotion?”

“I do,” Konstantin says. “It is as Katsuro said, Rani would want us to be on guard, but it comes across as frightening. The dreams are imbued with her urgency to tell us the message, and if she can understand our response at all, she would be looking for an emotional response to the dream. So we dream of losing those closest to us, those without whom we are not ourselves.”

“I am curious who Anandi sees,” Khan says after a pause.

“Now there is a good question,” Bishop says. “Has she ever told you?”

Khan shakes his head. “She rarely speaks of hers.”

“She rarely speaks of many things,” Konstantin says. “Anandi has always been one to keep her own counsel.”

“We could ask,” Bishop says. “For that matter, I would ask Matthew who dies in his dreams.”

“Surely we know that answer,” Katsuro says. “Andy may not realize it, but he is in love with her.”

“It is not a state in which I’ve ever seen him before,” Bishop says. “But you are correct.”

“He might also dream of Alona,” Konstantin says. “Any of those three likely dream about the others.”

“And Cat?” Bishop asks.

“What do you think? She dreams as I do,” Konstantin says. “But she always has.”

“I did not know she had nightmares,” Katsuro says.
“Oh, yes,” Konstantin says. “Not often, necessarily, but she does, and always has.”

“We appear to be learning all kinds of new things tonight,” Bishop says. “Quite an accomplishment for four men who have known each other centuries.”

“If we ever know all there is to know about each other, we will be very boring,” Konstantin says.

“Thus speaks the philosopher,” Bishop says, laughing.

“Thus speaks the scholar,” Khan corrects. “Kostenka was never limited to one discipline. In truth, he knows more than most of us combined, for he knows what we all know and then more.”

“It is unlike you to be so generous with your words,” Konstantin says, studying him. “Are you feeling quite all right?”

Khan has to laugh. “I compliment you and you ask about my health.” He covers Konstantin’s hand with his own briefly. “No. I am fine. I…am choosing to be grateful for what I have tonight, rather than worry about things I cannot help.”

“A wise choice,” Konstantin says. “Let us be grateful we are here, and perhaps we can pay more attention to the food, as this is quite good.”

“Ever practical,” Khan says solemnly.

“Food is an art as much as anything else, and should be appreciated for its beauty and its essence before being consumed,” Konstantin says. Khan says nothing, not entirely sure Konstantin was serious but also not sure he wasn’t, either. But after a pause, Konstantin laughs. “And part of being a philosopher is that you can spout reasonable sounding bullshit about anything. But this is an excellent meal and we should appreciate it.”

“Yes, we should,” Bishop says.

They do, and Khan makes a note to thank Andy for the assistance, because it really is the best meal he’s had this century. It even makes Katsuro smile in approval, and that happens rarely. The sake isn’t nearly enough to intoxicate them, but still, Khan feels fairly relaxed by the time they finally ask Michiko for the bill.

“Oh, there isn’t one, sir,” she says. “Hiro says to tell Andy this is one off her tab, that’s all.”

“I’m curious what the tab stands at now,” Khan says, not really expecting an answer.

“Well, she saved the restaurant, so basically whatever he wants,” Michiko says, smiling.

“Could you share that story?” Katsuro asks. “Please.”

“Of course,” Michiko says. “It’s fairly simple. Our environmental system went offline during a heat wave right after we’d taken delivery of two days’ worth of fish and seafood. Millions of credits’ worth of perishables we couldn’t easily replace. Hiro called a repairman but the repairman couldn’t fix it, so Hiro called Andy, who came in and patched it back online before the coolers lost more than a degree. Andy told Hiro to pay her later. I don’t think Andy ever sent a bill, so Hiro just added up the value of what we would have lost and that’s his tab.”

“What was actually wrong with the system?” Katsuro asks.

“I have no idea, sorry,” Michiko says. “I just know it took a repairman three hours to say he
couldn’t identify the problem, we’d have to take the whole system down for diagnostics, which
would have knocked us offline for a week or longer. It took Andy forty minutes to find the
problem and fix it.” She shakes her head. “She’s a genius, even if she’s a bit weird.”

“Most people are a bit weird, I think,” Konstantin says genially.

Michiko smiles. “Yes, of course. Please tell Andy Hiro sends his regards.”

“We will,” Khan says. “Thank you.”

They leave the restaurant and begin walking, none of them in any particular hurry to get anywhere.
A woman calls to them from outside a small club; curious, Bishop stops, and they get invited to a
show of close-up magic.

Bishop raises his eyebrows at Khan. “So?”

Khan shrugs. “Why not?”

By the time the show ends, it’s after one in the morning, and none of them particularly want to
walk home. So they transport themselves back to Magpie’s nest.

No one else is there, so they make themselves at home. Katsuro goes to make tea, Bishop and
Konstantin settle in to play chess, and Khan pulls up a spare computer to check his mail and make
sure he hasn’t missed anything. He doesn’t see anything, but spends a satisfactory hour researching
long-haul starship design.

Then a message lands in his inbox. Magpie, he knows from the anonymous address, but what is
this?

This is the girl you’re crazy about. She’s just crazy.

Attached is a video file. Khan downloads it and sets it to play once it finishes. He sits back on his
stool, crossing his arms over his chest, wondering exactly what Jill got herself into this time.

Chapter End Notes

The Erich thing and the sickness are actually inspired by/taken from the Khan
backstory comic that came out after STID. In the comic, there were thousands of
augments, maybe more, but someone engineered an illness that used their own
physiology against them and almost killed all of them. I think I remember Erich being
the name of the guy in North America, but I might be wrong about that. Anyway, there
you go.

(The comic started coming out long after I started writing, but I've used bits of it where
I felt it helpful. The portable transporter thing is entirely from the comic in which
Khan invented it, and Khan's attack on Praxxis, the Klingon moon, is directly from the
comic as well.)
Three in the morning. Not my favorite hour, no; that is an hour earlier, at two. I like two in the morning because it was quiet, on the streets, and I could sit outside (not that I usually had an inside) and listen to the nothing.

I like quiet. I like being on my own, having my privacy. After so long without it, I crave it, and much as I love Magpie and Jill, much as I love my uncle, there are times when I need to be completely alone.

But I’m awake at three and I don’t want to be alone, and my hand hesitates on the comm-link. He told me to call him, true; that doesn’t mean I feel comfortable with it.

Three-fifteen. I opt to send him a text message, rather than call; I may be a coward but if he doesn’t respond, that’s fine. I’ll make myself some tea, do some yoga, take a hammer to some broken parts if I feel like it.

I can be there in two minutes. Do you want me to be?

Before I talk myself out of it, I send back a simple Yes. and get up to go put the kettle on. Matthew might want coffee but I never learned how to make it, so he’ll either get tea or make it himself.

The water hasn’t boiled yet when I hear the sound of a transporter. Matthew materializes in jeans and a green t-shirt, and carries a hoodie in one hand. “I forgot shoes,” he says when he sees me try not to laugh at his bare feet. “If I have to run through the streets I’ll worry about then, although what size are you?”

“Not one you can wear,” I say, smiling. “There’s water heating for tea, but if you want coffee you’re on your own.”

“No, tea’s fine,” Matthew says. “Something green, maybe, or oolong?”

“Green, I think,” I say, going to my tea cabinet. I find a good blend, one with a bit of mint in it, and set the pot to brew. “Thank you for…” I stop, not sure what to say that won’t offend him somehow.

“I’m your friend,” Matthew says. “If I’m nothing else, Andy, I’m your friend, and friends do this for each other. By this I mean show up at three in the morning, have tea, talk about existential
crises and all that shite.”

I smile a little. “I could use a hug,” I say softly. “While the tea’s steeping, of course.”

“Of course,” Matthew says and holds out his arms. I step into them, and he holds me close. I’m not short but he’s taller than me—taller than Khan by a little, I think—and my head fits against his shoulder fairly well. “You want to talk about it?” Matthew asks, not letting go of me.

“No,” I say honestly. “Maybe over tea.”

“Tea makes everything better,” Matthew agrees.

I have to laugh. “Says the Irishman.”

“Hey, Ireland drinks more tea than England,” Matthew says. “Or did, once upon a time. No idea how it is now.”

“I’m sure we could find out if we really wanted,” I say. “Which I don’t.”

“I have better ways to spend my time,” Matthew says, laughing.

I do like his laugh. Unlike my uncle, Matthew laughs easily and often, and he makes me smile.

“The tea’s ready,” I say, pulling away from Matthew to fill our mugs. I hand him the honey pot, because I know he likes sweetener in his tea, and it’s all comfortable and strangely intimate.

Intimacy issues, Jill says, and I’ve never denied it. Between her, Magpie, and myself we have enough issues we could keep a few therapists in business for decades. But we manage.

Matthew and I take seats in my living room, on my couch, and I look at my mug and say nothing. I’m not ready to talk about it yet.

“Will you answer a question for me?” Matthew asks, and I look up at him. “It’s—in my time, right, there was more acceptance of alternative lifestyles and, well, genders than there seems to be now. Usually societal shift is toward acceptance, and given some of the other things I’ve seen accepted in modern society, non-binary gender seems such a minor thing. Why is it such a problem, still?”

“There are a lot of answers to that question, and I don’t know all of them, but I can tell you what I do know,” I say, tucking a lock of hair back. “And unfortunately, you’re not going to like the answer.”

“Tell me,” Matthew says, leaning forward.

“After you left the planet,” I say. “The Eugenics Wars were over, but there was a really big… backlash against any kind of medical—well, almost anything that wasn’t lifesaving. Transgender medical options were, as I understand it, fairly established, but there was a push from some quadrant to do away with it or make it harder to get. That didn’t work, thankfully, because there was so much evidence in favor of gender dysphoria, but societal attitudes changed, and being either agender or genderfluid was seen as less…acceptable.”

I take a sip of my tea. “Fast-forward through some more time and we met the Vulcans, and—I’ve never met one, so I can’t tell you if it’s true or not, but they’re very…traditional. And it’s all logic to them. And they don’t actually see the logic in non-binary gender. They think it a mental condition that needs changing, not an identity of its own. So that’s also had a lot of influence with things. Vulcan has been a really strong ally of Earth—they were the first to come here. And I don’t think Earth society is as accepting as you may think it to be.”
“And we’ve never met a non-binary species,” Matthew says.

“We haven’t,” I agree. “I hope to, someday, to find out what it’s like to grow up where that is an option, or the only option.”

“Do you think we should do away with the binary entirely?” Matthew asks.

I shake my head. “There’s no way we can. Humans are a binary species, and all humanoids we’ve met so far are also binary. There are some people who see themselves as outside the binary, and I’d rather we work to find ways for them to be part of society without everyone wanting to put them in a binary box.”

“You say we and them like you’re not one of them,” Matthew observes.

I shrug. “Even by genderfluid standards I’m a bit odd,” I say. “I’m not agender, I’m not a they or a zie. I’m Andy, and sometimes I use male pronouns and sometimes I use female pronouns, because I identify with both and neither. I’ve never looked for or found support within the genderfluid community on Earth. I don’t know as I want to start now.”

“No, of course not,” Matthew says. “What you do is up to you. I’m just…you view yourself as so alone most of the time.”

“I like being alone,” I say. “But I’m not. I have Magpie and Jill. And now Khan, and…”

“And me,” Matthew finishes where I trail off.

“Yes,” I say softly.

“And the rest of us, really,” Matthew says. “We’re kind of a package deal.”

“I have learned that,” I say, smiling. “To be fair, Jill and Magpie and I are one, too.”

“Aye, you are,” Matthew says. “And Jake.”

“Jake, too,” I say. “Although he’s not mine, not the way Jill is.”

“No, of course not,” Matthew says. “But still.” He takes a sip of tea. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I look down at my cup. “My dreams are different than yours,” I say slowly. “You all get visions and suggestions of what might be, but no real clarity as to what it all means. I have dreams with similar themes, but there’s—I know when something’s true, when something is a real message. I don’t know how to explain it, just that when I think about my dreams, if I figure out what the meaning is it just—I know.”

“I believe you,” Matthew says. “It makes sense for you. You’re the one with a blood tie to Rani. If anyone would get a clear message, it would be you.”

“Not even Khan?” I ask.

Matthew sighs. “I think, based on some conversations I’ve had, that she can’t contact him directly, except through dreams. I have some theories as to why, but I’m pretty sure it’s true. Honestly it wouldn’t surprise me if his dreams are more confusing than ours.”

“I don’t think they are,” I say. “But I think I agree with your point.”
“What message came clear to you tonight?” Matthew asks.

I take a sip of tea, stalling because if I say the words, they become real. But. “I don’t think we’re all going to survive this,” I say quietly. “I don’t know who, and I don’t know how, but I am…I think we won’t get through this without casualties.”

“I wouldn’t disagree,” Matthew says steadily. “If it helps, I think you’re likely to survive.”

“It doesn’t,” I say. “I’m not…I don’t want to die, but I came so close so many times I’m not really scared of it. But I can’t lose my family. Magpie, Jill, Khan, you…I can’t lose you.”

“You put me on the list,” Matthew says. “I didn’t think you would.”

“I don’t know what we are,” I say. “I don’t know what I want us to be, beyond friends.”

“That’s all we have to be,” Matthew says. “If that’s all you ever want, that’s all we have to be.”

“Does it matter to you?” I ask. “You know my biological sex, you know what’s under my clothes. Do you care?”

“No,” Matthew says. “Why should I? You’re still Andy, beautiful and unique, and knowing the sex you were born as doesn’t change the fact that you’re not one gender.”

“Both and neither,” I say softly.

“Yes,” Matthew says. “Who died in your dream?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I dreamed of death, of faces I didn’t know burning. I looked for you, all of you, but the smoke and flames…when I woke, I was coughing, and I couldn’t stop for a while.”

“You didn’t see any faces you knew?” Matthew asks.

I shake my head. “No, but they were human faces.”

Matthew shakes his head. “I don’t know. Maybe the rest of us won’t survive, those in cryosleep. Maybe we can’t stop the war. Do your dreams give you any indication?”

“No,” I say. “I haven’t dreamed about war, not galactic war, but I don’t know. It’s possible Rani can’t see that far ahead.”

“Everyone’s dreams tend to stop on Qo’noS,” Matthew says.

"Yes," I say. “They do, don’t they? I don’t know what Magpie and I are going to do when you go there. We can’t go with you. We just can’t.”

“No, of course not, and no one has ever suggested you should,” Matthew says. “We’re going to beg the Femarans for asylum while we go to and from Qo’noS, so I would think you and Magpie can hang out there. Or you can stay on Earth and we’ll find you when we return.”

“We’ll see what’s easier,” I say. “I just…hate the idea of you all going off to do this and me sitting at home safe.”

“Andy, you’re not a fighter and you don’t belong on a battlefield,” Matthew says. “You’ve done so much for us, over and over. Delachiara happened because of us, Andy, not because of you.”

“I know that, actually,” I say. “But it’s not that simple.” I take a sip of tea to wet my dry mouth. “I
first met Delachiara when I was seventeen,” I say. “I was already a whore at that point, already on coke but I wasn’t…that was when I was using just to get through the day rather than using just to use. Anyway, he found me, and he offered me…a lot of money to go with him. I didn’t know who he was at that point, but I knew a bad deal when I saw one, and I said no. But he kept asking. When we got off the streets, he stopped pursuing me for a bit, but he’s always been—I never thought he was just going to give up.”

“You weren’t a whore,” Matthew says.

“I had sex with men for money so I could buy drugs,” I say clearly. “Yes, I was. I was a whore and a junkie and a freak, and it’s a miracle I am where I am today. It’s not a pejorative term, Matthew, it’s just realistic.”

“I don’t like it,” Matthew says, scowling.

“Neither did I,” I say.

His frown fades. “Point, but…”

I close my eyes for a moment. “I’m tired,” I say. “I’m tired and there is a bottle of spicewine in my cabinet that sounds really damn appealing right now.” I open my eyes. “I won’t drink it, but I want to.”

“I know,” Matthew says. “Both parts. Do you want to sleep? I can stay and keep you company.”

“I do, but…” I hesitate. “I never let people up into my loft area.”

“We can sleep on the couch, or the floor,” he says. “Do you have an inflatable mattress or anything?”

I want to tell him no, it’s fine, we can use my bed. But only Jill and Magpie have ever been up there, and I just don’t know how I feel about showing that area of my place to Matthew. So I finish my tea and get up. “The couch folds out into a futon,” I say. “It’s actually fairly comfortable.”

We unfold the futon, and I get a couple pillows and a blanket from the linen closet. We settle on it, lying on our sides to face each other. Matthew reaches out, slowly and deliberately, and brushes my hair back. He gave me plenty of time to avoid or refuse, and…that means a lot to me. He doesn’t usually touch me without asking if it’s all right, either verbally or implicitly.

“You can come over here, if you want,” Matthew says. “I don’t kick or snore.”

“You don’t but you do talk in your sleep,” I say, smiling. But I move over, and I let myself settle against Matthew’s chest, my head on his shoulder and his arm around me.

“Is this okay?” he asks, stroking my hair.

“Yeah,” I say, closing my eyes. “This is…this is good.”

When I fall asleep again, I don’t dream.
Yes, I actually do know what Andy's biological sex is, and no, I'm not sharing that information. I was really struggling with how to write this without referencing it, and opted for first person because Andy doesn't need to use pronouns to refer to himself.
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

The floor...is lava. Jill level.

Chapter Notes

The first half of this chapter was written after the last half of last chapter, but for story reasons it made sense to split them up. Sadly the remainder of the chapter proved difficult to write and thus the delay (also I had a new story bite me hard). I humbly beg your forgiveness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A nightclub, he sees, with a stage full of metal poles of various shapes, sizes, and angles. “All right, ladies and gentlemen,” a voice says over the loudspeaker. “By this point you’ve all had enough to drink and imbibe that some of you should be feeling brave enough for our nightly Floor is Lava challenge. For those of you who haven’t been here for one of these, it’s very simple. You get to come onto the stage, we give you five minutes, and you have to stay off the floor for those five minutes. Everything on the stage is fair game except the floor. We have not had someone beat the five minute challenge in three weeks, so we’re due for a winner. Who’s up?”

The video speeds through a few things, set up most likely, and then Khan sees Jill walk onto the stage, barefoot, hair braided around her head, glass in her hand. She tosses back the last of her drink, hands the glass to the stage attendant, and grabs the first metal pole, swinging herself around it and up into the air.

She moves through the scattered metal poles easily, swinging herself from one to another and back, landing occasionally on one of the small platforms attached to the poles. When the stage itself starts moving Khan wonders for a moment if it’s just illusion, but he sees Jill laugh and almost lose her grip on a pole for a moment before she recovers.

At about three minutes her braids fall down, and at three minutes and thirteen seconds she pauses to hang upside down, suspended by her knees from a pole parallel to the floor. The stage spins around her and she dances to the music with her arms, earning cheers and laughter from the crowd, before she swings upright, flips herself over and grabs another pole.

“If you make it ten minutes, we’ll give you a million credits,” the announcer says at about 4:32 when Jill stops on a platform to dance along with whatever song is playing.

She laughs. “Two million and you’ve got a deal.”

“Make it to ten and we’ll do it,” the announcer says.

“I need a drink,” Jill says, laughing again. “Get me a shot of vodka and I’ll give you your ten minutes.”
Almost immediately one of the bartenders runs onto the stage with a glass. Jill leans down, takes the glass, knocks back the drink, hands the glass back and grabs another pole, this time clearly using it to show off instead of move to another part of the stage.

Khan really wants to know when she learned how to dance like this, athletic and sexual all in one, the dragon bold on her back. By the end of the ten minutes she’s clearly flagging, but she makes it without falling, and earns herself a standing ovation from the crowd when she finally slides down the last pole and lands on the stage.

“That was incredible,” the announcer says. “Hall of Fame worthy. We’ve never had anyone make it the full ten minutes before.”

“Worth three million credits, isn’t it,” Jill says, accepting another drink from a bartender.

“How about two million and a bottle of Andorian red?” the announcer asks.

A low murmur runs through the crowd, and Jill whistles. “I will take that deal,” she says. “What’s the year on the red?”

“I’ve got ’37 and ’42,” the announcer says.

“’42,” Jill says without hesitation.

“You would know that, wouldn’t you,” the announcer says wryly. “Deal. Two million credits and a bottle of ’42 Andorian red.”

“I am designating my friend here to sign paperwork and take custody of those things for me,” Jill says, pointing at someone—Khan guesses either Andy or Magpie. “Me, I’m going to go sit down for a minute.”

The video cuts out then, and Khan shakes his head, smiling in spite of himself. He looks at the clock, and it tells him it’s just past three, so theoretically everyone should be back soon. Maybe.

As if answering his unspoken thought, the door opens and people begin piling into Magpie’s nest, Matthew actually carrying a still-barefoot Jill. “Hey, brother, come get your crazy girl,” Matthew says over Jill’s giggles.

“Did Magpie send you the video?” Jill asks through laughter, reaching for Khan when he comes over to them. He takes her, letting her wrap her legs around his waist.

“She did,” he says. “Why did you do it?”

“Because I could, and I knew I’d win,” Jill says. “And now we have two million credits to play with and a bottle of Andorian red.”

“What is Andorian red?” Khan asks.

“Technically illegal,” Magpie says. “It’s spicewine. Part Andorian wine, part spice, the exact proportions are unknown by anyone except the winemaker, and it’s highly, highly prized and almost impossible to find off Andor. Hell, it’s almost impossible to find on Andor.”

“Spicewine, if it’s made properly, will make you feel absolutely incredible for a few hours without a hangover,” Jill says. “I had a very small glass once, and it felt like a full-body orgasm that lasted half an hour. One bottle should be enough for the baker’s dozen of us, and it is an out of this galaxy amazing experience. I figure we’ll save it and share it after we beat the Klingons.”
“Why did you ask about the year?” Khan asks.

“Anything made before about ‘40 is chancy,” Jill says. “Most of Andor’s wine and spicewine gets stored in two facilities after it’s made. In ’41 there was a really bad cold freeze that caused one of those facilities to go offline for a couple weeks, so there’s no guarantee the ’37 was stored safely and is still drinkable.”

“How do you know all this?” Matthew asks, fascinated.

“I actually learned about this from Trevor, who is a huge wine lover and has hundreds of bottles in his cellar,” Jill says. “He got his hands on a bottle of ’39 spicewine, and was fortunate enough that it had been stored properly—that’s where I had it. But he told me if I ever got a chance to get Andorian red, go for anything after ’41. Spicewine can last up to fifty years if it’s properly stored, but we just don’t know.”

“I would love to see the bottle,” Anandi says.

“Andy has it,” Jill says, dropping to the floor.

“I do,” Andy says, setting a black cloth bag on one of Magpie’s work tables. She opens it and takes out a bottle—larger than a standard bottle of wine, Khan notes. The liquid inside is a deep, vibrant red, and shimmers in the light. Looking closely, Khan sees it sparkle, as if the wine has tiny pieces of glitter in it. “The spice is what makes it sparkle,” Andy explains. “On its own, spice is really boring brown, but mix it with alcohol and it turns iridescent gold.”

“I want to try it,” Alona says.

“Yes, but not now,” Jill says. “Andorian red needs an occasion, not just a “hey we have it, let’s drink it” thing. When we beat the Klingons, we’ll drink it all.”

“I’ll keep this safe,” Andy says. “I’m the one who can, since I won’t drink it by chance.”

“Will you drink it at all?” Matthew asks.

“I’ll have a small glass,” Andy says after a moment. “That should be safe enough.”

“If you don’t feel comfortable with it, you don’t—“ Matthew says hesitantly.

“I know,” Andy says, smiling a little. “It’s okay, Matthew. I mean, I do drink alcohol on occasion, and I had slush earlier. I won’t ever take coke again, but once in a while I let myself indulge in legal substances, if I’m really careful about it.”

Matthew steps a little closer to Andy. “I admire you,” he says softly, probably not meaning to be overheard. “What you did, getting clean—that took an incredible amount of strength, and to stay clean for so long—you’ve earned my respect ten times over. I just—I don’t want you to put yourself in a bad position.”

“I won’t,” Andy says, dropping into Japanese. “Spice isn’t physically addictive from one dose. Psychologically, oh yeah, but it doesn’t create physical dependency until you’ve taken it for a while. And spicewine isn’t as dangerous as actual spice.”

“I—honestly, I would like to try actual spice once,” Matthew says.

“Magpie can get it for you,” Andy says. “Maybe when this is all over?”
“Hai,” Matthew says. He reaches out, brushing back a lock of Andy’s hair absently. Andy flushes a little, but doesn’t pull away or protest. “I dreamed about you last night,” Matthew says, still in Japanese.

“What happened?” Andy asks.

“You were—you had a blindfold on, and a white robe, and you were holding a lamp,” Matthew says, this time switching to English. “You didn’t say anything, but you were walking through a forest, and I had to follow you.”

“Where did we go?” Andy asks.

“That’s the thing, we didn’t,” Matthew says. “You eventually led me to a clearing on top of a mountain, and you sat down and folded your hands and said nothing. I tried talking to you, and I didn’t get any answers. So I took off your blindfold, and you hit me over the head with the lamp and I woke up.”

“Serves you right,” Alona says.

“It’s similar to the Hermit tarot card,” Maeve says. “Usually it’s an old man on a mountain with a lamp. It signifies spiritual journeying, and introspection. The converse is that the hermit is too withdrawn in himself to really experience the world. He’s alone, and lonely.”

Andy says nothing, but abruptly gathers up the bottle of spicewine and disappears from the nest, the sound of a transport only loud when she’s gone.

“Maeve,” Matthew says, turning on her. “Did you have to?”

“Well, you’re getting nowhere,” Maeve says. “And it’s not as though—”

“Hey,” Jill says. “We don’t fuck around with Andy’s feelings toward people and toward relationships. We don’t push and we don’t try to make Andy make decisions he isn’t ready for. You don’t get to do that to Andy. Me, maybe, or Magpie, or Jake, or any of you, but not Andy. No one gets to push Andy about this stuff.”

“Are you being considerate, or enabling weakness?” Alona asks. “How long can Andy really refrain from—“

Jill’s fist slams into Alona’s jaw and Alona falls back on her ass. “You shut up,” Jill says, pouncing on her and kneeling on her chest. “You shut up right now. No one gets to pressure Andy into making any decisions at all. It is a completely valid choice for Andy to stay celibate and single. Just because you want to see it otherwise does not give you the right to try to make it happen.”

Alona coughs. “Pax,” she says, spreading her hands.

Jill studies her for a moment, then gets up. “You guys don’t get it,” Magpie says. “Delachiara wanted Andy because everyone wanted Andy, because even on coke, even strung out, Andy was beautiful, and special. People like Andy don’t usually survive the streets. We’re all cynics out there and we’d sell our own children if it got us a flop. Andy made sure I had food before he did, sometimes, and we promised each other decades ago that if we got out, we did it together. I know what Andy went through on the streets. She never really went without coke unless Delachiara was after her, because he could always find someone willing to pay him for sex. Because when you’re on the streets, anything special is worth more, and Andy is about as special as it gets.”
She stops and takes a breath. “But that’s being a whore for you, and while I’ve put it behind me, Andy hasn’t, entirely. What Delachiara did to him was worse than rape, because he took Andy’s choices away, choices that she worked so damn hard to get back and keep. So if Andy decides he doesn’t want to have sex again this century, that’s up to him. If she says she isn’t ready for a romantic relationship, that is also her decision, and none of you get to pressure Andy about it.”

“Bird,” Jill says softly.

Magpie sits down and surprises everyone by bursting into tears. Jill makes it to her first, holding her and rocking her on the couch.

“I think I should go,” Alona says quietly.

“I think we all should,” Bishop says. “We will see you tomorrow, frere.”

His family leaves quietly, the hum of transporters fading out. Jake also left, Khan notices, or at least has gone elsewhere in the nest.

“I’m okay,” Magpie says thickly, her voice clogged with tears. “Just…that was probably overdue.”

“Yeah, it was,” Jill says, smoothing Magpie’s hair back. “I’m going to go get you a cold cloth, okay, and a glass of juice, and then I’m going to tuck you into bed.”

“Mama Jill,” Magpie says with the ghost of a laugh. “I promise I’m okay.”

“Let me fuss over you a bit, honey,” Jill says. She kisses Magpie’s forehead and gets up to go to the bathroom. Khan stays in the living room, but isn’t sure Magpie even realizes he’s there.

“Demon-dragon, I’m fine,” Magpie says, although she looks utterly wrecked and sounds worse. “I melt down occasionally. It happens and I’ll sleep it off and be fine.”

“It happens to everyone,” Jill says, returning with a flannel. “Here, wipe your face and rest your eyes a bit.” She hands Magpie the cloth and goes to get the juice.

“Taking Delachiara out scared you,” Khan observes.

“No shit,” Magpie says. “He’s always been the boogeyman in the closet. I honestly never thought we could take him on and win.”

“You likely could not have without us,” Khan says. “Does that help?”

“No,” Magpie says. “Because Andy and I survived decades without taking on Delachiara, and we had to do it because Andy was trying to help you and yours. So yeah, you fixed the problem, but you caused it in the first place.”

“That’s not fair, bird,” Jill says, returning with a glass of something orange. “Delachiara was looking for any chance he could get to go after Andy.”

“Yeah, but…” Magpie sighs and takes the glass, drinking half the contents in a series of long swallows. “Hey, that…what did you put in it?” she asks when she stops to breathe.

“The thing you normally put in mine,” Jill says reasonably. “Time for all good birds to go to bed. Time for all non-good birds to go to bed, too.”

“Ugh,” Magpie says. “I would have slept on my own.”
“Maybe, or maybe you’d have lain there awake all night and been more exhausted and hungover tomorrow,” Jill says. “Come on, I’ll tuck you in.”

Magpie sighs and takes another swallow of juice before getting up from the couch with a groan of effort. “If you see Jake, tell him it’s fine to come out of hiding,” she says, stumbling toward her bedroom.

“I will,” Jill says, taking Magpie’s elbow and steering her. They disappear into the bedroom, and because Khan isn’t sure where Jake actually went he sends him a quick message giving him the all-clear. He gets back an acknowledgment and puts his link away.

Jill emerges from the bedroom after a few minutes, taking a moment to stretch her arms over her head and arch her back. Khan watches with interest, not bothering to hide it; Jill sees him and laughs, posing for him for a moment.

He smiles. “Turn around,” he says.

“You are utterly ridiculous,” Jill says, but she turns around, lifting her braids up and out of the way.

“Yes,” Khan agrees, walking over to her. He rests his hands on her hips and kisses her jaw before biting her earlobe. “I am, and you are mine. My lioness.”

“My dragon,” Jill answers, leaning back against him. “How about you take me home and peel me out of this dress? There’s not much on under it.”

“I would like that,” Khan says, smiling against her throat. He runs a hand up her thigh, fingers slipping under the hem of her dress.

“Could you maybe not do that right here?” Jake asks from behind them.

“You suck,” Jill complains, pulling away from Khan and tugging her dress into place. “Did you have to show up now?”

“This isn’t even your place,” Jake says. “I thought there was a rule against sex in other people’s living rooms.”

“Oh, shut up,” Jill says. “Fine. We’re leaving Magpie’s and going back to your place to have sex.”

Jake makes a plaintive sound and collapses onto the couch. “I hate you.”

“I know,” Jill says. “Also, six pm tomorrow, you’re it, leave me the first clue by eight. Standard rules apply and let’s stay within Manhattan, but we’ll run overnight for once.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jake says. “Anyone else playing with us?”

“Probably not,” Jill says. “Magpie’s likely to sleep for about twelve hours. Be a good person and make sure she has water and coffee when she wakes up. Please.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Jake says. “Will she want food?”

“No but make her eat,” Jill says.

“I’ll…do my best,” Jake says. “Anyway, go on, get out of here.”

“We are,” Jill says. She takes Khan’s hand and he engages the transporter.
Back in the apartment, Jill immediately moves to take her hair out of its braids. It falls down her back in a smooth wave once she does, slightly wavy from the braid but no more than that. “An interesting look on you,” Khan says, still thinking he prefers the curls.

“I know it’s not your favorite, but I like it once in a while,” Jill says. “Speaking of once in a while. Have you ever had a male lover, or a male submissive?”

He appreciates she doesn’t assume one is the other. “I have,” Khan says. “Obviously not in a very long time, but there were some occasions. Why?”

“Because I met this boy tonight,” Jill says, walking toward him. “He was beautiful, and sweet, and I could have had him on his knees for me if I’d so much as hinted I wanted it. But I didn’t want him for me, dragon. I wanted to bring him home and tie him up as a present for you. I wanted to watch you take this boy apart, and fuck him, and make him thank you for the privilege. I didn’t, because I didn’t know how you’d react, but oh, I wanted to.”

“You want to see me dominate someone else?” Khan asks, surprised.

“Someone else I select, under very specific rules, and yes,” Jill says. “You are scorchingly hot as a Dom and I can’t always appreciate it because I’m not thinking. I want to watch you with someone else.”

“If I give you this,” Khan says, surprised he’s even considering it. “I want something from you.”

“Name it,” Jill says.

“One day, to do what I want with you, where and how I want it,” Khan says. “I want to take you out in public and play with you.”

“Define public,” Jill says, swallowing.

Khan lifts her and presses her back against the wall, his thigh between hers. “Anywhere I want,” he says softly, rocking his thigh against her sex. “In a theater, my hand up your skirt. In a public bathroom, where I hold you up and you can’t make a sound. This club you mentioned, where I can tie you, bound and exposed, and let people watch you.”

“I… have the info on going there,” Jill says, her voice shaky.

“Yes, I think we will,” Khan murmurs. He pins her wrists over her head with one hand, his other replacing his thigh between Jill’s legs. The panties she wears are barely more than a couple triangles and Khan brushes them aside, slowly twisting two fingers into Jill as he presses his thumb against her clit. “Tell me why this boy,” he says against her throat.

“Because he’s—he’s beautiful,” Jill says, breath catching more than once. “He looks like an angel, and I want you to mess him up.”

“Angel and demon?” Khan asks.

“Maybe,” she says, shuddering when he twists his hand just right. “Please, Khan.”

He smiles and rubs her clit firmly with his thumb, fluttering his fingers. “Come for me, kitten.”

She whimpers, head tossing against the wall. “It’s—almost—“

Khan doesn’t let up the pressure and Jill cries out, spasming around his fingers and hips jerking...
hard enough his hand feels cramped. She takes a few moments to catch her breath before Khan eases her down the wall. “Oh, I needed that,” she says with a full-on stretch. “Dancing always gets me worked up.”

“Show me how you danced tonight,” Khan says.

Jill laughs, arms already over her head. “You want your own show?”

“Humor me,” Khan says, smiling. “I want to see you dance.”

“You did, on the poles,” she points out, slowly spinning in a circle.

“That was different,” Khan says. “Show me.”

Jill laughs again. “To do it right I need a partner,” she says. “Come dance with me.”

“I don’t dance, kitten,” Khan says, but she takes his hand anyway and fits herself against his chest, wrapping his arms around her.

“Just move with me,” she says. “Just dance with me.”

So they dance, moving to music only they hear. Slow and sensual, the anticipation builds bit by bit, for once Jill not impatient enough to push for more. When Khan finally picks her up to carry her to the bedroom, it’s only because he isn’t willing to stop kissing her long enough to let her walk. Jill pulls her dress off as they walk, and has Khan’s pants undone before he sets her down on the bed. “I want you to fuck me, dragon,” she says, peeling out of her panties and turning over to settle on forearms and knees. “As long and as hard as you can.”

“You’ll regret that tomorrow,” Khan says, undressing.

“Maybe, but right now my pussy feels really empty and wants your cock in it,” Jill says, teasingly reaching down to touch her clit. “So come on, dragon. Fuck me. Claim me.”

Her lips part when she touches herself and Khan growls low in his throat. He crawls over her, pushes her hand away. “That is mine,” he says, his cock right at her entrance. “You touch yourself when I allow it.”

“Fuck me,” Jill whispers.

His hands settle on her hips, holding her still as he thrusts into her. “Something to remember, kitten,” he says in her ear, beginning to move slow and steady. “If you want me to dominate someone else, that’s one thing. No one else gets to touch you.”

“Barbarian,” Jill breathes. “Sometimes I think you’d like to keep me in a cage.”

“In another time, I would have,” Khan whispers back. “Adorned you in the finest collar, cuffs and chains, and kept you in a jeweled cage to display to my people. I would have taken you out as a pet, to play with during boring audiences. I would have draped you across my lap, naked and spread open, and fingered you while talking to my advisors. I would keep you on a leash, train you to eat from my fingers.”

“God, only you could make that sound appealing,” Jill says, shuddering. “Or maybe that’s just the sex.”

Khan laughs and bites her throat. “My lioness,” he murmurs. “You come to my hand only. Anyone
else, you would bite off at the wrist.”

“Damn right,” Jill says, pushing back against him. “So long as you remember I’m not tame.”

“Believe me, that is something I never forget,” Khan says, meaning it in earnest.

She laughs breathlessly and cuts off with a gasp when Khan pulls her back and up against him, holding her against his chest, her legs splayed outside his. “Oh, fuck,” she manages. “Oh, my God, that’s…”

“Tell me,” Khan whispers in her ear.

“I…” Jill trembles. “Please.”

He loves this, the moment when she can’t be coherent, when she can’t do anything but beg. And she begs, again and again, until he grants her release. She shudders and squirms against him and slumps, breathing hard.

“We’re not done yet,” Khan tells her, kissing her shoulder. “Not for a while, kitten.”

Jill laughs. “I can take it, dragon. Come on, fuck me.”

By the time they collapse on the bed, they’re both out of breath and a bit…tender in various areas. Jill draws one knee up, not saying a word but when Khan rests a hand on her belly she covers it with her own. “I’m okay,” she says. “Sore as hell, but we’ll fix that later. But oh, God, that was good. That was exactly what I wanted.”

“Sometimes I wonder which of us claimed which,” Khan says. “And who is really in control.”

“That would be me,” Jill says cheerfully. She laughs and rolls onto her side, looking at him. “Seriously, though, why does either of us have to be in control? This is a partnership. I submit to you during sex, but you don’t control me. As for claiming—that’s completely mutual, my love. I may be yours, but you’re mine.”

“Am I,” Khan says, studying her. “Do you honestly believe that?”

She meets his eyes. “I do,” she says. “I don’t know how long I’ll get to hold on to you, because it’s a big galaxy and there are a lot of ways to die, but—yeah. I’m in it with you, Khan, for the long haul, however long we get. I don’t—I won’t promise that I’ll never get insecure and I won’t promise that I’ll never question it, but don’t expect miracles.”

Khan smiles a little. “So now we go from my leaving you to you dying on me. Kitten, your mind is a minefield.”

“I know,” Jill says. “I know, believe me, and I don’t know that I’m entirely convinced you won’t leave but I’m trying, okay? I’m trying to hold on to what happens after the Klingons, after this is all behind us, but honestly I can’t see past Qo’noS at this point. And I refuse to go to an enemy planet with you thinking I don’t trust you.”

“There is no guarantee we will even make it to Qo’noS,” Khan says.

“I’m a gambler and the odds are telling me we will,” Jill says. “After Qo’noS, after Marcus, we can figure out where we’re going next, and who is going with us, but I’m in it with you as long as you’ll have me.”
“Always,” Khan says quietly.


“Jill, tell me something,” Khan says. “What happens in your dreams? What themes do you see repeated?”

She frowns. “I’m always running through a maze,” she says. “Something about a weird labyrinth and skeletons marking signposts.”

“Are you with any of us?” Khan asks.

“Sometimes, but it’s never you,” Jill says. “I dream—I’ve seen you die, and I’ve seen Jake die, and once I saw Andy and Magpie die, but mostly I see you die. The maze changes, and sometimes it’s an obstacle course, but I always feel like I have to run faster.”

“Is there any pattern to whoever is with you?” Khan asks.

“It’s never you and it’s never Jake, and everything else changes,” Jill says. “I just know I have to go faster and find—whatever it is I’m looking for.”

“Do you know what that is?” Khan asks.

“Not a clue,” Jill says. “I’m not sure I know in the dreams, either.”

“No, but there seems to be a pattern of you being separated from us,” Khan says. “From me.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s going to happen,” Jill says. “And if it does, I will find you again. I promise you that. Whatever happens, I will find you.”

“But if I find you first,” Khan says in Russian.

She smiles. “I’m going to go wash up a bit and then sleep the sleep of the just.”

“I think I will do the same,” Khan says.

When they settle into bed, he puts an arm around her, listening to her breathe against his chest. He closes his eyes, wondering what it all means, tired enough he doesn’t bother analyzing it.

She sees him die, and her siblings. He only sees her. Not even Andy has shown up in his nightmares. Khan wonders about that, briefly, then wonders if he has just given himself a reason for that to happen.

Rani never had nightmares. But after hearing Konstantin’s comments from earlier, Khan wonders if she had after all. If she’d hidden that from him, the same way she’d hidden her illness.

The lion-tamer never shows weakness to the lion.

First he had a lion-tamer. Now he has a lioness. Khan has to admit the latter suits him better.

He doesn’t dream when he sleeps, and he wakes to find Jill still snuggled against him, her curls brushing his nose and her hand fisted against his chest. Khan smiles and brushes her hair back, letting her sleep for now. By the angle of the sun it’s hours to sundown; they have time.

Still, it only takes about ten minutes before she stretches and stirs, rubbing her face against his chest. “What time is it?” she mumbles in Russian.
“Afternoon,” Khan says. “You can go back to sleep, kitten.”

“Maybe.” Jill yawns, stretches again, and sits up. “Except I really want a hot shower and, um. Some first aid to remedy last night. Good lord I’m sore.”

“I would apologize except you did demand it,” Khan says, also sitting up.

“I did and I’m not sorry, so you shouldn’t be either,” Jill says. “Vaginas heal fast, they kind of have to. It may just be a day or two before I’m willing to have penetrative sex with you.”

“All right,” Khan says.

"Anyway. Shower first, cream after." Jill kisses him briefly and slides out of bed. "Do you mind if I shower alone? I want a bit of space to wake up and clear my head."

“No, of course,” Khan says. “I will go make coffee.”

“Thank you.” Jill pads off to the bathroom and Khan gets up to get dressed and go make the coffee. He has enough time to brew a pot and get halfway through his first cup when Jill walks into the kitchen wrapped in her short blue robe, hair bundled into a towel turban. “I took my time,” she says, unwrapping her hair and spreading the towel over her shoulders.

“Do you need my assistance with the cream?” Khan asks.

“Yeah, I do, but I want coffee first,” Jill says, reaching for the mug he gives her. “And then I have to prepare because I’m playing tag. It’s only five, so I have three hours before Jake gives me the first clue, unless he’s already done it.”

“I have not seen anything to indicate he has,” Khan says.

“Yeah, but he’s getting more obscure,” Jill says. “I am, too, but. Anyway. Let’s go back to the bedroom so you can do this and then I can get dressed.”

They do, and he treats her with the cream even though she hisses and bites her lip at his touch. When he finishes, she takes a minute before she gets dressed. She goes for casual utility, with the boots from Marveek’s people over jeans and a hoodie, but Khan watches her test out a few kicks and is satisfied with her ability to move. Jill straps knives to both forearms, one in the small of her back, but leaves the blaster alone; she and Jake agreed on no ranged weapons due to risk of collateral damage or official police involvement. A few other essentials go in her backpack, along with two full water bottles and a few meal bars, and she braids her hair back. “I fully expect him to take me on a long chase today,” she says. “Hopefully I’ll catch him.”

“Do you usually?” Khan asks.

“About two out of three but when he loses me, he really loses me,” Jill says. “I’ve done the same to him, not often but I have, but mostly we can find each other. I mean, the goal is to find each other, just be creative about it.”

Someone knocks on the door and Jill frowns, going to it. She looks at the screen, frowns more, and opens the door slightly. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Jill?” the skinny teenager standing there asks.

“Yes,” she says. “Who’re you?”
“Your brother told me to tell you hickory dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock, you’ve got thirteen hours to find him and if you don’t he’s stealing Magpie away to the land of the goblin king,” the teenager says. “Was he on drugs? Because I want whatever he’s taking.”

“He wasn’t, sadly,” Jill says. “Did he say or give you anything else?”

“Yeah, he gave me this to give you,” the teen says, handing over a memory chip.

“Am I supposed to pay you anything?” Jill asks.

“Nah, he got it,” the teen says. “I was headed this way anyway. Later.” He—or she, Khan isn’t sure—heads off on roller skates.

“Well, that’s certainly among the more unique clues I’ve ever gotten,” Jill says, laughing. She closes the door. “Let’s see what Jake has to say.”

She slips the chip into a tablet and hits play. “Half-Pint,” Jake says. “I’m in a bit of a bind. I’ve been recalled to San Francisco on active duty, immediately. I don’t know what the deal is but if I go to San Francisco I don’t know if I can get out of it. So I need your help. I’ll follow this, and I’ll contact you within twelve hours to let you know the situation. If I don’t contact you within thirteen hours, get Magpie and Andy and find me. It’s not impossible that someone somewhere said something and Marcus found me, and I don’t trust—gotta go. Talk to you within twelve, I hope.”

Jill stares at the tablet. “That should be impossible,” she says. “He was on leave, he’d put in for the time and had it cleared by his CO and—Starfleet can’t recall you from personal leave short of a total emergency. We have to find Magpie and find out what the fuck happened.”

She digs out her link and dials. “Bird, we’re on our way over and we need your help,” she says. “Something’s funky with Jake and we need to find it.”

“Bring bagels,” Magpie says around a yawn. “And lox. And coffee.”

“I’ll call the deli on our way over,” Jill says. “Where are Andy and Matthew?”

“Playing chess in the living room,” Magpie says. “I was napping, but I’m awake now. But I want bagels and lox if you’re going to ask me to do the impossible. See you soon.” She hangs up without saying goodbye.

“Let’s go get bagels and lox,” Jill says. “Actually, no, I’m paranoid. You transport yourself back to the nest. I will go to the deli. I’m not conspicuous.”

Khan sighs. “And I am, I know.” He takes the transporter. “I will see you at Magpie’s.”

“You will,” Jill says.

He presses the button and shimmers out of existence.

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh. Did Jake get found out?
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

I think it's time to call in the ladies.

Chapter Notes

I am...attempting to finish this story before I hit 100 chapters. I am not entirely convinced that's going to happen.

As always, thank you so much for sticking with me through this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When he arrives in Magpie’s nest, everything seems much too peaceful for the way Khan’s nerves jangle, and his wings flare before he can pull them back. “That’s never a good sign,” Matthew says, looking over at him. Matthew wears jeans and a green t-shirt and for a moment Khan sees him in their dorm room, at the school, skinnier but still with the same vibrant hair and glint of intelligence in his eyes.

“Something is wrong and I know not what it is,” Khan says. “I would have your help, but let us not involve the others until we have more information.”

“What’s the short version?” Matthew asks.

“Jake is…not missing but not exactly found, either,” Khan says. “He was recalled to active duty in San Francisco unexpectedly. Jill indicated that should not be possible given Starfleet’s leave policies.”

“Well, now,” Matthew says, grinning. “This sounds like a lovely exercise in hacking into Starfleet security. We should at least be able to locate him, if nothing else.”

“If he’s in uniform, his life sign will be tracked on the Starfleet internals,” Andy says. “With so many people coming and going, all uniforms worn at HQ have smart technology in them that basically locates the officer and puts them on the Starfleet internal map.”

“It’s fucking GPS in the clothes,” Matthew says. “With—I’m presuming—an identifier, so Starfleet’s internal security can identify exactly who is where. Christ, did no one in your time read 1984?”

“That was a year in your time, wasn’t it?” Magpie asks. “What was so special about it?”

“It’s a book,” Matthew says. “About a fascist dictatorship that’s always watching its citizens to make sure they don’t step out of line.”

“Sounds creepy,” Magpie says.
“‘Twas,” Matthew says. “Brilliant book, though. Anyway, the point is that Starfleet has gone rather Big Brother on its officers.”

“It’s—I believe, from what Jill’s said—a recent protective mechanism,” Andy says. “After the battle of Vulcan, there were cadets and officers missing, bodies never recovered. Starfleet got a bit…touchy about making sure it could locate its people at all times. Subcutaneous transmitters got voted down as too intrusive, so they embedded smart monitoring in the uniforms. It identifies the officer through biometrics and acts as a passive locator beacon. The passive changes to active if vital signs change dramatically.”

“It is actually clever,” Khan says. “If a bit unnerving. And no, Matthew, I do not have it. I wore my own clothes, Marcus never quite forced me into uniform.”

“I should hope not,” Matthew says. “That would be too much.”

“As if the rest of it was not?” Khan’s wings flare again and he forces them back even though his muscles ache already. He doesn’t want Jill separated from him with Jake in possible peril. His siblings are safe by reason of anonymity—even if someone linked Jake to Jill, and Jill to him, no one could link him to eight of his family currently awake and alive. But Jill is the link between Khan and Jake, and if Jake is in danger because of Khan…

“That was ill-said of me,” Matthew says. “And if they wanted Jill, they would have gone for her directly. She is an officer in active good standing, Khan. They could easily have ordered her to appear at HQ, family emergency or no. Jake was summoned officially by Starfleet. If Jill were in trouble with the same forces, a recall would have landed in her inbox already.”

“Jake’s Intelligence and covert ops,” Magpie says. “It’s not unreasonable something from one of his jobs got him in trouble.”

Khan raises an eyebrow at her. “Okay, I don’t buy it either but it was worth an offer,” she says. “You want coffee?”

“Or I’m making tea,” Andy says, pushing to his feet. “Jasmine green? I’m feeling in need of something soothing.”

“I would like that, thank you,” Khan says.

She passes by him on her way and lays her hand against his cheek, resting their foreheads together. “Jill will be here in a few minutes, and we’ll sort this out, uncle,” he says.

Not for the first time, Khan thinks he can almost smell jasmine, instead of Andy’s usual clean, herbal scent. “My counselor,” he says in Japanese.

Andy smiles. “I’ll go make the tea.” He kisses Khan’s cheek and heads to the kitchen.

“Sometimes you can almost see her in him,” Matthew says in Hindi. “It’s kind of eerie.”

“Believe me,” Khan says in the same language. “I’m well aware. But…I find it a comfort.”

“I can see that,” Matthew says. He stretches his arms over his head, laces his fingers together and turns his hands palm up. Khan hears more than a few pops as he stretches and arches his back. “My Rice Krispie back has never changed,” he says when he sees Khan’s smirk.

“What is a Rice Krispie?” Magpie asks.
“Little puffed rice cereal,” Matthew says. “Pour milk on it, it pops and crackles.”

“Huh,” she says. “That’s a new one. I don’t much like milk, though. We couldn’t usually get it on the streets and it was usually almost spoiled.”

Someone bangs on the front door in a short rhythm and Magpie runs over to open it. “Food,” she says, taking a bag from Jill and ushering her inside. “I’ll go make coffee and set this out.”

“No one was paying any attention to me,” Jill says to Khan. “In case you wondered. No tails, no surveillance, no one talked to me except the guy at the bagel shop. Whoever got Jake doesn’t want me, or I’d be in silvers and in San Francisco.”

“I see everyone has had the same train of thought,” Khan observes. “And my answer is yes, presuming whoever recalled Jake to San Francisco was acting under official orders. I am not convinced of this.”

“Has he gotten in touch with you?” Matthew asks Jill.

“No, not since the first message,” Jill says. “His link’s turned off, sends me directly to mail. I sent him a message that I was heading to the nest but I don’t know if he’ll see it.”

“All right, well, I have coffee so now I can hack into Starfleet’s internal security,” Magpie says, returning with a mug and a plate. “Food is out in the kitchen, coffee’s made, Andy is following me with tea.”

“I am,” Andy says, carrying a tray with a teapot and two handleless mugs.

“Are we calling in anyone else?” Jill asks, heading for coffee.

“No, not yet,” Khan says. “Let us get a better sense of the situation.” He doesn’t feel settled enough to take a seat, but crosses to Andy and takes the mug she gives him.

“Okay,” Magpie says, taking a seat at one of her worktables and opening one of her computers. “Jill, I’ll need your expertise in a minute so I know where I’m looking.”

“HQ satellite building four, sub-level five, blue sector,” Jill calls from the kitchen. “That’s the actual offices for Intelligence. The fake ones are somewhere in the main building but Jake wouldn’t be there.”

“Okay, I can work with that,” Magpie says. She touches a few things and her wall glows with a duplicate of her screen. “Satellite building four, here,” she says. Khan sees the schematics light up on the screen, narrowing in as she works her way through the layers of security. “Matthew, I could use your help,” she says, frowning at her screen.

“What do you need?” Matthew asks, already poking at his own computer.

“I need you to log into Starfleet’s internal security monitoring and give me access to it,” Magpie says. “I could do it but this will go faster and I’m looking for reports or incidents or anything that might give me a clue where Jake is.”

“Is that the same security protocol as the other thing?” Matthew asks.

“Slightly different but I think it’s more straightforward,” Magpie says. “You’ll see.”

“Let’s have some fun,” Matthew says, grinning.
Khan sips his tea, watches them type and swipe and images flash on the wall. At one point the wall picture shimmers, blinks out, and when it comes back Khan sees colored dots on the building layout. “Jake would be a gold dot,” Jill says, studying the wall. “I think…okay, here. This section. See if you can identify him.”

“Maybe,” Magpie says. “The identifiers on these signs are muted, interestingly enough. But…I—okay, I can fix that.”

She says nothing else; tension rises in Khan and he steps back rather than hit anyone with his wings, knowing he can only keep them still so long.

“There,” Magpie says in satisfaction as one of the dots starts shimmering multiple colors. “There’s Jake. Now let’s get on the video in that room and find out what’s up with him.”

“It may be an unmonitored room,” Jill says. “Intelligence has those.”

“This one has video and audio,” Magpie says as the image on the wall shifts to show Jake, clean-shaven and dressed in an impeccable gray uniform, standing at rest.

“Well,” Jill says when they see the other person in the room. “Guess we know what Ikan’s been up to.”

“Audio on…now,” Matthew murmurs.

“You don’t have to be so formal with me, you know,” Ikan says. “I’ve read your record.”

“As you like, sir,” Jake says politely.

“We’re offering you a hell of a chance here, Commander,” Ikan says, leaning back in his chair. No desk in the room, Khan notes, just a few chairs. “Have a seat. Talk to me about it.”

“As you like,” Jake says, taking a seat. “I like doing field work. I don’t want to leave the field.”

“Even for this?” Ikan looks disbelieving. “Surely you don’t want to be a captain forever.”

“I don’t want to get moved into administration either, sir,” Jake says reasonably. “That’s not where my strong points are and I don’t want to spend my day reading reports. I’d rather be doing things I later report on.”

“But you’re taking some time off,” Ikan says. “Surely you can see the benefits of a more…stable career.”

“I’m taking some time off because a cadet died on my watch, during a class I ran,” Jake says, an edge in his voice. “Add that up with the fact that I haven’t taken vacation in twenty-two months, I decided I was owed some time.”

“Yes, of course, and I’m not trying to imply you shouldn’t have a vacation,” Ikan says. “But you might be able to take vacation more often with this role.”

“Yes, but I like my job now,” Jake says patiently. “I don’t want vacation until something goes wrong.”

“Yes, your job now,” Ikan says. “You’re out there quite a lot, aren’t you?”

“It’s what Starfleet pays me to do, so yes,” Jake says. “Why?”

“I make my living trading in rumors, among other things,” Jake says. “Is there something you want to know if I’ve heard?”

Ikan shrugs carelessly. “What have you heard about the Klingons?”

“Most of what I’ve heard is in my reports,” Jake says easily. “I hear a lot. I hear that they’re aggressive and looking to expand, and the Neutral Zone will only last so long. I also hear that some within the Federation are preparing for eventual war.”

“Section 31,” Ikan says.

“Let’s not play stupid,” Jake says. “I’m an Intelligence operative, a good one, and I’m a full commander. I know what section 31 is, I know what it does. What do you want to know about it?”

“Do you know anyone from it?” Ikan asks.

“No,” Jake says. “I kept my distance.”

Close to a flat out lie, but Khan doesn’t see any tells.

“Have you heard of a man named John Harrison?” Ikan asks.

“He works at section 31, weapons department,” Jake says. “I looked up personnel files, I was bored.”

“He’s gone missing,” Ikan says. “And we believe he’s conspiring to do Starfleet harm. In your new position, you’d be able to assist with the effort to find him and stop him.”

“I’m not much use on Earth,” Jake says. “Do you think he’s left?”

“We can’t find him, so it’s possible,” Ikan says. “You’re sure you never interacted with him?”

“Are you implying I’m lying, sir?” Jake asks, sitting up straight.

Ikan smiles. “No, of course not. I just wondered if maybe it had slipped your mind.”

“Pretty sure I’d remember, sir,” Jake says. “But in case you need me to spell it out clearly—no. I do not know John Harrison, I’ve never met him, and I still don’t know what he has to do with a new job I don’t want.”

No matter how you splice hairs he’s flat out lying, but Khan ranks his bluffing skills as up there with his own and Alona’s, and Alona can convince anyone of anything if she has to. His body language reveals annoyance and wariness, but nothing else, his voice the same.

“Take some time to think about the job,” Ikan says, changing the subject. “You don’t have to give an answer right away, although within a week, I’d think.”

“I can give you an answer now, sir,” Jake says, getting up. “I don’t want it.”

“Think about it,” Ikan says again, easy but with steel underneath. “And think about where you might have met Harrison. Look up his personnel file, see if his face rings a bell. You meet a lot of people, it’s not unreasonable you forgot a face.”
“Sir,” Jake says, cold and even. He salutes, standing at attention.

Ikan stands up, studying Jake for a long moment. “Dismissed, Commander,” he says after a long pause.

“Someone follow Jake, the other one follow Ikan,” Khan says.

“I’ve got Jake,” Magpie says.

“Leave Ikan on the wall,” Khan says. “I need to see what he does.”

Ikan sits back down after Jake leaves, and Khan’s stomach tightens at the faint, pleased smirk on his face. He knows that look, and it doesn’t bode well. After a moment, Ikan takes out a link, makes a few adjustments, and calls someone. “He didn’t buy it,” Ikan says after a moment. “I told you he wouldn’t. I told you this was an idiotic idea. All you’ve done now is put him on alert we know something’s going on with him, which means he’s going to disappear within twelve hours unless we can get some kind of leverage.”

He listens for a moment. “No. I am not going after Jacobs personally because one of us won’t survive that encounter and to be quite honest I don’t know which. He’s damned good, and you know it. Get me leverage on him, and I can keep him in place. Come up blank, and he’s in the wind and we’re no closer to finding the bastard.”

Ikan gets up, walking around absently. “I would, but we went to him because we can’t find her. Some family emergency—looks legit, of all things, but she’s offline and possibly off-planet. Jacobs was the best chance we had to find Khan and thanks to you now we’re one step behind where we were an hour ago.”

“Of course it looks legit, you ass, I set that up,” Magpie says. “Complete with video calls and helpful family members at the provided emergency links.”

“I would really like to know how they connected me to you,” Jill murmurs to Khan in Russian.

“Cruz or Smythe,” Khan murmurs back. “You met them.”

“Too smart for my own good,” Jill says. “So either Cruz spilled it before he died or Smythe did now because he didn’t think not to.”

Khan shrugs. “It doesn’t matter at this point.”

“No, I don’t—are you even going to listen to me?” Ikan glares at his link. “No. I don’t. I think she hooked up with him in London, he used her to do a few things for him, whatever. She’s not useful other than that.”

Jill cracks up laughing. “Oh, honey, you have no idea.”

“I don’t think she knows where he is, I think she did, and she might still have a way to contact him,” Ikan says. “I think she might have introduced him to Jacobs, and I think Jacobs knows where he is and is likely helping him.”

“You know, mostly I hate being underestimated but it’s kind of useful here,” Jill says.

“A bit,” Khan says, amused.

“He’s got a family, you know,” Ikan says. “Or are you still stupidly against involving civilians?”
“Please let him say yes,” Andy says softly.

“The whole point of Khan is not playing by Starfleet’s fucking rules!” Ikan snaps after a moment. “Why the hell are we bound by the constraints he isn’t?”

“Because you are theoretically civilized, and I never claimed to be,” Khan answers.

“Fine. It’s stupid and it’s going to cost us our chance at Jacobs, but fine. Have you given any thought to my other idea?” Ikan asks. “It may be the only opportunity we get.”

“I can’t imagine Marcus likes that one any better than the previous one, even though I don’t know what it is,” Jill says.

“With the right memory reconditioning before they wake up, they’d never know,” Ikan says. “Not until we told them.”

“Oh, fuck you, you arrogant bastard,” Matthew says. “You are not fucking with my family’s memories.”

“It wouldn’t work,” Khan says. “They tried it on me, and only acknowledged the truth of the situation when I refused to accept the fiction and told them my name. Likely Ikan does not know that.”

“Well, shit,” Ikan says. “All right, forget that. I withdraw that idea, then.”

“Keep talking, you glorious asshole,” Jill says, folding herself down on a floor pillow.

“No. I’ve got to go, I have work to do. I told you, I’m going directly to London from here and I’ll be there at least four days. With Verity and Keroack gone someone has to keep track of all their projects. I’ll check in, but unless you give me a compelling reason I can give Jacobs, he’s gone.”

Ikan listens a moment longer, then hangs up, shoving his link back into his pocket.

“Matthew,” Khan says. “Can you locate him? Can you tag him somehow while he is on Starfleet campus so we can find him later?”

“I can send a bug to his link,” Matthew says. “It’ll act as a silent transmitter. Best I can do, and if he disables the link it’s nothing.”

“Do it,” Khan says. “And then I think it’s time to call the ladies.”

“Oh,” Matthew says. “I…yes. This is exactly the thing the ladies are for.”

“I could use clarification on what the ladies are,” Andy says, raising a hand.

“Maeve and Anandi,” Khan says as Matthew dives into typing. “A medic and a scientist. Compassionate, both of them…and utterly, completely, ruthless. Ikan has information we need and needs to die. They will…deal with him, and once they have the information, he will die. How long that takes is entirely up to him.”

“We called them the ladies of the night, as a joke,” Matthew says. “It got shortened to the ladies, and since none of my sisters are the type to consider themselves ladies it just became shorthand for when we needed them.”

“Ikan’s going to have at least one suicide pill,” Jill says. “It’ll be kept in a false tooth but I don’t know which one. Jake has one. They’ll need to ensure he can’t kill himself before they can.”
“They will,” Khan says. “Let me go call Anandi.” He takes out his link and walks slightly away from the crowd, moving toward the kitchen.

She answers quickly. “Buenos noches, hermano. I trust you are not calling me for social pleasantries.”

“I have need of the ladies,” Khan says. “I think you will enjoy this one.”

There’s a pause. “Well, now,” Anandi says. “Is this one of the people from section 31?”

“It is,” Khan says. “His name is Ikan.”

“Ah,” Anandi says. “Yes. I remember his name from the files. Maeve and I will need some time to prepare our supplies and our equipment.”

“You have four hours,” Khan says. “Is that enough?”

“It should be,” Anandi says. “While we are preparing, I would request you find a location for us.”

“We will find one,” Khan promises. “Are there any special requirements?”

“Nothing outside the usual,” Anandi says. “Will we have an audience?”

“No,” Khan says. “He will die rather than talk if I am there, or anyone else, really.’

“If he offers to talk but only with you?” Anandi asks.

“No,” Khan says. “I will not speak with him. I trust you and Maeve to learn anything I might need to know.”

“Gracias,” Anandi says. “In four hours, we will meet you at Magpie’s nest. There you can explain the plan for finding and subduing Ikan before Maeve and I can begin our work.”

“I will see you then,” Khan says. “Thank you, Anandi.”

“De nada,” she says and hangs up.

Khan turns back to the room to hear another conversation. “No, I’m bugging out,” Jake’s voice says over someone’s link. “I have five escape plans and I’m enacting the third because it’s the plan I decrypted first. I will be at Magpie’s nest within about eighteen hours but I have to disappear which means I have some work to do first.”

“Do you want me to call Eema?” Jill asks.

“No, that’s part of the plan,” Jake says. “You and Khan might want to find somewhere new to bunk, though.”

“We’ll worry about that when we need to sleep again,” Jill says. “Be careful, Aaron.”

“I will,” Jake says. “I’ll message you every six hours, okay?”


“Khan, if you’re there, this transporter is going to be a godsend in the next eighteen hours,” Jake says. “I don’t think I could do this without it.”
“I am,” Khan says. “Use it well.”

“I will. Later.” Jake hangs up.

“They offered him the position of deputy director of Intelligence,” Jill says. “Which he’d be a good fit for in another ten years, but doesn’t want now. Wouldn’t want now even without all this.”

“But it would mean an immediate recall to active duty and HQ,” Matthew says, stretching. “Do we really want to dig into who let something slip?”

Khan shakes his head. “If you look closely enough the signs are all there, it’s only a surprise no one tried to find either of them before now.”

“Well, I dropped off the radar, and Jake’s not easy to find,” Jill says. “It’s possible they didn’t put anything together until recently, though. But it doesn’t matter right now. What do Anandi and Maeve need and how much time do we have to arrange it before we start putting together the plan to apprehend Ikan?”

“They will be here in four hours,” Khan says. “All we need to do is arrange a location for them. Matthew knows what they need.”


“This is where we pull in the others,” Jill says. “Because Anandi and Maeve are going to be busy, and you and I flat out can’t go.” She looks at Khan steadily. “You’re too recognizable and you’d spook him, or cause a commotion we don’t want. And he knows me, and while he doesn’t think I’m worth much I don’t want to see him and risk him changing his mind.”

Khan says nothing because he can't argue her point and he can't bring himself to agree to stay behind. After a moment, his wings ruffle and snap and he lets them stretch for a moment just because the muscles ache. “I understand,” he says finally.

“Hey,” Jill says. “I don’t like it either. This fucker fucked with my brother, and I want a piece of him. But Jake can’t go, I can’t go, and neither can you.”

“You can stay here and play ops with me,” Magpie says. “Matthew, too, unless he’s needed in London.”

“We need the others to identify where Ikan is likely to be and where we can lure him to,” Khan says. “Then we can determine who is going and who is staying. Other than the ladies, the rest of us would only be needed to apprehend him.”

“Yes, and it’s better if we don’t stay,” Matthew says, sounding distracted. “London is crawling with agents and there’s no guarantee none of them ever looked at pictures from our ship.”

“True but unlikely,” Khan says. “But still, we should be as inconspicuous as possible.”

“I’ll summon the gang,” Jill says, taking out her link. “Let’s figure this out.”

Over the next four hours, they figure out where Ikan is likely to be. They study his recent communications to see who he will contact, look at his credits to see where he spends money. And —Khan doesn’t know whether to thank luck or Matthew, honestly, but the tracker on Ikan’s link stays on, a quiet pulse of location.

Exactly four hours after Khan hung up with Anandi, she and Maeve transport into the nest, both of
them rolling hard-sided cases behind them. Maeve wears scrubs, Anandi a lab coat, and the look in their eyes is one Khan knows well. “Ladies,” he says, inclining his head.

Maeve smiles. “Have you located him?”

“We have,” Khan says. “Based on our information, we believe he will be walking through a public market in approximately three hours. We will apprehend him then. Bishop and Konstantin will be backup, and Alona, Ekaterina, Katsuro and Matthew will be the team to surround him and capture him. For necessary reasons, the rest of us will be staying here.”

“Si, of course,” Anandi murmurs. “Have we a time limit?”

“Two days,” Khan says. “Beyond that and he becomes a liability. He is likely to have at least one suicide option on him.”

“We’ll fix that,” Maeve says briskly. “No one dies on my watch until I kill them.”

“Well, that’s cheerful,” Magpie says. “And a bit alarming.”

Maeve smiles again. “I would never harm you, Magpie.”

“I know that,” Magpie says. “I’m really grateful for it.”

“Where are we going?” Anandi asks.

“An unused laboratory,” Matthew says. “It’s currently owned by the bank after the company using it went under. No one’s been to it in three months and there are no plans for anyone to visit it in the next three. No deals underway for it, no discussions about its loan. And it still has running water and power.”

“Well done,” Maeve says warmly. “That is quite well done of you, Matthew. May we have the coordinates?”

“Yes, of course,” Matthew says. He gives them to her, and Anandi enters them into the transporter.

“Please message us when you have him,” Maeve says. “Beyond that, we’ll let you know when we are finished.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. He doesn’t wish them luck or anything else; their skills at this are hard-fought for and earned, and they don’t need luck to break Ikan. He has no doubts they’ll succeed.

The ladies beam out of the nest. “The rest of us should go get into place,” Alona says, tossing the disc of her staff between her hands. “If he doesn’t go, what are our options?”

“We find him somewhere else,” Khan says. “We will continue to track him and report on his progress here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alona says. “We ready?”

A round of agreement, some movement, and the lot of them transport out of the nest, leaving behind an echoing quiet and four people. “So far he’s right where we want him to be,” Andy says, looking up from his screen.

“You think he’d think Jake would try to take him out,” Magpie says. “Maybe? Am I missing something?”
“Kinda,” Jill says. “He’s cautious for his own safety, but right now he thinks he panicked Jake and Jake is far more interested in getting out than going for him. I’m sure he’s monitoring Jake’s teammates and crew, to see if Jake gets in touch with any of them to ask for help or pass on a warning. And if he had any sign Jake was going to go for him, he’d bug out himself. But Jake is freaked and in the process of disappearing and laying a false trail for Marcus—not that I think Marcus will follow it, he’s not stupid—and if it wasn’t for us, no one would be going for Ikan.”

“Ikan’s mistake was in thinking you weren’t useful,” Andy says to Jill.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jill says cheerfully. “It happens a lot.”

“No by me,” Khan murmurs in Russian.

Jill smiles, walking over to him. “No, not by you. You just didn’t want to use me.”

“I beg to differ,” Khan says in a purr.

She laughs, resting her hands on his shoulders. “You did but I talked you into it.”

“That is fair,” Khan admits, his own hands on Jill’s waist. “I dislike this waiting.”

“You want to go flying with me?” Jill asks.

He shakes his head. “Not until we have Ikan in custody.”

“Jill-Bear, can you take over the monitoring, then?” Andy asks. “It’s pretty basic from here, we’re just tracking Ikan based on the link bug and visuals where we can get them. I don’t think any major hacking is required for a while and if it is we’ve got Magpie.”

“Yes, and I am fully caffeinated and awake and all set,” Magpie says. “Andy, why are you handing over to Jill?”

“So I can play chess with uncle,” Andy says. “He’s got to do something, you’re busy, and Jill doesn’t play chess.”

“I really don’t,” Jill says.

“I could teach you,” Khan says.

“I know the basics, but I just don’t think like that,” Jill says.

“But you do,” Khan says. “Your idea with the Klingons. That is thinking several moves ahead, and you have come up with counters or explanations for difficulties. You think strategically, and you analyze all the options in a situation. You should be quite good at chess.”

“But I’m not,” Jill says patiently. “Poker, yeah, because I can calculate odds and I bluff really well, but chess is just not my game. You and Andy play chess, I’ll hang out with Magpie and keep an eye on our people and Ikan.”

Khan doubts his ability to focus on the game, but he settles opposite Andy when she sets up the board. “Come on, uncle,” Andy says. “Give it a shot, at least. Also, you’re white.”

That doesn’t surprise him and he smiles a bit. “As you like.”

Partway through the first game, Jill reports the others are in place. Khan gets through one more game with Andy—he loses, not surprisingly—before Magpie reports Ikan’s on the move. “He’s
heading in the general direction of the market,” she says.

“We are ready,” Cat says through the coms.

Ikan continues to move toward the market. It feels almost too easy for Khan, too simplistic. Ikan goes where they want him to—not the exact path, but close enough, and easy enough Alona and Katsuro manage to fall in behind and tail him. Ikan, lessening Khan’s impression of him, doesn’t appear to notice.

Then again, Alona and Katsuro could tail Khan and he might not notice. The only one better than Katsuro is Anandi, and she… is busy.

Right on cue, Alona turns right where Ikan keeps going, and Matthew falls in where Alona left off. Khan’s siblings trail Ikan, in ones and twos, and he never seems to notice. Granted, the market is fairly busy, and people come and go all the time, but this seems almost too easy to Khan.

“We have him surrounded,” Cat says quietly through the coms. “He doesn’t know. On three, we move to get him off the street. One. Two. Three.”

Khan hears some muffled sounds, footsteps, a cry from a woman—it sounds like Alona, actually—and a few other things. He hears half a shout from Ikan and then—“We tranquilized him,” Matthew reports. “We’ve got him, will search him and transport him to the ladies and then we’ll be back by you.”

“This was too easy,” Khan says after Mathew signs off.

“Or you’re just that good,” Jill says. “You and yours are way better than Ikan.”

“True,” Khan admits. “Still, I do not know as I trust this. Magpie, please keep an ear out for Marcus or any communications that might indicate Ikan has gone missing.”

“Already on it,” she says. “Also, Jake just checked in by mail and said he’s holing up for the next six hours to get some sleep. He didn’t say where he was and I’m not sure based on the headers if he’s on Earth or not, but he said he’s safe and will be fine.”

“Good,” Jill says. She looks at Khan. “Come flying with me now.”

He nods. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

You are not likely to see the bits between the ladies and Ikan because even I have limits as to what I find disturbing and don't want to write. That would be high on my list. However, Anandi talks to me sometimes so you may see more from her in future.
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

As ready as we can make ourselves.

Chapter Notes

Still here, still working on this, still so very much appreciate you sticking with me. I promise I mostly know where we're going!

Jake appears in the nest sixteen hours after walking out of the interview, a battered backpack over one shoulder. Somewhere in that time he shaved his head but not his nascent beard, and he wears Marveek’s coat and boots over heavy jeans and a black shirt. “No one’s tracking me that I could find,” he says. “But I wouldn’t trust my apartment for anything more than beaming in, grabbing your stuff, and beaming out.”

“Been there done that,” Jill says. “We got the essentials and as much else as we could carry and we’re holing up in a spare apartment Magpie and Andy bought a while ago for storage. There’s not much in it but broken computer parts, and as far as all of us can tell it’s clean for now. Did you talk to Eema?”

“Yeah, I did,” Jake says. “She’s not happy but she understands.”

“That about sums up her attitude toward your career,” Jill says.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jake says. “I am really, really tired and I’m running on stims that are about to run out. Can I pass out here for a while? What even is going on here?”

“You bugged out and we grabbed Ikan,” Jill says. “He’s currently under the tender mercies of Maeve and Anandi. When they find out everything he knows, they’ll kill him.”

“Well,” Jake says. “I can’t say I’m sorry to see him go, but Marcus is going to know I had something to do with it, which means he’ll know Khan is involved. We could trigger some alarms if we’re not careful.”

“Which we will be,” Jill says. “But we think we’re almost ready to send our message to Qo’noS, so soon we’ll be off planet entirely and I don’t think he’ll follow us. I don’t think he can.”

“The only way he would follow us would be if we attacked Starfleet first,” Khan says.

“Are we going to do that?” Jake asks, setting down his backpack and shrugging out of his coat.

“No,” Khan says. “At least, that is not in our plans at this time. There’s nothing to gain from it except personal satisfaction.”

“Which isn’t insignificant, let’s not forget that, but yeah, we can’t satisfy our desire for
vengeance,” Jill says.

“Where’s everyone else, anyway?” Jake asks. He drops onto one of the couches, stretching out—but, Khan notes with amusement, he keeps his boots off the cushion.

“Mostly in London,” Jill says. “Some of them have other projects they’re working to finish. I know Bishop was putting together med kits for us on Qo’noS, and with Maeve and Anandi occupied he’s working on that with Katsuro’s help. The others have scattered for whatever reasons, but we’re kind of just waiting until Maeve and Anandi are done.”

“How long will that be?” Jake asks, his voice slurring a bit.

“At most another twenty-seven hours,” Khan says. “That is their deadline. Whether or not we know everything by then, he dies at that point.”

“I like it,” Jake says around a yawn. “Can we leave a black hawk on his body?”

“And one carved into whatever part of his body is left,” Jill says cheerfully. “Yes. Anandi has the paper, I’m sure she’ll come up with something.”

“She always does,” Khan murmurs.

“Clearly they’ve done this before,” Jake says. “Her and Maeve, I mean.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “We call them the ladies. During the war, they were our best interrogators. They don’t always use torture, but they won’t hesitate if they need to. With Ikan—truthfully, I know not what they will do to him. It depends on him, really.”


“Essentially, yes,” Khan says.

“Sounds good,” Jake mumbles and that appears to be it for him; his whole body goes lax and he says nothing else.

“He is going to have the worst migraine when he wakes up,” Jill says, grimacing. “Fortunately modern meds work better on him than on me, but we should make sure we have options for when he wakes up and wants to cut his head off.”

“He left his medkit here,” Magpie says. “Or most of it, anyway. Plus I’ve got my stuff, and your stuff, so I think we’re set.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jill says. “I’m just getting edgy. Nothing to do and I should—wait. I have things to do. I need to make sure no one has found me or is looking for me.”

“Purple computer on the second table has a link to Starfleet’s internal network,” Magpie says.

“Thank you,” Jill says, going over to it.

“Do you think anyone is looking?” Khan asks, crossing to her.

“Honestly no,” Jill says. “You heard what Ikan said about me. They don’t see me as useful or valuable to you. They think my family emergency is legit, and I’m considered off-planet, so they don’t think I’m even around to help you. Still, I should check, and send a message or two if it looks appropriate.”
She types quickly, navigating through Starfleet’s network to reach her inbox. “What the hell does he want?” she asks, looking at a message.

“Who is he?” Khan asks.

“Mikael,” Jill says. “My former captain.” She opens the message, chewing her lip. Khan reads over her shoulder, mostly because she didn’t tell him not to.

*Jill – I don’t know where you are or if this will reach you, but…watch your back. There’s trouble brewing and I don’t know all of what it is, but if I know you at all, you’re mixed up in it. If I can help you, I will, but be careful. This could get really dangerous.*

It’s signed with MK, and Jill slumps on her stool after reading it. “If he’s noticing there’s trouble, it’s less brewing and more fully percolated,” she says. “Although he has good instincts, so maybe that’s not accurate. I just know he doesn’t like to think badly of Starfleet brass. I should…no. I want to try and get in touch with him, but I shouldn’t.”

“A brief message would not go amiss, I think,” Khan says. “Simply that you are dealing with a personal emergency and on leave from Starfleet.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Jill says, nodding. She types a quick message and sends it off. “And…nothing else in here looks super important, although there’s an—huh. Update on the charges I pressed against creepy librarian asshole.”

“What is the update?” Khan asks.

“They settled,” Jill says, reading it. “He’s been discharged from Starfleet, without his pension—due to a demonstrated pattern of behavior with multiple complainants. And that appears to be that.”

“Are you satisfied with the outcome?” Khan asks.

Jill shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. We have other things to worry about, I’m not wasting my energy worrying about a creepy bastard who groped me once.”

“Sounds like a reasonable argument,” Magpie says. “We’ve got bigger bastards to deal with.”

“That we do,” Jill says. “Any change from Marcus?”

“No,” Magpie says. “No, and I’m…worried about that. He hasn’t tried to contact Ikan, he’s staying in San Francisco, but there’s activity in London and I don’t know all of what it is. I’m still logged in to the facility, but there are some new safeguards on the network and I would need to spend some time picking my way through them.”

“Do it, please,” Khan says. “If he means my family harm, I would know.”

Magpie nods and reaches for another computer.

Khan watches her for a moment, then looks back to Jill, who seems engrossed in whatever displays on her screen. He considers asking, realizes he needs a breath of air, and tells her he’ll be back in a few minutes.

Up on the roof, he feels himself relax a bit. Early afternoon, but a cloudy day, bringing a hint of rain to his nose. Among the gargoyles already on the building’s roof, no one will notice him, and he has an excellent vantage point to see the street.
People come and go, and he sees at least one drug deal and one solicitation, but those are quickly handled and all participants move on. Khan finds it strangely meditative to stay on the roof and watch the passers-by below. It eases tension that coils within him, waiting for a target.

“I thought I might find you up here,” Konstantin says, and Khan smiles, turning to see his brother behind him. “Always the observer.”

“I can breathe up here,” Khan says simply.

Konstantin smiles and walks over to him. “I thought to speak with you.” First, though, Khan knows the rules and hugs his brother, expecting it and still losing his breath when Konstantin hugs back hard enough to lift him off the roof.

“I did miss your hugs,” Khan admits in Russian when Konstantin sets him down. “No one bruises my ribs like you do.”

“I should hope not,” Konstantin says, laughing. “You look tired, brother.”

“It has been a wearying few days,” Khan says honestly. “And…something tells me it will only get worse from here.”

“Yes, I would not disagree,” Konstantin says. “Are we ready? Truthfully, Khan, are we ready?” He takes a slow breath, lets it out carefully as his wings stretch. “As ready as we can make ourselves,” he says. “As ready as we will be.”

“Then after the ladies are done, and have rested, we will prepare the message,” Konstantin says. “And prepare ourselves.”

“This may possibly be the maddest thing we have ever done,” Khan says reflectively.

“Conquering the planet as adolescents wasn’t?” Konstantin asks.

Khan shakes his head. “That was one planet, one species. Here we run the risk of intergalactic war and potential genocide. These aren’t the worst odds we have faced, but with the highest stakes. And we are missing five dozen of us.”

“Tell me something, Khan,” Konstantin says. “Do you think we will get them back?” His brother deserves honesty and even so Khan has to force himself to speak. “No,” he says finally. “I do not. Whether Marcus will kill them, or whether Starfleet will refuse to revive them, I do not know, but I think…I feel that the nine of us are what is left, and may be all we have.”

Konstantin smiles sadly. “You are not the only one,” he says. “Katya and I think the same, and Katsuro and Bishop.”

“We have lost so much,” Khan whispers in Russian. “So much, Kostenka.”

“Ah, Khan,” Konstantin says softly. “I know. And no one more than you.”

Khan closes his eyes for a moment, and doesn’t resist when Konstantin hugs him again. He leans his forehead against Konstantin’s shoulder and shamelessly indulges in the feeling of security, of home that Konstantin’s hugs always bring. The wrong scents, the wrong air, but this is right.

“We could be wrong,” Konstantin says finally. “We could get them back.”
“We could,” Khan agrees. “But I doubt we will.”

“If they offer us cryosleep again, would you take it?” Konstantin asks.

“No.” Khan’s answer is quick and firm. “I have slept enough. For better or worse, this is where my life is now, and they can either kill me or let me be, but I will not go back to cryosleep.”

“Neither will the rest of us,” Konstantin says. “So there we are.”

“So there we are,” Khan murmurs.

“Katya tells me she asked you the eternal question the other night,” Konstantin says, changing the subject. “What did you tell her?”

“The eternal answer,” Khan says, smiling. “What else would I say? I love her dearly, Kostenka, and I love you, but you and I were never meant to be. She needs you in ways I don’t.” He pulls away from Konstantin, settling his wings.

“Once upon a time, perhaps,” Konstantin says. “Do you regret that it wasn’t?”

“No, of course not,” Khan says. “Do you?”

“Nyet.” Konstantin kisses his forehead. “Besides, you have your Jill now, your lioness.”


“She seemed very intent on whatever she was studying, downstairs,” Konstantin says. “Should we go find her and ask what it is?”

“Let us not interrupt her,” Khan says. “Would you stay here with me for a bit?”

“Of course,” Konstantin says. “We should reach for peace while we have it.”

“We used to find moments like these, in the wars,” Khan says, looking back at the street. “You and Cat always disappeared.”


“Only to hear myself think,” Khan says. Konstantin laughs. “We all deal with chaos in our own ways.”

“Who else is here?” Khan asks. “Speaking of chaos.”

“Katya, of course, and Katsuro and Bishop,” Konstantin says. “Alona and Matthew are still in London.”

“What are they doing there?” Khan asks.

“Truthfully I know not,” Konstantin says. “Possibly finding a moment of peace in their own way.”


“Which is, strangely, how they find peace,” Konstantin says. “Imps, the pair of them.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Something we badly need.”
“In all honesty, I think that if there were to be a group of us that survived, the nine of us are the best we could want,” Konstantin says. “We have all major disciplines covered, the best fighters, the best linguists, and you.” He touches Khan’s cheek. “You always need to survive,” he says.

“There are times I didn’t agree with you,” Khan says. “Now…perhaps you are right.”

“You do,” Konstantin says. “Whatever and whoever else we may lose on our quest to Qo’noS, we cannot lose you and we cannot lose Jill. Without the pair of you, we can’t complete it.”

“You have a plan,” Khan says. He turns to look at Konstantin fully, letting his wings open a bit. “What are you planning?”

“I am not,” Konstantin says. “I remind you that you can not, must not throw your life away recklessly. The eight of us are well aware what Jill means, brother, both to you and to this plan as a whole. Trust that we will keep her alive on Qo’noS. Trust it so that you pay attention to your own safety and not hers.”

“The eight of you have a plan for Jill,” Khan says.

“To keep her alive,” Konstantin says. “More than that, perhaps.”

"Perhaps," Khan says dryly. "Do you have one for me, too?"

Konstantin smiles. “I want all my siblings to survive, brother,” he says. “I need you to survive.”

Khan reflects that it’s been a long time since he heard one of his brothers and sisters promise to die rather than let him be killed. Now, as then, he regrets the necessity but acknowledges it. “I understand,” he says. “I won’t forget.”

“Good,” Konstantin says. “If it helps, we have a descending list of priority for survival. You are first, Jill is second. More than that, I will not tell you.”

“Jill should be first,” Khan says.

“Nyet.” Konstantin looks at him evenly. “You are my oldest brother, my leader. You are always the first name.”

“Always?” Khan asks, slipping into Russian. “Even above Cat?”

Konstantin nods. “Always.”

Khan takes a breath, tears pricking at his eyes. “Kostenka,” he says. Konstantin hugs him and Khan holds on tight.

"You are the oldest," Konstantin murmurs in his ear. “You are our leader as much as we ever have one. We all know it. We all know you set the path for the rest of us. Any of us, Khan, would lay our lives down for you without hesitation, if it meant you survived. We all have our lists, of those we love and cherish, and all of us have you first. Alona, Matthew, Anandi.”

“Anandi,” Khan says, almost skeptically.

“Well, to be sure no one exactly knows what Anandi thinks,” Konstantin says. “But she has heard us discuss this and has agreed. Those who sleep had you first, Khan. The cryotubes were wired to supply power to yours in case of ship failure. The twelve who died on the ship—Katsuro and Matthew looked at the logs of the ship, and they did so because their systems failed in order to
“I designed that ship,” Khan says flatly. “I designed almost every inch of it. There was no priority pathing in the cryotubes.”

“Katsuro put it in without telling you,” Konstantin says.

“Why?” Khan whispers.

“Because you have to survive,” Konstantin says simply. “Because you are the best of us, and the worst, and the best chance we have for any of us to live on, to see our goals achieved. We had goals once, Khan, remember?”

“I remember,” Khan says quietly. “We have somewhat different goals now. To be honest Kostenka—I know not what happens after Qo’noS, after we write our ticket. I know not what that ticket looks like, and I have no…goal beyond wanting us free of Earth, of the Federation. Once we leave…what then?”

“We look for a home,” Konstantin says. “Or we look for a purpose. Or both. Whatever we do, Khan, we need you for it.”

Khan seriously wonders if there’s something mentally programmed into his siblings they never told him about—or never knew about. He decides that’s really not the point and lets his wings stretch, knowing the muscle cramps won’t be worth holding them back. “I don’t like this,” he says finally in Russian. “This…all of you need to survive.”

“Khan, we are not exactly eager to die,” Konstantin says practically. “Nor are we easy to kill. Nor are you easy to kill. We won’t protect you in a fight unless you are injured beyond your ability to defend yourself. But if any of us sees signs that a sniper has aim on you, or something similar, then yes, we will trade our lives for yours. This was always true. Joachim died saving you.”


“I know.” Konstantin says nothing else.

Khan stays quiet, letting his wings relax a bit and fold around him. “The first person on your list was always you,” Konstantin says. “You thought it was so for the rest of us.”

“It’s not me anymore,” Khan says. “On my list. You know that, Kostenka.”

“Yes,” Konstantin says. “You come first for us, she comes first for you. Which means we need to ensure you both survive. Either or is not acceptable.”

Something in Khan eases when he hears it. “I love you,” he says in Russian.

“And I you, brother.” Konstantin smiles, reaching out to squeeze Khan’s hand. “And, if you had asked me what my top ten list was, of all of us, it would have looked like the nine of us.”

“Who was tenth on your list?” Khan asks.

“Jasmine,” Konstantin says.

Khan smiles a little wistfully. “I miss her.”

“As do I,” Konstantin says. “She is still in cryosleep, is she not?”
“She is,” Khan says. “If we get anyone else back…”

“If we do,” Konstantin says. “If we are allowed to choose a section of our family, we will decide.”


“I would have said Rachel,” Khan says.


“Diana,” Khan says.

“So, then,” Konstantin says. “If we get five more.”

“You intend to plan it out to the remaining sixty-three?” Khan asks.

Konstantin nods. “I do.”

“Only show it to me if we need it,” Khan says after a moment.

“Of course,” Konstantin says.

“You did this,” Khan realizes. “In the wars, in the battles. You prioritized our survival.”

“I did,” Konstantin says. “We agreed as a group on a few things and I wrote the list of the details.”

“And then you told the others,” Khan says. “So they knew who to try and save and who to sacrifice.”

“We are practical,” Konstantin says. “We knew we could die. We knew some of us would. We made our decisions as to who that was most likely to be, and in most cases we were right.”

“Who died that should—no.” Khan takes a breath. “I do not actually want to know. I didn’t want to know any of this.”

“I will not tell you the current list,” Konstantin says. “You are first, Jill is second, that is all I will say.”

“Sometimes I wish we were less practical,” Khan says in Hindi. “I understand why you do this, and I acknowledge the necessity of it, but…”

Konstantin smiles a bit. “I understand. This is not a task I enjoy.”

“Which is why you do it,” Khan says. “Because you love us all, and you will be as fair as any of us could be.”

“Da.” Konstantin inclines his head.

Khan sighs. “Do you think we will all survive the trip to Qo’noS?”

“I think it possible,” Konstantin says. “How likely—that depends on a number of factors currently unknown, and until we get a response from the Klingons with their terms, I cannot begin to calculate. But I think it possible.”

“Bishop?” Khan asks.
“He agrees,” Konstantin says. “He says based on the existing data he has he thinks our odds better than even, but more than that he will not commit to, and there are the usual caveats about existing data being inaccurate or incomplete.”


“We will figure it out,” Konstantin says. “First we must send the message. Then they must accept it. Then we go there…and win.”

“Da,” Khan says softly. “Come, let us go inside.”

“Maeve called five minutes ago,” Bishop says when they come into the nest. “They are done.”

“Anything that requires our attention now?” Khan asks.

Bishop shakes his head. “Non. Ikan knew quite a lot about section 31 plans, and I think perhaps our goal once we leave Earth should be to disrupt those, but for immediate actions there is nothing pending we can influence.”

“What is pending?” Khan asks.

“Ikan thinks Marcus will destroy the cryotubes,” Bishop says quietly.

“I think he may be right,” Khan says after a moment. “We will hope not, but…Magpie, is there anything we can do to prevent it?”

Magpie chews her lip, thinking. “Maybe,” she says. “I can trigger a deadlock, so if anyone tries to get in that section of the facility it’ll lock down all the doors and systems. It can be overridden, with the right skill, and I can do my best to prevent that but I can’t guarantee it’ll hold.”

“Do it, please,” Khan says.

She reaches for a computer. “Once you leave Earth for Qo’noS, I’m shutting down my links to Starfleet’s network,” she says. “They’ll be looking for you, and I don’t want them to find me. Use it while you got it because I’m cutting connections soon.”

“What are you and Andy going to do while we go to Qo’noS?” Cat asks.

“Hide,” Magpie says succinctly.

“I think we can leave it at that,” Katsuro says when Cat looks ready to push. “The less we know, Ekaterina.”

“All right, all right,” she says crankily. “Just so long as we have way to reach you.”

“You will,” Magpie says. “Andy and I are already setting it up.”

Khan wonders if it will be difficult for Andy to send Matthew off to Qo’noS, but in truth he doesn’t quite know how things stand between them. He doesn’t know where either of them sleeps, or if there’s anything between them more than family.

“Speaking of Andy, where is she?” Jill asks. “Did he leave and I not see it?”

“No, Andy was out setting things up for us to hide,” Magpie says. “He’ll be back soon.”
“She better be,” Jill says. “I’m not staging another revenge mission.”

“I promise, Andy will be fine,” Magpie says. “And back in here within fifteen minutes.”

Khan doesn’t feel reassured by that, and barely resists the urge to reach for his comm-link and call her. “When the ladies get here, we will arrange to meet in the theater,” he says instead. “Time to record this…message.”

“I already have most of the audio,” Cat says. “I want one last take of the main aria, but the rest is ready.”

“Jake was filming fights, when he got knocked out,” Jill says. “We’ll piece some of that together with one last spar.”

“And then…we wait,” Bishop says.

“I expect they will make us wait at least a week before they reply,” Khan says. “Power games.”

“So here’s a question,” Jill says. “Once we send our message, do we have anything to lose by trying for one last raid on the cryotube facility?”

“Do you want that alphabetically or reverse chronologically?” Magpie asks.

“Okay, point, but think of what it could gain us,” Jill says. “If we can get two more out…”

Khan looks at Konstantin. “Is it worth it?”

“If we can get two, and choose the two…it very well could be,” Konstantin says.

“Jasmine,” Khan says.

“And Amir,” Bishop says.

“Before you start planning this really bad idea, let me at least look at the security at the facility now,” Magpie says. “And I want Andy and Jake for help on this, plus Matthew, so can we maybe think about this after you send a message to the Klingon High Council just in case we don’t have time?”

“What do you need me for?” Andy asks. “What are we doing?”

“Think we could steal two more augments?” Jill asks, grinning.

Andy tips his head to the side. “Possibly,” he says after a moment. “Probably, if we make Marcus look elsewhere and they haven’t revamped the security too much. It’d be risky, but…maybe, it’s probably doable.”

“You are not helping, so come here and help me look at the security,” Magpie says. “They’re going to go get the message together, and now Jill-Bear wants to change the plans and add two more augments, so we might as well figure out how to do it.”

“I love you, Magpie,” Jill says sweetly.

“You owe me for this,” Magpie says, but laughs.

The others gather, and after an hour or so Maeve and Anandi join them, dressed in casual clothes and freshly bathed. “Everything he knew,” Maeve says, handing Khan a memory chip. “He talked
freely and willingly, once he knew there was no way out.”

“He had nothing to lose and quite a lot of pain to fear,” Khan says.

Anandi shrugs. “He hurt you,” she says. “There was pain.”

Khan decides not to pursue that. He tucks the chip away and explains the plan. “We should be ready in a few hours,” Maeve says.

“Six hours,” Khan says. “Will that be suitable time for everyone to rest and prepare?”

He gets a general round of agreement and nods. “Then let us go.”

The others beam out of the apartment; Jake doesn’t move; Jill looks at Khan, hands on her hips.

“Where do you want to go?”

“We should sleep,” Khan says.

Jill waits patiently, and Khan smiles. “There is a place I would show you.”

“Am I okay wearing this?” she asks, looking at her jeans and hoodie.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Come with me.” He sets the transporter, puts his arm around her, and presses the button.

They materialize after sunset, the air warm and perfumed with a hundred scents Khan hasn’t breathed in centuries. Lights flicker and dot the market, a hundred booths and stalls displaying wares, food, a thousand things. The air is a thousand times cleaner than it was in Khan’s time, and the smell of smog no longer tinges everything; the lights carry farther, the voices rise more clearly on the wind. “Three centuries and it’s still here,” he murmurs, looking out over it.

“Where are we?” Jill asks softly.

“Delhi,” Khan says. They stand on a hill about a block away from the market, far enough removed to be mostly hidden in darkness but close enough to see the details. “I established this market, after I took power. I wanted it to be a display of luxuries, because I provided my people with the basics. They called it the Lion’s Market, and… I did not know if I thought it would still be here. I hoped.”

Jill takes his hand, her fingers warm in his. “Do you want to walk through it?”

“I do, but I know not if it is wise,” Khan says. “I am not exactly inconspicuous.”

“We’ll risk it,” Jill says. “You’ll have to translate for me, though.”

They walk through the market, and Khan’s wings get a few second looks but no one stops them. He buys them both chai, taking a moment to savor the first real chai he’s had in this time. It was always a favorite of his.

Jill stops to look at a stall of fabrics, but laughs and shakes her head when the woman offers her one. “I can’t sew,” she says. “And I’ve nowhere to put it.”

Khan smiles, looking at one in particular. The shades of gold and black remind him of Rani, and for a moment he can see her in it, standing in front of him.

He steps back, shaken, and Jill comes to his side immediately. “What is it?” she asks in Russian.
“I thought I saw someone,” Khan says. “Come, let’s continue on.”

They continue through the market, buying sweets from one stall and foodstuffs from another. Once more Khan thinks he sees Rani, in gold, but when he turns to look all he catches are shadows.

“Did she come here with you?” Jill asks.

“She held court here,” Khan says. “In the center of the market, there’s an amphitheatre, and she would come and have audiences with petitioners. They called it the Queen’s Court, and while it was unofficial everyone knew she had my ear, and I would listen to her advice unless I had a valid reason to disagree.”

“Did you have one often?” Jill asks.

“No,” Khan says. “The sorts of matters for which people came to her rarely needed one.”

He takes Jill deeper into the market, into the theatre, and stops cold at it, not sure he can breathe for a moment. He never ordered a statue of Rani, he didn’t want one—but someone did, and had, and she sits in lotus at the back of the stage, so beautifully carved Khan almost thinks she can breathe. “Oh, my God,” Jill murmurs. “You didn’t know she was here, did you?”

“No,” Khan whispers.

He walks toward the statue, which rests on a block of stone, tall enough that the head is almost on eye level with his own. It’s not her, but it’s achingly true to life, and Khan leans forward, resting his forehead against the statue’s, just for a moment.

For a moment, he feels something cool brush against his cheek, and the scent of jasmine. He doesn’t move, or open his eyes, just in case…but the moment passes, and he draws back. When he walks over to Jill, though, she looks troubled, and her left hand curls into a fist. “What happened?” Khan asks.

Jill opens her fist, revealing a carved stone. “I didn’t pick it up,” she says, clearly shaken. “Something brushed past me and it was in my hand. What does it say?”

“It’s Hindi for light,” Khan says, also shaken. “I used to…Rani was my light.”

“What am I, then?” Jill asks softly.

“My lioness,” Khan says, finding reassurance in it. He touches Jill’s face, cups her cheek in his palm. “My lioness, and my fire.”

“My dragon,” she murmurs, leaning into his hand. “Let’s go back to the apartment where we’re sleeping. We have a couple hours left before we have to meet the others and I can think of a few ways to spend that time.”

“You should sleep, kitten,” Khan says, setting the transporter.

“I’ll sleep before we rescue more of your people,” Jill says. She wraps her arms around his waist. “And I’m totally serious about doing it. We’re under a time crunch and we need to get as many of your people out of there before Marcus kills them.”

“I see you have had the same lines of thought as my siblings,” Khan says.

“You won’t negotiate for them and they’re useless hostages,” Jill says. “So, yeah.”
Khan puts his arm around her shoulders and folds a wing around her. “You truly think we can save more?” he asks.

“I do,” Jill says. “I think we’re that good, and luck is on our side at the moment.”

“We cannot trust on luck,” Khan says.

“No, of course not, but it sure is helpful,” Jill says. “Come on, dragon. Let’s go somewhere with a bed.”

He takes her to the spare apartment, which has the feel of a middle-level hotel room with a surprisingly comfortable bed. At some point, he thinks, Jill will have to sort out which of her belongings are where, before they leave Earth. But later for that. She has enough to do now.

“How long do we have?” Jill asks, unzipping her boots.

“About two and a half hours,” Khan says.

She smiles. “Let’s make the most of it.”

Khan laughs. “Come here, kitten.”

Jill slips out of her hoodie, then her shirt, undressing as she walks toward Khan, until she stands before him clad in nothing but her hair. Without saying a word, she reaches behind her, lifting up her hair and turning around. “You don’t get tired of looking at this, do you,” she says.

“Never,” Khan murmurs, kissing her shoulder.

She laughs. “I like hearing that.”

They get a bare forty minutes’ sleep before they have to leave for the theater, and Khan doesn’t miss Jill dosing herself with stims but doesn’t comment. “Let’s put on a show,” she says, taking his hand.

“One last time,” Khan says and hits the button.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

This may not be a wise idea but the payoff will be worth it.

Chapter Notes

Well, you didn't expect them to just wait quietly, did you?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The finished video, when Magpie and Matthew finish editing it, Khan thinks far too melodramatic and overwrought—which, he supposes, makes it good fodder for the Klingons. Still, it does carry a sense of gravity about it.

“Do you know where to send it?” Bishop asks when they finish watching.

“I do,” Khan says. “Magpie and I set it up previously. There will be a delay, but it should arrive within an hour.”

Magpie holds out her tablet. “Just push enter. I refuse to actually send it.”

“Now you develop superstition?” Andy asks.

“Maybe,” Magpie says. “I’m just refusing to actually be the one to pull the trigger.”

Khan smiles. “Truthfully I can’t blame you.” He takes the tablet, looks at the message one last time, and hits send.

"And now what?" Alona asks. "While we wait for their reply?"

“I have a thing about that,” Jill says, raising a hand. “Jake, Bishop and I planned this out while the rest of you were either healing or editing the video, and in three nights we’re staging a raid on the London facility where the cryotubes are. It’s pretty risky but I think we can pull it off, and we’re going to try for four.”

“Four,” Khan says, nonplussed. “Two was the maximum.”

“Two was the max I could take with me,” Jill says. “I’m not going alone. Alona’s coming with me.”

“Oh, fantastic,” Alona says. “This sounds brilliant.”

“Here’s the thing,” Jill says. “We can get in, get four, and get out, but we need either one unkeyed transporter that can take four or two unkeyed that can take two.” She looks at Khan. “You said they weren’t difficult to make.”
“They aren’t,” Khan says. “I will make you two, although it will go more quickly with Andy and Katsuro’s help. We can key them after you get out.”

“Who are we getting?” Alona asks.


Konstantin inclines his head.

“I can’t argue with any of those choices,” Alona says. “We’re going to need to equip them fast, though.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Jake says. “Khan made extra weapons, so they’re covered, and I’ll take care of the rest although someone who knows their sizes needs to tell me so I can buy clothes.”

“We can manage that,” Maeve says. “Where will they sleep?”

“We have spare beds scattered among us,” Khan says. “If we must, we will find a new place, but I doubt we will be here long enough after this to need it.” He smiles a bit. “I still remain unconvinced this is a wise idea.”

“It may not be but I think the payoff will be worth it,” Jill says. “And if we hear from the Klingons before the op, we’ll re-evaluate.”

“Let’s save those we can, while we can,” Maeve says quietly. “We may not have the chance again.”

Khan can’t argue that point. “There’s little else we can do but prepare for this while we await a reply,” Bishop says. “So let us make our preparations as comprehensive as they can be.”

Khan can’t argue that point, either, and his family scatter to make their preparations. Bishop and Anandi work to create the stimulant, and two doses of something they think will be a counter. “In case you get dosed again,” Anandi tells Jill. “Or in case Alona does.”

“Alona can tolerate it better than I can, but thank you,” Jill says. “Here’s hoping we don’t need it.”

Maeve and Jake gather clothing and gear for the four they hope to recover; Cat and Konstantin, surprising everyone, volunteer to make a pilgrimage to the Femarans to request knives. “Jasmine likes her knives,” Cat says. “I am little use at practical preparation and I despise waiting, let me do this.”

Jake contacts Melcian, who assures him Ekaterina and Konstantin are welcome, and they leave.

Alona spends her time with Jill and Matthew, analyzing security of the facility; Khan works with Andy and Katsuro to build two more transporters. Magpie rarely leaves her spot in the nest she’s built herself out of cushions and pillows, and Khan doesn’t know what she’s working on but leaves best alone.

“Not to…well, to ask the question, what happened to Ikan’s body?” Magpie asks suddenly, out of nowhere.

“We never ask,” Matthew says. “Just trust that it was thoroughly disposed of in ways that make it untraceable, or virtually so. We did talk about making his body into a message but decided it would be better if Ikan just disappeared, and the ladies are good at disappearing bodies.”
“Okay,” Magpie says. “Fine, and I don’t need details, but I’d like to know why his biometrics just registered on a scan at Starfleet HQ.”

“Say that again,” Khan says flatly.

“Ikan’s biometrics, or the life-sign identifying itself as Ikan’s, registered on the Starfleet internal security network,” Magpie says. “Specifically in the satellite building where he was talking to Jake.”

“Can you get him on visual?” Khan asks, already moving over to the wall.

“I’m working on it,” Magpie says. “This building doesn’t have visuals in the hall and I can’t find him in a room. Oh, wait, there—there.” Video springs into life on the wall and Khan studies the person in gray, watching him stand in a room.

“If I didn’t know better,” he says.

“Who says you do?” Magpie looks up at him. “You said he was remarkably easy to take down. Maybe that was a decoy.”

“You know, that’s not news we want right now,” Jake says. “Hang on. Can you enhance video of the left side of his head? I need to see his skull by his ear.”

“Why there?” Magpie asks, freezing video and enlarging part of it.

“Because Ikan, the real one, has a mole there,” Jake says. “It mostly fades in against his skin tone, but it’s the one spot I know is legit on him. And there is…no mole.”

“No, and—Magpie, resume video, please,” Khan says. “Look at him walk around the room. Ikan did not move like that, he was more controlled.”

“So the question is why is there a faux-Ikan and what does Marcus hope to gain from it,” Matthew says.

“Those are two questions,” Khan says.

“I can’t get audio,” Magpie says, frustrated. “There’s a jammer on the link and I could break it but then they’d know I was there.”

“Let’s not draw attention to ourselves,” Khan says. “Still, if we can follow this faux-Ikan, we might have an idea what Marcus wants with him.”

“I’ll see what I can do, although I could use Matthew,” Magpie says.

“I can help,” Matthew says, coming over. “What do you need?”

Khan leaves them to it and goes back to his worktable with the transporters. He can think of a few reasons why Marcus wants an Ikan imitator in place, but none of them likely have much impact on his family. Marcus has to know Khan was behind Ikan’s disappearance, and would realize that Khan would recognize an impostor.

He doubts the faux-Ikan has anything to do with Jake, although it’s possible, but Marcus should realize that Jake, like Khan, would recognize an impostor. More likely, Marcus needs “Ikan” to pretend to be alive for plans regarding section 31.

“It would be interesting if we were to disappear him, but impractical,” he says.
“We haven’t time,” Katsuro says mildly. “Although I would like to know what purpose Marcus has for him.”

“I would as well, but priorities,’ Khan says. “We can keep an eye on him, but I doubt we need much more.”

“No, it’s about time to prep for the op,” Jill says. “Are the transporters ready?”

“Yes,” Katsuro says. “Khan needs to seal the power source.”

“I still don’t understand why you won’t let me do it,” Andy grumbles.

“The same reason Magpie wouldn’t send the message,” Khan says, picking up the first transporter. That, and sealing the power source requires a drop of blood to key the transporter’s life signs. Khan honestly doesn’t know if Andy’s blood would cause a problem with the transporter recognizing his siblings, but prefers not to risk it.

He seals both, ignoring the sting in his fingertips, and hands them to Jill. “Are you ready?” he asks. She grins. “Oh, yeah. This is gonna be fun.”

“Now you’re talking,” Alona says, laughing.

Khan admits he would feel better about this endeavor if Cat and Konstantin were back from the Femaran planet. Splitting them even further like this doesn’t sit well with him, and the increased risk on this mission makes him even less enthused.

He says nothing. “We’ll be on comms,” Jill says. “It’s not like you won’t know what’s going on, dragon.”

“I know,” Khan says. “I never like sending people into danger without me.”

She stretches up on her toes and kisses him lightly. “We’ll be fine.”

While they go to make their preparations and work with Andy and Magpie, Khan stops by Matthew. “Any news on faux-Ikan?” he asks.

“No, but he seems mostly to be there to stand in meetings and look ominous,” Matthew says. “I can’t get any kind of audio on him, it’s like they’ve put an audio jammer in the way they’ve tracked him. I find that interesting, and more evidence that this guy is not the one we wanted dead, but mostly it’s just a nuisance because it means I don’t have an audio imprint of him.”

“He likely can’t fake the voice as well as the appearance,” Khan says.

“Yeah, that was my bet,” Matthew says. “It does leave me very curious about Starfleet internal politics, though, because if Marcus doesn’t need faux-Ikan to fool you or Jake, and if Viola’s out of the way, who is he worried about?”

Khan considers it, analyzing it from a few angles. “There are people who know the age of our ship,” he says. “There are people who know I was revived, and people who can put pieces together. Most of them likely realize I have disappeared, and intend revenge on Marcus and anyone else I find guilty by association. Taking Ikan down is the first step in that revenge, and Marcus likely does not want to scare his section 31 personnel. Or he wants to put forth the illusion that he has not lost any resources in case of intra-departmental politics, that’s also likely but I do not know enough about normal Starfleet politics.”
“Jake and Jill do, probably,” Matthew says.

“Jill is busy,” Khan says. “Jake, come here please.”

“Yo,” Jake says, rolling to his feet easily and walking over to them. “What do you want to know?”

“If Marcus wanted to pretend that nothing had happened in section 31, who would he be putting on a show for?” Khan asks. “Who would take advantage of knowing two of his top field operatives are disappeared, one in league with me and the other presumed killed by me?”

Jake scratches the back of his head. “I would have said Viola, but she’s on leave and can’t come back. Rafferty runs the medical side of section 31, so he undoubtedly knows you’re gone and Ikan’s missing. I never dealt with him much, so I doubt he cares about me. There are a couple other admirals I think would object to section 31 on moral and ethical grounds, and depending on what they found out about it, they might stage an uprising or at least force Marcus to resign.”

“Who are those?” Khan asks. “We may need one of them as an ally later.”

“Pike,” Jake says. “Pike is honest and ethical and somewhat of a rule-breaker when he has to be. Jill and I always planned to go to Pike once we had a deal with the Klingons.”

“Speaking of, any word from them?” Matthew asks.

“No,” Khan says. “But I doubt we will have one for another few days.”

“I promise, as soon as I hear anything,” Magpie says absently. “But even Neutral Zone gossip is quiet. Like the Klingons pulled back some patrols that skirted the edge of the zone, even before the Federation protested or responded.”

“When did that happen?” Khan asks, senses prickling.

“Um,” Magpie says. “It—one moment—okay, so a day ago there was a bit about a patrol that appeared to turn around on its way to the Neutral Zone, without prompting by the Federation, and they haven’t sent out another ship.”

“I do believe they got our message,” Matthew says.

“I do believe you are correct,” Khan says, smiling. “Now it just remains to see how they answer it.”

“If they answer it,” Magpie says.

“They will,” Khan says. “How, I do not know, but they will.”

“Hopefully they don’t answer with a squadron of ships headed for Earth,” Matthew says.

“That is unlikely,” Khan says. “I won’t say impossible, but statistically very unlikely. We have made no aggressive moves toward them, we have not attacked them. We sent them a message—a challenge, but not a physical threat. If they agree to our offer, they will be treating us as ambassadors, and whatever else Klingons may want, they do care about honor.”

“That is what Klingons want,” Jake says. “Honor. Everything in their society is based around honor and earning it and maintaining it. If we defeat them in honest combat, we’ve dishonored them and proven ourselves worthy opponents.”

“What Marcus fails to realize about war with the Klingons is that it’s only inevitable if you do not
meet the Klingons on their terms for negotiations,” Khan says. “They only respect those who are tested in battle, and diplomats are somewhat a foreign concept.”

“Which is why we’re negotiating by combat,” Matthew says. “Small war to prevent a bigger one?”

“Essentially,” Khan says.

“Jasmine is going to love this,” Matthew says.

“Who is Jasmine?” Jake asks. “I mean, who are they getting tonight?”

“Jasmine was my right hand,” Khan says. “My assistant, captain, whatever you want to call her.”

“We called her the lion’s claw,” Matthew says. “She was also his most trusted assassin.”

“She was my most trusted anything,” Khan says. “At least, of those who served with me.”

“Let’s be honest, you trust her more than me,” Matthew says, grinning.

“I trust you to get in trouble and I trust her to stay out of it,” Khan says, but has to laugh. “Amir and Aisha also were my people. They served for me a similar role as Alona and Matthew did for Bishop.”

“And Carson?” Jake asks. “He is the last one, right?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Carson puts up with Matthew and Alona despite their being Irish and his being Scots, but he actually served with Anandi, in South America.”

“Carson was our pediatrician, because for some reason we needed one,” Matthew says. “Or he thought we did. But Bishop had himself and Maeve as medical experts, and Carson had interests in biochem as well as medicine, so he went with Anandi.”

“And he became to me what Jasmine is to Khan,” Anandi says. “I look forward to having him back.”

“Hopefully we’ll have time for them to recover before we drag them to Qo’noS,” Matthew says. “I mean, we could—”

“No,” Khan says. “For one, we’re not likely to get a response for another few days, which should at least give them time to sleep off the awakening process and get caught up on the essentials. They will be at a physical disadvantage on Qo’noS, and we have to acknowledge that and plan for it. We haven’t time to properly equip them with everything and they won’t have time to condition themselves.”

“Will they be at a disadvantage with a Klingon?” Jake asks. “I mean, how badly off are we talking here?”

“They will still have the advantage over a Klingon in single combat,” Khan says. “And the advantage of you, obviously. It is not as though we are putting unprepared people into combat.”

“Basically it’s just that they won’t have had the chance to study and train like we have,” Matthew says. “It doesn’t make them weaker, it just makes them less prepared.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Jake says. “But I’m pretty sure four of your people, even less prepared, could wipe the floor with a squad of Klingons.”
Matthew grins, flashing teeth. “I certainly hope so.”

“How is that not a strategy,” Anandi says and Matthew laughs.

“No, it’s not, but right now I’m using it anyway.”

“How badly could this go tonight?” Alona asks.

“The worst that happens is we get captured, or shot,” Jill says, fitting her earbud into place. “Which is unlikely given the transporters, but possible. I’m less worried about phasers and more worried about actually getting captured. You don’t exist and I’d be facing immediate court-martial, so let’s try to avoid it.”

“Yes, although it would be interesting to see what Starfleet would do with someone who doesn’t exist,” Matthew says.

“Not that interesting,” Jill says. “She’d either end up dead or in prison. Correction, rehab facility.”

“It’s not going to happen, so let’s stop talking about it,” Alona says. “But what else could go wrong?”

“The biggest things we have to worry about are not being able to get the cryotubes open, not being able to wake up your family in time, and getting caught on the way out.”

“The first one we can manage unless they’ve put new security on the tubes. The second we should manage based on the stimulant and past experience. The third is why we’re beaming out of there as soon as we get out of the shielded area.”

“What if your comm-links go down?” Matthew asks.

“We follow the plan and bug out as soon as we have everyone,” Jill says. “If we lose contact with you, odds are there’s something really bad going on.”

“Security scans are quiet, for the record,” Magpie says. “I’m not seeing anything suspicious in terms of activity or lack of activity. Everything looks normal. Andy and I put a couple hiccups in their monitoring, so that will start to get their attention as you two get through the building and hopefully distract them from looking for you.”

“How is that not a strategy,” Alona says, grinning.

“Oh, whatever,” Magpie says, rolling her eyes. “Are you two ready?”

“We are,” Jill says. “I think. Alona?”

“I was born ready,” Alona says. “Is it time to go?”

“Just about,” Magpie says. “Well, I mean you’ve got some time, but sunset is soon, so it’s time to get moving.”

“Let’s do this,” Alona says cheerfully. “I haven’t gotten to have fun like this since I woke up, so this should be awesome.”

“Just be careful,” Matthew says. “And that’s coming from me.”

“We will be careful, I promise,” Alona says, waving a hand. “We can be careful and have fun at the same time.”
“Absolutely we can,” Jill says brightly. “We’re going to.”

Khan smiles, but it feels forced and he doesn’t maintain it. He still thinks this is too risky, that this could go wrong in so many ways, but to get four more of them back, especially now...

When Alona and Jill leave for London, Khan returns to the roof, knowing himself too restless to settle inside. He considers going flying, but can’t quite bring himself to leave the building, just in case something happens.

“We are going to play Go,” Anandi says, walking toward him with a box. “I have not played in a very long time, and you have not played in perhaps a longer amount of time, and we both need to be distracted about tonight. So we are playing Go.”

“All right,” Khan says, both amused and resigned. The game will cheer him up, but he knows the outcome already. No one can beat Anandi at Go. “Why do you need to be distracted?”

“Carson,” Anandi says succinctly, sitting down on the roof facing Khan.

“Of course,” Khan says. “I am certain he will be fine, just like the others.”

“Well, we shall see,” Anandi says, setting up the board. “But right now it is quite noisy and crowded inside and I would prefer some cool space.”

“Are you feeling well?” Khan asks.

“Yes, of course,” Anandi says, laughing. “I would just prefer not to be surrounded by loud people right now. I would like some quiet, and cool fresh air, and a conversation with my oldest brother.”

“What would you like to converse about?” Khan asks. “Anything in particular?”

Anandi shakes her head. “I simply wanted some time with you. We may not have a chance for it again.”

“This starts to feel familiar,” Khan says. “The wait, the anticipation of a battle where we know not the outcome or all the variables.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Now, as then, we find chances to have some quiet, and discuss what may be.”

“Do you also intend to remind me I must survive Qo’noS?” Khan asks, because that seems to be the trend.

“I should not think I have to,” Anandi says. “You are practical, Khan, and you know we need you to survive in order to complete our goals. If you are asking whether or not I would trade my life for yours, I would. We all would.”

“I wish it were not necessary,” Khan says. “I want all of us to survive, hermana.”

“Of course you do, and of course we also want to survive,” Anandi says. “But our goal in going to Qo’noS is larger than our desire to be free of Starfleet. We have a purpose here, a goal of preventing war, and without you I doubt we can accomplish it.”

“And Jill?” Khan asks.

“You would never forgive us if something happened to her,” Anandi says. “She will survive, Khan. You and she both will.”
“I had this conversation with Kostenka,” Khan says. “How many more times will it be necessary?”

Anandi smiles. “It won’t,” she says. “We all know where we stand, hermano.”

“What do you think we will do, once we leave Earth?” Khan asks, changing the subject.

“See the galaxy,” Anandi says. “There is so much out there, so many opportunities. Perhaps we will find a home on a new planet, or establish a home base for ourselves. I know there are some plans Starfleet has we should do our best to disrupt—Ikan knew quite a lot about them—but if we prevent war with the Klingons, those are less critical. I would like, for once, the chance to travel and see the galaxy without an overriding goal of preventing war or winning it. We never quite achieved stable peace in our time, and it is a luxury I would like to experience.”

“I think we all would,” Khan murmurs.

“Mostly,” Anandi says. “I remain unconvinced Cat wants peace.”

Khan laughs. “You have a point.”

“And Alona and Matthew do not like things too quiet,” Anandi says. “They will invent trouble if they do not find it.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “So this will be an interesting adventure. Jill, also, will invent trouble if she doesn’t find it.”

“Your rogue,” Anandi says, smiling. “And our imps.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “This will be the first time we have had extended time together without someone controlling our circumstances or impending war, you realize. We may very well self-destruct.”

“I think we have a good balance of people,” Anandi says. “We should be able to maintain a healthy living environment, although I would request we get a ship with enough quarters for everyone to have their own. Or at least their own private space. I realize you and Jill, and Cat and Konstantin, will want to share, but everyone needs privacy.”

“They do, and yes,” Khan says. “Jake and Katsuro and I looked at some long-haul ships over the last few weeks, and there are two models we like. Both have ample room for privacy and personal time, as well as storage.”

“Do you think we will be able to acquire the ship and provision it?” Anandi asks.

“I do,” Khan says. “They will want us gone, because we will remind them that one of their own betrayed the ideals he was sworn to uphold. They will be grateful for our aid, but they will want us gone for fear we will cause more trouble by existing. If we tell them we want to leave, I lay fairly high odds on us being able to acquire whatever we need.”

“So long as they do not try to arrest you,” Anandi says. “Or Jill or Jake.”

“I think we can avoid those scenarios,” Khan says. “Once Marcus is dealt with, they will have fewer reasons to charge any of us.”

“Yes, but when you kill Marcus, they may change their minds,” Anandi says.

Khan bares his teeth in what isn’t a smile. “I would like to see them try.”
“Agreed.” Anandi studies the board. “They will try to hide him from us, you realize. They will want him alive, to stand trial.”

“Yes, I know,” Khan says. “I have no intention of allowing him to survive long enough to be sentenced by a jury.”

“If they send him into exile?” Anandi asks.

“We go after him,” Khan says. “Marcus will die by my hand, regardless of what Starfleet wants.”

“Only your hand?” Anandi asks.

“Only mine,” Khan says evenly. “Although I am certain he will have lackeys that will need disposing of.”

“I’m certain,” Anandi says. “Men like him always have lackeys. And what of his ship, the Vengeance? What do you intend to do with it?”

“Nothing,” Khan says. “I designed it, I could do so again. There are a myriad of things with the ship that could be improved upon, although overall it is a solidly designed ship built entirely for combat. It does not suit our needs, however, and I have no personal attachment to it.”

Anandi nods. “I was not certain if you wanted us to use it when we leave Earth.”

Khan shakes his head. “It is too obvious, too big a target and too clearly a Federation vessel. It would cause more problems than it solved.”

“Likely,” Anandi says. “We will, however, need a ship with some offensive capabilities.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I would very much like to get my hands on the cloaking technology the Romulans use, but they are not an allied species and I have no desire to entangle us in another possible war.”

“Thank goodness,” Anandi murmurs. “We will figure it out. If all else fails you can likely invent it.”

“With Katsuro and Andy’s aid, yes,” Khan says.

“The three of you make a good team,” Anandi says thoughtfully. “Which is good, as I expect you will be our engineers on the ship. Obviously you will captain it, but you and Katsuro and Andy will likely be the ones to fix things.”

“In all probability, yes,” Khan agrees. “Konstantin did also note that we seem to be fairly balanced across disciplines and areas of study.”

“Something we must do before we leave,” Anandi says. “We must have a memorial. I would prefer before we went to Qo’noS.”


“I know,” Anandi says. “I think…I believe we should say goodbye before they are.”

“What did you dream, Anandi?” Khan asks softly.

“Something I do not entirely remember,” she says. “Just that—we should say goodbye while we can, before goodbye becomes memorial. None of us expect them to survive long past us leaving for
Qo’noS, and we should take a moment to acknowledge that before we leave.”

“We could be wrong,” Khan says.

“We could, but…” Anandi shakes her head. “I think not. Frankly I am somewhat bemused as to why Marcus has not destroyed them already.”

Khan shrugs, wings ruffling a bit. “He might still hope to awaken someone he can control,” he says. “Or he might be having a difficult time finding the paper justification for it. Or we have suitably distracted him with the loss of Ikan, or…” He gestures, spreading his hands. “A thousand variables, truthfully. There is no particular reason Marcus will kill them after we leave for Qo’noS—it is not as though we are announcing our departure.”

“No, but we all feel it,” Anandi says. “Including me, and trust me, Khan, I dislike anything that is based so heavily on intuition. But there is a growing sense that when we leave Earth for Qo’noS, we must take everyone and everything we can, because it may not be there upon our return.”

“I would like to get our things off our ship,” Khan says. “I have some ideas, but that can wait for now.”

“Before we leave,” Anandi says. “I am also uncertain I like the idea of Andy and Magpie staying on Earth when we leave for Qo’noS.”

“I had considered that, but neither of them have been off-planet before,” Khan says. “They will hide themselves the best they can, and they have access to more resources on Earth than off it. And they will remain plugged into news in case something happens.”

“But how will they contact us?” Anandi asks.

“We have an emergency link that will cross the distance,” Khan says. “If we absolutely need it.”

“Here is hoping we do not,” Anandi says.

“Hope is not a strategy,” Khan says, smiling.

She laughs. “Si, si, but I have little else to go on right now.”

“What have you dreamed lately?” Khan asks.

Anandi shakes her head. “I would prefer not to discuss my dreams.”

“Nandita,” Khan says, using the childhood nickname. “Tell me.”

She pulls the scarf out of her hair, running her hands through the resulting puff of curls. “Truthfully, Khan, I do not remember most of it,” she says. “Just…a sense of disaster, of overwhelming failure. The world was on fire, quite literally.”

“Where were we?” Khan asks.

She shakes her head. “A city I have not seen before. But it was just you, Khan. No one else—none of us were there.”

“Jill?” Khan asks.

“You were alone,” Anandi says softly. “I think it was a portend of what could have been, not what might be now, but it was disturbing.”
“I am not alone,” Khan says simply. “Not now.”

“No.” Anandi sighs. “I used to believe we had a purpose. We all did. Now… I wonder what there is for us, now that we can choose our own way.”

“We all wonder that,” Khan says. “It will be something we find together. That is all I know for certain.”

“And for now we have goals,” Anandi says.

“Speaking of, we should go see how the mission tonight is proceeding,” Khan says. “Since I do not think we are actually playing Go.”

Anandi smiles. “No, I think we are not.” She puts away the untouched board and rises to her feet. “I think I will bake bread, while we await the mission’s end.” she says. “At least that way I can be suitably productive.”

Khan smiles. “You and Konstantin would get up at four to bake bread,” he says, remembering when they were barely adolescent. “Often he made me join you.”

“I remember,” Anandi says. “Will we be able to bake, and cook, on a ship?”

“We will, although we will have to provision ourselves along the way,” Khan says. “There’s talk of replicator technology being used for foods, but it is not yet a reality.”

“Call me old-fashioned but I would rather not have my food appear out of nothing,” Anandi says.

Khan laughs. “You know, I agree.”

They go inside, and a check with Magpie and Andy confirms that Jill and Alona have not encountered any problems so far and are making their way to the cryotubes now. Khan doesn’t ask for more details and follows Anandi to the kitchen instead. While she begins assembling ingredients, he makes tea, opting for a black tea as he expects it will be a long night.

It takes longer this time for Jill and Alona to reach the cryotubes—Khan doesn’t know if they were moving slowly because there were two of them, because security was higher, or any number of other reasons, but it takes longer before Magpie announces they’re through the security field, and half an hour goes by before Andy says they’re back outside it. “Five minutes to transporter range,” Andy says, studying his screen.

“Did they get all four?” Khan asks.

Magpie shoots him a thumbs-up and Khan breathes out slowly. Thirteen of them, his closest and most trusted, and a plan that might have just gotten slightly less dangerous.

“Incoming,” Andy says seven minutes later. “We’re going to need some space.”

Khan steps back, watching six forms coalesce in the middle of the room. In truth, he doesn’t know who to reach for first, or what to say. He had thought nine was all they could get, and now…

Jill reaches him first, and he wraps his arms and wings around her, lowering his head to hers. “Thank you,” he whispers.

“You’re welcome, dragon,” Jill murmurs back. “You might want to say hi to the others and then go find Jasmine. She didn’t react well to the stimulant and threw up twice, and was going to get some
air on the roof as soon as we got back here.”

“In a moment,” Khan says, not letting go of her just yet. “Did you have any close calls?”

“One,” Jill says. “But they didn’t see us. That’s absolutely it, though. No more.”

“No,” Khan says. “Then again I had said that before tonight.”

“Yes, and you were wrong,” Jill says, laughing. “I really need some water, and then some food, and you need to say hi to the others.”

She does and he does, and so Khan lets go of Jill and goes to greet his family.

Chapter End Notes

I freely admit this chapter and the next one (which is almost done) are pretty self-indulgent, but I hope you don’t mind too much.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

She gave me a box. I never opened it.

Chapter Notes

This chapter started as an outtake, and ended up fitting into the story, but to me it feels a little rougher than some of the rest of WC, a little more implausible (although lbr, this story is kind of impossible on seventeen different fronts). I'll be curious to know what you think of the events in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He finds Jasmine on the roof, as he expected, her hair lifted gently by the breeze and hands folded in the small of her back. “At ease, soldier,” he says affectionately and Jasmine laughs, turning around to face him.

She gestures, looks at him, opens her mouth, closes it. “Khan,” she says finally. “How bad is it?”

Khan smiles and holds out a hand. Jasmine laughs and jumps on him, hugging him harder than possibly Konstantin does. He hugs back tightly and lets her ground herself.

“Okay,” she says finally, pulling back and landing on the roof. “Okay. So how bad is it?”

“We’ve faced worse odds but not higher stakes,” Khan says. “Threat of intergalactic war with an alien species, we’re on our own with no backing from Earth’s current government or military, and the leader of said military wants me dead.”

“What did you do to piss him off?” Jasmine asks.

“Why do you say it’s a him?” Khan asks.

“Because it always is,” Jasmine says. “Let me guess, he thought he could control you and found out otherwise?”

Khan smiles. “You do know me.”

“I do,” Jasmine says, smiling back. “Who do you need me to kill?”

“Klingons,” Khan says. “I can give you the five-minute explanation downstairs, with the others.”

“Give me the ten second explanation,” Jasmine says.

“Aggressive warrior species,” Khan says. “We challenged them to trial by combat for the right to negotiate peace accords with their empire and the current Earth governmental system.”
“Without Earth’s support,” Jasmine says.

Khan nods. “Yes.”

She snorts. “How hard are they to kill?”

“Easier than one of us, harder than a regular human,” Khan says. “Their biology is designed for redundancy and they are faster and stronger than a regular human. However, we have the advantage of them. I will show you, and the others, a few vulnerable spots to strike for.”

Jasmine nods. “What else can I do for you, Khan? You have questions in your eyes.”

“Tell me something,” he says, studying her face. “I went to the Lion’s Market, to see if it still existed.”

“Does it?” she asks.

“It does,” Khan says. “And there is a statue of Rani in the ampitheatre, seated in lotus. I never ordered one, I never wanted one, and you are the only person I know who would have thought to do such a thing. Why?”

“She asked me to,” Jasmine says softly. “Before she died, she asked me to put a memorial of her in the market.”

“Why?” Khan asks, honestly baffled.

Jasmine shakes her head. “I don’t know. I asked, because it seemed odd, but all she said was it needed to be there. She was specific about it, Khan, she told me exactly what it should look like. So after she died, and after some time had passed, I did as she’d asked.”

“Was there anything special about it?” Khan asks. “Any hidden compartments or such?”

Jasmine nods. “Her hands are folded, but there’s a compartment in them.”

“What is in it?” Khan asks, not sure he wants to know the answer.

“She gave me a box,” Jasmine says. “I never opened it.”

Khan steps back, feeling badly shaken. “If I take you there, can you open it?” he asks after a moment.

Jasmine nods again. “This should be interesting,” she says.

Khan gets one of the unkeyed transporters and shows Jasmine how to use it, setting the coordinates for the market. She steps closer to him and he hears her inhale sharply as the transporter picks them up.

They materialize in shadows, to the side of the ampitheatre stage. “That…was wild,” Jasmine says slowly. “And you can go anywhere, so long as you know the coordinates?”

“Essentially,” Khan says.

She shakes her head. “Man, we would have been unstoppable with those.”

“I am almost glad we did not have them,” Khan says. “Too easily abused.”
“There is that,” Jasmine says. She walks over to the statue, studying it for a moment, then reaches for its hands and presses a spot on the left. The statue splits along the line of its fingers—rather cunningly hidden, Khan thinks—and Jasmine reaches into the hidden compartment, taking out a small metal box. She hands it to him and his fingers curl around it almost convulsively.

Jasmine closes the compartment again and looks at the statue’s face. “Lion-tamer,” she murmurs in Hindi, sketching a bow. Khan gives her a moment, then sets a hand on her shoulder. She nods and looks up at him. “Where to now?”

He takes her to the roof of Magpie’s building, as private as they need and with enough room for neither of them to feel stifled. Jasmine folds herself into lotus and Khan kneels opposite her, opening the box slowly.

He takes out an envelope, unaddressed, but sets it aside in favor of the other thing in the box, a carved stone identical to Jill’s save for the carving—this one has the stylized lion Khan used as his personal seal. He smiles faintly to see it.

“Do you want me to leave?” Jasmine asks when he picks up the envelope.

“No, actually,” Khan says. Rani asked Jasmine to do this; she should be here to see what message Rani left.

_Sometimes I don’t know what is real and what I am dreaming anymore. I dreamed you found this message, hundreds of years in the future. I see you in that future, when I dream, and in my dreams I am part of it even though I’m long dead and gone. I don’t know if what I dream is going to happen or is happening somewhere but if there’s a chance this message will reach you, I will take it._

_In my dreams you’re in such danger, and so angry, and so alone. Those dreams end in fire and death. But in some of my dreams, in a precious few, you’re not alone, and I don’t dream of you dying in fire. I dream of you fighting, and winning, but I don’t know the prize._

_I don’t want you to be alone, my love, and if you find someone, have found someone, I want you to be happy. I want you to win whatever fight you’ve taken on, and my lion, if these dreams portend what may be I promise I will do anything I can to help you._

_I love you. I will always love you, so long as part of me exists somewhere. I hope these dreams mean I will, that I will see you after I die. I’m not afraid to die, my lion, but I fear for you, after I go._

_They say I tamed you but you were never tame, my lion, and never will be. No one can tame you. Remember that, Khan. Remember that, and remember I love you._

Khan doesn’t realize he’s crying until the first tear hits the paper.

Jasmine rescues it from getting soaked and Khan struggles to breathe, not entirely sure he remembers how. “Just let it out,” Jasmine says softly, taking his hands. “Just cry for her, Khan. It’s just us.”

She doesn’t understand all of it—she doesn’t know most of it—but Khan frankly doesn’t have the words to tell her and his heart aches. Rani loved him so much, he thinks, stunned again by it, by her determination to help him no matter what.

“There was a compartment,” Jasmine says. “In Rani’s statue, in the Lion’s Market. We went there. She left him a message.”

“Oh,” Jill says softly. “Oh, Khan.”

The sympathy and concern in her voice gives Khan a moment to catch his breath. He reaches for Jill, needing her to remind him of the present instead of the past; she wraps around him, lets him lean his forehead against her shoulder and breathe in her scent, spicy-sweet and sandalwood.

“I’m here,” Jill murmurs in Russian, scratching his scalp and petting his neck and shoulders. “I’m here, my dragon.”

It still takes a moment, maybe more than one, before Khan sighs and pulls away slightly. His head aches, but he knows it will pass. Jill studies him, laying a hand against his cheek, and when he smiles faintly she kisses his forehead. “You look awful but you’ll be fine in a bit,” she says briskly.

“Yes,” Jasmine agrees. “I’d get you a flannel but I’ve no idea where anything is.”

“I can get you one,” Jill says. “And then we can talk.”

“That would be good,” Jasmine says. “You look really familiar, for the record. Like I’ve seen you before somewhere.”

“Given everything else I’m not really surprised by that,” Jill says. “For all I know you dreamed about me.”

“I may have,” Jasmine says. “I don’t usually remember my dreams that well. You just look like I should know you.”

“You will,” Khan says, frankly exhausted and in no hurry to move. “Jill is my mate.”

“Yes, Khan, I did get that impression,” Jasmine says patiently. “I’m sure we’ll be fine together, assuming we ever have time to figure it out.”

“Well we haven’t heard from the Klingons yet so we’ve got a bit,” Jill says. “Khan, the others are downstairs where Bishop and Katsuro are explaining the situation to Aisha, Amir, and Carson. Do you want to give Jasmine the rundown up here or go downstairs?”

“Here is fine,” Khan says. “It will take me less time.”

Jasmine settles cross-legged on the roof, hands folded precisely in her lap—Khan knows it to be a memory aid. “The story starts in another universe,” he says. “An alternate one.”

Within about five minutes he’s sketched out the basics; Jasmine listens intently, but doesn’t ask questions until he finishes talking. “You know, if you weren’t my oldest brother and I didn’t love and trust you more than anyone else in the universe I would be calling the medics to take you away to an insane asylum right about now,” she says finally.

“I’m aware,” Khan says. “This is not exactly the awakening we hoped for.”

“Really it isn’t but we are awake,” Jasmine says. “At least, thirteen of us.”

“Baker’s dozen,” Jill murmurs. “Seventeen of us all told. Enough to defeat two interplanetary governments and make them do our bidding?”

Jasmine smiles slowly. “I should think so.”
“When Cat and Kostenka get back, they should have weapons for you,” Khan says. “Melee, anyway. I have a ranged weapon for you.”

“Is there any way to get anything off our ship?” Jasmine asks. “I had my assassins’ daggers there and would ideally love them before we go into combat.”

“It would depend on the level of security around the ship,” Khan says. “It is unlikely, but it is theoretically possible.”

“What is an assassins’ dagger?” Jill asks.

“I have two of them,” Jasmine says. “Each one has a hollow handle with poison inside. If I squeeze the handle the right way, it coats the blade. I’ve no idea if it would work on these Klingons, but it is dangerous enough to hurt us, so I would think it would be at least somewhat effective.”

“I would think so,” Jill says. “Do you have anything else on the ship you badly want or need?”

“I have a few belongings I’d like back, definitely,” Jasmine says. “Although we all would. I would hope we have intentions of regaining our things once we show our cards.”

“Yes, of course,” Khan says. “Although…let us go talk to Andy and Magpie. I think I have an idea.”

The living room of Magpie’s nest feels decidedly crowded, and noisier than usual, but when Khan enters the room with Jill and Jasmine all noise dies down. “Andy,” he says. “Magpie. How difficult would it be to transport some small objects from our old ship?”

“Depends on where it’s currently parked,” Andy says. “If it’s in a standard ship hangar, not difficult so long as we can locate the objects on the transporter scan. If it’s in a more secure location—well, that depends on the location and what we’re looking for.”

“Do you know where the ship is being held?” Jasmine asks.

“I do,” Khan says. “It is in a geosynchronous orbit around Earth. Marcus did not want it anywhere anyone could get a close look at it, including me.”

“So that would mean it’s probably not that difficult to get stuff off it,” Andy says. “Hell, if the security is straightforward enough we could probably beam onto the ship, get your stuff, and beam out.”

“That might be pushing our luck a bit too much,” Jill says. “But we can probably beam things off it easily enough.”

Khan moves over to a worktable to get a spare computer and starts digging. He listens with half an ear to the conversations around him, but none of it seems terribly relevant to him and he wants, badly, to get his family’s personal possessions off the Botany Bay.

Matthew comes over to him with his own computer after a few moments, and after him Bishop joins them. “If we could get a camera up there,” Matthew says.

“It doesn’t appear as though anyone’s looking at it,” Bishop says. “We could attempt to sneak in and leave quietly.”

“Let us not unless we have no other alternatives,” Khan says. “The storage lockers for our personal belongings were here. We just need a destination to transport all of the items.”
“Do we really need to get everyone’s stuff, though?” Matthew asks. “There’s only thirteen of us.”

“No, but I don’t know how best we could go through and identify everyone we need,” Khan says.

“Okay, so how big is a locker?” Andy asks. “And how much is generally in them?”

“It’s like the size of a student locker,” Matthew says. “Half a meter tall and on the narrow size. They’re built into the ship, though, so we couldn’t transport them, just what’s inside.”

“Are the lockers labeled?” Andy asks.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“So how about we send up a camera drone to take pictures?” Andy asks. “And then transport the contents of the lockers we identify?”

“That’s certainly easy enough,” Matthew says. “We just need a camera drone.”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Andy promises and shimmers out of existence.

“I am really not going to get used to that,” Jasmine says. “It’s just incredible.”

“It is,” Jill says. “Although most people don’t have access to tech like this. Khan invented the ones we’re all using because it didn’t exist.”

“Of course he did,” Jasmine says, smiling at Khan. “He’s never let the lack of something stop him.”

“We should figure out where we’ll put everything,” Jill says.

“It can all go in the safe room for right now,” Magpie calls. “Or the spare apartment Khan and Jill are using.”

“Let’s put it in the safe room,” Jill says. “That way it will be safe if we have to leave in a hurry.”

“Agreed,” Khan says.

Andy returns with the camera drone and they send it up to the ship. “It doesn’t look like anyone’s been on it since they took out the cryotubes,” Khan murmurs.

“Security scans are pretty minimal,” Magpie agrees. “I guess they figured out of sight was close enough to out of mind and it’s not like you could do much with the ship now.”

“No, we could not,” Khan says. “Nor would we want to.”

Andy pilots the camera to the lockers easily enough, and one by one they identify the owner and either leave the contents on the ship or transport them to Magpie’s safe room. It takes time, but no one seems impatient and no one looks to be looking for them.

Finally they finish and Andy beams the camera back to the nest. “What did you still have on the ship?” Jill asks Khan softly as the others start to get their things out of the safe room.

“Rani’s journals,” Khan says. “A few old books I treasured. I was able to keep most of my possessions with me after I was revived, mostly because I refused to negotiate at all until that demand was met. But I left her journals on the ship so no one else would read them.”
“Have you read them?” Jill asks.

“I have,” Khan says. “Not in a long time, but I have read them. They were a comfort to me, after she died.”

“She left you a message,” Jill says. “Was that a comfort?”

“No,” Khan says. “But I know not what it was, either. That she was dying, and thought of my future without her—I did not deserve her when she was alive and now I know not how to feel.”

“She loved you,” Jill says. “She loved you enough to find a way to care for you after death. When I first met you, I said she didn’t love you enough, because otherwise she would have told you about the cancer before it was too late. I still think there’s some of that, but…now I wonder if she knew something all along, if she knew something like this could happen.”

“She dreamed of it,” Khan says. “The message she gave me, she dreamed of this, of this time. She didn’t know if it was real or already happening or about to happen, but she dreamed.”

“Which makes me wonder what started her dreaming,” Jill says. “We all thought Rani was behind it, but who or what is behind her?”

“A good question to which I know not the answer,” Khan says.

“What did her message say?” Jill asks, falling into Russian. “Or you don’t have to tell me.”

“You can read it,” Khan says. “She wrote in English.”

“If you’re sure,” Jill says dubiously.

Khan reaches into his pocket and takes out the envelope. “I am.”

Jill takes out the letter and reads it, saying nothing until she hands it back to Khan but when she does he sees tears in her eyes and she sniffs. “She loved you,” she says. “So much.”

“Yes,” Khan says, taking a breath. “I did not deserve her.”

“No, I think you did,” Jill says. “She didn’t deserve the cancer, but you deserved her. You deserve to be happy, my dragon.”

Khan smiles faintly, putting the letter aside. “Happy is a somewhat impractical concept.”

“You deserve to be happy,” Jill repeats firmly. “You deserve a partner.”

“I have one,” Khan says. He takes Jill’s wrist, drawing her in against him. “I have you.”

“Do I make you happy?” Jill murmurs, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“That’s too simplistic,” Khan says. He folds his wings around her and lets her lean on him. “You are…I need you for my survival, kitten.”

“You don’t,” Jill says. “You don’t need anyone like that.”

“That is untrue,” Khan says. “I do need people. I need my family around me, and I need you as my mate. Happy, angry, none of that matters—what matters is that you are my lioness, for now and always.”
“My dragon,” Jill murmurs. “I love you so much.”

“And I you,” Khan murmurs back.

Jill sighs. “Still no word from the Klingons?” she asks more loudly.

“No word,” Khan says.

“Is there a time limit at which point we call it a lost cause?” Jasmine asks.

“No,” Khan says. “Well, perhaps, but we’re not anywhere near it now.”

“What happens if we get to it?” Jasmine asks.

“We figure out a way to get off planet and disappear into uncharted space,” Jill says succinctly.

“Okay then,” Jasmine says. “Nice to know what our options are. I don’t suppose anyone wrote up a brief summary of the societal and technological advances since our time so I have an idea what I’m dealing with?”

“I did actually do that,” Konstantin says. “Well, mostly brief.”

“I would really love to read that, brother,” Jasmine says. “As would my siblings, I’m sure.”

“Da, of course,” Konstantin says. He gets his own tablet out of his backpack, fingers dancing over the surface for a few moments. “There you are.”

“Thank you,” Jasmine says, taking the tablet from him and finding a seat.

Jill covers a yawn, still leaning on Khan. “I’m pretty beat,” she says. “I think I want to go find a bed and not move for a while.”

“You can do that, since all we’re doing now is waiting,” Magpie says. “I promise, as soon as I hear anything I will let you know and call everyone in to see the message. It just hasn’t arrived yet.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jill says. “I’m going back to the spare apartment to sleep. Khan, are you coming with me? You don’t have to at all.”

“I will,” Khan says. He still feels shaken by Rani’s message, and wants time alone with Jill to center himself and relax.

They say their goodbyes to the others and beam themselves to the spare apartment; as soon as they finish materializing Jill kicks off her boots. “Are you really okay?” she asks, taking Khan’s hands.

“I will be,” Khan says. “I…did not expect this.”

“No, of course not,” Jill says. “Was there anything else in the box, other than the letter?”

“Yes,” Khan says. He takes the stone out of his pocket and shows it to Jill. “I used the lion as my seal.”

“It’s lovely,” Jill says, brushing a finger over the carving. “I really…honestly, dragon, I don’t know what to make of any of this. I mean, we thought Rani was behind the dreams, but what’s behind her? And when did it start? If she was dreaming before she died, is that…time can be non-linear, so…”
“I do not know, kitten,” Khan says quietly. “I think—I choose to believe that she is still out there somewhere now, that part of her has been helping us all along even if we do not understand the extent of it.”

“You were frustrated that you couldn’t talk to her directly, though,” Jill says. “Now that you have the letter…”

“Yes,” Khan says. “That she designed the statue, the letter solely on the chance I would find it hundreds of years in the future—I still wish I could speak with her, but I am no longer angry I cannot.”

“I haven’t dreamed lately,” Jill says. “Not since we went to the market. I—this sounds weird, but I put the stone under my pillow, and I slept really well. It’s likely just a placebo effect, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“I doubt it is solely placebo,” Khan says. “Not given everything else.”

“Yeah, there is that,” Jill admits. “Would you like tea? I think you should have tea.”

“I would like tea,” Khan agrees. “Have we any?”

“We have,” Jill says. “I will even have tea with you.”

“What tea would you like?” Khan asks, walking to the kitchenette.

“Something fairly light,” Jill says. “I want to sleep at some point tonight, maybe.”

Khan looks at the options and picks an oolong he hasn’t tried before, because why not? When the tea is brewing, he brings the tray over to the coffee table, setting it down and taking a seat on the ottoman. Jill curls up on the couch, tucking her feet under her, although she does take a mug when Khan sets the tray down.

“So,” Jill says finally. “You’ve had time to process. What are you thinking? What do you want?”

“I am still processing, to be honest,” Khan says. “I think…I feel better about the entire situation. I thought, when we started dreaming, she was deliberately not contacting me. Now I think she has rules she must follow, and one of those likely is talking to me directly.”

“Which again goes back to the question of who’s behind her and what they’re doing,” Jill says. “I wish I could talk to her, to ask those questions.”

“Well, you are awake,” Khan says. “When you sleep, perhaps…”

“Maybe, but I doubt it,” Jill says. “I don’t remember stuff from real life in my dreams, it’s a weird thing of mine. Half the time when I dream I wake up confused about what happened, because it made perfect sense in the dream but when I try to think about it once I’m awake I give up.”

She takes a sip of tea. “Also—does it matter? Does it really matter who’s behind this? Rani is clearly helping us as much as she can, so…I don’t know what to suggest.”

“It only matters in that I wonder if we are being used,” Khan says. “If there is more at stake than even we know, and for all we know we are being set up. Or we have been set up already and know it not.”

“I honestly don’t know what stakes we could be playing for that are more than we know now,” Jill
says slowly. “I’m not saying we aren’t being set up for something but I really have no idea what it would be. I’m pretty sure stopping an interplanetary war is high on the list of ‘things to accomplish’.”

Khan smiles a bit. “It’s true,” he says. “I just wonder, sometimes, what this is really all about, and how long Rani has been working to set it up.”

“She’s had a few centuries, assuming time passes linearly for her now,” Jill says. “So there could be a lot—or there could be nothing.”

“There could, but I do think there is a purpose to this entire quest of ours,” Khan says. “More than we know.”

“Everything happens for a reason?” Jill raises her eyebrows.

“I would not go that far, but close,” Khan says.

“I never believed that,” Jill says. “We have free will for a reason, so I find it difficult to believe there’s some deity or something out there that determines what happens to us and why. Sometimes things happen simply because those are the choices people made.”

“Yes,” Khan says, taking a sip of tea. “You chose to interrupt my evening and find out why I looked sad.”

“And now here we are,” Jill says. “Although I’m pretty sure my actions since meeting you have had a purpose.”

Khan smiles faintly. “I would agree.” He sets his mug down, studying Jill. “She was my lion-tamer, although I was never tame and she knew it. You…you are my lioness.”

“I would never try to tame you,” Jill says. “Or even pretend I had. I love you because you’re not tame, because you are an apex predator and you go after what you want.”

“I do,” Khan murmurs. “So do you.”

“Life’s too short not to grab hold with both hands,” Jill says.

“It is,” Khan says. “Just so long as you do not fall over.”

“I’m like a cat, I always land on my feet,” Jill says with a quick grin. “Khan, why did she give me the stone with light carved into it? What is the meaning?”

“She was…” Khan says the phrase in Hindi. “She was a light in my heart. She always worried that I would be consumed by darkness without her. I bought her a lantern at one point, as a joke, and she insisted on leaving it in our bedroom with enough fuel to act as a nightlight.”

“And now—what?” Jill looks uncertain.

“You are my fire,” Khan says softly. “Light and warmth, my guidepost out of darkness.”

“Just so long as I don’t burn us both down,” Jill says softly.

“You will not,” Khan says.

Jill wraps her hands around her mug. “I guess she approves of me,” she says hesitantly. “Or something like that.”
“She would,” Khan says. “I believe—if she is out there, she does approve of you, I am certain of it. She didn’t make me promise to look for love again after she died, but she did tell me she wanted me to find someone eventually. I was not designed to be alone, according to her.”

“You aren’t,” Jill says. “You need your family around you, to balance you and support you. You’re a natural leader, Khan, and you need people who will follow you, like your family does. And you are a natural caretaker. You’ve been taking care of me since the first night we spent together. You aren’t meant to be alone at all. It’s why I was so concerned about you that first night, and why I was so insistent on helping you so quickly. You looked—you told me you were alone, completely. You didn’t have any friends or allies, and I couldn’t just let that go. Sometimes one person reaching out a hand is all you need. Sometimes it comes with a bunch of other people and plans to negotiate with a semi-hostile foreign species.”

“Without you bumping into me,” Khan says softly. “None of this would have happened.”

“Do you think Rani engineered it?” Jill asks. “That I would trip into you?”

Khan shakes his head. “No. That was all you. Rani might have engineered things, or helped to influence things, so that we would cross paths, but you deciding to trip into me was all you. That is just who you are as a person, kitten. You try to help anyone you think needs it.”

“If I can, yeah,” Jill says. “And you needed my help. More than anyone ever has, or likely ever will again.”

“I still do,” Khan says. “I was serious when I said you are necessary to my survival, my lioness. A man can only lose so much.”

“I have no intention of being lost,” Jill says firmly. “Now, on Qo’noS, or anywhere else. I told you, Khan, it took me a while to get there but I love you, and I’m in this with you for the long haul.”

Khan smiles a bit. “Then I want something from you, before we leave Earth for good.”

“What is it?” Jill asks.

“I want you to marry me,” Khan says simply.

Jill blinks. “Okay, I wasn’t expecting that. I mean—why? It’s not like we’d be going anywhere that would recognize it, or for which it’d be necessary, or—“

“Because it might be necessary, at some point,” Khan says. “It’s a large galaxy out there, it is entirely plausible we would come upon a scenario in which we would need a legal bond, or at least the pretense of one. And I am an old-fashioned man, kitten. I believe in the covenant of marriage, of pledging fidelity and love to my partner, til death.”

“And possibly beyond, given what’s been going on,” Jill says. She takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “After we get back from Qo’noS. Before we leave Earth for good. Then I’ll marry you.”

Khan nods. “That is acceptable.”

“It better be because it’s the only answer you’re getting,” Jill says. “I really—I did not expect that from you.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“I just didn’t think you’d see it as necessary,” Jill says. “It’s not like we’re going to consider
ourselves bound by the Federation’s rules once we leave.”

“No, of course not,” Khan says. “But marriage is a universal constant, more or less, and I want that constancy.”

“Okay,” Jill says softly. “Okay. I’ll marry you. But I want a ring at some point. Nothing fancy, because it’ll just get caught on stuff, but I want the symbol. If you want the ceremony for its symbolism, I want a ring.”

Khan smiles. “All right, although it may be a bit before I can acquire one.”

“You’ve got a bit of time,” Jill says, smiling back. “Also Andy and Magpie can probably help and they know my ring size, which is pretty small.”

“Rani had small hands,” Khan says. “Not that I would give you her ring, but it would likely fit.”

“Maybe, but I don’t want it and you shouldn’t give it to me,” Jill says. “That was hers. I want my own.”

“Of course,” Khan says. “I will get you a ring.”

“Thank you.” Jill stretches and sets her mug down. “I am tired,” she admits. “Adrenaline from the mission is wearing off, along with the stims, and I’m ready to fall over.”

“You should sleep,” Khan says. “Do you want a shower first?”

“No, I’ll get one in the morning,” Jill says. “I think I’d fall asleep under the spray if I tried now.” She pushes to her feet slowly, stretching again. “You don’t have to come to bed with me, though.”

“I will,” Khan says. “In truth, kitten, I am still shaken by the message, by what it means.”

“Then come to bed with me,” Jill says. “We can talk, or just cuddle, or have sex. Whatever you need, my dragon.”

Khan smiles a bit and gets up, taking Jill’s hand when he crosses to her. “I need you,” he says, brushing a curl back from her face.

“Fortunately for you, I am right here and you can have me however you want,” Jill says, turning to kiss his palm. “But I don’t actually think you want sex.”

“No,” Khan agrees. “I do not. Just let me hold you.”

“As long as you want,” Jill says, wrapping her arms around his waist.

They settle into bed, Jill curled into Khan and his arm and one wing over her. “She had no idea if her message would reach me,” Khan says finally. “She risked it, not knowing if the statue would survive until now, if I would ever go to it and find it. She didn’t know, but she risked it anyway in hopes her dreams came true.”

“And they did,” Jill says. “I would have done the same thing, dragon. Anything I could, to get a message to you, if I thought it was that important.” She kisses his collarbone. “I love you,” she says softly. “I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone. Lions have a pride, but I think dragons mate for life.”

“This one does,” Khan says, tightening his arm around her.
“Good.” Jill sounds pleased by that.

“It does not bother you?” Khan asks in Russian. “The message from Rani?”

“Why would it?” Jill pushes up to look at him, frowning. “She was your wife. You loved her more than anything. You still love her, and I know that. I’m not jealous of it. I know—I know you love me. Love isn’t a zero-sum game, Khan. You can love her as much as you ever did and still love me now.”

“And I do,” Khan says, brushing a curl back from her cheek.

“Besides, I think the stone she gave me was her way of signifying approval,” Jill says, sounding a little sheepish about it. “She passed on the torch, somewhat literally.”

“She did,” Khan says. “In some ways, you and she are very similar, but in others you are so very, very different. Rani was my light, but she was a contained light, a lantern to guide my way. You are my fire, and nothing contains you for long unless you agree to it.”

“Fire is what burns in lanterns, Khan,” Jill says. “She chose to contain herself. I chose not to.”

“My point,” Khan says. “Similar and yet not. And you contained yourself in your own way, kitten. You fit yourself into Starfleet’s confines for—what, fifteen years?”

“Yeah, about,” Jill says. “It wasn’t always an easy fit.”

“No, but you stayed,” Khan says. “You rose to command rank.”

“I did, and you know—I’m still proud of that,” Jill says. “I’m—I believe Starfleet can be redeemed, that it can undo the damage Marcus did, or at least it can find a way to heal and move forward. It has a cause and a mission worth believing in, and I’m proud of my service. I worked my ass off for them and it was mostly worth it.”

“Do you want to stay and help them move forward?” Khan asks, honestly uncertain what her answer will be.

She sighs. “No. I mean—if things were different, then yes. But you come first, my dragon. You have no reason to stay and help them and every reason to tell them to fuck off and leave. I’m not asking you to stay, you or anyone else. We’re leaving Earth when this is all over, and Starfleet can cope without me.”

“And Jake?” Khan asks.

“Jake is less confident that Starfleet can be redeemed,” Jill says. “The thing with Viola and her daughter really—that really hit him hard, because Viola was his first mentor out of the Academy and he trusts her absolutely. And for Marcus to attempt to kill her daughter…he’s taking that hard. If you hadn’t already claimed Marcus’s life, he’d be first in line.”

“No,” Khan says evenly. “That is mine.”

“Yes, I know, and so does Jake,” Jill says, patting Khan’s shoulder. “I’m just saying he’s unhappy, and ready to leave Earth. Although we’ll need to find a way to make it possible for Eema to see us, and Abba and his brothers.”

“I can build another transporter,” Khan says, considering it. “Unkeyed, able to take up to four people.”
“That would be brilliant,” Jill says. “Do you have time and parts, though? And could you build some kind of comm-link so we can keep in touch that way?”

“I have the parts,” Khan says. “Time may be more difficult to acquire, but depending on circumstances I can make the transporter in a day. For a comm-link—it is doable, but I would want to talk to Andy and Jake about options first. I know Jake already has something for distance so I would want to look at it and see how best to improve it. And again, time is not necessarily something we have right now.”

“Hurry up and wait,” Jill says with a sigh. “But once we start making plans to leave Earth, we should be able to get some of this done. I mean, I would think they’d give us some time to supply and outfit ourselves.”

“I think it may depend on how we deal with Marcus,” Khan says. “Either they will want to rush us off-planet to cover up his death, or they will find a way to write it off as self-defense.”

“I suppose we’ll have to see how that shakes out,” Jill says. “I honestly can’t think past going to Qo’noS right now and defeating the Klingons. I don’t even know what peace accords would look like.”

“I have some thoughts on that,” Khan says. “As does Bishop, and Konstantin, and Katsuro. We have talked about it some, and have some ideas on where to negotiate from and what are acceptable terms.”

“Better you than me,” Jill says. “I’m a hopeless negotiator.”

“I would disagree,” Khan says. “But in this I do think my siblings and I have the advantage of you. We did, after all, once negotiate planetary peace.”

“Khan, I think in most things you and your siblings have the advantage of me,” Jill says matter-of-factly. “It’s not just a question of ability and skill, but of experience. I’ve never been any kind of diplomat, and neither has Jake. We can help, but we don’t know what a good base would look like.”

“I know, kitten,” Khan says, brushing her hair back. “My family and I do know how to negotiate these things.”

"Who is your best negotiator?” Jill asks.

“Ekaterina and Konstantin,” Khan says. “They make a formidable team, and they play off each other well. After them, Bishop.”

“Not you?” Jill asks.

“I was not including myself in the list,” Khan says. “I am with Cat and Kostenka.”

“Why do you call him that and not Kostya?” Jill asks.

“Because that, like Katya, is only for them,” Khan says. “We never got told that, but it just seemed to be how things were.”

“Katya and Kostya,” Jill says. “Good pair.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “They are. Two of our best, and our worst.”
“But you,” Jill says. “You *are* the best and the worst.”

“Kostenka said that to me, too,” Khan says, somewhat surprised.

“It’s true,” Jill says. “Your siblings have strengths you may not, or at least their skills are better than yours in a few areas, but overall you’re the strongest, the smartest, the most ruthless and the most compassionate. You’re their leader, my dragon, and no matter what decisions you make together they look to you for guidance.”

“Sometimes,” Khan says. “Sometimes they ignore me.”

“Price of having siblings, I think,” Jill says, grinning. “You are, though. You’re just…you’re more than any of them individually. There’s just something about you.”

“I think, kitten, you are biased,” Khan says, although he’s oddly touched by the compliment. A thought occurs to him, and he considers how best to put it. “When first I told you about Rani, you told me she hadn’t loved me enough. Do you still think that?”

“No,” Jill says after a moment. “No. I think she made a mistake, a big one, and it cost her her life but I’m starting to wonder if there was something else at work. If she hadn’t died the way she did, would any of this have happened? How much of an effect has she had on us, and was her death the trigger?”

“All good questions,” Khan says. “And answers I have not. But seeing her message…she loved me, Jill, as much as she was possibly capable of. She followed instincts about a dream to get me a message centuries in the future.”

“Yeah,” Jill says softly. “She loved you, Khan, more than anything.”

“No,” Khan says. “Not more than you.”

“You can’t compare us,” Jill says. “That’s not fair to her or me. She loved you more than she loved anything else, and she still loves you, wherever she is, whatever she’s doing. I love you, more than anything, and I always will, but you can’t compare how I feel about you to how she did.”

“I don’t,” Khan says, stroking her hair. “I did not mean it like that. Just that…she loved me, still does, but I thought early on and still think that she never would have done what you did. You put your own life and career and family on the line for me. You take more risks than she did.”

“We’re very different,” Jill says. “She was who you needed then.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “You are what I need now.”

Jill laughs a little. “I still don’t know if I entirely believe that but it’s lovely to hear.” She kisses his chest. “We should sleep.”

“We should,” Khan says. Jill sighs and closes her eyes, snuggling in a little closer; Khan holds her and lets himself drift.

He’s not quite asleep when both their comm-links blare sound. Jill snaps awake and grabs hers before Khan does. “Calastinova, Commander Jill,” she says crisply. “Alert acknowledged, code one eight seven four. Status please.”

“Wake up, this isn’t Starfleet,” Magpie says.
Jill blinks, then shakes herself all over. “Oh, hi,” she says. “Why the hell did you hit the emergency signal on my link?”

“Because the Klingons responded and I wanted to get your attention,” Magpie says. “I haven’t looked at the message yet. It’s a video file, a big one, and an attached text document, but I won’t look at them until you guys get here, so hurry up.”

"Did you tell the others yet?" Khan asks, already out of bed and pulling on clothes.

“No, I wanted to tell you first,” Magpie says. “I’ll even give you ten minutes to get here before I tell everyone else.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“Don’t be late,” Magpie says cheerfully and hangs up.

Jill jumps out of bed and dives for clothes, and in six minutes they beam to the nest.

Chapter End Notes

If you ask me whether Rani or Jill loves Khan more, I can’t tell you. They're very different women and their relationships with him are different. I can tell you that Jill took more risks on Khan's behalf than Rani would have, even when she was alive, but that's also who Jill is as a person. I think Jill loves Khan more fiercely than Rani ever did, though.
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

Oh my God, it worked.

Chapter Notes

The part of me that's 12 is vastly amused that I'm posting chapter 69 without actual sex on-screen. Sorry, it got axed due to space constraints and my wanting to get through this chapter so we can get to the fun bits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Space fills up quickly, and Khan moves to stand by the wall before he loses a chance. He hadn’t been sure Cat and Konstantin would be back yet, but they arrive after Alona and Matthew, carrying duffle bags. “Later for this,” Cat says, setting her bag down. “For now—” She gestures at the wall.

“We’re waiting on everyone,” Jill says. “We’re missing Jake, Jasmine, Carson, and Andy.”

“They had best hurry,” Cat grumbles.

Fortunately for Ekaterina’s temper, the other four arrive quickly and find spaces in the room. Silence falls, and Khan looks at Magpie. “Let us see this,” he says.

Magpie hits play, and a moment later the chorus kicks in, heavy on the bass and also brass, or whatever the Klingon equivalent. Khan finds it interesting—and flattering—that the Klingons’ message to them takes the same form as theirs: a video combining powerful music and deadly fights, ending when all bodies lie sprawled on the stage except one man.

He walks forward and growls two sentences in Klingon. “What was that?” Jasmine asks softly.

“Magpie, freeze video,” Khan says. “He said ‘You understand honor. Come fight us to prove you have it, and we will consider your proposal.’”

He nods at Magpie and the video resumes. The Klingon says something else, then inclines his head back and to the side briefly. The screen fades to black and a moment later Klingon text appears. “Before we read this, what did he say?” Jasmine asks. “And what did that gesture mean?”

“He said ‘This will be a good death’,,” Khan says. “The gesture—exposing the throat briefly. Acknowledgment of an equal opponent.”

“Oh, my God, it worked,” Jill says and bursts into tears.

“Half-Pint,” Jake says, reaching her before anyone else does. “It worked. You know why? Because you are smart and canny and you know people. You know how they react and why and what they’re likely to do. You knew how the Klingons would react to this and they did exactly like you thought. You did this, shorty, and now we’re all headed to the Klingon homeworld for stage two.
God help us.”

Jill giggles through her tears. “I just—I wasn’t sure, all along, and you guys all went with it and I was seriously terrified they’d reject it and this plan would fail and it was my idea and oh, God, I’m tired,” she says, sniffling. “Bird, can I borrow your bed for a few hours?”

“C’mon, I’ll tuck you in,” Andy says, making his way to Jill and steering her to the bedroom. A few moments later, Andy emerges, closing the door behind her. “I was expecting that,” she says.

“Yeah,” Magpie agrees. “She’ll be fine in about fourteen hours.”

“That is oddly specific,” Maeve says.

“It’s surprisingly predictable,” Andy says. “When she gets this overtired, she usually has some kind of emotional meltdown—this was really pretty minor—and then she crashes for twelve hours, during which time nothing will wake her. When she wakes up, she’ll have a killer headache, but we have a combination of meds that get her going and then she takes a really long hot shower and then she’s fine. From meltdown to post-shower is almost exactly fourteen hours.”

“Da, so, she is fine, let us go back to the video,” Cat says.

Khan clears his throat and Cat sighs. “Pardon,” she says. “Still, she is safe, and we can do nothing for her, so?”

“What does the text say?” Jasmine asks after a pause.

“It repeats what he said,” Alona says. “Interesting that they won’t give us an English translation. We challenged them in their language.”

“Which shows them we know it, so why bother using ours?” Cat asks. “One is usually less fluent in one’s second language, thus they opt to retain that advantage in case it causes us to miss detail or misinterpret things.”

“Except not quite,” Magpie says. “Sorry. Don’t stab me. The attached text file is actually two files, one in English and one in Klingon. One of you will have to confirm if they’re the same, but the formatting is similar.”

“Put them on the wall, side by side,” Khan says. Magpie does and he studies the text. “It does look to be the same. Interesting, they have explanations of certain Klingon terms in the English version.”

“They are treating us seriously,” Bishop says. “It would not do to have us defeated by a misinterpretation.”

“They would rather defeat us honestly on the battlefield,” Jake says. “So what is the text?”

“Conditions and an explanation,” Khan says, reading it. “We are to arrive at certain coordinates on Qo’noS in five days, and they will contact us twelve hours prior with said coordinates. Once we arrive on the planet, we will have some kind of test to pass—it’s unspecified about what that test is—and once or if we do that, they will send their best warriors to meet us on the trial field. If we survive that, which they sound doubtful about, they will agree to negotiate for peace.”

“There is a list of equipment we can’t bring,” Alona says, reading further down. “No transporters—well, fuck that, because I’m not giving mine up but we’ll refrain from using them. We can’t bring anything to transport our stuff that we can’t carry. All food and medical supplies we want to
use are on us to supply—however, and this is emphasized, they will supply us with fresh, clean water.”

“The Klingon planet has areas that are pretty arid,” Jake says. “They see death by dehydration as dishonorable, so it’s in their code of battle that they ensure all enemies or opponents have access to clean water. They don’t want us to die by anything preventable before we get to them.”

Khan looks at him and Jake shrugs. “I read through Viola’s files, and hunted up a couple of the guys who made the reports.”

“There are rules on weapons,” Alona says. “It gets pretty specific but basically boils down to no bombs, grenades, weapons of mass destruction, that sort of thing. All kinds of personal arms are allowed, although they say that ranged may not be allowed once we get to the actual trial.”

“Which indicates the ‘test’ may require them,” Khan says. “Interesting.”

“My guess is the ‘test’ is some kind of endurance course,” Bishop says. “They want to wear us down before they fight us.”

“We’ve earned the right to try and fight them, but we have to get to them before we fight them,” Alona says. “I agree. I also think there’s no guarantee they won’t split us into groups, and we may not get to pick them.”

“So we divide supplies,” Jasmine says. “Bishop, Maeve, Carson, we split the heavy medical supplies among those three and give everyone else a basic kit. Everything else gets divided so if one or two people end up elsewhere the rest of us don’t lose anything vital and those people have the essentials.”

“Jasmine, Alona,” Khan says. “Sort it out. Packing lists, equipment lists. Presume we will be undergoing an endurance survival course in any kind of weather. Work with Jake to determine what we have and what we need to acquire in the next two days.”

Jasmine sketches a salute and Alona nods. The two of them move to get Jake and then the three of them huddle in a far corner. “Bishop, Maeve, Carson, and Anandi,” Khan says next. “We need med kits. Individual for each person and three larger packs, four if Anandi wants one. As thorough as we can make them. Anandi, I trust your judgment on any…other supplies we should bring.”

Anandi smiles. “As you should.”

“Everyone else,” Khan says. “Pack it up. When we leave Earth, we leave our belongings with Andy and Magpie. There will be nothing else left anywhere.”

“We have a safe storage location,” Magpie says. “I’ll give you coordinates, and you can transport boxes there, or whatever you’re using. It’s climate-controlled, pressurized, and safe. I don’t want anything in my nest or Andy’s loft.”

Khan nods. “Of course. Minimal training, over the next few days. Let’s not risk it.”

“Before we disperse,” Ekaterina says, “I have some things to give out.” She moves to the duffle bags, opening one. “Ah. Aisha, this is for you.” She takes out a large flat case and Khan can’t figure out what’s in it until Aisha opens it to reveal a gorgeous scimitar. “They were unable to put in the folding technology, as we had limited time, but they made this,” Cat says.

“It’s lovely,” Aisha says, taking a few test passes with it. “Perfectly balanced, although a bit lighter than I would expect. What is the metal?”
“Adamantium,” Konstantin says. “Not available in our time. Stronger and sharper than steel.”

“I quite like that,” Aisha says.

“Amir, for you,” Konstantin says, handing him a similar case. Amir opens it to reveal a similar scimitar, slightly bigger. “We had to use similar designs due to time, but this should suit you regardless, da?”

“Da,” Amir says, grinning.

“Likewise,” Cat says. “Carson, for you.” The longsword suits him, Khan thinks, watching him twist his wrist and sheathe it at an imaginary scabbard at his side. Cat laughs. “We do have scabbards, or holsters.”

“And for me?” Jasmine asks Konstantin.

“You get six knives and this,” Konstantin says, handing her a sheathed blade. Jasmine unsheaths it to show a blade very similar to Jill’s, although without the artistry in its design.

“Oh, this is beautiful,” she says, studying the blade. “Where did you go for these?”

“You know, I do not know the name of the planet,” Cat says. “It is the home of the Femarans, a friendly allied species. They are superior weaponsmiths, and before we transport to Qo’noS, we will transport to their planet for a night.”

“They did agree to that,” Khan says.

“Da, of course,” Cat says. “They wished to give us a banquet, to honor us, before we leave. I told them we will have the banquet when we return victorious. Aktok said that was acceptable.”

“They don’t tell people the name of their planets,” Jake says. “In case you were wondering. It’s a thing, we’ve never asked why, but they don’t say.”

“Names have power,” Khan says simply.

“They do,” Cat agrees. “And so. Let us make our final preparations.”

They scatter, leaving Khan, Andy, Magpie and a sleeping Jill in the nest. “Andy and I are working on a couple things for you,” Magpie says. “We have a one-shot long-range comm link, it’ll reach from us to Qo’noS and last about ten minutes. After that the power source depletes and we don’t have a spare to give you. We’re hoping you’ll use it just to let us know you won and you’re on your way back.”

“Or in case of dire emergency but we’re preferring to think you’ll just let us know you achieved the almost impossible,” Andy says.

“Thank you,” Khan says. “What else are you working on?”

“Earbud comms have a pretty limited range,” Magpie says. “We’ve modified one set to have a range of ten thousand kilometers, but that’s not enough to cover the planet, which is our goal. We’re working on modifying the set, but it requires a lot more power and we’re limited in how much we can supply due to needing to keep the comms earbud size.”

“Truthfully, Magpie, I doubt we will be allowed to use comms that cover the planet,” Khan says. “Ten thousand kilometers will likely be sufficient.”
“Probably but we’re going to fiddle with it a bit more,” Magpie says. “Also, we don’t want anything in my nest or Andy’s loft but if there are things you want us to hold specifically we can.”

“I figured Jill would want to leave Bilbo with us,” Andy says. “And if you had any of Rani’s things.”

“I do, and I would appreciate you keeping them safe for me,” Khan says. “You said Jill will be fine but not for another thirteen hours, roughly. I will take advantage of that time to gather our things and pack up.”

“Do you want help?” Andy asks. “I can spare a couple hours.”

“Thank you, but no,” Khan says. “I would like some solitude.”

“I understand that impulse,” Andy says, smiling. “We’ll call you if Jill wakes up before you get back, but I doubt it.”

Khan nods. “If she does, or if anyone else needs me,” he says.

“We’ll let you know,” Magpie promises.

“Thank you.” Khan sets the coordinates on his transporter and hits the button.

He materializes in Jill’s London flat, which might be a bit risky, but no one seems to notice and Khan leaves the door locked and the blinds drawn. It doesn’t take him long to pack up Jill’s clothes, although he leaves her uniforms and assorted accessories there. He thinks she packed up everything else she wanted when they went to New York, but makes two circuits of the flat just in case. Other than some coffee, and toiletries he doesn’t bother to take, he finds nothing.

He leaves that flat and goes to New York, and then San Francisco, packing up his things and Jill’s. One bag he uses to hold clothes and toiletries for them for the next few days, and one smaller bag he uses to hold things he thinks they might need on Qo’noS. Bilbo and Rani’s things go in a canvas tote bag, and he stops at the secured storage location to drop off everything else before he returns to the nest.

“She’s still out cold, although we think she’ll start waking up in a few hours,” Magpie says when he materializes. “What have you got for us?”

Khan hands over the tote bag. “Bilbo, and Rani’s things. The rest are things I think we’ll need until we leave and then possibly on Qo’noS.”

“Cool,” Magpie says. “Jasmine pinged us and said she’d be here in a bit, also. Alona and Jake went out to buy supplies but because we never had time to build her an identity, she has no credit cards or ID or anything.”

“We’ll figure that out later,” Andy says. “Although I would think when you come back victorious the Federation will set you up with official stuff.”

“Something like that,” Khan says. “Later for that, though.”

An incoming transporter makes him look and as expected, Jasmine shimmers into existence. “I am never going to get used to that,” she says, shaking her head. “Anyways, Khan, plans are coming along nicely. Jake wants to take me, Carson, Amir and Aisha to some place where he says we can hopefully get coats and boots like yours, which I understand have some armor in them.”
"They do," Khan says. "And if he can outfit you, that would be helpful."

"He said he wasn’t sure but he thought they would have something for us," Jasmine says. "Do you want to come along?"

"Perhaps," Khan says. "Andy, I will leave Jill’s transporter here in case she needs it, and take the unkeyed one, if I go."

"I’ll let her know," Andy says.

"The others are coming here, should be arriving in a few minutes and then we can leave," Jasmine says. "In the meantime, Khan, can I talk to you on the roof?"

"Of course," Khan says. He takes her up top, wondering what’s on her mind.

"Tell me more about these dreams," she says. "Alona and Jake mentioned them, that everyone was having them. And after the statue…what’s going on, Khan?"

Khan takes a breath, letting it out slowly. "It gets complicated," he says.

"I’m listening," Jasmine says simply.

He smiles a little. "We think Rani, wherever she may be, is…helping us," he says carefully. "Or trying." He tells her about the dreams they’re all having, about Andy’s connection to Rani, about Marika’s visions. Jasmine says nothing until he finishes.

Then she blows out a breath, runs her hands through her hair, and mutters a string of Arabic Khan doesn’t try to translate. "Well, shit," she says finally in English. "Khan, this is…I don’t even know how to put it."

"I’m well aware," Khan says.

Jasmine shakes her head. "It’s just…I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t trust you so much, or if I hadn’t known about the statue and Rani’s message."

"I know," Khan says. "Believe me, I doubted it myself. We all did. Sometimes I am still not sure I believe it."

"Has anyone dreamed anything about us actually winning against the Klingons?" Jasmine asks.

"Rani did," Khan says softly. "In her message to me. But the rest of us…no. We dream of fighting, of devastation and things falling apart around us, but we have not dreamed of winning—or losing."

"Sounds like things are in flux," Jasmine says quietly. "Do you honestly think we’ll win, Khan?"

"I do," Khan says. "But I know not the price we will pay."

"Do you think we’ll get the others back?" Jasmine asks.

Khan hesitates, then shakes his head. "I think the thirteen of us may be all we have."

"That’s a hell of a price," Jasmine says.

"Yes," Khan says. "And it may not be the full cost."

"Well," Jasmine says. "We were raised to think we could do the impossible."
“We were, and we achieved it for a time,” Khan says. “Now we need to achieve the impossible again.”

“And this was all Jill’s idea,” Jasmine says.

“Essentially,” Khan says.

Jasmine shakes her head. “It’s incredible. I don’t think even I could have come up with an idea this crazy.” She grins. “But it sounds like it could really work.”

“I think it will,” Khan says.

“What are we doing after we win, though?” Jasmine asks. “What happens then?”

“We leave Earth,” Khan says. “We equip ourselves with a ship designed for long trips and head into the galaxy to see what else is out there, and perhaps find ourselves a new home.”

“Or we make the ship our home,” Jasmine says. “We always wanted to go into space when we were awake.” She smiles a little. “How much do we know about, out there?”

“Some quadrants we know fairly well,” Khan says. “Some are utter mysteries. There are a few allied alien species, and some that are hostile or ostensibly neutral. But there are all kinds of opportunities, and things the Federation has not discovered yet.”

“Are we going to be officially part of the Federation? Or Starfleet?” Jasmine asks.

Khan shakes his head. “No. The closest we would come would be Federation citizenship. Other than that, we need nothing from them.”

“They need us more than we need them,” Jasmine says.

“Yes, exactly,” Khan says. “Even though they do not know they need us.”

“They’ll learn,” Jasmine says, smiling. “Khan, if this did start in an alternate timeline, is it possible we could meet ourselves out there somewhere?”

“It is possible but I think highly unlikely,” Khan says. “Also I know not what purpose it would serve.”

Jasmine shrugs. “Just to see what we did in another universe. If you met Jill there, or if Rani hadn’t died, or…”

“Or if we were still asleep,” Khan says. “Or destroyed, or… I see no real reason we should look for ourselves.”

“I’m not saying we should go searching,” Jasmine says. “Just if we happen to come across a way to see what we did somewhere else.”

“If we do,” Khan concedes.

Footsteps make them both look and they see Jake, Carson, Amir and Aisha coming toward them. “I contacted Marveek,” Jake says. “He can’t promise me they’ll be able to fit everyone with boots, but he says the coats should be doable, if nothing else. I also want to talk to them about packs—I know we have some but they make some really good packs I think would be better suited for whatever we’ll find on Qo’noS. You want to come with us?”
Khan considers it, but Jill should be waking up within an hour or two and he doesn’t want to leave her alone. “I think not,” he says. “Unless you need me.”

“Nah, I think we’re good,” Jake says. “Comm-links will work there, so if we need you I’ll call.”

Khan nods. “Be careful.”

“Always am,” Jake says. He gives the others the coordinates and they beam away.

When he goes downstairs, he finds Andy with magnifying goggles on and a bright light shining on the table in front of her; Magpie sits at another table studying her screen. “I checked on Jill a little while ago,” Magpie says. “She made noises and waved a hand at me, so she’s got a while to go before she’s coherent and actually conscious.”

“That is fine,” Khan says. “I actually thought I might take some time to reread Rani’s journals, since I have some space.”

“We put the bag in my bedroom, so it’s in there with Jill,” Magpie says. “If we need you I’ll holler.”

Andy has not said a word, but Khan looks over and decides not to interrupt. He goes into the bedroom instead, finding the bag easily enough. Jill doesn’t stir when he turns on a bedside lamp, and Khan settles in to read.

The words are familiar by now; he has photographic memory and has read Rani’s journals before. But he takes comfort in seeing them, in her tidy handwriting, still clear on the page. She writes about meeting him, about her first two weeks with his people, and he remembers those days vividly as he reads.

Jill snuffles in her sleep and rolls over, throwing her arm across his lap. Khan smiles, brushing her hair back, but she doesn’t wake immediately. She does mumble something, and stretch, but doesn’t open her eyes.

Clearly, Khan thinks, this will be a process. He picks up his comm-link to send Magpie a message that Jill is waking up and will likely need whatever combination of meds she uses, then sets the journal aside.

It takes a few minutes, but Jill stretches and grumbles and yawns her way into being awake, blinking her eyes open sleepily. She rubs them, yawns again, and flops down on her stomach. “My head hurts,” she mumbles.

“I have something for that,” Magpie says from the doorway. “You want the usual combination? I also have a very big cup of coffee.”

“You are a goddess and I love you,” Jill says. “Coffee and drugs, please.”

Magpie laughs, coming over with a hypospray and a mug. She sets the mug down and Jill tips her head back, letting Magpie inject her with the hypo. “That’s two out of three and here’s three,” Magpie says, digging a bottle out of her pocket and handing it to Jill.

Jill opens the bottle, tips out three pills, and swallows them with a drink of coffee. “I need to finish my coffee and have a really long hot shower and I think then I’ll be human,” she says. “Did I miss anything exciting around here?”

“No,” Khan says. “Jake took the new ones to Marveek to get outfitted as best they can in the time
we have left. Everyone else is making preparations.” He tells Jill what he did with their things, and Bilbo.

“You are wonderful and I love you,” Jill says. “I’ll go through what you left out for me and make sure I don’t need anything else, but you just saved me hours of work and I loathe packing so you are a god and we can discuss repayment in sexual favors when we don’t have company or, you know, upcoming trial by combat.”

Khan smiles. “Do you want company for your shower?”

Magpie snorts. “Sure, just use my bathroom for sex.”

“No, I was going to go back to the spare flat since that’s where my toiletries are,” Jill says, making a face at Magpie. “And yes, I would like company. No idea when we’ll get the chance again.”

She hops out of bed and pulls on her shoes. “There’s nothing we’re needed for here, is there, bird?”

“No, we’re good,” Magpie says. “If we need you I’ll call you but we should be fine.”

“We’ll keep in touch,” Jill promises.

They go back to the spare apartment; Jill kicks off her shoes and her hoodie as soon as they materialize. “I really do want a really long hot shower before we have sex,” she says. “I’m a little stoned on opiates and a lot hungover and I need hot water and soap and then I will gladly let you fuck my brains out.”

Khan laughs. “I see.”

“Hey, I have priorities,” Jill says, grinning. She undresses as they walk to the bathroom, leaving a trail of clothes; Khan waits and undresses while Jill starts the water.

He gives her a minute to stand under the spray and relax before he gets into the tub, and she wraps her arms around his waist when he does. “The next couple days are going to crawl by,” she predicts. “Waiting until the deadline.”

“We will manage,” Khan says. “But yes, I expect this to go slowly.”

“I’d like you to do something with me before we leave,” Jill says.

“What is it?” Khan asks.

“I want to say goodbye to Eema,” Jill says. “And Abba. Just in case something happens.”

Khan bites back his initial response because nothing is guaranteed, and he understands her wanting to say goodbye. “In the morning,” he says, not entirely certain what time it is at the moment.

“Yeah,” Jill says. “For now…kiss me, dragon.”

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In the morning, they beam to Sarah’s front porch, arriving in mist just past sunrise. Khan’s surprised Sarah is up this early, but she answers the door fully dressed and sounding completely awake. “I keep odd hours sometimes,” she says. “Coffee?”

“Please,” Jill says. “Is Abba here, too?”
“He is,” Sarah says. “In the kitchen. We have coffee and babka, although I know you can’t stay long.”

“A cup of coffee, about,” Jill says. “I’m going to go say hi to Abba.” She darts ahead into the kitchen.

Sarah looks at him for a moment. “Will she survive this?” she asks finally.

“Yes,” Khan says. “The only way she does not is if every other person on the planet with us dies.”

“A reasonable enough caveat,” Sarah says. “I very much hope you’re right. Come have coffee.”

In the kitchen, he finds Jill sitting in the lap of a balding, neatly bearded man, and he doesn’t look like what Khan expected but to be fair he’s not sure what that was. “My husband,” Sarah says. “Martin Jacobs, this is Khan, Jill’s partner.”

“Hello,” Martin says. “I would get up but.”

“But I’m here and I’m not moving,” Jill says.

“I see,” Khan says.

She laughs. “Well, maybe I should. I just never see Abba these days, and I don’t know when I’ll see either of you again.”

“You will,” Sarah says. “I don’t know when, but you will see us again.”

Jill smiles. “I believe that, too.”

Sarah smiles back and goes to pour the coffee. Jill dumps sugar and cream into hers, and Martin adds cream, but Sarah adds nothing and as always Khan drinks his coffee black. Jill takes a seat next to Martin, scooting her chair closer, and he turns to look at her.

“Let’s let them chat for a bit,” Sarah says to Khan. “Come, we can talk in the living room.”

Khan nods and follows her to the dim room; Sarah doesn’t draw the curtains back, and he appreciates it. “What do you want to know?” he asks.

“Will she survive this? Will Jake?” Sarah asks.

“The only way Jill does not survive is if I am dead, and every member of my family with me,” Khan says. “I cannot make the same promise about Jake’s life but I give you my word, I will do my best to ensure his survival.”

“My son is a survivor,” Sarah says. “And a fighter. If there’s a way to survive this place, he will find it.”

“I believe you,” Khan says. “So are we all.”

“Yes, but you’re not all my children,” Sarah says. “I have less invested in your survival. Perhaps not yours particularly, but.” She folds her hands at her waist. “I would like to meet them, your brothers and sisters. Before you leave Earth, after you come back from this.”

Khan nods. “All right.” It’s a fair enough request. If they are able to honor it, they will.

“I know you are agnostic,” Sarah says. “Will it bother you if I pray for you? For your family?”
“No,” Khan says. “I welcome all good wishes and intent.”

She nods. “Then I will.”

Martin and Jill come to join them in the living room. “Khan, the books are mostly Abba’s, if you had questions,” Jill says.

He doesn’t really but asks about the history of one of the books, just to be polite. Amusingly, he gets drawn into the conversation, which turns into a discussion of historical literature and how accurately books should reflect the culture of their time. Khan thinks Konstantin would love speaking with Martin; for all that he teaches math, he has the soul of a philosopher.

Eventually, though, they need to leave. Jill hugs Martin, then Sarah, holding on to both of them for long moments. When she finally steps away, her eyes are bright but she smiles. “Let’s go,” she says, taking Khan’s hand.

He sets the transporter for Magpie’s nest. “Good luck,” Sarah says softly.

“Thank you,” Jill murmurs back and Khan presses the button.

As they inch closer to their departure, tension crackles among them, anticipation needing an outlet. They can’t spar or train too intensively to release it, so the tension continues to grow. Soon, Khan promises himself, feeling the tension in his muscles, in the wings that want to ruffle. Soon.

And then it’s time. All their packs are carefully, exhaustively filled out; if they are missing anything, it’s something seventeen people haven’t come up with. That’s not a guarantee of success but Khan likes the odds.

“To the Femarans,” he says, all of them standing in a circle, packs on their backs. “And from there...to Qo’noS.”


“We will,” Maeve says. “And we will let you know when we are safe.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Andy says. He hugs Matthew, then Jill, then Khan, not letting go for a moment. “Ichiroheian o inoru,” he says softly.

“Smooth roads indeed,” Khan murmurs back. “I will see you again, Andy.”

“I know.” Andy kisses his forehead and steps back.

Khan looks around the circle. Fifteen people, his closest and most trusted and most skilled. If he can succeed in this mad quest, it will be because of them.

“Come on, dragon,” Jill says softly. “Let’s fly.”


The world shimmers around them and disappears.

Chapter End Notes
If my online dictionary is correct, Andy is saying 'I wish you a smooth road' to Khan, an old-fashioned way of wishing someone good luck on a journey. For any Japanese speakers, I apologize if that's not correct.

Also, I don't want to be a huge tease, but...there's a lot of fun stuff coming up in the next couple chapters, and a few plot twists I didn't see coming (although if you did, I'd love to know what gave me away).
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Maybe we're on the same side.

Chapter Notes

Quick note: For what I think become fairly obvious reasons soon into the chapter, I needed a new narrator for this section. Anandi decided to speak up but she insisted on first person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We materialize on a mountain, or part of one; fortunately it’s broad and flat enough for us all to stand. The air whistles around us, and I breathe carefully, uncertain of our height. After a few breaths, however, I relax; wherever we are, it has sufficient oxygen for our needs.

I hear the hum of an incoming transporter and my hand goes to my weapon, although I don’t draw it. Everyone around me does the same, and we leave our hands on our weapons when we see the three Klingons materialize. The one in the middle holds up a hand. “We will not fight you here,” he says.

Slowly, I relax my hand, as do my siblings. “So,” the Klingon says. “You actually came.”

Khan flashes teeth. “We did.”

The Klingon nods. “How many of you are there?”

“Fifteen,” Khan says.

“Then you will divide into two groups,” the Klingon says. “You may divide yourselves as you see fit but neither group can exceed ten people. You will choose the people for your side. For the other…whose idea was it that you come here?”

“Mine,” Jill says clearly, stepping forward.

The Klingon frowns. “You are not big enough to be a full grown human.”

“Say that again and we will be fighting here,” Jill says evenly. “I am a grown person, a fighter, and his mate.” She jerks her head toward Khan. “Do not insult my honor or his.”

The Klingon bares teeth. “You have a warrior’s spirit. It is suitable, then. You will pick for the other side.”

Jill looks at Khan. “Where are we going? The two sides?” she asks.

“One group of you will be beamed to a set of coordinates,” the Klingon says. “The other group will
be beamed to another. We will give you coordinates and a guide, and you will make your way to different checkpoints. The final checkpoint, you will meet up, and from there, you will make your way to the combat tourney.”

Oh, this is clever, I think. They want us to arrive tired, injured, low on resources. Little do they know this will only make our blood rise. We could not have asked for better terms.

“You will have only a certain amount of time to check in at each point,” the Klingon says. “The faster you arrive, the more time you can rest until the time is up and the next coordinates are provided. You may not use communicators to talk to each other. You may not use personal transport technology. Only what you carry with you.”

Jill looks at Khan again and takes a breath, letting it out slowly. “This is going to sound really silly, but why don’t we split by gender?” she asks. “It mostly balances out. Our side is smaller and lighter but yours has more physical strength.”

“Nyet,” Cat says. “I stay with Kostya. This is non negotiable.”

“If she goes to your side, should we put a man on my side?” Jill asks.

“No,” I say, coming forward. “It will be myself, you, Alona, Maeve, Jasmine, and Aisha. Six of us can move quickly and travel lightly. We have the best climber and the strongest runners, and you.”

“I’m picking, but apparently Anandi is our team captain,” Jill says. “Khan? Is this all right with you?”

“I want you on my team,” Khan says, taking her hand.

“Nyet,” the Klingon says. “If she is truly your mate, she will fight all the harder to find you. This is non negotiable.”

Jill stretches up on her toes and kisses Khan. “See you whenever,” she says.

Khan growls softly and pulls her back in, kissing her again. “My lioness,” he murmurs when he lets go. I doubt anyone else could hear it, but I have the best hearing of my family.

She smiles and touches his cheek. “My dragon.”

I move to one side with my sisters, as my brothers and Ekaterina move to the other. “May you die with honor,” the Klingon says, oddly formal, and I feel the transporter take us.

This time we materialize on the outskirts of an abandoned city. The wind croons eerily through abandoned buildings and half-destroyed ones; the air has an acrid taste. Before us is a low stone wall, and on top of the wall sits a tablet. Alona steps forward and picks it up. “It’s…okay. This is our general guide, and it…huh, I didn’t expect that. It will show us the cardinal directions, but also give us a general sense of which way the next checkpoint is and how far we have to go. Each checkpoint will have a new tablet, and some way to check in, along with access to fresh water. We have four hours to get to the next checkpoint, which is…thataway.”

“Are the instructions in English or Klingon?” Jasmine asks.

“Both,” Alona says.

“Alona, you scout ahead with Jill,” I say. “Aisha, you and Maeve bring up the rear, and Jasmine and I will take the middle. Don’t get out of sight, and activate your earbuds. We can’t use them to
talk to the others, but we can use them for ourselves."

“Yes ma’am,” Alona says, touching her ear. Jill snaps me a salute and does the same, and the two of them head off. I do not know if we are near morning or night, but the sky has an odd purple-orange tint to it. Certainly light to see by, but somewhat unnerving.

Cities in disrepair and purple skies. My dreams were more literal than any of us knew. I shiver a little, thinking about that. My family saw their loved ones die. Khan saw Jill. I know they all wanted to know who I saw die, in my dreams.

I saw myself die, watching as though I were a stranger. I died in multiple ways, various scenarios. My family tried to save me, but never succeeded.

I don’t know if that will come to pass or not, but I know as well as my family does that I am more expendable. There is no partner without whom I will go mad, or who will grieve my loss that fiercely. I don’t wish to die, but I accept that it may happen. Everyone dies eventually.

“Hey, pay attention,” Jasmine says, snapping her fingers. “You almost walked into a hole.”

I wince. “That was ill-done of me,” I say. “I was distracted.”

“I saw that,” Jasmine says. “You want to talk about it?”

“I wonder if we will all survive this trip,” I say quietly, in Arabic.

“I haven’t been awake and studied our situation enough to calculate the odds,” Jasmine says apologetically. “Or you mean something else.”

“Have you had any strange dreams, since you awoke?” I ask.

“One,” Jasmine says. “I dreamed of Rani, in Khan’s throne room. She thanked me for passing on her message.”

I stumble. “You actually dreamed of her? Talked to her?” I ask. “None of us ever did. What did she say to you?”

“She thanked me,” Jasmine says. “I just stared at her, and she said—‘Thank you, my claw. Thank you for delivering my message.’ I managed to bow, and I asked her what was going on, and she asked me to promise her something.”

“What did she ask you?” I ask softly.

“To protect Jill,” Jasmine says. “She said Khan couldn’t, and I needed to keep the lioness safe. She said it would make sense later, but everything was as it should be.”

“Why would—” But of course, I think. Rani was closest to Jasmine out of any of us, aside from Khan. There must be something preventing Rani from talking to Khan directly, but she managed with Jasmine. “I retract that question. But did she say anything else?”

“She said she’d done as much as she could to guarantee our success, but now it was up to us,” Jasmine says. “I asked her what she’d done and she refused to answer. I asked her if I would talk to her again and she said she didn’t know, but maybe. And then she flicked her hand at me and I woke up.”

I shake my head. “What did she look like?” I ask.
“Healthy,” Jasmine says. “Vibrant, even. She wore the gold sari Khan loved on her, and her hair was down. I didn’t know what other questions to ask.”

“And that was also why she talked to you,” I say. “You were closest to her and lacking in context, so you would not ask questions she did not want to answer.”

“Rani was clever,” Jasmine says. “Apparently she still is, somewhere.”

“But what message did you pass on to her?” I ask, belatedly coming back to that question.

“When she was dying, she made me promise to build a statue of her in the Lion’s Market,” Jasmine says. We pause to climb over a half-destroyed wall, and stay quiet while we navigate the next few hundred meters. “She asked for a compartment within the statue and gave me a box I never opened. I took Khan there and gave him the box. She wrote him a letter.”

“So she knew,” I say, stunned.

“She hoped,” Jasmine says. “She had dreams, and she saw this in them, and she hoped they would happen.”

“This is incredible,” I say. “I wish I knew what she was doing for us.”

“So do I,” Jasmine says. “Was this at all like your dreams?”


“We’re pausing,” Alona reports. “After you get through the wreckage of this building it clears out a bit, and Jill and I are waiting there. We need to turn what I think is north soon, but I’m hoping we get a clearer path before then.”

The four of us scramble over the building and through its skeleton, and find Alona and Jill where they said they would be. “I think, maybe, if we head like a kilometer this way and turn north we’ll have a fairly open run for a while,” Alona says. “The tablet thing gives me a limited GPS.”

“Well, we’ve got nothing else to go on so let’s try it,” Jill says. “How many kilometers do we have to cross to get to the checkpoint?”

“About twenty-five,” Alona says. “Although it might be more depending on how circuitous a route we have to take.”

We make our way through the ruined city and do in fact find what looks like the remains of a highway where Alona thought we would. We take it, although the road peters out after about a kilometer and we end up walking on a fairly even, flat plane. “This feels too easy,” Alona says.

“Doesn’t it?” Jill turns a cartwheel, effortless even with her pack, and brushes off her hands. “Maybe it’ll—what the fuck?”

We see the ship speeding toward the ground; from the sound of its engines it is trying desperately to pull up, but Jill shakes her head, already starting to run toward where it will likely crash. “Whoever that is, I don’t think they’re supposed to be here,” she calls over her shoulder. “And I don’t want to get accused of cheating.”

“I don’t want to get attacked, either,” Alona says as we all start running. “Anandi, go on ahead, you’ll get there first.”
I actually slow to a stop for a moment, to take a breath and center myself. I take off my backpack and throw it to Jasmine, who slings it on her shoulders and keeps going.


When I sprint like this, I feel free, unbound in a way I think Khan gets when he flies. He took me up, once or twice, and it was similar, but so foreign to me. Running comes naturally to me, and from the time I could toddle, I was always the sprinter. Faster than anyone, but only for so long.

But for that time—oh. I easily outdistance my sisters, gaining on them with each step. The land around us is flat and cracked; not ideal but at least I don’t have to watch where I put my feet. As I run, the roar of the ship’s engines gets louder, and deeper, and then I hear them cut off abruptly; a moment later, the ship settles a meter above the ground. I can see it, now, and I pour on more speed until I get close enough I’ll be able to see who emerges, if anyone.

Then I slow to a jog, then a walk. I stop, breathing hard, although that will pass in a moment. Mindful of Jill’s words, and Alona’s, I draw my weapon, although I don’t aim it just yet. A quick glance behind me shows that my sisters are gaining on me but it will be a few minutes before they arrive.

The ramp to descend the ship lowers, and this time I do aim my weapon, planting my feet squarely. The first to descend sees me, her eyes widen, and she raises her hands in the universal sign for ‘don’t shoot’. I motion for her to come forward, and she does, motioning to someone behind her.

She’s human, I think, or close enough I can’t tell the difference. Dusky skin, dark hair, not dressed wholly impractically but not dressed for a run like ours. If she has a weapon, I don’t see it.

Two men come down the ramp behind her, both raising their hands when they see me. One of them has dark hair and pointed ears, and I think back on the research I did, trying to remember which species have those. The only one I can call to mind is Vulcan, but there are few of them left. Why would a Vulcan be on the Klingon homeworld?

Then again, why would humans? I look at the third man; golden hair, piercing blue eyes even in this gray air, and I think Jill needs to be here because I don’t have enough knowledge of current galactic black markets. I’m not sure she does, but I know the rest of us don’t.

“Do—you speak Standard?” the woman asks after a moment.

English, clearly her first language, and I can’t pinpoint the accent but those have shifted since my day. “I do,” I say neutrally.

She glances back at the blond man, then looks at me. “I don’t know what you’re doing on Qo’noS,” she says carefully. “It’s not my business. I don’t want to cause trouble. We’re looking for a man named John Harrison.”

Well, I think. At least they found us, and not Khan’s group, wherever it happens to be. “Interesting,” I say. “So are we.”

“Maybe we’re on the same side, then,” she says.

I smile. “I don’t think so.”

“You said ‘we’,” the blond man speaks up. “You’re alone.”

“Not for long,” I say.
I don’t lower my weapon, they don’t lower their hands, and slowly the sound of running footsteps
behind me gets louder, and louder, until I know the three in front of me hear it and see my sisters.
They slow to a stop, and I hear a few weapons unsheathe. “Jill,” I say. “I need your counsel here.”

Jill comes up next to me. “Oh, fuck,” she says as soon as she sees the three people standing in front
of us. “Why the fuck are you here, Jim Kirk?”

Kirk—the blond—jolts. “What the hell?”

“You’re Captain James Kirk, in command of the Enterprise,” Jill says, pointing at him. “You are
Commander Spock, his first officer, science officer, and absolute bastard of a test designer. And I
do believe that makes you Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, comms officer.” She rubs her hands over her
face. “Which means we are fucked.”

“You took the Kobyashi Maru,” Spock says, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, you asshole, I did,” Jill says. “Lieutenant Commander Jill Calastinova, last assignment XO
on the Marshall, at your service. Let me guess, Admiral Marcus sent you here looking for John
Harrison?”

“How did you know that?” Kirk asks. “Or, rather, how did you put that theory together?”

“Don’t play me, Kirk,” Jill says, pointing a knife at him. “We are, quite literally, the only people
on this planet who care if you survive. Am I right or not?”

“You are,” Spock says after a moment. “Why did you know that?”

“Because I know John Harrison,” Jill says. “And Marcus sent you here to start a war based on a lie,
because whatever he told you was a lie. We’re trying to prevent the war he wants.”

“Where is Harrison?” Kirk asks.

“I really wish I could answer that,” Jill says. “I can’t. What I can tell you is that we are on a
mission to cross a significant chunk of this planet in not a whole lot of time, and if you want to
survive and report back to your ship, you’re coming with us.”

“Who are you?” Uhura asks. “Please. Will you at least tell us your names?”

“Anandi,” I say, holstering my weapon. My other sisters introduce themselves, and I pick up my
pack. “Alona, where do we need to go?” I ask.

She studies the tablet. “We have to…okay, we’ll have to cross a ravine, or maybe that’s a creek
bed, I’m not sure, but if we go about two kilometers due east we should have a straight shot north
and then east from there, at least until we get to the checkpoint.”

“Checkpoint?” Kirk asks.

“Yeah,” Jill says, putting her knife away. “Is there anything on your ship that would be useful in a
survival situation? Rope, blankets, medkits, ration packs?”

“A few things,” Uhura says. “Spock, come on, we’ll go see what it has.” She runs up the ramp,
Spock following her.

“Harrison betrayed Starfleet,” Kirk says carefully.

“Harrison never belonged to Starfleet,” Jill says. “He had nothing to betray. What did Marcus tell
“There was a building in London,” Kirk says. “It held a lot of classified projects. Harrison destroyed it.”

“Was it the Kelvin archive or the unnamed facility?” Jill asks.

“The unnamed one,” Kirk says and I lock my teeth on a keen of sorrow.

I do, however, turn and look at my sisters. “We said goodbye,” Maeve whispers. “It was all we could do.”

Alona breathes out slowly. “Yeah, and we knew this was likely but…”

“But,” I say quietly.

“I don’t understand,” Kirk says.

“What did Marcus tell you about the things destroyed in that building, and why Harrison picked it?” Jill asks carefully.

“He said Harrison was in league with the Klingons, had fled to Qo’noS to share advanced Starfleet research with them,” Kirk says. “That there had been a specific project he’d wanted to take that was at that facility, but Marcus had prevented him from stealing it, and in revenge he blew up the building and destroyed the project.”

“Wow,” Alona says. “That’s a remarkably slanted view but semi-accurate if you adjust back to reality.”

“What is reality?” Kirk asks.

“I’ll tell you once Uhura and Spock come back and we get moving,” Jill says.

A couple minutes later, the two of them come down the ramp again, Spock with a backpack. “Some medical supplies, some small weapons, enough ration packs for five people for two days,” Uhura says. “Rope, universal tape, some other stuff. What exactly are we doing here? Checkpoints and you’re an officer, but the rest of you aren’t? What is going on?”

Jill snorts. “Oh, boy,” she says. “Let’s try this from the beginning. John Harrison isn’t a real person, he’s a construct Marcus made up. The real man isn’t from this time. He, and those on his ship, were discovered in cryosleep after the battle of Vulcan. Marcus revived him, alone, and forced him to cooperate by holding the fate of everyone from his ship over his head. The man, you see, has a talent for war, and Marcus wants one.”

We begin walking, Alona guiding us. “Still not seeing how we end up here,” Kirk says.

“For various reasons I ran into Harrison—we’ll use the name for now—in London, and offered him my help,” Jill says. “With a bit of assistance, we were able to save a dozen of his family from their cryotubes. There were seventy-two people in tubes in that facility, Kirk. When we left for Qo’noS, there were sixty. Marcus killed them, when he blew up that facility.”

“You suggest the admiral violated every Starfleet oath—” Spock starts.

“Your fucking admiral took the man I love and experimented on him, Spock,” Jill says, quietly furious. “Your admiral threatened him with the deaths of his family if he did not cooperate, held
him hostage in a time not his with no one else to support him. He didn’t just violate his oaths once, Spock. He built an entire section of Starfleet—section 31—designed to bypassing those oaths, and his vision of Starfleet is one that betrays its core mission. He wants a war, and he wants Starfleet to become a completely military operation, and we are here on this planet to stop him from doing those things. And you know, I may have a way you can be useful.”

“How do you think?” Jasmine asks.

“Oh, okay, look,” Jill says. “We’re here to find the other group so both halves of us can find the arena, right? Finding the arena, or at least getting to it, proves we’re worthy enough to fight them. We are not letting these three get in the combat ring because that’s a death sentence…but I think I can argue that they should be allowed to witness it on behalf of the Federation, since they proved their honor in getting to the arena.”

I hear Kirk start asking questions but I ignore him in favor of thinking about Jill’s idea. “You have a point,” I say. “I think this could be successful, so long as they don’t kill him for simply being on the planet.”

“No, I think I can argue that his being here proves the need for our negotiations to succeed,” Jill says. “Since Marcus sent him, and we’re here telling them not to fight Marcus.”

“I think, hermanita, that if anyone can convince the Klingons of this, it would be you,” I say.

She grins. “I’m really good at bluffing.”

“Do you speak Klingon?” Uhura asks.

“That I don’t,” Jill says. “At least, not more than a few phrases. A few of us do, though. I’m guessing you do.”

Uhura nods. “I’m a bit rusty but it’s solid.”

“We might need that,” Jill says.

“Can you—will you tell me more about why you’re here? What plan you have to find peace?” Uhura asks. “I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

Jill looks at me. “Your call, Anandi.”

I shrug. We can kill the three of them easily enough should we need to, and with their ship crashed into the planet it would certainly cover it. And if we tell them the truth, we stand a chance of gaining their active cooperation. “Si,” I say. “Tell them.”

“Listen up, because this is a little crazy and a bit complicated,” Jill says to the three Starfleet crew. “Harrison’s real name is Khan, and he is from the Eugenics Wars. He and his family—everyone else with me—were the augmented humans, the genetically enhanced ones who tried to rule the planet.”

I clear my throat and Jill laughs. “Pardon, who did rule the planet for a time. Eventually they were defeated and sent into exile aboard their ship, in cryosleep, and that was the end of it until Marcus found the ship. We know Marcus wants war with the Klingons. We don’t, and we don’t think Starfleet or the Federation really does either. So…we approached the Klingons and made them an offer. We’re matching our best fighters—well, all of us because that’s who we have—against their best fighters, and if we win we get to negotiate peace terms with them.”
“What happens if you lose?” Spock asks.

“We won’t,” Jasmine says.

“This is possibly the craziest idea I’ve ever heard,” Kirk says. “It’s like something I would come up with. Whose idea was it in the first place?”

“Mine,” Jill says, laughing.

“So, wait,” Uhura says. “You’re going to fight the best of the Klingons?” She looks at Jill disbelievingly.

“Not alone,” Jill says. “There are fifteen of us taking the field. Two of us aren’t genetically enhanced, but I’ll have thirteen superhumans to watch my back. And I’m good. I’m not physically as strong as a Klingon but I’m faster and more flexible, and I know how to fight dirty.”

“Who is the other non-enhanced person?” Spock asks.

“Who else were you sent here to find?” Jill counters.

“Aaron Jacobs,” Kirk says. “So did he pull you into this or you pull him?”

“Oh, I pulled him,” Jill says. “Everything about this was my idea from the beginning, including offering Khan my help.” She laughs. “Because I’m that kind of crazy.”

“You’re our kind of crazy,” Jasmine says. “Which is why this works so well.”

“Your kind of crazy sounds like mine,” Kirk says, grinning.


“Yeah,” Kirk says.

“How’d it make you feel?” Jasmine asks. “Did you like it? Did you get a rush from it? Did you get the ultimate thrill of taking another’s life? Did you feel like a god, Kirk, or did you feel regret?”

“I don’t regret that I killed him,” Kirk says. “But I didn’t like it.”

“Then your crazy isn’t ours,” Jasmine says and spins around again.

“Is it yours?” Kirk asks Jill.

“I occasionally feel guilty that I like killing people,” Jill says. “In pursuit of this venture, I’ll take down anyone and everyone I have to and I don’t really care about their deaths.”

“Lioness,” Jasmine murmurs, sketching a bow for half a step. “That being said, we’re not about to start killing indiscriminately until we get to the combat ring,”

“Well, no,” Jill says. “Once we get there, however…”

Jasmine laughs. “A worthy mate,” she says to me in Arabic. “It is fitting that this time he have a mate who fights with him.”

I nod in agreement. “For him,” I say. “You should hear the full story of how she came to help him.”
“I would like to hear that,” Uhura says in Arabic.

“Lioness,” Jasmine says abruptly in English. “How did you find Khan?”

“We were in London,” Jill says. “I quite literally saw him on the street and—I didn’t like the look on his face. I didn’t know who he was or what his problem was but I wanted to find out, so I contrived to trip into him and then I talked him into dinner.”


“Because I’m not a fool, Kirk, and I recognize the truth when I hear it,” Jill says. “Khan has never lied to me. He may stretch the truth occasionally but he’s always been honest with me, and I believed him when he told me the truth. And I don’t like Marcus, and I never have. He doesn’t think much of me because I’m a short woman, and I have no patience for men with stupid prejudices. But objectively, I know Marcus wants a war, and I know there’s almost nothing he won’t do in pursuit of that war.”

“How long were you on the Marshall?” Kirk asks.

“Five years, three as XO,” Jill says. “We missed the Battle of Vulcan and I almost got reassigned after it but I did not want my own ship so I fought to stay where I was.”

“You didn’t want command?” Spock asks.

“Really I didn’t,” Jill says. “I mean, I wanted it eventually, but not after Vulcan, not like that.”

Kirk hisses in a breath and I wonder what context I’m missing. “You know Jake,” Jill says to him. “You’ve had beers with him once in a while. You really thought he had betrayed the Federation?”

“I didn’t want to, believe me,” Kirk says. “But Marcus had footage, video of him and—and Khan, leaving the facility in London, half an hour before it blew up.”

“Well, that’s really obviously faked, since I’m pretty sure half an hour before that place blew up Khan and Jake were on Qo’noS somewhere,” Jill says. “Also what did the two men in that image look like?”

“Just two men, dark haired, dark clothes,” Jim says.

“Yeah, that’s faked,” Jill says. “You’ll see why assuming we ever meet up with them.”

“We will,” I say calmly. “Alona, how are we on time?”

“We’re okay for now, but there’s going to be a difficult patch in a couple kilometers,” Alona says. “As we get closer Jill and I will scout ahead.”

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We get to the final checkpoint tired, bruised, muddy and limping in a couple cases. Aisha carries Uhura on her back, while Maeve carries Aisha’s backpack, and Jasmine pulls the litter with Alona on it. Jill and I, the least encumbered and in the best shape, search for the check-in option while the others rest. This checkpoint, unlike the others, has a stone building; inside we find a few beds, a rudimentary kitchen, a bathroom with what I think can be a shower, and a tablet on the table. Jill runs for the tablet, bringing it back outside to Uhura and Alona. “You guys can rest on beds inside once you’re up to moving, but right now we need to check in and see if we can find the others,” she says, handing it to Alona.
Alona flips on the tablet and reads through the first page. “Okay,” she says slowly—I know the morphine hasn’t worn off completely yet. “Okay. There is a gray box to the right of the door. Inside the box is a blue switch. We are to flip the switch, which tells them at least one group has arrived, and we have twelve hours to rest before we have to continue. The trick, though, is that we get twelve hours from the time we flip the switch, and if the others don’t get here for ten hours more they get two hours to rest.”

“Okay, so how much time do we have before we’re late to this checkpoint?” Jill asks.

“About an hour,” Alona says.

“Forty-nine minutes,” Spock says.

“Then in forty-five minutes we hit the switch and hope for the best,” Jill says. “Spock, you’ll be our timer.”

Spock nods and goes to kneel next to Uhura, sitting on the ground. He rests a hand on her back and murmurs something to her I don’t bother listening to. She’s a bit worse for wear, and the concussion can’t be fun, but she’s not bleeding internally and she responds to current pain medication, so we gave her that instead of our own morphine.

I find Spock interesting. At one of the checkpoints, when we had a few minutes, he briefly explained the Vulcan code of logic to me. I can see how it has its advantages, but while I may be a scientist, and I may often be the most dispassionate of my siblings, I am in fact still human and I do have emotions. For that matter, Spock is half-human, and I do wonder how he copes with that. He and Uhura clearly have a romantic involvement, for that matter. How does that affect him? Or, for that matter, her?

I don’t think I care enough to follow up after this campaign is over, however.

Maeve tends to Alona, with Jasmine assisting. I move over to them, but Maeve shakes her head. “I’ve got this, Anandi,” she says. “You see to the others.”

“They are more or less seen to,” I say, but I look. Spock is carrying Uhura into the building; good. Kirk sits against the side of the building, looking somewhat sunburned and sweaty, but then again, so are the rest of us. I go inside and find the water supply with a pile of bottles next to it; since we are all somewhat dehydrated I start filling them. Jill comes over to me and begins ferrying the filled bottles to people, until she comes back to me and tells me that’s the last.

I finish filling the bottle in my hands and drink from it, draining most of the bottle before I lower it. Then I refill my bottle, and Jill’s, when she hands it to me. “Halfway there,” she says, taking the full bottle back. “They’ll be here soon.”

Hope is not a strategy but we have little else. Still, though. We made it with only a few serious injuries while encumbered with three unprepared and unequipped people. Surely Khan and the others can do better.

Jill flips the switch when Spock tells her to, and it glows for a moment before a ticking countdown appears on the wall. Twelve hours and counting.

An hour goes by. We eat, or force ourselves to really, and wash up as best we can, and then there’s nothing to do but rest. Alona sleeps; when I ask Maeve she says Alona will be fine by the time we need to leave. Uhura sleeps, and I’m less certain about her but if all else fails Konstantin will sling her across his shoulders. I am not entirely certain he would notice.
The hut feels too close for me, and I go outside, finding a patch of foliage to sit on. A few minutes later, Jill comes out and joins me. She has something in her hand, a small object she keeps playing with. “What is that?” I ask.

Jill holds out her palm and I blink. An unpolished gray stone with the Hindi word for light carved into it. “Where on Earth did you get that?” I ask, honestly dumbfounded.

“Rani left us a message,” Jill says. “This was my message. I brought it with me because it seemed important somehow.”

“It may be,” I say. “I honestly do not know. Does it feel differently to you? Has it changed?”

Jill shakes her head. “No, just…I felt like I should have it with me.”

“Keep it safe,” I say.

“I will,” Jill promises.

Kirk emerges from the hut and comes over to us, moving slowly. Jill gestures to the grass and he takes a seat. “I don’t know if Nyota can keep going,” he says. “For that matter I’m not entirely certain how much I’ve got left in me.” He looks sheepish, as if he doesn’t want to admit it, but after the last twelve hours I know it’s true.

“We’ve got eleven hours,” Jill says. “And stims. And if all else fails we’ll carry you, because there’s only one way off this planet, and it’s with us.”

“How did you even get here?” Kirk asks. “There’s nothing in orbit or anywhere near the Neutral Zone.”


“Back in the Neutral Zone, or hopefully at this point in Federation space,” Jim says. “We—Marcus said he had evidence of where Jacobs was but when we got closer we couldn’t find him. And our ship had a warp core malfunction and got stranded in the Neutral Zone. The three of us got in our ship and told my ship to make emergency repairs and get to friendly space, and we’d find them when we had the prisoners. When we got closer to Qo’noS, we caught human life signs, and then trying to get closer to one we took fire from an automated system and then crashed, and then you found us.”

“Man, you are lucky,” Jill says.

Kirk rubs the back of his neck. “I’ve been told that before.”

“You should rest,” I say. “We have sedatives, if you need to sleep.”

“I’m waiting until the others get here,” Kirk says. “I was sent here to either arrest or kill two men and I want to see them.”

“You will not, of course, be arresting or killing either of them,” I say mildly.

“No, of course not,” Kirk says. “But I want to meet them both while I’m on my feet.”

Jill looks at me and I nod slightly. If we have to drug him, we will, but for now it can wait.

The three of us sit there quietly in the grass. After about ten minutes—longer than I thought she’d last—Jill gets up and takes off her coat and boots and socks, beginning to stretch out and move
through yoga poses. I consider joining her but the sun warms my bones. The air doesn’t feel right but the heat does, and I feel warm for the first time since I awoke this century. I fold up my coat and pillow it behind my head, and then I stretch out to bask in the sun and let my body recover.

Kirk doesn’t try to talk to me, and after a few minutes he lies down as well. Jill folds herself into child’s pose, I see through slitted eyes, and doesn’t move for a time.

Then she jumps to her feet and looks up. “I think they’re coming,” she says, shielding her eyes and scanning the horizon. “I heard…I heard something.”

I had not, and Kirk looks sleepily surprised, but we get up. Jill quickly pulls her boots back on, but keeps looking up into the sky. After a moment, though, I do feel a vibration in the ground, a rumble of approaching feet. After another few moments, I can see them through a haze of dust. I count heads, realize Konstantin is carrying Katsuro, and still come up one short. Where…

Then I realize, and I look up like Jill does. A black dot—there. There is my brother, diving down out of the sky, speeding toward the ground, right to Jill. She doesn’t move, and Khan pulls up at the last minute, backwinging and sending a gust of air past me. He lands on his feet, lightly, and Jill dives into his arms. His wings close around her and he bends his head to hers, and I look at Kirk, and Kirk’s open mouth.

“You see now why we said it was faked,” I comment.

“Yeah,” Kirk says slowly.

I ignore him in favor of walking over to my family. “We have about ten hours before we need to go on,” I say. “How are you?”

“Katsuro is the worst off but will be fine in another couple hours,” Bishop says. “The rest of us… bruises and strains. Who the devil is with you?”

“That,” I say, “would be Captain James Kirk of the Federation ship Enterprise. His first officer and comms officer are inside the hut.”

“Oh really,” Cat purrs. She has a smear of blood on one cheek, and blood on her hands, and I don’t ask the source but I do look pointedly at her knife. “Oh, very well, if you insist,” she says, putting it away with a grand show.

“Jill has thoughts on how we can use them,” I say.

“Of course she does,” Matthew says. “Let’s get Katsuro into a bed and then you can tell the rest of us.”

Konstantin carries Katsuro toward the hut, and my other siblings move to put down packs and stretch. Khan and Jill haven’t moved yet, but as people begin to move around them Khan folds back his wings and straightens up. He has a gash on his forehead, over his left eye; it must be recent, otherwise it would have healed by now. Dirt spatters his coat, as it does all of ours, and I see a bruise on the line of his neck, running under his shirt.

Still, though. He looks at me, and I smile. “Now you look like a warrior again.”

“I feel like one again, finally,” Khan says, smiling faintly. “If we receive nothing else from the Klingons, at least we have restored ourselves.”

“You say this like you were a couch potato,” Jill says, poking Khan in the stomach.
“No,” Khan says, catching her hand. “Just too long off a battlefield.”

“Save the bloodlust, my dragon, we’ll need it when we get there,” Jill says. “For now, we need to rest once you deal with Kirk.”

“Yes,” Khan says thoughtfully. He lets go of Jill slowly and she steps away from him, dancing over to a point midway between him and Kirk.

“Khan, this is Jim Kirk,” Jill says. “Captain of the Enterprise, general troublemaker, also genius, and going to be our Federation witness at the combat. Jim, this is Khan.”

Khan studies Kirk and it impresses me that Kirk doesn’t flinch; I’ve seen Khan’s attention reduce men to tears. “What did he tell you I did?” he asks. “No. I know. He destroyed my family and sent you to tell me, thinking I had done it. What the devil did you do to piss him off?”

“Not a damn thing,” Kirk says.

“Pity,” Khan says.

Anger flashes in Kirk’s eyes. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he sent you here to die, Kirk, you and everyone with you, and if you had angered him at least there would be a motive. Here, it seems he’s just decided you are expendable. A bold sacrifice, something emotionally potent enough to rally the public behind a war the peace-loving Federation cannot even comprehend right now. The genius young handsome captain, tragically lost to the Klingons. Either he’ll say you were in league with them, and kill you that way, or he’ll kill you and say the Klingons did it.” Khan shrugs. “He never expected you to be able to apprehend me. It was just an excuse to get you close to the planet. Let me guess, your ship has no functional warp drive?”

Kirk licks dry lips. “You say all this like you don’t care,” he says. “But you’re here to prevent the war.”

“I am,” Khan says. “So tell me, Captain Kirk, are you for me or Marcus?”

“I don’t want to believe you,” Kirk says, but holds up a hand. “That doesn’t mean I don’t. I believe you, and I believe Jill. So I will work with you however best we see fit in order to regain my ship and arrest Marcus.”

“The former yes, the latter no,” Khan says. “But we’ll discuss that later.” He looks at Jill. “Witnesses, kitten?”

“They have honor enough to make the trek to see the fight,” Jill says. “They have honor enough to witness it, and their sworn word that they will carry these terms to the Federation and get them signed should keep them relatively safe. Even Klingons have diplomatic immunity, right?”

“Yes, you have to kill a lot of people to get it,” Jake says. “Excuse me for a second, I need to interrupt this lovely meeting.”

“By all means,” Jill says, gesturing toward Kirk.

Jake grins and punches Kirk in the gut. “You fucking asshole,” he snaps. “You didn’t question it? You didn’t think maybe you should do a bit more investigation before you chased off to a foreign planet in search of two men, one of whom you know?”
“Pike was in that building,” Kirk shouts at Jake and suddenly I have so many questions. “What the fuck would you have done?”

“First question, did he survive?” Jake asks.

“No,” Kirk says, clipped. “I got to him just in time to see him die. Spock was with him longer.”

“What was he even doing there? How did this even happen?” Jill asks, sounding bewildered. “That building had cover of being a storage and research facility for really boring shit. What was the cover story for the explosion?”

Kirk passes his hands over his face. “That was what I didn’t get, it seemed so random,” he says. “Marcus told me the place was actually Khan’s—Harrison’s—headquarters, that he’d destroyed it to keep anyone else from seeing what he’d been working on. He did not, I repeat, not, tell me there were cryogenically frozen humans in that building.”

“No, of course he didn’t,” Khan says. “He wanted you to tell me so I could properly have the shock.”

“Begging your pardon but you don’t sound all that shocked,” Kirk says.

“We saved who we could,” Khan says, and he sounds tired for a moment. “I knew, from the time I was revived, I would likely never get all of my family back. We considered ourselves lucky to get as many as we did, and before we left Earth we said goodbye to the rest.”

“But what was Pike doing in that building?” Jake asks after a moment.

“Pike had just accepted a position as head of Intelligence,” Kirk says. “It was a really temporary thing, but the position had been semi-vacant since—“

“Since Viola stepped down, yeah, we know,” Jake says.

“Yeah, you would. Anyway, there was some other politicking going on and I didn’t get all of it but essentially Marcus got forced into appointing a new head of Intelligence, and he somehow got forced into appointing Pike.” Kirk spreads his hands.

“Oh, my God, I know how she did it,” Jake says.

“How who did what?” Kirk asks.

“Viola,” Jake says. “Viola forced the appointment. She never officially resigned, and there’s established tradition of outgoing admirals hand-selecting their replacements. She must finally have resigned under the condition that Pike replace her. It would have been brilliant, if it had worked.”

“Yeah, that was it, though,” Kirk says. “It was a—as part of the incoming-outgoing deal, she met him at a few different classified locations to formally transition data and records keeping and so on. The facility was one of them, and it blew up while they were in it.”

“Viola was in that building?” Jake says numbly.

Kirk nods. “I would have told you easier, if you hadn’t punched me.”

Jake spins and kicks one of the benches hard enough it cracks. “Did she survive?” Jill asks quietly.

“I don’t know,” Kirk says. “She didn’t die at the scene, but I don’t know what happened once she got to medical.”
“You’re sure you won’t share,” Jake says to Khan.

“I never said he couldn’t hurt first,” Khan points out and Jake flashes teeth.

“Here,” Maeve says, starting to hand out water bottles. “Drink, you’re probably all dehydrated. There’s ample water, cold and hot, and a sort of shower if anyone wants to wash up. We’ve about ten hours before we’ll be given the next checkpoint, so rest well, aye?”

I smile, looking at Maeve. She’s all warmth and soft sweetness until you look underneath and see the scalpel. Most people will never see underneath. Many of the people she killed never did.

“What is the status for everyone else?” Khan asks.

“Uhura has a concussion and some pretty extensive bruising,” Jill says. “Alona had a badly broken leg, but Maeve set it and splinted it and we gave her morphine, and she should be all right in another couple hours. The rest of us have some bruises, and probably some cracked ribs among the lot of us.”

“You?” Khan asks, gently touching her ribs.

“No, not me, stop it,” Jill says, pushing his hands away. “I told you, I’m fine other than a couple bruises and sore muscles. Now that you’re here, I’m going to get some rest, and then I’ll be fine.”

Khan simply drapes an arm around her collarbone and pulls her in against him. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, now you turn back into Tarzan?” Jill sounds both annoyed and affectionate. “Fine, then we’re getting some rest together, but I need to be not moving somewhere with my feet up soon. And don’t ev—Goddamnit,” she says when Khan scoops her up. “That was not the intent.”

“Brother, do dial it back a bit,” Cat says. “We’re in mixed company.”

“I give up,” Jill says, laughing. “There are some beds inside, and spaces out here. I’m kind of enjoying the sun, so let’s find a spot.”

They do, keeping their packs and things with them because none of us are stupid. The others move to settle in and rest where they may, and I return to my spot in the grass, relaxing in the contentment of finally, finally, being bone-deep warm.

Next to me, the grass rustles, and I turn my head and slit one eye open. “Carson, querido,” I say, reaching up to touch his face. “Come rest with me.”

“I would say that to you during siesta time,” Carson says, stretching out next to me. “You never listened.”

“I had things to do,” I say. “I always did.”

“Everyone does,” Carson says. “Which is the point of the siesta.”

I laugh and stretch out, stripping out of my outer clothes to let more of my skin feel the sun. I see a few of my siblings have done the same as I lie back down. We possibly should have someone on watch but the Klingons established this as a respite for us; I trust it as much as I trust anything else on this planet.
Did any of you see this coming? Because I really didn't, so if I gave myself away at some point I'd love to know what I did.

Also, I am practically giddy that we finally got to Qo'noS, where I've been trying to go for tens of thousands of words. I have so many plans for this planet and the people on it, babies, you have no idea all of what I've got in store.
Jim wakes up abruptly, aching in every muscle. He looks at the countdown and they’ve got two hours left, which means he got about eight hours’ sleep. Normally that would be good enough.

Normally doesn’t involve trekking across the Klingon homeworld in the company of fifteen insane superpeople. At that thought, Jim grins to himself. Yeah the situation sucks but on the other hand this could be fun.

He eases off the bed and moves outside as quietly as he can; outside, the sun set a while ago and the air has turned surprisingly cold. When he looks around, he sees the other augments pulled their coats on again, and someone has a shiny blue blanket wrapped over them. Jim doesn’t want to disturb them, so he moves quietly, stretching out and loosening his muscles. As he does, the aches fade, and after a few minutes he feels human again.

The sound of quiet voices draws him in, but he hesitates, not wanting to reveal himself. A couple tall bushes block him from the people behind it, but when he stops, he can hear Jill’s voice. “Did you dream?” she asks.

“No,” Khan says. “Did you?”

“I don’t know how to convey what I dreamed,” Jill says. “Just…a lot of chaos. And Jim in a jester’s hat.”

“Is he our fool?” Khan asks and Jim bristles.

“The fool spoke truth to power,” Jill says. “We’ll see what he says to the Federation. No, it was weird. It was like we were chess pieces, and the Klingons were chess pieces, and we were moving and then this brightly colored piece wearing a jester’s hat spun across the board and things shifted.”

“To or against our advantage?” Khan asks.

“I couldn’t tell,” Jill says. “I don’t play chess, which is why this was annoying. And no, you are not going to draw a chessboard and have me tell you.”

Jim hides a laugh.
“You really think it’ll work? Them as witnesses?” she asks softly.

“I think it stands as good a chance of working as anything else has so far,” Khan says.

“Yeah but I have to get proven wrong at some point,” Jill says.

Khan laughs softly. “Not yet. In truth, kitten, I think it will work presuming Marcus has not initiated hostilities with the Klingons yet.”

“I should hope we’d know about that if it happened,” Jill says. “I mean—he sent Jim on a suicide bogus rescue mission, but he has to make it look plausible before he comes after him. So figure, with our luck, he’ll show up either in the middle of combat or right after.”

“Oh, I hope he does,” Khan says softly.

“You may not rip his heart out,” Jill says. “I saw it in a movie once and it was gross.”

“It’s also impractical and difficult,” Khan says. “Involves breaking ribs.”

“The fact that you know that and considered it bothers me,” Jill says. “Except it’s wrong because you can go up *under* the ribs, can’t you?”

“You would still break some,” Khan says. “As organs go, the easiest one to remove is the eye.”

“Also one of the most painful,” Jill says. “Why are we even discussing this?”

“You told me I was not allowed to rip out his heart,” Khan says, laughing.

“Can we put a ban on ripping body parts out or off?” Jill asks. “Because yuck.”

“Does that include with the Klingons?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jill says. “All’s fair there, at least what they tell us fair is. God, I want coffee.”

“Have we any?” Khan asks.

“Yeah, there’s some in the ration packs,” she says. “Along with fake creamer and real sugar. Come with me, we’ll figure out how to make some very large pots.”

Jim hears rustling and makes it look like he was just coming toward them when they emerge, surprisingly put together. “You get any sleep?” Jill asks, hands busy with her hair.

“Yeah,” Jim says. “You?”

“Enough.” Jill finishes braiding her hair and ties it off with a couple bands. “I feel…I feel pretty good, actually.”

Khan looks down at her, and she laughs. “Just—we’ve made it this far. We fucking got to Qo’noS, and then we got through being separated, and now we get through this together, and shit, if it’s all worked so far, we might pull this off.”

“Now you think we might fail,” Khan says dryly and Jill laughs again.

“I think we’ve got this, dragon,” she says, grinning. “I think you and me, and our family, we’ve got this.”
“Not all our family is here,” Khan says, brushing his knuckles down Jill’s cheek.

“No,” Jill agrees. “But we’ll get them.”

“I still don’t understand how this plan was supposed to work,” Jim says.

“We’re negotiating with the Klingons in terms they understand,” Jill says. “We fight them, we prove we have honor. We win, we prove we are superior opponents and they agree to negotiate binding peace accords.”

“But you don’t have a Federation diplomat here,” Jim says.

“We have you, sugar,” Jill says. “But our original intent was to go back to Earth and present the Federation with the peace accords as a fait accompli. We figured they’d have a hard time turning us down.”

“Yeah, probably,” Jim says. “Also I’m not really a negotiator.”

“You won’t be one,” Khan says. “Just a witness.”

Jim doesn’t know how to feel about that. On the one hand, he’s not a diplomat. On the other hand, Khan doesn’t care about Starfleet or the Federation, so how is Jim supposed to trust his motives? Is he going to sell the Federation down the river?

“Coffee,” Jill says firmly, hooking her hand around Khan’s elbow and pulling him toward the stone hut. Jim laughs, following them inside. He automatically looks for his people, relieved to see them sitting on one of the beds.

“We have a couple hours,” he says, walking over to them. “Uhura, how are you doing?”

She nods. “I’m good. Surprisingly. But whatever they gave me really helped, and I slept like a rock. I have no idea if I’ll make it through this trek, but I’m okay.”

“If all else fails we will make Konstantin carry you,” Ekaterina says.

Since Konstantin is, frankly, huge, Jim can see how that would work.

"Da, well, it is what I do,” Konstantin says. “Shall I start to wake the others?”

“Da,” Khan says. “Stretch out, loosen up. It is cold out and we have a long way to go.”

“Teach your grandmother to suck eggs,” Alona says sleepily. “God, I need coffee. Or stims, I’d take stims.”

“We have both,” Jill says. “Or we will. I don’t think I’d recommend combining them though.”

“I’d probably survive,” Alona says. “But I’ll stick to coffee for right now unless it’s truly dreadful.”

“It probably will be but we’ll try our best,” Jill says.

“How are you doing, captain?” Spock asks quietly.

“I’m okay,” Jim says, meaning it. “I slept surprisingly well and nothing hurts that much now that I’ve stretched out.”
“Khan, what do you know about this part of the trek?” Spock asks, surprising Jim.

“Almost nothing,” Khan says. “Simply that we would combine groups for it.”

“How did they split you up? Did you decide?” Jim asks.

“They told us we would have to split into two groups,” Jill says. “Khan, as our leader, was head of one group. I, because this whole thing was my idea and also I’m Khan’s mate, got picked as head of the other. We opted to split by gender with one exception for Cat.”

“Why is that?” Spock asks.

“Because I do not fight parted from my mate,” Ekaterina says. “Never, not in decades.”

“Why did you choose to split by gender?” Spock asks. “What was the logic?”

“We realized that we had a fair balance of strengths if we did,” Jill says. “We couldn’t figure out how else we were supposed to do it, and the Klingons didn’t give us any clues, so we said what the hell.”

“The Klingons told us that each group would be transported to somewhere on the planet,” Khan says. “We would be given directions and checkpoints along the way. If we failed to make a checkpoint in time, we were disqualified. Eventually we would meet up, they said, and then continue the trek to the arena together.”

“So far so good,” Jill says, flashing him a grin.

Khan smiles, which surprises Jim simply because he doubts Khan smiles all that often. He says something in Russian, and Jill laughs and pokes him in the stomach.

“Has anyone seen Anandi?” Konstantin asks, coming back inside. “She was not where I last saw her, and I did not see her or Carson.”

“They’re likely together,” Maeve says. “Did they come inside when we weren’t looking?”

Jim doesn’t see anyone, and a moment later Maeve and Alona follow Konstantin outside to find Anandi and Carson. “This seems somewhat ridiculous, that we survive only to lose members in their sleep,” Khan says.

“We didn’t lose them, they just hid themselves,” Jill says. “I am fairly certain the Klingons didn’t steal two random people during the night.”

“Were it anyone else I would say they snuck off to have sex,” Ekaterina says.

“Why not those two?” Jim asks.

“Anandi doesn’t do sex,” Matthew says. “Or romance. Anandi is self-sufficient and self-reliant and requires no romantic partner or person to have mutual orgasms with.”

Jim wonders if she does solo orgasms and doesn’t ask.

“Okay, well, the sort of coffee is done,” Jill says. “I will volunteer to try it first because I made it.” She pours a cup, dumps in a lot of sugar and some powdered creamer, and takes a sip. “Well, it’s about as bad as ship coffee, but it’s still drinkable.”

“Ship coffee isn’t that terrible,” Jim says.
“Maybe not on your ship,” Jill says. “On mine it was universally drinkable but not much more than that.”

“No, that about describes Enterprise coffee,” Uhura says. “Jim just has no taste buds.”

“Well, then he’ll love this,” Jill says. “Come help yourselves, and eat something from whatever ration packs you have.”

Jim waits for a few other people to get coffee before he gets himself a cup, and it’s not great coffee but it’ll do. As he takes the first sip, the others come in, joined by Carson and Anandi. “We dug ourselves a bed to stay warm,” Carson says. “The ground stayed warm.”

“That would be why we didn’t see you,” Alona says. “Also clever. Jill made terrible coffee.”

“I will pass, thank you,” Anandi says, wrapping a dark blue scarf around her hair. She tucks a knife into the fabric, which Jim thinks is a good way to lose a knife or get cut, but it’s not his business. “How long do we have?”

“A bit over an hour,” Bishop says. “My guess is they are having us start at midnight Klingon local time.”

“How long is a Klingon day?” Uhura asks.

“Twenty-eight hours,” Khan says. “With varying amounts of warmth and sunlight depending on the latitude. I honestly am not certain where we are on Qo’noS, however.”

“You don’t have any kind of compass or locator?” Jim asks, surprised.

“We have a compass, certainly,” Khan says. “We were prohibited from using locators or tracking devices. Or communicators between groups, although I recommend we all use them now.”

“I can’t believe you actually played by the Klingons’ rules,” Jim says. “You didn’t play by Starfleet’s.”

“The Klingons did not try to use me,” Khan says. “We approached them with an offer, they gave us terms, we accepted. Marcus tried a variety of tactics with me but honesty was never one of them, Kirk, nor was anything involving consideration of my opinion or my wishes.”

“What exactly did he do to you?” Uhura asks softly.

“There’s a classified section of Starfleet that works on projects Starfleet should have nothing to do with,” Jill says when Khan doesn’t answer. “Khan was in their custody for six weeks.”

Jim honestly feels sick hearing it; then again, how much worse is that than sending Jim’s ship out here to die? Speaking of—“I need to at least warn my ship,” he says in frustration. “I have a link, but…”

“But their use is prohibited and we will not break the Klingons’ rules,” Khan says evenly. “Your ship, Kirk, will wait until we manage to get to a location where you can contact them safely. If they can’t, that is up to whoever you left in charge. There is nothing you can do about it now.”

Jill looks at Khan, clearly thinking about something, and leans up to murmur in his ear. Khan frowns, then grimaces. “After,” he says finally and slips into what Jim thinks is Russian, but speaks quietly enough Jim can’t overhear and from the frustrated look on her face Uhura can’t either.
After a few moments, Jill nods. “Da,” she says. “Okay. So. I want to go do some yoga before we leave. What’s left on the timer?”

“An hour and four minutes,” Spock says.

“Then I’ll make this fast.” Jill downs the rest of her coffee, grimaces, leans up to kiss Khan and hurries outside.

Not sure what else to do, Jim walks over to Khan. “You really—I know Jill said this was her idea, but you really thought it was a good one?” he asks. “This, coming to Qo’noS, fighting the Klingons.”

“No,” Khan says, sounding amused. “I thought it was a terrible idea, however it was the best option we had. The only option, really.”

“But why try to prevent the war? Why go to all this trouble?” Jim asks. “You don’t care about the Federation, you don’t care about the Klingons.”

“I do have to live in this galaxy, Kirk, and I have lived through war. I have no wish to live through an intergalactic war that would drag on and cause millions of deaths.” Khan sounds tired, and in the moment Jim wholeheartedly believes Khan’s had enough of war. “I want Marcus for my justice, I want my family back—those I saved—and I want the chance for my people to leave Earth under our own terms, to see what we may. Averting the war seemed the best way to accomplish those things.”

“What about Jill?” Jim asks. “She is Starfleet.”

“Not for much longer,” Khan says.

“Did you ask her to do that?” Jim asks.

Anger flashes in Khan’s eyes and he steps toward Jim, not quite threatening him. “Jill makes her own decisions,” Khan says evenly. “She knew she was saying goodbye to her Starfleet career when she decided to help me.”

“Yeah, so did I, but fuck it,” Jake says, coming over to them. “Also, Khan—if we put a jammer on the link, and a booster, we can get a text-only message to the Enterprise. The Klingons won’t pick it up because it won’t be a big enough file to register on their scans, assuming they’re even scanning us.”

“Did we bring the jammers?” Khan asks.

“At least one or two,” Jake says. “I have mine, anyway, and I think Jill threw hers in her pack out of habit.”

“Do you routinely bring jammers on away missions or something?” Jim asks.

“I work in Intelligence, so, yeah,” Jake says. “Jill doesn’t but should have.”

“You never did tell me exactly what you did for them,” Jim says.

Jake shrugs. “Whatever I got paid to do, although I drew the line at sexual violence or coercion, and I didn’t forcibly drug people although I have bought more than a few drinks and a few doses of various drugs. All for other people who consumed them willingly. I spent a lot of time out on the frontier and out in no man’s land and I survived, and I built up a persona that has served me well
and will continue to do so once we leave Earth.”

“You imply that Starfleet asked you to kill,” Spock says.

“You want copies of my orders?” Jake counters blandly. “Six. Six sanctioned assassinations Starfleet told me to take out. There were more they knew about and didn’t object to.”

“Honestly curious, is that a lot or a little?” Alona asks. “I need scale.”

“It’s not much,” Jake says. “Six kills over about ten years of work, but a couple of them took a lot of set up. I had other kills, but Starfleet didn’t order those. I had a lot of orders phrased as ‘if this happens we will look the other way’ with a list of people who could wind up dead. Kind of a ‘Don’t actively kill them but if you happen to we’ll deal’ thing.”

“I have a hard time believing that,” Jim says.

“There was a scientist in section 31 who repeatedly broke my bones to find out how quickly they would heal,” Khan says, voice clipped. “I put nothing past Starfleet, and six kills in ten years is fairly minimal.”

“Someone’s got to do the dirty work,” Jake says. “We can’t all be starship captains and save the galaxy the heroic way.”

“Except you’re trying to save the galaxy the unorthodox heroic way,” Uhura says.


“Is it what Jill does?” Jim asks. He doesn’t know much about Jill at all; he thinks maybe he met her once or twice at social gatherings, but he never served with her, obviously. But she doesn’t seem like any other Starfleet officer Jim’s ever met.

“Jill saves whoever she thinks needs saving,” Jake says. “And will do whatever the fuck she thinks she has to in order to accomplish that goal. I mean, yeah, she wants to avert the war and win against the Klingons, but really, this all started because she decided Khan needed her help, and that hasn’t changed.”

“How did you even—I mean—that facility, where they kept the cryotubes, that was guarded and classified,” Jim says. “How the fuck did you get twelve people out of it, just out of cryosleep?”

“It involved two people not here,” Khan says. “And needs Jill to tell it properly, as I never went.”

“I’ll go grab her,” Alona says and darts outside. A moment later she returns with Jill.

“They want to hear the story of the facility missions,” Khan says. “I thought you might like to tell it, since none of us ever heard it from your perspective.”

“Oh,” Jill says. “Yeah, I guess. So the thing to know is that I had two people, my family, who I was working with, and the three of us did jobs like this when I was younger, before I joined the Academy. We stole things, basically. One person did the software, one person did the hardware, and me, because I’m small and flexible and quiet, went in and did the burglary. So we ran a set of ops to the facility where Khan’s family was. We accessed the network, got ourselves into the security protocols, and I had tech on me that hid me from infrared and some visual monitoring. I broke into the building, made my way to the room with the cryotubes, and each mission I woke up two people and got them out of the building with me. The last mission Alona went with me and we grabbed four people. It actually wasn’t that difficult once we were able to get into the facility
security."

“But I can’t imagine that awakening from cryosleep is particularly easy or swift,” Uhura says.

“It’s not, but Khan’s people aren’t usual either,” Jill says. “We managed the first two trips, barely, and then we had Bishop who devised a stimulant for the next ones so it was easier for them to get up and moving.”

“What order did you get people in?” Jim asks, trying to get a better sense for group dynamics.

“Cat and Konstantin were first, then Bishop and Katsuro, then Alona and Matthew, then Anandi and Maeve, and then we got Jasmine, Carson, Amir and Aisha in the last go,” Jill says. “And…that appears to be the lot of them.”

“Us,” Maeve says softly. “You are one of us, sister.”

Jill smiles. “Well, so there appears to be seventeen of us all told. Two of us aren’t fighters and are not on Qo’noS. We’ll get them later.”

“You need to eat something,” Khan tells her quietly.

“Ugh,” Jill complains. “I know, I know, but ugh. Do we have any meal bars that have dried fruit in them?”

“This one has cranberries and apricot bits,” Maeve says, holding out a wrapped bar.

“That’ll do.” Jill takes the bar and unwraps it. “I hate these things.”

“I don’t think anyone actually likes them,” Jim says.

“Probably not, but you need to eat too,” Jill tells him.

“Yeah, I know.” Jim goes to find his own pack and dig out a meal bar. The others do the same, or find other options for food. Jill makes more coffee, and by the time the countdown ticks to five minutes, everyone has gathered in the stone hut, waiting for instructions.

At exactly 00:00, a face appears on the wall. Jim’s Klingon isn’t good enough to know what he says, but Khan answers readily. “The Klingon asked if everyone survived,” Uhura murmurs to Jim. “Khan said yes, with additions. He’s explaining that you crashed on the planet and found Jill’s group for safety, and…now he’s explaining her idea about witnesses.”

The Klingon on the screen looks disgruntled, but that’s kind of par for the course with Klingons, Jim thinks. He lets Khan finish speaking, though, then asks a question. Khan smiles and gestures to Jill. “My mate,” he says in English.

“Your mate is worthy of you,” the Klingon says. “She thinks like a Klingon would, a cunning warrior.”

“Thank you,” Jill says.

The Klingon flashes teeth. “Your…guests…may accompany you to the tourney ring,” he says. “If they survive, they will witness the combat. If you lose, however…”

Khan flashes teeth in response.

“Your next checkpoint coordinates are on the tablet,” the Klingon says. “You have five hours.”
Jim badly wants to ask how long it will be, how many checkpoints, before they get to wherever they’re going, but Khan doesn’t and Jim doesn’t want to incur either the wrath of the Klingons or Khan’s wrath; he’s not sure he’d survive either one. Okay, maybe he would, but he’s got Uhura and Spock to think about here, too.

Khan nods in response to the Klingon, then pauses for a moment and asks a question. The Klingon frowns, clearly thinking about it. “One,” he says finally. “One message no longer than thirty seconds, we will allow. One-way transmission.”

“Thank you,” Jill says.

“You have five hours,” the Klingon says and the screen goes blank.

Khan looks at Jake. “He’s got thirty seconds to send a message, although I would recommend voice only,” he says.

Jake nods. “Kirk, give me two minutes.”

“No more than that, we’re leaving in five,” Jill says. “Pack up, everyone.”

Jim goes over to Jake, waiting mostly patiently until Jake finishes fiddling with the comm-link and hands it to Jim. “Just start talking,” he says.

“Enterprise, this is Kirk,” Jim says steadily. “We’re alive, but we’re in a bit of a pickle and are currently trapped on the planet. Whatever you do, do not drop your shields, and as much as you can, move back out of the Neutral Zone into friendly space, or close to it. We may have some help, but I don’t know when we can get back. But we’re alive. Do not, I repeat, do not, try to contact us. Kirk out.”

He hands the link back and Jake fiddles with it some more, then nods. “It’s been sent.”

Jim doesn’t feel all that much relieved by it but it’s the best he can do.

“Who was your scout?” Jill asks Khan as everyone tightens laces and pulls on packs and heads out.

“Depended on the terrain, but usually Cat,” Khan says. “You and Alona should continue it.”

“I love it when we think alike,” Jill says. She bounces up and kisses him, then heads off after Alona.

“If I did not know better I would say she was enjoying this,” Spock says. He, Jim, and Uhura get herded to the middle of the line, and Jim resents it even though he knows they’re not prepared for this.

“She is enjoying this,” Matthew says, laughing. “So am I. So are most of us. This is a test of endurance, strength, honor and personal combat. The stakes couldn’t be higher, and the odds are not necessarily in our favor although I’m starting to wonder. It’s the most brilliant thing we’ve done in…shite, I don’t know. A fucking long time. But Christ it feels good to be here, to test ourselves.”

“He rather has a point,” Jasmine says, falling in on Jim’s right side. “And this is well done of the Klingons. We will arrive at their tourney eager for battle.”

“But also tired, possibly injured, and low on resources,” Spock says.
Jasmine snorts. “You underestimate our ability, and our training.”

“What were you trained in?” Spock asks.

“Everything,” Jasmine says, changing speed and angle slightly to look at both him and Jim. “Languages, maths, physics, biology, chemistry. We learned to sing, and dance, for truly superior humans were creative as well as scientific. We learned history, so much history, and we learned tactics. We learned how to fight battles, how to win wars. We learned how to kill, in every way possible. There was nothing we did not at least touch upon, and very little we did not study in depth to some degree. Not all of us have advanced knowledge in every subject, clearly, but most of us have a basic grounding in all fields.”

“What was your specialty?” Jim asks her.

“I was Khan’s captain,” she says, spine stiffening for a moment. “His most trusted aide, and one he trusted to speak for him in certain circumstances. So for him I studied tactics, and logistics, and diplomacy. Anything I needed to learn to serve him, I did.”

“She was also, in case she doesn’t mention it, his most trusted and skilled assassin,” Matthew says blandly.

It doesn’t really surprise Jim, to be honest, and Jasmine laughs. “That I was,” she says. “Although there were some he always insisted on killing.”

“Did you kill many people?” Spock asks blandly.

“Those I had to,” Jasmine says. “Those Khan ordered me to. And a couple because I wanted to.” She smiles, and a shiver runs down Jim’s spine.

“Hold,” Bishop calls back to them. “Wait. We may have a problem.”

The flat plain they’ve been walking on comes to an abrupt stop, and Jim peers over the edge to see the ground…awfully far below, without any kind of path he can identify.

“It’s not a huge problem but we’ll have to be careful,” Jake says, already digging rope and pitons out of his pack. “The problem is going to be getting the first person down to lay rope. Who’s our best climber?”

“Aisha,” Khan says. “But I think I have a different idea. If I take Jill, I can catch her if she falls, and she can anchor the rope.”

“Oh, man,” Jill says. “Yeah, although that’ll be a lot of work for you.”

“And you,” Khan says.

“Okay so how about you take Jill and start the rope trail, and Aisha follows behind you and makes it more secure?” Jake asks.

Jim watches the three of them prepare; Jill fastens a rope around her waist and hands the other end to Khan, who fastens it around his wrist—Jim doesn’t understand the logic on that one, but hopefully it’ll be enough to keep her from falling. He actually really wants to see this, because he’s never seen anyone fly before.

Jake takes a spike out of his pack and hands it to Konstantin. “Drive it in as deep as you can go, leave the circle above ground,” he says.
Konstantin studies the ground, then raises his hand over his head, steps forward into a lunge and slams the spike into what Jim thought was solid rock. “Jesus,” Uhura whispers under her breath.

“That, I think, will hold,” Konstantin says, testing it. The spike doesn’t budge, even when he pulls. “We will keep an eye on it.”

Jill knots a rope securely to the ring of the spike and picks up the coil. “Dragon, let’s fly,” she says, flashing him a grin.

Khan backs up, everyone scattering out of his way. He takes a breath, then sprints forward, grabbing Jill at the last minute and diving off the cliff, wings snapping open. Jill whoops with what Jim is pretty sure is delight, and a moment later the two of them rise up over the edge of the cliff. “Looking at it, this could be worse,” Jill says. “It’s rocky but there’s enough ledges and things that with a guide rope, maybe two, it’ll be pretty doable. Aisha could get down it without a problem, though.”

“Not with my pack,” Aisha says. “If someone can take my pack, I can start anchoring a guide rope. Jill, would you then want to scout ahead?”

“It’s like you read my mind,” Jill says. “We’ve got the comms, so if we get out of sight let us know. Which general direction do we need to go in next?”

Alona points and Jim wonders what direction it is or how that works on Qo’noS or if it matters. “Got it,” Jill says. “We’ll be back.” She tosses the rope to Aisha, who catches it neatly. Khan falls back before flipping over and beating his wings, gaining height before he apparently catches a wind or something or whatever the fuck he does, and carries Jill off in the general direction Alona indicated.

“How long can he do that?” Uhura asks. “Fly and carry her?”

“Barring other factors, fairly indefinitely,” Konstantin says. “Carry her, certainly he will never grow tired doing that. Flying—he can soar for hours.”

“Exactly how strong are you all?” Jim asks.

“Far beyond your abilities,” Jasmine says. She laughs. “I think they tried to quantify it once, but we never really cared.”

“There was some quantification, but mostly those records were destroyed,” Anandi says.

“What records?” Spock asks.

“We were a science experiment,” Anandi says. “And as such, our growth and development and skills had to be strictly measured and tested. We eventually put a stop to it, and most of the records, along with the data on how we were created, was destroyed in several fires.”

“How did you put a stop to it?” Spock asks.

“Be logical, Mr. Spock,” Anandi says. “What does a monster do when it is freed of its captor?”

“Are you monsters?” Uhura asks.

All of them laugh. “We are the creatures that hunt in the night,” Ekaterina says, walking toward her. “We are the things you don’t want to see. We are the apex predators of any situation, and you would be wise to remember that.”
Uhura stands her ground, but a muscle jumps in her jaw.

Ekaterina sniffs thoughtfully and says something in Russian, almost to herself. Uhura answers her, and Ekaterina stops, then asks a question. Uhura answers in another language, and then Jim doesn’t try to keep up with the linguistics, but it goes on for a good few minutes. Once, Uhura says something and Ekaterina shakes her head. “That is not any language which originated on Earth,” she says. “I have not had time to learn alien languages other than Klingon, so with your courtesy, please allow me equal ground.’

“You’re right, that was Vulcan,” Uhura says. “But how the hell did you know it didn’t originate on Earth?”

“Because I studied linguistics, and the history of languages, and the core languages from which the others developed,” Ekaterina says. “What you said bore no resemblance phonetically to any of those, and from your phrasing, the grammar was a strange mix.”

“Vulcan grammar bears a sort of resemblance to Hebrew,” Uhura says. “The language, though, is unique. It’s quite beautiful, and now it’s quite rare.”

“Then I will learn it,” Ekaterina says.

Spock steps forward. “Why?”

“Because all languages deserve to be spoken,” Ekaterina says. “If a language is rare, it must be passed on to anyone capable of carrying it, lest it die out.”

“But is it worth preserving the language if the people and the culture are lost?” Spock asks.

“So long as there exists a speaker of the language, the people are not lost,” Ekaterina says. “The culture, well. This is why ideally one would learn a language from the native people, and live with them, to gain that knowledge. However, this is not always possible, so if nothing else, the language should be passed on along with any important texts.”

“You attempted to unify Earth but you speak of preserving all cultures,” Spock says.

Ekaterina frowns at him. “Why is this a discord? We attempted to bring those cultures together, not override them. I had dozens of languages spoken in my realm, and to properly serve my people I learned all of them, what I did not already know. You are Vulcan, da?”

“I am half-Vulcan,” Spock says.

“If we had more time I would have you teach me the language, and the customs,” Ekaterina says. “However.” She looks back down over the edge of the cliff. “How goes it with Aisha?” she asks.

“Steady and not that slow,” Bishop says. “Khan and Jill flew out of sight and say they are turning around.”

“What did they see of interest?” Ekaterina asks.

“The next few kilometers will be a bit arduous,” Bishop says. “Jill says the ground looks solid enough, but it is very rocky and uneven. However it is our only option, as on one side is the steep cliff and the other is a lake.”

“We did not actually plan for extended swimming,” Konstantin says.
“We did not because the odds of it were unlikely,” Jake says. “Qo’noS has one ocean and one continent, and there was no path we could really take across the ocean or even across part of it. Interior lakes and such, maybe, but the odds of us getting told to swim for our lives were low.”

“Here they come,” Bishop says, looking up into the dark sky. Jim can’t see anything, but a few moments later a black spot starts growing larger, and then shapes itself into a very odd form that resolves into Khan carrying Jill. He holds her like a princess, Jim thinks, and she has one arm around his neck and one holding something he can’t make out.

They land gracefully on top of the cliff and Khan sets Jill down. Jim looks more closely and realizes she had night vision shades in her hand; where the hell she had those stashed, Jim doesn’t know. She slips them into a pocket inside her coat, which answers that question, he supposes. “Okay, so, one, that was amazing, and two, we’ve got good news and bad news,” she says, looking at the others. “The good news is it shouldn’t be that hard to get down the cliff, and I think Aisha has just made it to the bottom.” She tilts her head, as if listening. “Okay, so Aisha is at the bottom of the cliff and says she’s coming back up because while we can all get down without a problem she has concerns about our guests, and she’s best equipped to help them down.”

“He says something in Russian that makes her blush and laugh. “Brother, if you would,” Ekaterina says with a snort. “All right. Those of us making our way down this cliff, arrange packs among you so that no one is overloaded and those who need tread more lightly can do so. Is the ground at all unstable, Aisha?”

“Needs must,” Bishop says. “We will manage. Jill, you and Khan may wish to scout in the air and avoid the terrain.”

“Yeah, I’m planning on it,” Jill says. “I can’t recover from a sprain that easily although my dexterity is fantastic. But any chance to be in the air.” She grins and looks at Khan. “Although are you tired?”

Aisha reaches the top more quickly than Jim would have thought, and doesn’t look at all winded or bothered by the climb. “This was a fun one,” she says, picking up her pack. “Basically if you hang onto the rope and watch where you put your feet, you should be fine. It’s uneven and there’s some...”
switchbacking involved. We could use a light, though.”

Jake digs a round white ball out of his pack and squeezes it; the ball lights up, and when Jake tosses it into the air, it bobs around for a bit before settling about a meter above Jake’s head. “It’ll stay with me,” Jake says. “So maybe put me in the middle?”

“Where did you get that?” Spock asks, fascinated. “I have never seen a light like that before.”

“Andy made it,” Jake says. “Well, Andy took a design I had seen elsewhere, and made it. This should provide enough light for us to get down the cliff, although he wasn’t entirely certain how long it would last.”

“Who is Andy?” Spock asks.

“Andy is one of the two people not with us,” Jake says. “And a genius with hardware.”

“Will that recharge? Or is it one use only?” Jim asks.

“It will recharge over time but it will take a while,” Jake says. “Andy was working under time constraints and couldn’t do as thorough a job as usual, and the anti-grav took up most of the time she had.”

First Jake said him, and now her. Jim is confused but doesn’t ask. Whatever Andy is, the ball provides enough light for them all to see clearly, but isn’t too bright. As Jake moves, it stays with him, bobbing around gently. “I presume you have a base sensor somewhere in your pack, or on your body,” Spock says, studying it.

“It’s actually built into my earbud,” Jake says, touching his left ear. “We have two more of them, but I’d rather not use another one since we don’t know where else we might need them.”

“Agreed,” Khan says. “Jill has a torch she can carry, which should also provide some light.”

Jill digs a survival lantern out of her own pack and straps the handle to her wrist, so she can’t drop it. “I’ll light it once we get in the air,” she says. “It’s pretty damn bright.”

“You thought of everything,” Jim says.

“We came prepared for an endurance trek,” Ekaterina says. “And the fight of our lives.”

“Aisha, please decide the climbing order,” Khan says. “When the first person is partway down, Jill and I will take to the sky.”

“You must be loving this, brother,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “When was the last time you could do this much flying?”

“Too long ago,” Khan says, a shadow passing over his face briefly. “But yes, this is rather enjoyable.”

Jill laughs when Ekaterina looks at her. “You know there’s very little I love more.”

Jim remembers the wild exhilaration of the space jump, panic and fun bubbling up inside him. Then he wonders what it would be like to be able to fly, like Khan, and feels a tug of jealousy. And Jill—Jim’s never met anyone quite like her before. She reminds him a bit of himself, except—and it’s strange to think this—she’s a bit crazier than he is.

Well, maybe. He was the one who took two other Starfleet officers to the Klingon homeworld and
thought they’d survive, so…

“You and I should trade adventure stories sometime,” he says to Jill. “If we ever get a chance.”

“I never space-dived onto an exploding planet to blow up the drill exploding it,” Jill says, grinning.

“No, you secretly came to the Klingon homeworld to fight their best warriors,” Jim says. “I’d say we’re even.”

Jill laughs. “You may have a point.”

“Kirk, how are you at climbing?” Aisha asks, coming over to them. “And you two?”

“I’m okay,” Jim says. “These aren’t great boots for it, though.”

Uhura shakes her head. “I was a runner, not a climber. And these boots aren’t going to give me much help.”

“Spock?” Aisha asks.

“I am stronger than Jim, but not a skilled climber,” Spock says.

“All right,” Aisha says. “Uhura, you are with me. Kirk, you follow Bishop, and Spock, you follow Konstantin.”

Jim discovers that puts him and Spock near the middle of the line and Uhura up front with Aisha. He actually ends up between Bishop and Jasmine, which only makes him worried because Jasmine seems…unpredictable. Konstantin is behind Jasmine, with Spock behind him.

Fortunately Jake is in front of Bishop, so at least Jim has plenty of light. He kind of needs it; the rock underfoot, or whatever it is, is hard but dark, so it’s hard to judge next steps. Nothing really reflects the light, and climbing down this is like climbing weird stairs, tricky and likely to cause someone to fall.

A bright light comes on and Jim blinks, stumbling before he adjusts. “Jesus, Jill, what is powering that thing?” Jake calls up.

“Your guilt complex,” Jill calls back.

“That would explain it.” Jake laughs. “How long will it last?”

“Standard survival lantern, so indefinitely,” Jill says. “Andy just amped up the illumination on it.”

“What doesn’t Andy build?” Jim wonders, almost to himself.

“Almost nothing,” Bishop says, carefully stepping down and giving Jim a hand before he actually asks for it. “Andy is a genius, and I do not use that word lightly.”

Coming from him, that’s damn impressive, Jim thinks. “But not a fighter,” he says.

“No. Not that.” Bishop doesn’t give Jim a chance to resist taking his hand, and Jim appreciates it but feels a bit insulted. Then he almost tumbles into a hole and realizes why Bishop did it.

His muscles ache a bit by the time they reach the bottom, but he takes a few steps around to shake out and it helps. Except that apparently the next few kilometers are just as bad, so…Jim sighs and begins climbing over weirdly shaped black rocks, or lava, or whatever it is. He keeps up with the
others, although he’s fairly certain they’re slowing their pace for him and Uhura and Spock. Well, maybe not Spock; Jim doesn’t know exactly what advantages he has over a regular human other than strength. It never seemed a good time, after Nero.

After about a kilometer it evens out a bit, for which Jim is somewhat pathetically grateful. “We need to go I think east in about three klicks,” Alona says, pitching her voice to carry to everyone on the ground. “If I’m right, it’ll get easier at that point.”

“Why would you not be right?” Spock asks.

“Because I’m not sure how to read all the information on this thing,” Alona says. “It doesn’t give me a lot of detail on terrain.”

“Well, we shall find out,” Ekaterina says. “Brother, are you ever coming down to earth?”

“You mean down to Qo’noS,” Matthew says, grinning. Ekaterina punches him in the shoulder.

If Khan answers, Jim doesn’t hear it, but a few of the augments snicker. “Well, I will not say the torch is not useful,” Cat says, beginning to hike again. “Eventually he will land.”

“Who has Jill’s pack?” Jasmine asks, grabbing Spock’s arm when he stumbles and steadying him without any visible effort.

“Konstantin,” Ekaterina says. “Who else? We planned for that. His pack is designed to carry another.”

Jim looks at Konstantin, striding along, and remembers him driving that spike into solid rock. A chill runs down his spine and he shakes it off.

Khan and Jill eventually land when the rest of them get off the weird uneven rock and onto cracked asphalt, or close enough. “I did not realize Qo’noS had so much land that was abandoned or not settled,” Spock admits.

“The constant wars within the population keep their numbers lower than you’d think,” Jake says. “Also I’m pretty sure they’re giving us routes away from anywhere with actual people.”

“That would be logical,” Khan says, voice dry as dust.

Jim can’t decide whether to like the guy or hate him, truth be told. He wonders what old Spock would say about him, if Khan existed in that lifetime and if so, what happened.

Maybe when they get out of this he’ll ask.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you wanting to see a conversation between Kirk and Spock Prime about Khan--I am sorry, but I don't intend to write that. I'd end up crying over Leonard Nimoy and nothing would get written.
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Tomorrow we fight to preserve life. Tonight we respect our dead.

Chapter Notes

Stick with me, I promise we're in the awesome fun section where everything happens.

However, on that note: There are some fairly graphic descriptions of violence and killing in this chapter, and there will be similar descriptions in the next chapter. I happen to think they're kind of critical to the story, and I never claimed this was fluff, but if those things bother you then you may want to skip the last quarter of this chapter and most of next chapter. I'll update the tags accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They arrive at the battle grounds just before sunset. Jim looks at it—an old ampitheatre, surrounding a flat field of some kind of grass and dirt. Three Klingons wait for them. “You survived,” the one in the middle says. Jim thinks it’s the same face from the screen earlier but isn’t certain.

“We did,” Khan says. “Did you expect us not to?”

The Klingon bares his teeth. “So far you have proven your honor,” he says. “And your…guests. It remains to be seen if you are truly a worthy opponent. But we respect your honor, and your strength in completing the course. You have until sunrise to rest, then the tourney will begin.”

The Klingon on the left gestures toward an old building. “You may use that for shelter and water supply. On our honor, none will disturb your rest tonight.”

“On your honor, will our guests be safe during the tourney?” Khan asks; Jim couldn’t see if Jill nudged him at all.

“They will,” the Klingon in the middle says. “Their outcome after the combat depends on yours.”

“I am aware,” Khan says, unbothered.

“Tomorrow will be a good day to die.” The Klingon bares his teeth, inclines his head back and slightly to the side, and he and the other two shimmer out of existence.

Khan looks at the ampitheatre, looks at the building next to it, and when he looks back at the others Jim doesn’t know how to read the look on his face. “Skeletons in armor,” Ekaterina says, strangely.

“Purple skies,” Matthew says, gesturing to the purple and orange clouds overhead.
“We never won,” Bishop says. “But we never fought, either.”

“Tomorrow, then,” Ekaterina says. “Tomorrow we resolve this. Tonight—a song, for our hosts. For this place, full of ghosts, and for our own ghosts who travel with us.”

As she talks, the others slowly gather into a circle, shedding packs and coats, shaking themselves loose. “Tonight we pay respect to the dead,” Ekaterina says, in the center of the circle. “We lay to rest the ghosts waiting for us, and we pay respect to the ones who travel with us. Tomorrow we fight to preserve life, to preserve the unity we so longed for in our lifetime. Tomorrow we fight for all we hold dear, and with those we love most. But tonight!” She throws her arms in the air. “Tonight, we respect our dead.”

Silence falls over the circle. “We knew when we left Earth that those we left there might not survive,” Ekaterina says. “Now we know they did not. We said goodbye when we left; tonight, we say rest in peace.”

Someone starts singing, soft and low, and voices join in one at a time until Jim’s listening to the saddest wordless song he’s ever heard. He has no idea how they do it, but his chest feels tight. Ekaterina, though, hasn’t opened her mouth. He finds that strange, but the song builds, looking for something, and—and then she opens her mouth and the clearest, most pure voice Jim’s ever heard ripples out in a descant over the chorus, anguished and wailing.

He stands transfixed, listening to them sing. Different voices pick up the wail—because that’s what it is, a keen of grief. As Ekaterina’s voice fades back to the chorus, someone else steps in, and then someone after him. Jim can’t see Khan’s face clearly enough to know when he’s singing, which is the one fly, but really he can barely move because of the power of the music. It seems to go on forever, and when it finally fades into silence Jim realizes his cheeks are wet—but he looks at Uhura and hers are too. She breathes out and wipes her face with her fingertips.

Khan steps into the middle of the circle and starts listing names, in apparent alphabetical order. There’s a pause after each name, and Jim realizes Khan is reciting the names of the ones lost in the explosion, and giving people a chance to privately grieve. Sixty names, in all; a heavy weight to carry.

After the last name—Zachary—he bows his head, saying nothing. Silence holds until Jill steps into the circle, walking right to him and wrapping her arms around his waist. Khan bows his head to hers and wraps his arms and wings around her. That seems to break the spell, and the others begin to disperse, most of them picking up packs and heading for the hut.

Jim stays where he is for a bit, giving himself and his crew a chance to breathe. Uhura took Spock’s hand at some point, he notices, and Spock hasn’t pulled back yet. “That…was powerful,” Uhura says finally.

“You have to wonder how many times they’ve sung that,” Jim says.

“This is our fourth chorus of the dead,” Bishop says, apparently overhearing. “We sang our first after the fire that destroyed our student complex. Our second after the first wars were over, and our third before we took flight on the Botany Bay.”

“How many have you lost?” Uhura asks.

“There were just over a hundred and thirty of us originally. Ninety-one survived to the wars. Eighty-four made it onto the ship. By the time Marcus found it, we were at seventy-three. Now we are thirteen.” Bishop says it calmly, but Jim whooshes out a breath.
Uhura steps forward. “I am so sorry for your losses,” she says.

“Merci.” Bishop inclines his head. “Come inside. It is getting cold.”

Inside is surprisingly spacious, with plenty of bunks. Jim tosses his jacket on the one Alona points him to and takes the water bottle Maeve hands him. “Thank you,” he says before drinking half the bottle.

“The dispenser is there, use it as needed,” Maeve says, pointing out the water source. “There are also two bathrooms with running hot water and shower facilities, and enough of a kitchen to make coffee in the morning, although I know not who will drink it.”

“Wouldn’t Jill?” Jim asks.

“No,” Jill says. “Tomorrow I’m relying on stims. They’re faster, give me a sharper edge, last longer and I can dose up again when they wear off. I’m pretty sure we all will.”

“Katsuro will not,” Ekaterina says, sitting cross-legged on her own bunk She undressed down to a black t-shirt and pants, which means Jim gets to see the several sheathed knives she wears. “Katsuro never does.”

“Hai,” Katsuro says, smiling faintly. “And I would think Anandi would use her own.”

Anandi shrugs and takes a drink of water. “I had not time to prepare for all of us,” she says after swallowing. “I know my own biochemistry well enough to modulate, but anyone else would require a more specific lab and more time.”

“Yes, but what else did you prepare?” Ekaterina asks.

“Two things,” Anandi says. “I only had time for two if I were to make enough for all of us.” She reaches into her pack and takes out a black box. Opening the box, she takes out a small red sphere. “When you squeeze it between your fingertips, as I will not demonstrate, it expands into a handful of essentially glitter. Throw in your opponent’s eyes but close your own eyes first, lest it blind you temporarily.”

“How long do its effects last?” Jasmine asks.

“I can honestly say I have no idea,” Anandi says. “In a human, it would last until the human managed to rinse his eyes. I never tested my work on Klingons and I don’t have a baseline.”

“We can but hope,” Matthew says.

“Hope is not a strategy,” about six people say in unison. Anandi laughs.

“Well and so, I think that based on the limited data I had about Klingon biology this should work essentially the same, perhaps for a shorter time.” She puts the sphere away. “This is the other, which again I will not demonstrate.”

Jim looks at what appears to be a blue capsule, larger than the usual capsule size. “Slice it open with your blade, run your blade through the contents, it will last until it makes contact with organic material.” Anandi studies the capsule for a moment and puts it away. “I have enough for one dose each. Be very, very sure you want to use this, as it is extremely painful upon contact and cannot be ameliorated other than excising the affected tissue before it has a chance to spread further.”

“What is its effect?” Jasmine asks.
“Corrosive,” Anandi says. Jim winces inwardly, but says nothing.

“Are we vulnerable to it?” Ekaterina asks.

“No,” Anandi says. “Our flesh regenerates too quickly for the corrosion to spread. I did test it on myself.”

Jim grimaces; that’s hardcore.

“Yeah, I’m going to pass on that one,” Jake says. “My flesh doesn’t regenerate that quickly.”

“Neither does mine,” Jill says. “I will also pass.”

“I presumed as much, which is why I only made thirteen doses,” Anandi says. “I will not live with the knowledge that my work poisoned you.”

“Is there anything else you made for anyone in specific?” Khan asks.

“Si,” Anandi says. “I made euphorsics for Jake and Jill. They are not what the name sounds like—they will simply block pain. All pain. But they do nothing to heal injury.”

“How long will they last?” Jill asks.

“On you, perhaps three hours. On Jake, perhaps one or two.” Anandi opens the black box and takes out a green tablet. “I have two doses for each of you. Simply dissolve under the tongue.”

“Even modern pain medication is not that advanced,” Spock says. “How did you come up with it? On what is it based?”

“Poison,” Anandi says. “An old poison, from South America. I studied them. This was something I developed before we left Earth, but refined since waking in this time.”

“You could make a fortune with it,” Jim says without thinking.

Anandi smiles. “I will keep that in mind. The danger with these, of course, is that just because you cannot feel the pain does not mean you are not injured.”

“We know,” Jill and Jake say in unison.

“I thought you did,” Anandi says. “Nevertheless.”

“This is the Anandi version of those paper pamphlets you used to get with pills,” Matthew says.

“The what?” Jim asks.

Matthew sighs. “Never mind.”

“Warning labels,” Uhura supplies helpfully.

“What else is in your bag of tricks, Anandi?” Jasmine asks.

But Anandi shakes her head. “The rest of my work was spent on assisting Bishop and Maeve with the medical kits.”

“Presuming we get the opportunity to use them,” Jasmine says.

“Even if there are no formal rounds of combat—which I doubt there will be—we should be able to
cover for each other if someone needs to duck out and bandage a wound, or if someone is disabled and needs to be carried off the field,” Ekaterina says.

“Truth be told, this will certainly not be easy, but I wonder if part of them want us to win,” Bishop says. “If what we have heard about conflict within their ruling house is accurate.”

“Where did you hear that?” Spock asks.

“It was in Viola’s files,” Jake says. “She gave me access to them before…before.”

“If we win, we present them with an honorable way out of war,” Khan says. “The Klingons, for all that they are savages, are also not stupid. They would believe they could win the war, but they must be aware of the cost, and some of them would be unwilling to commit to a course of action that would kill millions of their people.”

“I think you’re giving them too much credit,” Jim says.

Khan raises an eyebrow. “We are here, are we not?”

Okay, he’s got a point.

“Food,” Maeve says, breaking the spell. “Everyone eat something, drink more, and then go to sleep.”

Jim grabs three ration packs from Spock’s backpack and brings them over to Spock and Uhura. “You two all right?” he asks in a low voice as they open their packs and begin eating.

Uhura nods. “I wish…there’s so much to this story that we don’t know, and layers of meaning I feel like I’m missing. I would love to know the whole of it someday.”

“When you teach me Vulcan, I will share the story,” Ekaterina says, surprising Jim. He hadn’t thought they could be overheard, and reminds himself again he has no idea how much better the augments’ senses are.

Uhura looks up, also startled, but nods. “If we ever do. You are talking about leaving Earth for good.”

“I would presume your starship would also be leaving Earth at some point,” Ekaterina says dryly. “And it will take us at least a bit of time to find and equip a ship properly.”

“We have to get back to our ship,” Jim points out.

“Ah, well.” Ekaterina shrugs. “I cannot predict that outcome. None of us can.”

“Sleep on it,” Alona advises him and a murmur of laughter runs around the room. Jim’s clearly missing something but no one bothers to explain.

After they eat, people take turns in the bathrooms, everyone emerging clean and in new clothes. Jim envies them for that, because his own outfit is starting to itch. As if catching his thought, Maeve frowns, looking at him, then turns to Alona, asking a question in a language Jim can’t identify. Alona looks up, then nods, scrambling off her bunk to go grab something.

“Some of us brought an extra spare outfit,” Maeve explains. “Between the lot of us we should be able to let you change, at least.”

“Thank you,” Uhura says before Jim can. “You’re being remarkably gracious to three people who
crashed into your plans and could have disrupted the whole thing.”

Maeve smiles. “If you become a liability, our grace may cease.”

Jim remembers Ekaterina’s words on the cliff and a chill runs down his spine.

“Guys, no,” Jill says. “I mean, we can’t predict everything but trust me we do not want to anger the rest of Starfleet, which we would if something happened to these three. Right now our hope is that if we take out Marcus they’ll be in too much turmoil to really bother with us, and bound by the accords. If we’re responsible for the death of the fucking flagship captain, they’re not going to let us go that easily. Consider them valuable hostages, if you want, but we absolutely are not killing them.”

“Seconded,” Jake says, raising a hand.

“Valuable hostages,” Khan says thoughtfully. “You never cease to surprise me, lioness.”

Jill laughs. “But it’s right, isn’t it?”

“Close enough,” Ekaterina says. She looks at Jim. “Will you give your parole?”

Jim doesn’t particularly like the idea of being a hostage but is at a clear disadvantage here. “Yeah,” he says instead. “What does that get us?”

“Some weapons,” Ekaterina says. “If we have to spare. Our continued hospitality, and a guarantee that we will do our best to restore you to your people once our terms are met.”

Not for the first time, Jim’s struck by how formal and old-fashioned they are sometimes. He knows they’re centuries old, but even with that in the equation there seems to be more than that. They have their own code, he thinks, and tries to remember what he knows of old knights and codes of conduct.

“Do you have weapons to spare?” Spock asks.

“Jasmine?” Khan asks.

“They have phasers, at least,” Jasmine says. “We did not take those. As for melee, we have a few extra knives, although not the adamantium ones.”

“Adamantium knives?” Jim repeats. “Where the hell did you get those?”

“From the Femarans,” Jake says. “I have contacts with them.”

Jim whistles in envy. “Those must be incredible.”

Ekaterina flicks her hand and a knife appears in it. “They are.”

“What knives do we have available?” Khan asks.

“Many of us had knives on the ship,” Jasmine says. “We did not bring all of them, but enough that we have spares should we need them and we can give these three a knife each.”

Khan nods. “A word, my claw,” he says, gesturing to the door. Jasmine almost-but-not-quite salutes and the two of them leave the building.

“Anyone?” Matthew asks once they leave.
“With those two, could be anything,” Amir says. “Except sex.” He glances at Jill quickly.

She snorts. “Trust me, I’m not worried about him screwing around on me.”

“He would never,” Ekaterina says.

“I know. *That* is one thing I never worried about.” Jill takes a drink of water.

Alona and Maeve come over to Jim, carrying a bundle of clothes each. “The bathrooms have soap,” Maeve says. She sets her bundle down and divides it out, handing Uhura a set of black clothing. Uhura grabs it and makes a beeline for the bathroom.

Jim laughs, and does pretty much the same thing when Spock gestures for him to take the other bathroom. The clothes don’t fit perfectly, but close enough, and the clean socks are a godsend. He emerges feeling a lot better about the world, and goes back to his bunk. Khan and Jasmine returned, he sees, and everyone appears to have gone back to their bunks to sleep.

He doesn’t expect he’ll sleep easily, or possibly at all, but the hours of physical exertion catch up with him and he drops off almost immediately.

He’s pretty sure he’s dreaming—which is weird in and of itself—but he can’t figure out where he is. Jim looks around, but all he sees are swirling mists. “I can’t show you a vision because you’re not woven into the situation yet,” a woman says. Jim blinks, and turns to see a short woman with dark hair and a gold dress. “You’re where you should be, but you aren’t part of it yet. You haven’t bled for it yet.”

“Why am I where I should be?” Jim asks rather than anything else.

She smiles. “I’ve spent a long time setting up these pieces. You were the one I couldn’t predict, whether it would be enough. I have no connection to you, I have no ability to influence your line or your life.”

“What is it all supposed to do when it falls into place?” Jim asks.

The woman smiles again and says nothing.

“Do you know who’s going to win tomorrow?” Jim asks, trying a different tactic.

“I know who *should* win,” she says. “But nothing is certain.”

Not really all that comforting but she has a point. “If you couldn’t predict me, how did you get me here?” Jim asks.

She laughs. “I influenced what I could, and let the course of events follow, and it was enough.”

“What kind of influence do you have?” Jim asks. He’s not surprised when she smiles and refuses to answer. “Okay, well, any words of wisdom before tomorrow?”

“Don’t ever drop your guard,” she says. “And—you’re being asked to be a witness, which means you have to pay attention. Watch what happens in the arena. Remember it. Billions of lives depend on it.”

“There are fifteen of them,” Jim says. “I can’t watch all of them.”

“Watch him,” she says and Jim doesn’t bother to play dumb. “And her, but watch him. Remember what he does. Count his kills. You may need to know it.”
Jim doesn’t really want to watch this fight but nods. If he’s going to be a witness, he’ll be a good one.

“Sleep well,” she says and the next thing Jim knows people around him are getting up and he wonders what time it is.

“Our best estimate is an hour before sunrise,” Maeve tells him when he says it out loud. “Thus, we prepare. We have plenty of stims if you would like a dose.”

“How long will it last?” Jim asks. “I don’t want to crash halfway through the fight.”

“Twelve hours, and I will give you a second dose in case,” Maeve says.

Jim wonders where they got the drugs and doesn’t ask. Maeve offers stims to Uhura and Spock as well; Uhura accepts but Spock declines, pretty much what Jim figured.

He lets the pill dissolve under his tongue when Maeve gives it to him, tucks the other one away in his jacket, and when it kicks in he appreciates the lack of jitters, just a smooth swell of energy. Having these yesterday would have been nice, he thinks and bites it back. Maybe they hadn’t stocked enough for that.


“Whose knife is it?” Jim asks, examining the blade.

“Jasmine’s,” Alona says. “So take care of it, Kirk.” She smiles and pats his cheek.

Of course it’s Jasmine’s. Jim sighs and straps the knife around his waist.

He gets himself a meal bar, tucks another into his pocket and tells Uhura and Spock to do the same. There’s no telling how long this will take.

Around him, the augments get ready, checking straps and holsters and braiding hair back. Jim’s surprised they don’t take off the long coats, but apparently they’re also some kind of body armor. What he doesn’t understand is where their weapons are. He sees some of them—Jasmine and Ekaterina wear multiple knives, and a few of the augments have larger edged weapons, but most of them appear unarmed.

Jim remembers the woman from his dreams and looks at Khan, trying to be unobtrusive about it. It impresses him how calm they all are, like this is just another day; Khan tucks an extra knife into his sleeve and checks what appears to be the handle of something—whatever it is, he wears it at his side, easily drawn if he wants.

Jill braids her hair into some kind of helmet, but tucks a couple things into her hair; again, Jim wonders about them falling out, but he has to admit when she finishes, nothing budges when she shakes her head. “When did you even learn to do that?” Jim asks.

“I was a thief,” Jill says. “I had to make sure my hair could stay out of the way in a fashion that none of it would get snagged on anything or fall out. I already knew how to do a few kinds of braids because when you have long hair, you learn, so I figured this out. I might cut it off after this, though.”

Khan frowns. “Why?”

“Because I grew my hair out to hide the scars on my back,” Jill says. “I don’t need to do that
Khan actually seems bothered by Jill cutting off her hair, which amuses the hell out of Jim. What century—right, never mind. Jill seems amused by it too, though, and walks over to Khan, resting her hands on his chest. “My body, my decisions;” she says. “I won’t cut it all off, but if we’re going to be traveling for a while I want to go shorter so it has a while to grow before I decide to hack it off again.”

“Reasonable,” Khan says. “And yes, my lioness, I am well aware it is your body and your decisions. Pax.”

Jill growls at him, playfully, and laughs. “Pax.”

“You are in a remarkably good mood,” Uhura says. “For someone about to go and fight for her life.”

“Oh, honey, I’m an adrenalin junkie and this is about as big a high as I could get,” Jill says. “Also, I slept really well. Like really well, like even without the stims I woke up feeling refreshed and ready to run a marathon. Anyone else?”

Jim certainly didn’t, and Uhura shakes her head, but there seems to be consensus among the others. “We did pay our respects to the dead,” Ekaterina says. “And this is a battlefield, full of ghosts.”

“Or this is one last trick she had up her sleeve,” Jasmine says. “I wouldn’t be surprised, either way.”

“Maybe it’s both, somehow,” Aona says.

Jim feels suddenly uneasy that the ‘she’ the augments seem to be referencing is the same woman from his weird dream last night, and decides to keep his mouth resolutely shut.

“I see light in the sky,” Matthew says, looking out one of the few windows. “Shall we go outside?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Kirk, if you three would give us a moment.”

It’s phrased as a request; it isn’t. Jim nods and watches the fifteen of them walk outside. “You ready for this?” he asks his people.

Spock looks as impassive as ever but Uhura grimaces. “This isn’t going to be pleasant to watch,” she says.

“No. But we have to.” Jim doesn’t add to that, but honestly he doesn’t need to. The fate of the Federation could rest on it—although honestly their own lives are a more immediate concern right now.

The three of them stand there in semi-awkward silence, but Jim honestly can’t think of anything inspiring to say. “Do you think they’ll win?” Uhura asks finally.

“I do,” Jim says, but he looks at Spock. “Tell me why I’m wrong.”

“I do not have sufficient information to analyze the odds,” Spock says. “Therefore…I hope you are correct.”

“Hope is not a strategy,” Uhura says softly, but she smiles.

“Where did that come from even?” Jim asks.
“I asked Alona, and she said it was something Anandi used to say all the time. Anandi is very logical and scientific, and disliked it when anyone would rely on hope even metaphorically,” Uhura says. “It became an inside joke.”

“They must have a lot of those,” Jim muses.

“They have their own language,” Uhura says, a little wistfully. “Ekaterina said they developed it as children, but the scientists prevented them from using it, so it died out.”

“When did you and she talk about all this?” Jim asks.

“At the second checkpoint yesterday,” Uhura says. “You were talking to Jasmine.”

“More like Jasmine was stalking me,” Jim says, earning a laugh from her. “I’ve never felt so much like prey as when she looks at me.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t want to kill you,” Uhura says. “Possibly not yet, but at least not right now.”

“You’re so cheerful about that,” Jim complains.

“Right now, Jim, I take my humor where I can get it.” Uhura smiles and shrugs. “I’m not looking forward to witnessing the slaughter, but I will do it.”

Spock touches her shoulder and she smiles, looking up at him. “I’ll be fine.”

The door opens and Bishop gestures to them. “Come. It is time.”

When they walk outside, the first thing Jim hears is the roar of noise from the amphitheatre. He looks up to see it full of Klingons, shouting and jostling each other. “Are they your opponents or the audience?” he asks Khan.

“How can I possibly take on that entire stadium,” Jim says.

“Both?” Khan shrugs. “I know not. It does not matter.”

“You can’t possibly take on that entire stadium,” Jim says.

Khan looks at him. “Yes. We can.”

The dead certainty in his voice makes Jim pause a moment, and he steps back. There’s something electric about Khan today, something that Jim half-worries might bite him if he gets too close. Khan sees him step back, and smiles; Jim looks back steadily, not showing the chill running down his spine.

The same three Klingons as last night materialize in front of the entrance to the arena. “Are you ready to die, human?” the middle one asks Khan.

“Always,” Khan says, walking over to him slowly, his family falling in behind and Jim behind them. “Are you?”

The Klingon snarls. “Make your entrance, humans,” he says. “The rules will be explained in the ring.”

He turns and walks into the arena, followed by the other two; a moment later Jim hears his amplified voice speaking in Klingon. “Standard crowd warm up, heavy on the honor,” Uhura murmurs to him.

The crowd roars, and then someone sets up a chant: “Hu-man! Hu-man!” The entire arena picks it
up, and Jim almost sees the building shake.

“They want a show,” Ekaterina says. “Let’s give them one. Kostya!” She turns and calls out something in Russian.

Konstantin lays down a bass line, deep and powerful enough Jim almost feels it in his bones. After a couple phrases, Bishop and Khan join in. Jim loses track of who adds to the song, but follows the augments as they walk to the arena entrance, singing, building in volume and intensity.

As they walk into the arena Ekaterina’s voice soars down from a high enough note Jim honestly wonders if she broke glass. She’s not wearing a mike at all and her voice fills the arena, enough that the Klingons shut up fairly fast.

Jim stays to the side of the field, watching the other fifteen walk onto its center and form a loose circle, guarding each other’s backs. Ekaterina’s voice blends with someone—Anandi, Jim identifies when he sees her. But it’s so different—where Ekaterina’s voice is pure, clear like crystal, Anandi’s is rich like velvet, and much lower. Jim can’t remember the name for that type of voice and decides it doesn’t matter.

He doesn’t know what language they’re singing in, but the song is powerful, and ends on a note of challenge. As if they rehearsed it, all of them unsheathe weapons just after they stop singing—and Jim frankly stares because a lot of them literally unfold out of nothing. Konstantin’s broadsword is massive, but there is no way he carried it on the trek. Jim would have seen it. But.

The crowd goes crazy, shouting and screaming; Jim sees Ekaterina laugh, idly twirling her blade. Khan stands there impassively, sword held in one hand, but next to him Jill grins.

After a couple minutes, though, the Klingon-in-charge speaks up again. “He’s calling for order,” Uhura murmurs to him and Spock. “Talking about the honor of these opponents now, and he emphasizes that they came here and have agreed to Klingon terms and survived, therefore they should be taken seriously as honorable opponents.” That actually earns him a roar from the crowd.

“And—now he’s talking about us,” Uhura says. “He says we crashed due to no fault of our own, and proved our honor in making the trek to the battlegrounds, therefore we are diplomatic witnesses and are not to be touched.” Another roar from the crowd, but Jim doesn’t think it sounds angry. He hopes.

“Rules,” Uhura says after a moment. “Only handheld melee weapons. Nothing ranged, nothing they are not currently carrying or can pick up on the field. They may leave medical supplies along the wall, and water will be provided at all times. There will be three rounds of combat with an hour between each round for whatever medical treatment anyone needs, and the third round will go until one side is left standing or sunset, whichever happens first. If there is no clear victor at sunset, the humans will be allowed to negotiate but will not be afforded any special courtesies. If the humans win—” something that earns a contemptuous snarl—“they will be treated as diplomats and accorded all Klingon courtesies, and anyone harming one of them will be killed. If the humans lose, their lives and possessions are forfeit and we lose our diplomatic immunity. We will, however, be free to leave the planet under our own power.”

“Which is lovely given our ship is somewhere else,” Jim says. “But if they lose, we’ve got a lot more to worry about on top of getting out.”

“They won’t lose,” Uhura says.

“Do you really believe that, Nyota?” Spock asks.
She smiles a little. “I think I do, but I’m not sure why. There’s just—there’s this energy in the air, and it feels like they can’t lose.”

A Klingon in formal armor and robes walks over to them. “Witnesses,” he says, more a growl.

“Yes,” Jim says.

“Come with me.” The Klingon jerks his head and Jim really doesn’t want to but follows him up into the stands, to the VIP box or whatever they call it. The Klingon gestures to the empty chairs. “I am Gowtek.”

“I’m Kirk,” Jim says. “This is Uhura, and Spock.”

Gowtek grunts. “To witness a trial by combat is a grave responsibility,” he says. “Each of you will pick a human to witness. You will count their kills, and their injuries, and their death if that happens. Which of you is considered the leader?”

“I am,” Jim says.

“Then you will witness the winged human. Who will you witness, Uhura?” Gowtek asks.

“The woman on his left,” Uhura says. “The one twirling her weapon.”

Gowtek looks somewhat pleased by that although honestly it’s hard to judge Klingon facial expressions since they look perpetually angry. Jim figures that’s also a fairly accurate state of affairs anyway. “And you?” he asks Spock.

“The woman with her hair in a blue scarf,” Spock says.

“Done,” Gowtek says. “I, myself, will witness the leader’s mate, as she must be witnessed.”

“Why is that?” Jim asks.

“A man is dishonored by his mate, if she is not a strong warrior,” Gowtek says. “I will witness her honor.”

“So I don’t think you think she can actually fight,” Uhura says.

Gowtek snorts. “She is half the size of a full grown Klingon. But she will die with honor.”

“I think she may surprise you,” Jim says.

“Perhaps.” Gowtek sounds anything but convinced. He takes his own seat next to Jim. “The horn will announce the first round of combat.”

Jim watches the fifteen crazy humans in the arena, glad of his vantage point. He can see Khan clearly, although honestly he’s impossible to miss. The arena isn’t that huge.

A long, sonorous horn sounds; the humans tense, and a stream of Klingons pours into the arena, all in some kind of armor wielding bat’leths or other edged weapons. They surround the humans, but there are more Klingons. For a long few moments, each group sizes each other up, both apparently waiting for something.

Then, at what Jim thinks is a very subtle cue from Khan, Jasmine laughs. “Let’s dance, darlings,” she says and spins into a kick that lands squarely in the Klingon’s throat. He chokes and stumbles back, one hand going to his throat, and Jim wonders if she just crushed his trachea or something.
from the way the Klingon doesn’t appear to be recovering that easily.

And it’s on. The stands erupt with roaring and shouting, but it’s nothing compared to the dance going on in the arena. It’s beautiful, in a violent, destructive way; Jim watches Khan move, graceful and savage all at once and has a better idea what Jill sees in him, because under other circumstances…

One Klingon falls to Konstantin’s broadsword; his body goes one way, his head another, and the volume from the crowds doubles. Another one gets caught between Jasmine and Khan’s blades; she flips, twists, and shoves him onto Khan’s sword in a move they’ve clearly done before. He sag to his knees and Khan pulls his sword up sharply before pulling back. Jim winces, but Klingons are hard to kill.

After a minute, though, Jim thinks the humans are almost…playing with the Klingons. Two down, sure, but they don’t kill anyone else, almost like they’re waiting for some kind of signal from…someone.

“Anyone not clear?” Khan calls after a few minutes. No one answers. “Go.”

Jim almost doesn’t believe it, it’s over so fast. Fifteen humans move and after a few moments, fifteen Klingons fall. Jill whoops. “It actually worked!”

“Celebrate later, they’re not all dead yet,” Jake says, although he laughs.

“Shut the fuck up, Aaron,” Jill calls back. “I can count as well as you.”

“They sound like us,” Ekaterina says to Khan.

“Can you count as well as I can?” Khan asks, spinning out of the way of one Klingon and slicing his sword into another’s side. The Klingon doesn’t actually fall to the ground so Jim doesn’t count it, but it doesn’t matter because Jasmine’s blade takes off his head a moment later.

They seem to like decapitation, Jim thinks uneasily, but also, Klingons are really damn hard to kill.

The first round of combat ends about the way Jim expected it would, with a lot of Klingon bodies on the ground and fifteen humans more or less unscathed. When Jim looks, he sees blood on a few of the augments—red, so clearly theirs—but no visible wounds. He looks for Jill, and sees a bruise on her cheekbone, but nothing else. Hopefully she hasn’t cracked her cheekbone; those fucking hurt.

The horn blows again, long and low, and some Klingons begin hauling bodies off the field while the humans go to get water or whatever else they’re doing. Jim can’t quite see them from where he sits now.

“Here,” Gowtek says, handing him a bottle. “Drink.” He passes two more bottles to Uhura and Spock. “The sun can be fierce, and you are not accustomed to it. It would be dishonorable of us to allow you to get heatstroke or become ill from dehydration.”

Jim doesn’t know the etiquette of thanking Klingons but Uhura says something that earns her a pleased snort from Gowtek. “You speak our language.”

“Somewhat,” she says.

“For a human, your accent is tolerable,” Gowtek says. “Although you do not speak quite as well as the winged human. He sounds like a true Klingon.”
“You sound like you admire him,” Jim observes.

Gowtek shrugs a shoulder. “He is a strong warrior, with honor,” he says. “He came here to fight on our terms, with his people, and if we owe him and his people nothing else we owe them respect for daring to challenge us.”

Jim takes a sip of water. It’s going to be a long day, and there will be a lot more deaths before it’s over.

Chapter End Notes

One round down, two to go....but what is Khan thinking?
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

Time to have some fun.

Chapter Notes

A couple things to note about this chapter: It overlaps with some of the previous chapter, but from an alternate point of view. This one begins with Khan and Jasmine leaving the house the night before the combat.

The other thing to note here is that the violence does get graphic. I did update the tags, and if you are disturbed by descriptions of fights and people dying, you may wish to skip most of this chapter.

They go outside, finding enough light from the stars and moon that Jasmine can at least see Khan’s face. “My lord,” she says in Arabic. “What need have you for me?”

Khan smiles a little. “You never hesitate,” he says.

“I serve you, Khan,” Jasmine says simply. “You ask for my aid, you have it. You know that. What do you need from me this time?”

“The Starfleet crew,” Khan says. “I entrust their lives to you, my claw. I know what Jill has said, and Jake, and I know that if things go very, very badly we may need to kill them before someone else does. I trust you to take that action if it is truly needed.”

“Khan, I don’t have enough context to truly analyze that situation,” Jasmine says.

“Which is why I need you to do it,” Khan says. “Anyone else would be hung up on Starfleet and the mess we are in. You do not have that context. You can simply…act. If they become a liability, if they endanger us, you will kill them.”

Jasmine draws herself up and salutes. “My lord.”

Khan smiles again. “Thank you. Were there any problems on your trip here?”

“No,” Jasmine says. “Not that you’d care to hear about, anyway.” She smiles a little. “It feels good, though. We haven’t done something like this since we were teenagers.”

“Then we conquered the planet,” Khan says.

“Think we could conquer the Klingons?” Jasmine asks curiously.

“Under different circumstances it would be possible but not these,” Khan says. “Truthfully,
Jasmine, I do not want to conquer anything anymore. I want what remains of our family to go see the galaxy, the way we once dreamed.”

“A time for war and a time for peace,” Jasmine says quietly. “When we dreamed of seeing the galaxy there were somewhat more of us.”

“I know.” Khan looks weary, and Jasmine steps closer to him, laying a hand on his arm.

“You saved all of us you could,” she says. “Trust that, at least.”

“I do,” Khan says. “But it is my weight to carry nonetheless. I promised I would always take care of you.”

“Always the oldest brother,” Jasmine says.

Khan smiles. “Eternally.”

“Which given that Jill is essentially our little sister…” Jasmine laughs. “She makes you laugh, Khan. That’s too rare.”

“She may yet drive me mad,” Khan says but Jasmine hears the warmth in his tone. “Even Rani at her most exasperating was not as complicated as Jill.”

“Didn’t you once tell me that love is infuriating and maddening and rather a pain in the ass?” Jasmine asks innocently.

“Yes, and as I recall at the time I was very drunk, at least briefly,” Khan says. “And Rani was not talking to me for some insult. That lasted about four hours.”

“What broke it?” Jasmine asks. “I actually don’t remember.”

“She walked into my office, glared at me, folded her arms across her chest and said ‘I’m still mad at you’,” Khan says, smiling at the memory. “I told her I knew that, and she laughed and mostly forgave me.”

“She loved you beyond death,” Jasmine says. “I never thought such a thing existed.”

“Neither did I,” Khan says. “But I still love her, and as long as part of me exists somewhere I always will. So I suppose it is not that unexpected.”

“Does it bother Jill?” Jasmine asks, expecting the answer to be negative and unsurprised when Khan shakes his head.

“She always asked about her, even from the beginning,” Khan says. “It never upset her as anything more than being sad I had lost Rani.”

“Would she give you back? If Rani came back?” Jasmine asks.

Khan glares at her. “It is a moot point, my claw.”

Jasmine knows the warning tone in his voice and also knows when to push past it. “Would she?” she asks again.

“Perhaps,” Khan says finally, grudgingly. “But I would not go. I am not… I am not the man who married Rani anymore. Jill is my mate in this time, and I will not change that.”
“Are you going to marry her?” Jasmine asks, knowing Khan.

“I asked,” Khan says. “She said after we return to Earth.”

“For what it may be worth, I approve of her,” Jasmine says. “She is, in every way, a superior human, and I am proud to call her part of my family. She suits you as a mate.”

Khan’s face softens and he smiles again, touching her cheek. “I thought you would, but it is good to hear you say it.”

“Will we win tomorrow, Khan?” Jasmine asks simply.

He nods. “We will.”

Jasmine believes it. Khan always knew whether they would win or lose; it was why they almost never lost. “We should sleep, my lord,” she says.

“You always get more formal when you tell me to do things,” Khan says.

“Yes,” Jasmine says, frowning at him. “Of course I do. Me saying ‘Khan, go to bed’ is your little sister nagging you to sleep. Me saying ‘My lord, you should sleep’ is your captain advising you and something you should take heed of.”

“I always do, my claw,” Khan says. “I wish we could have revived you sooner. I would have appreciated your counsel.”

Jasmine shrugs. “You had other priorities, and I understand that. You have me now, at least.”

“Had it not been for Jill’s rather mad idea I would not,” Khan says. “Without her I would have none of you.”

“Twelve life-debts, Khan?” Jasmine asks. “Do we owe her that many?”

“At least,” Khan says. “She does not want us to owe her anything, but without her all of you would be dead now.”

“Then what she wants is irrelevant,” Jasmine says. “We owe her that debt.”

“Yes,” Khan says, smiling faintly. “I agree. So do the others. We just do not tell Jill.”

Jasmine laughs. “All right. Come, my lord, let’s get some rest before tomorrow.” She takes his hand and starts heading back inside. Khan laughs and tugs his hand free, but follows her back inside.

The bunks are big enough for an adult Klingon, but even so it will be a tight fit for himself and Jill. But when he sits down on the bunk next to her she smiles and shifts over, letting him settle next to her. This close, he can feel her heartbeat, soft and steady, and smiles. “We should sleep, kitten,” he murmurs in Russian.

“Meow,” she murmurs back, tucking her head against his shoulder. “We’re gonna kick ass tomorrow.”

Khan huffs a laugh. “One way to put it.”

He feels her smile against his shirt. “Love you,” she says softly.
“And I you.” He kisses her hair and closes his eyes, listening to the sounds of his people settling in for rest. One by one, he identifies them: Konstantin’s not quite snore, Alona’s snuffle, the way Maeve sighs before she falls asleep and the utter silence that means Matthew is out cold.

Three he doesn’t know as well, but ignores those. Jill’s right; they may be useful. But they’re not his responsibility, and Khan doesn’t much care if they sleep well.

The night before battle; Khan knows he needs to sleep, but rarely finds himself able to on nights like these. But he can rest, and relax, with Jill cuddled against him.

Something cool brushes past his cheek, and Khan smells jasmine for a fleeting moment.

When he opens his eyes, the stars have shifted position outside and he thinks it will be sunrise in an hour or so. He doesn’t remember dreaming; honestly, it feels like no time elapsed. But he feels… good. Battle excitement, certainly, but he feels rested and refreshed, like he just took a vacation instead of went on a two-day endurance trek.

“Thank you,” he murmurs in Hindi, getting up.

He doesn’t have to wake the others; they seem to have caught the same signal he did. They make their preparations, eat something, drink something. Jill braids her hair up in a fashion Khan finds possibly unnecessarily complicated, but truthfully he doesn’t know. She talks of cutting it, though, and he frowns, displeased by the idea.

Call him old-fashioned; it’s only the truth.

“I see light in the sky,” Matthew says. “Shall we go outside?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Kirk, if you three would give us a moment.” It’s not a request.

They go outside, the fifteen of them, forming a familiar circle, this one close to each other. “We will win this,” Khan says matter-of-factly. “We will go into the arena, and we will show the Klingons what a truly superior opponent means. All of you are necessary to us winning. However, that being said. Maeve, you are first on point as medic, should someone need more aid. After you, Carson, and then Bishop, and if all three of you are acting as medics we have bigger problems.”

“Understood,” Maeve says; Carson and Bishop murmur agreement.

“I can act as medic,” Anandi points out.

“Then you are after Carson and before Bishop,” Khan says. “We pull him off the field last. If we have multiple injured, we patch up the strongest fighters first.”

“No,” Konstantin says. “First we patch up you and Jill, then our strongest fighters.”

“Wait, that sounds like we’re not your strongest fighters,” Jill says with a flash of grin.

Konstantin laughs. “You know my meaning, sestrenka.”

Khan waits for them to settle again, but in truth he likes the humor. None of them are overly anxious or tense, which is good. Nerves are one thing; anxiety another. “We play by their rules,” he says when everyone has quieted. “If they forbid poison, we do not use it.”

“Do you think they will?” Anandi asks, frowning. “I would hate to think of my work being useless.”
“Nah, I don’t think they will,” Jake says. “They don’t use it, but they’re made of strong stuff and most poisons don’t bother them that much.”

“Mine will,” Anandi says. “I believe.”

“We will see,” Khan says. “Regardless. We play by their rules, to the letter if not the spirit.” He gets a round of agreement, and nods. “Last night we paid our respects to the dead,” he says quietly. “Today we fight for our lives, and millions of others. The stakes have never been higher, and the odds… on the surface do not look to be in our favor. But. We will win this, because that is what we do, and there is no Klingon or group of Klingons that can defeat us.”

“Damn right,” Alona mutters.

“Before we go in there,” Khan says. “I would have us all take a moment of quiet. Think about those things you love, those people you hold dear. We fight for them today. A chance to explore and see the galaxy under our own terms. Think about what we fight for, what we can achieve, and take a moment.”

Most of his family close their eyes, but Khan keeps his eyes open, looking around the circle. This is customary for them, the huddle and the moment of quiet. Jill and Jake less so but he presumes they have had similar encounters at some point.

A small, warm hand slips into his own and Khan smiles, looking to his right to see Jill looking up at him. She squeezes his hand, meeting his eyes. The trust he sees in hers, the bedrock certainty that they will win this—Khan smiles again, raising her hand to his lips.

“All right,” Cat says after a few moments, raising her head. “Time to have some fun.”

That breaks the mood and everyone laughs. “Bishop, if you would get our witnesses,” Khan says.

“Bien sur,” Bishop says and heads back inside.

The Starfleet crew come outside and Khan sees them react to the crowd. In truth he’d almost forgotten about the noise; he will use it to his advantage in the arena, but for now, it means nothing. Kirk walks over to him, looking concerned. “Are they your opponents or the audience?” he asks, nodding at the arena.

“Both?” Khan doesn’t care, really. “I know not. It does not matter.”

“You can’t possibly take on that entire stadium,” Kirk says.

“Yes. We can.” Can, and win, Khan thinks, meeting Kirk’s eyes. Certainly it would not be easy, but achievable, oh yes.

Kirk’s eyes widen, just a little, and he steps back. Khan catches a frisson of fear from him, and smiles. He had forgotten how good it feels to intimidate an opponent, or a dubious ally.

He never ruled by fear, but he used it when necessary.

Three Klingons in formal armor and robes materialize at the entrance to the arena, and Khan walks over to them, the others following. “Are you ready to die, human?” the middle one asks.

“Always,” Khan says. “Are you?”

The Klingon snarls. “Make your entrance, humans,” he says. “The rules will be explained in the
He turns and walks into the arena, followed by the other two. A moment later his amplified voice rings out and Khan listens to the speech. “He’s rousing the crowd,” he says for the benefit of those who don’t speak Klingon. “Reminding them the honor at stake in this battle, that the warriors fighting us were chosen specifically because of their skill and their honor, that no matter if they die, they did so to help change history.”

“Interesting he didn’t pick a side of which way,” Jasmine says.

“Political, really,” Alona says.

“That seems to be about it,” Khan says, listening. The crowd roars, and someone sets up a chant; Khan looks at Cat, and both of them smile.

“They want a show,” Cat says, all but giddy about it. “Let’s give them one. Kostya!” She turns and calls out the music she wants; a moment later, the bass kicks in and Khan spends a moment just appreciating Kostenka’s voice.

He knows why Cat picked this one; it allows her to enter the song on a sustained high note, and no matter the noise in the arena the Klingons will hear her. Khan adds his voice to the chorus on cue and walks to the entrance of the arena with the others, waiting for the right moment. One more phrase, and...there.

As they enter the arena Ekaterina hits her entrance like it was a knife target, and Khan sees it ripple through the crowd, which quiets much more quickly than he had thought. Then again, the Klingons love powerful music.

The fifteen of them form a circle facing out as they sing, Anandi’s voice picking up the melody while Cat weaves harmony around her. They could continue for another verse, but Cat flicks her hand to the side, indicating she wants to end it. So instead of continuing, they build to the ending, a powerful statement of victory and also a challenge, if Khan remembers the translation correctly.

Silence falls as the song ends, and if they want a show—Khan draws his weapon and twists his wrist, watching the blade erupt from the handle. Apparently the rest of his family had the same idea, he thinks, seeing blades around him. Well done.

The crowd goes completely mad, enough that the arena shakes a bit and Khan wonders if their dreams of a crumbling amphitheatre were literal. Cat laughs, and to either side of him Jasmine and Jill both grin.

It goes on for a couple moments, then the Klingon in formal attire speaks up again. Khan translates for those around him, and hears Ekaterina doing the same. The rules are about what he expected although the formal rounds of combat are a bit of a surprise. Not a bad one, necessarily, but still.

One of the Klingons in formal robes walks over to the Starfleet officers and Khan watches them climb into the stands. He can see them, clearly, but can’t hear whatever they’re discussing. Whatever they say, Kirk looks determined, and directly at him. Khan looks back, meeting Kirk’s remarkably blue eyes.

He remains to be convinced letting them live is the best course of action but for better or worse they appear to have committed to it.

A long, low horn blows, and the crowd rumbles in anticipation. Khan watches, and sees the line of Klingons stream into the arena, circling his family. More of them than there are humans, but if this
is it for the first round of combat, it won’t last very long.

The Klingons snarl; Ekaterina laughs. No one moves to attack. Khan lets it build for a moment, then flicks the fingers on his left hand, a signal to Jasmine. She laughs. “Let’s dance, darlings,” she says and spins into a kick that lands squarely in the Klingon’s throat.

“No one fights alone,” Khan calls before the dance reaches him. He means to fight with Jill, but decades of training and fighting with Jasmine mean he automatically goes to her. Jill dives into a somersault, rolls across the middle of the circle, and comes up next to Jake, the two of them falling back to back and engaging a pair of Klingons.

Konstantin gets the first kill, which doesn’t surprise Khan; that broadsword is one hell of a weapon. He doesn’t think he could wield it properly with one hand.

“No, incoming,” Jasmine calls in Arabic. He turns, catches the Klingon between their blades and—yes. They’ve done this before, the way she twists and pulls her sword back just to let Khan run him through. The Klingon’s eyes go wide and Khan yanks the sword up as he falls to his knees.

No quarter. Not today. No one survives the battlefield except his family.

When the first round ends, he walks over to the side of the arena, where someone set up a canopy for them. Khan doesn’t know if it’s for privacy or shade, but appreciates it either way. “Status,” he says, accepting a bottle of water from Maeve. “Any injuries?”

“Me,” Jill says, a cold pack pressed to her face. “I took a hit to the face and Maeve thinks it fractured my cheekbone, but she’s not certain.”

“I have a tricorder, we can check,” Jake says, grabbing his pack.

“How much pain are you in?” Khan asks, hand hovering over Jill’s face but not touching her.

“I’m not happy about it,” Jill says. “But it’s not unbearable. Did we pack the bone regenerator?”

“We did,” Maeve says. “I thought that didn’t work on you though?”

“Depends on how bad the break is,” Jill says. “If it’s just fractured, the bone regenerator will get me going, and then I’ll just take something for the pain.”

“I’ll get it,” Maeve says.

Jake gets the tricorder and pronounces Jill’s cheekbone to have a hairline fracture. Khan knows the regenerators are painful, and moves to Jill’s side as Maeve sets it up. “It’s okay,” she says. “Bone regen just feels weird, it doesn’t hurt like dermal regen.”

She still winces when Maeve turns on the machine, though, and grabs for Khan’s hand, holding on tightly. “There,” Maeve says after a minute. “Do you want morphine or one of the euphorics?”

“Morphine,” Jill says. “I’m saving the euphorics for more serious injury, and this will wear off by the next round.”

Maeve nods and hands her pills; Jill knocks them back and looks at Khan. “Did anyone else get injured?” she asks.

“Some superficial injuries, and I think a few cracked ribs,” Alona says. “Among the lot of us, that is. Also, Konstantin, you scare me.”
“I would never cut your head off,” Konstantin says solemnly.

“Jake, were you injured?” Khan asks. His family will heal in an hour of whatever injuries they incurred; Jake may not.

“I think I caught a few bruises,” Jake says. “But it’s nothing major and nothing I need any help for. Either this first round was really, really weak, or we’re a lot better than they are.”

“Both, I think,” Khan says. “Remember that getting to the first checkpoint was easy, as well.”

“Yes and the third one was damn near impossible,” Jake says.


“There was a flash flood that caused a rockslide,” Jake says. “It was too unstable to walk on, but we didn’t have a way around it that wouldn’t delay us by hours. Khan had to fly us all over the rocks.”

“Including Konstantin?” Jill’s eyes widen.

“It was not my idea of a good time, but I can carry him,” Khan says.

“I know that but I didn’t think you could carry him and fly,” Jill says.

“I had to,” Khan says simply.

Jill smiles a little. “What couldn’t you do, my dragon, if you had to achieve a goal?”

Khan smiles back and takes her hand, drawing her in against him. “There is nothing I wouldn’t do,” he murmurs to her. “My goal was to find you again. I did whatever was necessary in pursuit of that goal.”

“Finders keepers,” Jill says and leans up to kiss him.

They rest for the hour they have, although no one particularly needs it. Khan appreciates the five minute warning they get; it gives them enough time to finish drinking water, stretch out, and move back into the arena.

The horn blows again and Klingons come charging into the arena. More of them, this time, and in better quality armor. “Just take them down,” he calls. “We don’t need to show off.”

“Aww,” Jill says, teasing.

Khan snorts. “How’s your cheekbone?”

“Good as new,” Jill says. “It probably says something about me that you are so turning me on today.”

“It means you’re one of us,” Jasmine says, laughing. “Killing is the best rush you can get, like an orgasm only more. And this—oh, this is about as good as it gets.”

“It really is,” Jill says. “Khan, distract this one.” She slips behind him, backing up; Khan knows what she has in mind, and despite the fact that he said this wasn’t a show, he engages the Klingon, Jasmine holding off two more.

He hears her sprint, sees her flip in the air and steps out of the way just as she lands on the
Klingon’s shoulders, her hands already on his head. They hit the arena floor together, but only Jill gets up.

“Holy fuck that was amazing,” Jasmine says. “Also, a little help?”

Jill darts over to her; Khan leaves them to it aside from the part of him that always tracks Jasmine, and the part of him that always tracks Jill. He has his hands full, and admits to smiling, because Jasmine is right. Killing is a rush, and addictive, and this is about as good as it could get.

However, it’s not easy, and dispatching the Klingons this round takes much longer, partially because more join the combat as others die. Maeve throws Aisha over her shoulders at one point and hauls her off the field, leaving Khan and Jill to close in and take on Aisha’s opponent while Matthew and Alona take on Maeve’s.

“We’re at one to one,” Bishop calls. “Expect more.”

That does seem to be the pattern, and Khan looks, but no one else enters the arena. Well. They do have a third round, after all, and it wouldn’t do to completely exhaust their warriors before it.

Fifteen to go. Khan clashes blades with a Klingon, uses a wing to knock him off balance and kicks his blade aside. His sword doesn’t quite decapitate the Klingon, but almost.

Fourteen. Ekaterina snarls and two knives fly into a Klingon’s eyes. He goes down and doesn’t move again.

Thirteen. A Klingon roars and stumbles back, clawing at his eyes; Khan glances and sees Jake covering his own eyes and a few red particles floating in the air. “Anandi!” he calls, knowing she will want to see this.

“Carson, take him,” Anandi says. “Here.” She moves in one of the flashes of speed she’s capable of and her blade slams down on her opponent’s wrist, not-quite-severing her hand. That achieved, Anandi sprints over to Jake and the still-roaring Klingon. “Did it get in your eyes?” she asks urgently.

“No, I’m fine,” Jake says, lowering his arm. “He’s not, though.”

“Then take him down,” Anandi says. “Much as I would love to see this play out.”

It takes a few swings—the Klingon can’t see, but he’s not incapacitated—but with one assist from Anandi he eventually falls to the ground.

“He never did recover,” Jake says.

“No,” Anandi says and smiles. “Excellent. Muchas gracias, hermano.” She reaches up and touches his cheek before running back to Carson, except Carson’s opponent collapses to the ground just as she gets there.

Another one falls to Matthew’s blade but Matthew falls over after; Khan can’t quite see why. Carson grabs him and hauls him off the field before anyone else can attack. A roar from the crowd; Khan catches the glint of metal from Konstantin’s sword out of the corner of his eye and presumes his weapon took another life.

Nine left. Jill looks almost caught between two Klingons; Khan watches, knowing her intent. Both Klingons raise weapons and Jill dives out of the way just as they swing, resulting in them hitting each other and Jill dancing away unscathed. She follows up with a backstab to the Klingon still
standing and Khan moves in to dispatch the other one.

Seven. Khan doesn’t see it but feels the thud of a body slamming into dirt. He turns just in time to see Alona slam her staff down on the Klingon’s head. He doesn’t move again.

Jasmine feints with the knife in her off hand, pretends to trip, and slams her sword into the Klingon’s chest. The Klingon’s eyes go wide and she gurgles; Jasmine twists her blade sharply and pulls back.

Katsuro takes one down although Khan honestly didn’t even see him move; one moment he stood in one place, the next he was in another and the Klingon was on the ground.

Amir’s scimitar slices deeply into a Klingon’s side and another swing from Jasmine’s blade takes him down.

Three left, and one of them comes charging at Khan. He bares his teeth and engages, and although he does take a few blows the Klingon eventually goes down.

That…apparently seems to be it, he realizes, looking around the arena and its carpet of Klingon bodies. He takes a slow breath, and as he exhales the horn blows.

“Status,” he says as soon as he gets to his family.

“Give me your weapon, I will clean it,” Cat says, holding out her hand. Khan hands her his sword and takes the wipe Maeve gives him, scrubbing off his face and hands.

“Aisha and Matthew were both injured,” she says, “Aisha had a bat’leth cut into her side, and Matthew was hit in the head by his opponent’s weapon before he fell. They are both on the mend but I’m not certain Aisha will be back to normal by the next round.”

“Aisha would like some more morphine, please,” Aisha says politely.

“Here, love,” Carson says, handing her pills and water.

“How much damage did Aisha take?” Khan asks.

“The major organ damage is mostly repaired by now, from what I can tell, and now we’re into muscle tissue,” Maeve says.

“Stay put,” Khan tells Aisha. She snorts.

“Yeah, I’m not moving, and you guys can start without me if I’m hurting this much in an hour.”

“Anyone else?” Khan asks. “More than the usual?”

“Raise your hand if you want a painkiller,” Carson says and starts handing out pills. Khan declines, but Jill takes a dose.

He frowns, moving over to her. “Were you injured, kitten?” he asks softly.

“I’m generally achy and my cheekbone still stings a bit,” Jill says. “This will wear off before the next round so I’m going to relax a bit until then.”

Khan nods, brushing a smudge of dirt off her cheek. “Having fun?” he asks.

She laughs. “Aren’t you?”
“This next round will be the most difficult, obviously,” Khan says, pitching his voice to carry to the others. “No theatrics. No wasted effort. Just take them down as quickly as possible, however you can, and nobody fights alone unless absolutely inevitable. I expect they will keep throwing fighters at us until close to sunset.”

“From the angle of the sun, it’s mid-afternoon,” Jake says. “It’s going to be a long round.”

“Drink well,” Maeve says, passing out water bottles.

“How did Aisha get stabbed through the coat?” Jill asks suddenly. “I thought those didn’t cut.”

“Apparently the coats can be cut by a strong enough thrust from a Klingon bat’leth,” Aisha says.

“Well, shit,” Jill says, looking shaken.

“It has to be a really strong slice,” Aisha says. “I had Klingons hacking at me all day and only one got through, and he put everything he had into it. Nothing’s perfect.”

“Yeah, true,” Jill says. “It’s fine. We’ll be fine.”

“You are still faster than they are,” Ekaterina points out, meticulously cleaning weapons. Bishop and Amir assist her, but it takes time. Khan folds himself down to sit on the ground, taking the chance to rest while he has it.

He drinks two bottles of water, eats a meal bar, but mostly he sits and rests, conserving strength and energy. Even Jill mostly stays still, although she does take off her coat and move through a few gentle yoga poses.

Anandi, though, Khan finds amusing because she stretches out in the full sun, coat pillowed behind her head and skin gleaming in the light even through the dirt and dried blood. “Anandi we think may be part lizard,” he tells Jill softly. “She is eternally cold, and will bask in the sun given almost any opportunity.”

“I am not part lizard, I lived most of my life in India and South America,” Anandi says clearly. “This planet is as close to my adopted country’s climate as anything else, and I am actually warm for once.”

“Man, you’re going to hate starship travel,” Jake says. “Those ships are eternally cold no matter how you set the thermostat, and you can’t make the ship too warm because the engines generate a lot of heat that has to be kept somewhat under control. It mostly has to get vented, because it’s too much to reflect back and be used in the ship.”

“I foresee many layers of clothing in my future,” Anandi says with resignation.

Khan smiles faintly. “I should think that between the seventeen of us we can sort out a way to keep ourselves from being overly cold while on the ship.”

“Half the reason I was always cold were those stupid uniforms,” Jill says.

“How are they stupid?” Jasmine asks.

“They’re like mini-dresses,” Jill says. “Completely impractical for anything and fucking cold.”

“Ohay, that really is stupid,” Jasmine says with a snort.

“Yes,” Jill agrees. “So very.”

“I’m fine,” Matthew says. “A bit of ringing in my ears but it’ll be fine.”

“I am…still in pain, but healing,” Aisha says. “But I do not think I am likely to rip things open if I fight.”

Maeve frowns. “You’re not, but I would rather you stayed put for a bit longer. Maybe ten minutes after the fight starts.”

Aisha sighs, but nods. “All right.”

The fourteen of them gather up their weapons. Jill takes one of the euphorics, and Khan thinks Jake does as well. “If you need to redose on stims you can safely do it now,” Jill says, doing exactly that. A few others do as well, although Khan decides to wait for the moment.

They take their places in the arena. “Lioness,” Khan says, brushing his knuckles down Jill’s cheek. “Take them down.”

“Fly high, my dragon,” she murmurs back and blows him a kiss.

The horn sounds, and Klingons stream into the arena. Twice as many of them as humans, Khan sees, and he is certain there will be more. They don’t hesitate; they circle the humans and attack, and after a moment Khan realizes he’s smiling.

Such an old dance, and such a beautiful one. A new partner, this time, with new steps, and Khan appreciates the skill needed to properly wield the bat’leth. When this is over, perhaps they’ll take lessons.

But there is only one way this dance will end. Klingon bodies fall; humans weave in and out and cover for each other; more Klingons replace the fallen and haul away the dead. Aisha rejoins the fight, but Bishop stumbles off the field with one hand clamped over the wound in his other arm, his sword folded into its hilt and carried in his teeth. Maeve goes to him and Alona and Matthew close ranks.

Then Jill gasps and stumbles back, one hand pressed to her abdomen; Khan sees blood. “Jasmine, take them,” he says and moves to grab her, hauling her off the field. He gets Jill to the tent, but she’s barely conscious by the time he sets her down, hand still pressed to her stomach.

Maeve and Bishop both go to her; Khan hesitates for one agonizing moment, then plunges back into the fight. There is nothing he can do for her except win this fight. With that in mind, he stops holding back even slightly. “Go,” he calls to his family. “End this.”

Let the Klingons know what a truly superior opponent means, indeed. Khan smiles again, and lets the savage run wild. He loses himself in the heat of battle, the bloodlust and rage and fire. His world narrows to his family and his opponents, and the only thing that matters is the next one he has to kill.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm having fun here.
Two Klingons left, and the first streaks of dusk appear in the sky. Two Klingons, and half the humans, and Jim doesn’t know if any of them are dead but he hasn’t seen Maeve or Aisha come back into the arena, and Jill hangs back on the edges of the field, a bandage wrapped around her torso. She must have used one of Anandi’s euphorics, Jim thinks, because she moves without looking in pain even though he saw the slice she took, saw her bleeding until Khan grabbed her and got her off the field.

Ekaterina throws a knife without pausing to aim and one of the two remaining Klingons goes down, the knife sticking out of his throat and purple blood gushing out around it. Amir follows to make sure he stays dead, Jim supposes, but he’s more interested in Khan and the one remaining Klingon, circling each other cautiously.

The Klingon makes a curious gesture with his right hand and Jim sees shimmers of energy build. “No,” he whispers just before the Klingon punches Khan in the chest and Khan gets knocked back hard enough he hits the ground.

He doesn’t get up immediately. Jill runs to him, but Jim is more interested in Konstantin, who charges at the Klingon, face set in anger. The Klingon tries to punch him with the energy device and Konstantin roars, rather like a bull, grabbing the Klingon’s hand and twisting, literally picking the man up only to slam him against the ground. And again.

Konstantin, not satisfied with that, starts punching the man, apparently determined to turn him into Klingon soup by bare fists alone. Silence falls in the arena, and the thud of fists on flesh seems worse, somehow, than everything else Jim has witnessed so far.

“You said he lives,” he says to Ekaterina. “I do not see him standing.”

“Look over here,” Khan says and Konstantin spins around to see him. Khan looks a bit pale, and
there are scorch marks on his shirt, but he stands under his own power. “It was just an energy blast,” Khan says, almost...gently. Like he’s talking to a child, or someone not functioning at top cognitive capacity. “It stopped my heart briefly. I recovered.”

Konstantin looks at him for a long moment, then nods and bends to scrub his sword clean on the sand of the arena floor. “Is it truly over, Khan?” he asks.

Khan looks up at the VIP box. “Is it over?” he asks clearly.

“It is sunset,” Gowtek says, getting to his feet. “And...only one side is left standing. Congratulations, humans, you are now Klingon diplomats, an honor won by few. We celebrate the victors!”

A roar shakes the arena. Gowtek continues speaking about honor and how those who died today will be remembered and Jim knows he should pay attention but he’s exhausted, and he didn’t even fight today.

Eventually, Gowtek stops talking and Klingons begin leaving the arena. Then he turns to Jim and the others. “We must record your witnessing before the combat is formally ended,” he says. “Kirk. How many kills did the winged human count?”

“I have a total count of forty-seven,” Jim says. “But there were two where I couldn’t be sure who took the death blow.”

Gowtek nods. “That is the mark of a good witness. We will include those and record forty-seven. Uhura?”

“Fifty-one, with the same caveat about one,” Uhura says.

“Fifty-one will be recorded. Spock?” Gowtek turns to him.

“Forty-two,” Spock says calmly.

Gowtek nods. “An honorable number.”

“And your human?” Jim asks him. “Jill, the winged human’s mate. How many kills did she record?”

“Thirty-eight,” Gowtek says. “And one serious injury that disabled her from fighting.”

“You still sound rather like you don’t believe it,” Jim observes.

Gowtek actually smiles a little; Jim isn’t sure he’s ever seen a Klingon smile before. “She is a true warrior, regardless of size, and a wise lesson in that fact. Come, let us go see them.”

About time, Jim thinks, following him down to the tent, Spock and Uhura right behind him. When they get there, he sees Jill being tended to by Maeve, Carson looking at Jake and Matthew lying on the ground with Bishop kneeling by him. That...could be worse, Jim supposes.

“Do you require aid?” Gowtek asks.

“We will tend our own, thank you,” Maeve says. “How long do we have until we must begin negotiations?”

“Until you are rested and recovered,” Gowtek says. “You have earned the highest honor possible among Klingon diplomatic envoys. We will wait for you to regain your strength before we
proceed. If you require food, or aid, there is a communicator in the building you can use.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. “If you would leave us to rest.”

Gowtek does the head-back-and-to-the-side thing and leaves. Khan waits until there is no one else in the arena. “Status check. Aisha.”

“Cracked ribs, some bruises that haven’t healed,” Aisha says. “Nothing requiring any major medical help but I could use a painkiller.”

“I’ve got you,” Carson says, going to her.

“Alona,” Khan says.

“Also the ribs and I think I’m healing a concussion,” Alona says. “The double vision has stopped, though.”

“Just a concussion?” Khan asks.

“Yeah, no skull fracture,” Alona says. “I’ll be fine but I would also take a painkiller, especially if it’s morphine.”

“What else?” Carson goes to her next.

“Amir,” Khan says.


“Anandi?” Khan looks at her.

“Bruises,” she says. “Well, and a dislocated shoulder but Carson put it back for me.”

“Bishop,” Khan says.

“Ribs still healing,” Bishop says. “I would not say no to a bit of pain relief.”

“Yeah, how about we just do morphine all round?” Carson asks.

No one seems to object, and Carson and Maeve begin giving out pills. “Carson, status,” Khan says.

“Clear,” Carson says. “Just some muscle strains that’ll heal easily enough.”

“Cat,” Khan says.

“I do believe my right wrist is broken,” Ekaterina says carefully. “When I threw my last knife, I used sufficient force that I believe I snapped a bone.”

“When was the last time you did that?” Maeve asks, going to her.

“Not since I was sixteen,” Ekaterina says. “Still, I did take him down. Did anyone recover my knife?”

“I did,” Amir says. “We’ll sort out the weapons later.”

“Jake,” Khan says, ignoring the side conversations.

“Jake is afraid of this euphoric wearing off,” Jake says. “Because I don’t hurt now but I’m pretty
“You got stabbed a few times,” Carson says. “We cleaned out the wounds, stitched you up, gave you a pint of our blood, you should be fine if somewhat uncomfortable as you heal. But we have plenty of morphine, and Anandi can probably make more of the euphorics. Just stay put.”


“Clear,” Jasmine says. “I got stabbed, though, and I’m healing but fuck I’m hurting.”

“Have morphine,” Carson says, handing her pills.

“Jill,” Khan says and Jim detects a crack in his armor.

“Jill is unconscious at the moment because she tore her stitches running to you,” Maeve says. “Before you react, she will be fine, but she lost some blood and passed out. We gave her morphine and blood and redid the stitches and she’ll be fine when she wakes up. She didn’t get sliced as badly as Jake, so she should heal quickly.”

Khan takes a breath and exhales slowly. “Thank you. Katsuro?”

“Clear,” Katsuro says. “I will decline the morphine.”

“Also not a surprise,” Carson says. “Did you even get touched today?”

“The Klingons were remarkably slow,” Katsuro says.

“I did notice that,” Jasmine says.

Khan clears his throat and everyone shuts up. “Konstantin?”

“Kostya is offline,” Ekaterina says. No one looks surprised by that, whatever it means.

“Has he any physical injuries?” Carson asks.


“Yourself, brother?” Maeve asks. “Status?”

“I would appreciate a dose of morphine,” Khan says, for once willing to take the drugs. “I feel rather…bruised all over.”

“Unsurprising,” Maeve says. “I am all clear as I was playing field hospital unit for the last while.’

Khan nods. “Thank you. Matthew?”

“I fucking broke my right fucking leg,” Matthew says, sounding disgusted. “In apparently three places from what Maeve’s telling me. I’m stoned to the gills on morphine right now, though, and Bishop held me down while she set it, so I should be on the mend soon.”

“How did you do that?” Alona asks.

“I don’t even remember,” Matthew says. “I took a hit from someone’s bat’leth and then tripped over a body and then it all went hazy until Maeve dragged me off the field.”

“Who do we need to carry back to the house?” Jasmine asks. “Because I don’t know if I can carry
“Jill,” Maeve says. “Jake should not walk but can if he absolutely must. Matthew’s leg is not knitted and he should not put weight on it.”

“I will carry Jill,” Khan says and no one bothers to argue.

“We have a litter in one of the packs here,” Maeve says. “We can use that for Matthew, and Bishop, can you carry Jake?”

“Oui,” Bishop says.

Jim doesn’t know what to do but offers to help Maeve set up the litter for Matthew. She accepts, although Jim thinks it’s more to allow him to help than out of any real need. Still, they get Matthew on the litter easily enough and Carson and Katsuro carry him toward the house.

Inside the house, most of the humans start stripping out of coats and boots and, well, clothes. Four of them duck into the bathrooms, Jim guesses to share the showers. Others take turns as they heal enough, or wake up, or a shower comes free. Jill doesn’t wake up, though, and Khan doesn’t leave her side.

“Brother she will be fine, would you please go bathe?” Maeve asks finally.

“I will bathe when she wakes up,” Khan says.

“‘m awake,” Jill mutters. “I hurt all over, oh my God, even my hair hurts. And I’m covered in dirt and blood and bits of Klingon. Please tell me there’s a shower free and plenty of soap.” Her voice picks up volume and clarity as she speaks, and she opens her eyes somewhere in there.

“There is, and I have your own toiletry bag,” Khan says. Jim didn’t miss how he visibly relaxed when Jill started talking, and smiled when she opened her eyes to look at him. “Come, my lioness.”

“You’re carrying me,” Jill tells him. “Because seriously, ow. I feel kind of like I did after Dante with some obvious exceptions.”


Uhura grimaces. “It’s…some kind of new drug,” she says. “I don’t know more than that.”

“It’s a rape drug,” Jake says. “Creates an overwhelming imperative to have sex, and if you don’t, your heart can give out. Even if you do find a partner, you can end up having a heart attack. Jill got dosed with it at one point, so did someone not here.”

“And we both survived,” Jill says, sitting up very carefully with Khan’s help. “Did I have to get stabbed in the gut?”

“Actually, you were fairly lucky,” Maeve says. “You didn’t get stabbed deeply enough to cause internal damage. Had that happened…well, let us be glad it did not. This is just soft tissue and muscle damage, which yes, will hurt, and heal slowly, but it could have been far, far worse. And we have plenty of pain medication.”

Spock frowns. “Why would you not use a dermal regenerator?”

“Because I’m a freak,” Jill says, beginning to strip out of her clothes. “I don’t respond well to regen. It either works partially or not at all. I mean, we have one, and we’ll use it after I get clean,
but it won’t heal me completely.”

“Fascinating,” Spock murmurs. “I never heard of anyone for whom regen did not work before.”

“It’s something like one out of five million,” Jill says. “So you combine that with my propensity for almost getting myself killed and interesting things happen.” She pulls off her shirt and support tank, and turns around to show them her back. “This used to be scars.”

“Now it’s beautiful,” Uhura says. “You should let the Klingons see it.”

“I thought about that,” Jill says. “It’ll depend on if we get any time to get things before negotiations start.”

“Probably, but how are you going to get through the Neutral Zone and back?” Jim asks.

“The same way we got here,” Jill says. “Seriously, though, shower now, please for the love of God.”

“Yes,” Khan says, lifting her into his arms. “Come, my lioness.”

“Dragon,” she murmurs, resting her head against his shoulder. Jim watches him carry her into the bathroom and shakes himself once the door closes.

“Gowtek was very impressed by her,” he says. “He thought she would die with honor, but she won, and he was impressed.”

“As he should have been,” Ekaterina says. She and Anandi have commandeered the little kitchen area; Jim has no idea what they’re doing, but something smells like actual food. “The lioness more than held her own today.”

“How much do any of you actually remember about the fight?” Uhura asks.

A round of laughter runs through the room. “I counted my kills, but if you ask me to remember each of them I cannot,” Ekaterina says. “I have some discrete memories, moments here and there, but mostly it blurs in my mind.”

“I think none of us will have a clear memory,” Bishop says. “Unless perhaps Anandi?”

Anandi, though, shakes her head. “No, not I. I am as prey to battle-fever as the rest of us, hermano.”

“Well and so, this is ready,” Ekaterina says. “Come eat.”

Jim hangs back, letting the other augments get plates before he and his crew go over to the kitchen. Ekaterina hands him a plate with three different things on it and he blinks. “Where did you even transport this?”

“Oh, it was all freeze-dried or dehydrated,” Ekaterina says. “So weighed very little. We simply reconstituted it and added some flavorings.”

Jim thanks her and takes his plate over to his bunk, Uhura and Spock joining him on theirs. None of them speak; to be honest, after the day, Jim is out of words. The augments also stay fairly quiet, with a couple murmured conversations here and there. Eventually Khan and Jill emerge from the bathroom; he’s only in pants and Jim can’t actually see what Jill has on but he sees bare legs and arms from where Khan holds her. And hair. A lot of hair.
“I smell food,” Jill says as Khan sets her down on the bunk; now Jim can see she’s wearing a tank and exercise shorts. “I would very much like food. And water.”

“Stay put,” Khan says. “I will get you those things.”

“I’m injured, not invalid,” Jill says, moving to stand up. Khan puts a hand on her sternum and pushes her back onto the bunk. “Okay, no, that is not cool and you don’t get to do that.” Jill says, glaring at him.

Khan uses his wings to block the two of them in, shielding them both from the rest of the room. Jim hears murmurs under the feathers but not more than that, and if anyone else hears more they don’t share.

He focuses his own attention on his food, not entirely certain what he’s eating but it tastes pretty good and he’s starving suddenly. He’s just finished when Khan folds his wings back and stands up, leaving Jill reclining on the bunk.

“Sister, I would look at the stitches,” Maeve says, coming over to her. “Do you need anything for pain?”

“Yeah, actually,” Jill admits reluctantly. “Why did you stitch me up rather than the sealer?”

“Your wound was too deep for the sealer, at least with my understanding of it,” Maeve says. “I opted to close your wound the fastest way I knew, which involved stitches and glue.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining,” Jill says hastily. “Just wasn’t sure. And yeah, the dermal sealer we have wouldn’t work on anything that went to muscle, I don’t think.”

“I have morphine or a euphoric, which would you prefer?” Maeve asks.

“Morphine,” Jill says. “I’ll take the opiates while I’m safe and can be fuzzy-brained. Save the euphorics for when I need a clear head.”

“Modern pain medication would leave you clear-headed,” Spock says.

“Yes, if it worked on me,” Jill says. “It doesn’t, like regen. The most effect I get from modern pain medication is similar to over the counter blockers.”

“Where did you get all the morphine, though?” Jim asks. “That’s not easy to come by.”

“It is if you know the right people,” Jill says.

Maeve hands Jill pills and a cup of water and Jill swallows the pills, leaning back to let Maeve look at her stomach. “You’ll have a scar, but it shouldn’t be too bad,” Maeve says. “No sign of infection—which is a minor miracle given the conditions. You know what it should and shouldn’t feel like.”

“I really do,” Jill says, tugging her tank back down. “This will be really inconvenient for about a week. Well, no. With the dermal regenerator I might be down to like two days. But I need to eat before we use that thing, or I might pass out.”

“I have food for you,” Khan says, handing her a plate and a fork. Jill thanks him and shifts to let him sit by her feet with his own plate.

“Is everyone else healed? Or mostly?” Jill asks between bites.
“Jake is still recovering, but we will use the regenerator on him as well, which should mostly heal him,” Maeve says. “Konstantin is still offline and will likely remain so until tomorrow, after he has slept.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Jim asks.

“Konstantin is, in many ways, the gentlest of us all,” Maeve says. “He fights fiercely, but he is at heart a lover of peace. But he has a temper, a powerful one, and when he loses his temper, he stops thinking on much of a rational level. It takes time for him to come back from that.”

“Does it happen often?” Jim asks.

“Nyet,” Ekaterina says. “Amir and Anandi and I will be cleaning weapons after we have eaten.”

“If you want something truly cleaned, ask a scientist,” Anandi says, laughing.

“Indeed,” Ekaterina says. “Those of you who are not injured are welcome to join us, but all weapons will be inspected by myself or Anandi before being declared clean and ready to use.”

“Do we have the proper solvents to clean these blades?” Jasmine asks. “For that matter, how do you clean them? Do we need to sharpen them?”

“No,” Khan says. “Adamantium holds its edge. It wipes clean easily, in most cases, and there is a solvent we have for tricky spots or details.”

“I didn’t even know you could get adamantium weapons,” Jim says wistfully. “Man.”

“They’re not cheap and they’re worth the money,” Jake says, reclining on his bunk.

“The folding technology used in most of your weapons was fascinating,” Spock says. “Whose idea was it?”

“The Femarans’,” Khan says. “They demonstrated, and we made requests.”

“The Femarans are fairly reclusive,” Spock says. “How do you know them?”

“They’re the best weaponsmiths in the galaxy,” Jake says. “As part of my persona, I traded in small arms. I made contacts, and built up a friendship with one of the weaponsmiths.”

“You have a large number of useful contacts,” Jim observes.

“I was an Intelligence operative for fifteen years,” Jake says. “But you want useful contacts, you want Jill. Without her, none of us would be here.”

“It was mostly that through me we got you, and then we got Andy and the bird, and without those two we’d be nowhere,” Jill says.

“No,” Ekaterina says. “Without the four of you, we would be nowhere. Although really for the missions to retrieve us it was the three.”

“Yeah, I didn’t have much to do with that,” Jake says.

“A little,” Jill says. “You gave us some information.”

“Yeah, true,” Jake says. “But still. Let’s be real, shorty, without you and Andy and the bird this plan would never have gotten off the ground.”
“Yes, because I am batshit and they go along with me,” Jill says, laughing.

“More or less,” Matthew says after a moment.

“Who controlled your transports?” Spock asks. “You said you arrived on Qo’noS via beaming, but no standard transporter can reach Qo’noS or even the Neutral Zone, and there are no ships in orbit or nearby. How do you intend to leave this place, and where are you going?”

“You ask many questions,” Ekaterina says, laying down a line of towels on the floor. “Knowing the answers may come with a price. Are you willing to pay it?”

“That would logically depend on the price,” Spock says.

“Ah, but in this case I do not know,” Ekaterina says. “Only that there will be one. There always is.”

“Nothing comes for free,” Khan says quietly and Jim remembers the chorus of the dead, the wail of agonizing grief.

“I’ll pay it,” he says abruptly. “Whatever price there is, I’ll pay it when it comes due.”

“Jim,” Spock says in mild alarm.

Jim gestures. “We witnessed the arena today. We’re bound to whatever comes out of this. If there’s a price for knowing the rest of the story, I will pay it. I got us into this.”

“What do you mean, you witnessed it? That sounded formal,” Ekaterina says.

“It was,” Jim says. “We were witnesses, therefore we had to pick someone to witness. I had Khan, Uhura took you, and Spock witnessed Anandi. Gowtek, the head Klingon, witnessed Jill mostly I think because at first he wanted to witness her death and then he couldn’t figure out how she was still alive.”

“I’m good at surviving,” Jill says. “What does it mean, to witness?”

“Watch them, count their kills, mark their injuries, witness and remember their death in that event,” Jim says. “My count is a little off because there were two occasions where I couldn’t tell who actually took the death blow, but Gowtek said we would include them as your kills regardless.”


“Forty-seven,” Jim says quietly. “Including those two.”

“And I?” Ekaterina asks. “I am curious if Nyota’s account matches mine.”

“Fifty-one,” Uhura says. “I also had one I wasn’t sure about. What was your total?”

“Fifty exactly,” Ekaterina says. “So whatever you were uncertain about was likely not my kill.”

Uhura smiles a bit. “Gowtek will let you count it, though.”

“Anandi, do you wish to know my count?” Spock asks.

“Is it forty-two?” Anandi asks.

“It is,” Spock says.
“Bueno.” Anandi takes a drink of water. “Then your witnessing was accurate.”

“Thank you,” Spock says solemnly.

“I am curious who among us had the highest body count,” Ekaterina says, beginning to lay weapons on the towels. “If any of us remember, or was witnessed.”

“What was my count?” Jill asks. “I lost count, or lost track.”

“Thirty-eight,” Uhura says. “And one disabling injury recorded.”

“Does it matter, Cat?” Bishop asks.

“Only in that I want to establish a mathematical average,” Ekaterina says. “So if you do remember your kill count, please tell me.”

“Fifty-one,” Jasmine says. “One of those may have been Khan’s.”

“Forty-three,” Bishop says.

“I think forty or forty-one,” Jake says.

They don’t know Konstantin’s count, and Aisha and Alona both admit battle-fever and inability to recall. Still, when the numbers are added up—“Forty-four,” Ekaterina says. “On average.”

“Jesus,” Jim whispers under his breath when he does the math.

“Somewhere around six hundred sixty Klingons died today,” Ekaterina says steadily. “Well over six hundred, certainly. Possibly over seven hundred, as Konstantin was…efficient. They considered us *that* dangerous, *that* serious, that they threw hundreds of fighters at us. Some of their best, undoubtedly. We will remember this date, every year. We will remember their deaths, and we will sing for them. It is the least we can do.”

“Basically? We kicked ass,” Alona says.

“So hard,” Jill says. “Maeve, what was our injury count?”

“You, Jake,” Maeve says. “Matthew’s leg, Aisha’s wound after round two. Bishop had his arm half-severed. A few others. Enough that I spent the last few hours playing medic.”

“How the hell did you heal from it that fast?” Jim blurts, looking at Bishop.

“Maeve exaggerates somewhat,” Bishop says. “I had a deep slice to my forearm, but it did not quite reach bone. It was a clean wound, so Maeve cleaned it out and slapped a compression bandage on it and it healed quickly save some lingering soreness which even now is gone.”

“We made some compression bandages infused with transdermal pain relief and antibiotic ointment,” Maeve says. “Specifically for situations like this, as we knew it was a likely one. Honestly I was surprised no one had thought of it before.”

“It’s a combat-oriented resource, and Starfleet doesn’t usually think in those terms,” Jim says. “And if they don’t…”

“The price of peace is that you have to be willing to defend it,” Khan says. “I disagree with Alexander Marcus on virtually every detail including his right to exist, but he does have one valid point. Starfleet is woefully underequipped to face whatever dangers may lie out in unexplored
t

At some point, those two things are going to crash, and it will not go well. Starfleet’s base shielding and armor plating on its ships is woefully insufficient, and the warp core as currently designed is far too easy to breach. Unless you want someone to climb into the core and kill themselves, it needs a better design.”

“What if someone has to get inside the core to contain it?” Spock asks.

“That is my other argument, that the warp core on a Starfleet ship should be the most guarded resource because if you lose the core, you lose quite a lot. Starfleet argues that is why they’ve made the warp core safe to eject, but if they would just shield the damn thing properly in the first place you might not reach that point. I can give you a dozen scenarios in which as currently designed it would take deaths to deal with an unstable warp core. This is a situation that should not have to happen,” Khan says, sounding—Jim finds this hard to believe—offended. Like poor ship design bothers him.

“Marcus had you working on classified projects,” Spock says. “Did you design ships for him?”

“I designed the Vengeance for him, and I expect he will be coming here in it eventually,” Khan says. “Truth be told I rather expected him by now, but either your ship hasn’t figured a way to contact you or he has not shown up yet, and I lack the way to tell if either is true.”

“What is the Vengeance?” Jim asks. The name sounds familiar, but from where?

“It’s a Dreadnaught-class warship,” Khan says. “Designed solely for combat, able to be crewed by minimal people, one alone if necessary. Its weapons far outstrip anything the Enterprise can offer, and I designed its shields. Unless you had someone on the ship to disable them, he could tear your ship apart without your being able to land one hit on him.”

“Then it looks like I may need your help to keep that from happening,” Jim says.

“On one absolute condition,” Khan says.

Jim already knows what it’s going to be. “He’s yours.”

“Jim,” he gets from Spock and Uhura.

“On one condition,” Jim says.

“What the hell do you want me to agree to?” Khan snaps.

“Keep him out of Federation space,” Jim says. “Anything else I can argue.”

At that, Khan’s anger fades and he smiles. “Well thought out, Kirk. We’ll keep him out of Federation space when we hold our trial.”

“Are we actually going to hold him on trial?” Jasmine asks.

“Not exactly,” Khan says. “We will, however, read him the litany of his crimes, now with five dozen murders added.”

“Under whose authority do you intend to execute him?” Spock asks stiffly.

“Mine,” Khan says. “I am certain we can construct a meaningless legal argument later but the answer, Mr. Spock, is that I promised myself and Marcus a long time ago that I would kill him for
his actions toward me, and I intend to follow through on that promise. Be glad I don’t intend to take Starfleet down with him.”

“Did you, at one point?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says evenly. “I had preliminary plans toward a few things, and then I met Jill, and the situation changed.”

“Yeah, I’m good at that,” Jill says. “Changing things up.”

“What would you have done?” Jim asks.

“Do you truly want to know?” Khan asks.

“I saw you kill four dozen people today,” Jim points out. “At this point I might as well hear it all.”

Khan smiles faintly. “The Kelvin archive in London is more than an archive, of course; it’s where section 31 is headquartered and most of its medical and scientific laboratories are based. I had started sketching out a plan to blow it up. Following that, an attack on Starfleet resources brings all —“

“Captains and admirals in the quadrant to a specific room within HQ,” Jim says slowly. “Sitting targets.”

“It’s poor planning on Starfleet’s part,” Khan says. “But would have worked to my advantage. Never conduct emergency hearings in a room that has any egress to the outside world, Kirk.”

Jill looks at Khan. “How far into this did you get before I came along?”

“I had the basic idea sketched out, and refined it somewhat as we started our plans, and then I eventually put it aside,” Khan says. “I do want to point out that Jake also brought up the idea of blowing up the archive.”

“Khan, I’m not angry you thought about doing it,” Jill says. “I am, however, glad you didn’t. Too much collateral damage.”

“Yes, well,” Khan says. “When one has nothing left to lose, one stops caring about the damage.”

He sits on his bunk with Jill in his lap, leaning back against his chest. His wings look relaxed, Jim guesses; he doesn’t know much about wing language but they’re not folded back, they drape around Khan’s shoulders.

“One has somewhat more to lose now,” Jill points out, leaning up to kiss his jaw.

Khan smiles a bit and holds her close. “Yes.”

“Morphine time, who needs it?” Carson calls out. A few people raise hands, and he starts handing out pills while Ekaterina and a few others start cleaning weapons. Jim realizes how tired he is—not that he fought today, but man, keeping track of the kill count was difficult, and just…almost seven hundred Klingons died today, and for what? For the chance to negotiate peace accords that Marcus might destroy before they even get signed?

He sighs and goes to the bathroom to wash his hands and face. When he comes out of the bathroom, he settles on his bunk. “What happens in the morning?” he asks.

“Certainly nothing before then,” Ekaterina says. “Khan?”
“I have a plan based on Marcus not showing up, but in the event that he is here, we will need to deal with him,” Khan says. “Some of us will go to the Enterprise, with Kirk and his crew, to assist in repairs. Jasmine, you and Katsuro will assist Kirk certainly, and you can have anyone else you need save Jill or myself.”

Does Khan have to send Jasmine with him? Jim doesn’t really trust her or feel comfortable around her. He says nothing.

“You want me on the Enterprise or with Marcus?” Matthew asks, sounding a bit sleepy.

“With me,” Khan says. “We may need you to hack into the computer systems and only Magpie could do it faster—perhaps.”

“Well, then, you’ll have to put up with me,” Matthew says. “And on that note I’m going to sleep now that this morphine has kicked in and my leg has stopped hurting.”

“Can you walk on it yet?” Ekaterina asks.

“No,” Maeve says before Matthew answers. “I mean, yes. It’s knitted, at this point, but I want him staying off it until tomorrow morning to give the bone time to fully heal and the muscles to recover. In the morning he should be fine. Everyone should be fine save Jake and Jill, and with the help of the dermal regenerator they will be much improved.”

“Speaking of, we might as well do this and get it over with,” Jill says, sounding resigned. “Can I just not move and not make Khan move?”

“Yes, that is fine,” Maeve says, going to get the regenerator. “Do you want a sedative as well?”

“No,” Jill says. “I’m tired enough to sleep on my own, I promise.”

Jim’s had dermal regen before, and it feels weird but it doesn’t hurt. But he watches Maeve use the machine on Jill, and it’s obvious it hurts her. She says nothing, but her hand tightens on Khan’s enough Jim sees marks in his skin when she lets go. “There,” Maeve says, taking the regenerator away. “That should at least get you started for now, and I’ll go get you another dose of morphine.”

“Appreciate that,” Jill says, taking a slow breath.

Jim follows everyone else’s lead and settles into his bunk to sleep. He can’t quite doze off, though; he’s exhausted, but something has him on edge.

Eventually he lulls himself to sleep using the rhythmic sound of Konstantin’s breathing, the not-quite-snore that proves surprisingly effective.

When he sees the mists again, he’s somehow not surprised. “They won,” he says, looking around for her.

“They did,” she says, walking over to him. “But it’s not over yet.”

“Am I still not part of it yet?” Jim asks, gesturing to the mist.

“You haven’t bled for it,” she says again. “You will.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says, thinking of his ship, stranded out there, and a Dreadnaught-class ship capable of ripping it apart. “How did you get into this anyway?”

She smiles and says nothing.
“You’re from their original time,” Jim says. “Who were you? Were you one of them?”

“Yes, and no,” she says. “I was the lion-tamer.”

They call Jill the lioness, Jim thinks, and this means something, but he can’t quite see it.

“Any words of wisdom?” he asks instead of pursuing that.

“Good luck,” she says. “Also, stop being afraid of Jasmine. That only encourages her.”

Jim snorts. “I’m not afraid of her, I just think she’s going to suddenly decide to kill me.”

“Only if he tells her to,” she says and Jim reflects that she doesn’t use Khan’s name but that emphasis says it all. “Or if she thinks his needs are served by your death.”

“That’s not really reassuring,” Jim says after a moment.

She smiles. “Good luck.”

Mists swirl around him and Jim bolts upright to the alarm shriek of a comm-link going off. He, Spock, Uhura, Jill, and Jake all grab for in some cases nonexistent links and snap out names and codes to acknowledge an emergency signal.

“Mine,” Jake says after that confusion ends. “Who the fuck is calling my link, on Qo’noS, with a Starfleet emergency code?”

“Someone looking for Starfleet officers,” Jim says, realizing what—“We used your link to contact my ship, they found a way to contact back, I’ll bet you anything.”

“There was a jammer on that link, and it—never mind, Andy could do it so whatever,” Jake says. “Hey, person on the other end of this link, who are you?”

“This is acting Captain Hikaru Sulu,” a voice says. “I’m looking for Captain Kirk.”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Jim says, running over to Jake. “Are you still in the Neutral Zone?”

“We are,” Sulu says. “And we have company. Something really, really big, and…Admiral Marcus. He’s looking for you, captain, and I can only stall him so long.”

“Sulu whatever you do do not drop your shields,” Jim says immediately. If the Vengeance is as powerful as Khan says they might not matter at all, but it’s the best he’s got.

“Wasn’t planning on it, sir,” Sulu says. “However if you have any other suggestions?”

Jim looks at Khan. “You have an idea?”

“Stall him for half an hour,” Khan says. “If you can. If not—we still need half an hour.”

“Before what?” Sulu and Jim ask.

Khan smiles coldly. “Before we end this.”

Jim blows out a breath and watches Khan go over to the comm in the wall, apparently going to contact Gowtek or something. “Sulu, I know it sounds insane but...if you can stall him for half an hour I might be able to get there,” he says finally.
“I’ll do my best, sir,” Sulu says.

“Hey,” Jake says. “Who reverse-engineered the link and bypassed the jammer on it?”

“Scotty did,” Sulu says.

“Nice work,” Jake says. “Pass that on.”

“I will,” Sulu says. “Er—who are you?”

“Captain Aaron Jacobs, Intelligence operative, call me Jake,” Jake says in a way that makes it sound like he’s said this far too often. “Not, for the record, currently operating on Starfleet orders.”

“Right,” Sulu says. “Is it too much to hope for that at some point we get the full story? Or at least a few more details?”

“At some point,” Jake says. “Some of us will see you in thirty, but before you go I need the coordinates of the ship’s bridge.”

“Right,” Sulu says again and provides them.

“Anyone got that?” Jake asks when Sulu’s done.

“Yes,” about four people say.

“Cool. See you in thirty.” Jake disconnects the link.

Chapter End Notes

1. Do you know where your towel is? Anandi is *such* a hoopty frood. She always knows where her towel is.
2. Yeah, don't piss Konstantin off. It doesn't go well for the provoker.
3. This story now holds the record for highest body count I've ever written, including the unfinished thing where I kind of killed everyone. Yeah. Sorry, Klingons, you died for a noble cause.
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

Make your decisions. We leave in five minutes.

Chapter Notes

I feel like this story is picking up speed and I'm hanging on for dear life. Also another warning about some graphic violence in this chapter but I'm pretty sure you'll be happy about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All right, Kirk,” Khan says, turning around from his own comm-link. “Gowtek has graciously agreed to let the humans handle their own affairs, but does caution us that if either ship takes aggressive action toward Qo’noS they will take it as a hostile act and render our negotiations moot.”

Kirk manages a smile. “But no pressure.”

“Indeed,” Khan says. He pulls on his coat, and his boots, considering options.

“You still haven’t explained how we’re getting from here to my ship in thirty minutes,” Kirk says, but he manages to sound confused and not petulant, which Khan appreciates.

He turns to look at Kirk, taking the transporter out of his pocket. “Personal transporter, utilizing transwarp technology, capable of taking two humanoids from Earth to Qo’noS in one go,” he says precisely. “This one is biometrically locked to myself and Jill, and will not take anyone else. I will not share any information on how I developed it, and I will not give Starfleet a copy to examine.”

The naked longing he sees in both Kirk and Spock’s eyes makes him smile to himself.

“Are they all locked?” Spock asks after a moment.

“No,” Khan says. “Which is why this is possible.”

He settles the sword at his side, raising his eyebrows at Kirk when he looks to object. “They’re going to have phasers,” Kirk points out.

“One shot from a phaser will not kill us,” Khan says. “Will not even incapacitate us, actually.”

“It will kill me, but I won’t get shot,” Jill says.

“You survived over six hundred Klingons,” Cat points out. “I should think a few thugs will be of no consequence.”

“Let’s not get cocky,” Jill says, but she laughs. “Khan, what’s the plan?”
The simple way she trusts him to have one—Khan smiles a little, to himself. “Sulu won’t hold Marcus off for half an hour, so I expect the Enterprise will be damaged. Bishop, Maeve, Katsuro—you will be needed for repairs and likely medical emergencies. Save it, Kirk,” he says when Kirk looks about to object. “Never, never turn down an offer of medical aid. Don’t let your pride stand in the way of your men’s lives.”

Kirk shuts up.

“Jasmine, you’re with Kirk,” he says just to see Kirk’s reaction. It amuses him when Kirk looks resigned and a bit wary, but he says nothing. “I trust your judgment, my claw.”

“My lord,” Jasmine says automatically.

“Cat, Kostenka, Jill, Jake, you are with me. I built a designated location into the transporters, coded to the Vengeance. Due to the vagaries of space I can’t entirely guarantee where on the ship we will end up, but I know its design.” If they’re fortunate, they’ll come out a level below the bridge. If not…well. At least he knows the ship inside and out.

“So long as we don’t end up outside it,” Jill says.

“No,” Khan promises. “Matthew, you also will come to the Vengeance with the goal of disabling their weapons systems. If you can disable the whole computer system so much the better but do take the weapons offline.”

“Can do,” Matthew says.

“The rest of you, pick a ship,” Khan says. “If you think you can be useful with either physical labor or some kind of repair, go to the Enterprise. If Marcus targets where I think he will they’ll have hull breaches and we can withstand vacuum better than they can.”

“You can withstand vacuum?” Kirk asks.

“For up to five minutes,” Khan says. “Brief exposure will give us frost burns but not kill us.”

“I…don’t want to know how you know that, do I,” Kirk says after a pause.

Khan almost applauds; the boy can learn. “No,” he says instead. “You don’t. Those of you going to the Vengeance it is likely we’ll have to dispose of most of Marcus’ crew on our way to the bridge, wherever we end up. Make your decisions, and we leave in five minutes.”

He leaves them to discuss and takes Jill to the side. “Kitten,” he murmurs. “Are you all right? Are you up for this?”

“I took a euphoric,” Jill murmurs back. “So I’ll be okay for a few hours, and I have morphine for after that. If we can’t get this resolved in the next three hours, we’re kinda fucked anyway.”

She has a point, but still. Khan touches her cheek. “I will never say this to you again, but stay behind me,” he says in Russian, keeping his voice low. “You’re injured and you cannot heal from a phaser blast.”

“No, I know,” Jill says. She sighs. “I will not promise to stay behind you but I promise I will be careful. Best you’ll get, my dragon.”

He smiles a little. “I’ll take it.”
When they sort themselves out, those going to the *Vengeance* include everyone Khan listed, as well as Anandi, Alona, and Aisha. Carson and Amir opt to go to the *Enterprise*, which doesn’t really surprise Khan. “Matthew, how is your leg?” Alona asks as his group gathers on one side of the room.

“I’m not running a marathon with you,” Matthew says. “Although I probably could at this point.”


“I’m all right,” Jill says. “I took a euphoric so I’m good for now.”

“The regen works better on me than Jill, so I’m pretty much healed,” Jake says. “And modern pain medication works on me, so I took that and I’m good to go. I gave Jill my last euphoric.”

“I can make more but not until we return to Earth,” Anandi says. “The compounding process takes time and I have neither the equipment nor the raw materials.”

“How do you get the raw materials?” Jill asks.

“My kit of poisons was on the ship,” Anandi says. “Surprisingly, very few of them are useless due to age. In this case, however, I know the chemical composition of the poison and the derived euphoric and given access to the correct lab equipment I can synthesize it.”

“We’ll get you a proper lab,” Jill says. “Shouldn’t be difficult to outfit a private ship.”

“Bueno,” Anandi says.

Khan looks over at the *Enterprise* group. He knows the difficult position he is putting them in, and knows that he runs the risk of losing them depending on the damage Marcus has done or will do to the ship. “Jasmine,” he says, getting her attention. “There is a hard-coded transport setting that will take you somewhere on the *Vengeance*. If the ship looks to be in danger of destruction, get out. All of you, get out. If the *Vengeance* for whatever reason is in danger of destruction, either go to the Femarans or go back to Qo’noS. This is *not* a suicide mission.”

He looks at Kirk. “My people survived the Klingons. I will not send them to die at Marcus’ hands. He has killed enough of us already.”

“I understand,” Kirk says steadily. Khan doubts he does, to be honest, but lets it stand.

“Let’s end this, then,” he says. “On three. One. Two. Three.”

They materialize somewhere in—hangar bay, Khan identifies, looking around. He can hear weapons—not currently firing but charging. “Matthew, terminal access there, shut down the system,” he says. Matthew sprints over to the access point and slips a memory chip into the slot; a few moments and some swiping later the weapons systems abruptly go offline—interestingly, so does almost everything else except basic gravity and life support.

“Sorry, couldn’t separate it,” Matthew says, coming back over to them. “Where to?”

“Where else?” Khan smiles. “The bridge. They’ll know we’re here but they’ll only be expecting one or two at most. This way, quickly.” He hurries, not quite running but moving faster than a walk. Jill keeps up with him, but Khan does not like her color. Euphoric or not, she is still injured.

Later for that. For now—they come across two thugs; Jake takes down one and Jill demands the other. “We signed up to serve,” Jake says tightly, wiping his blade clean. “Any so-called officer on
Marcus’ ship betrayed their oaths to Starfleet. We may be here but we’re trying to save it, not destroy it from within.”

“Some would argue the reverse,” Cat points out.

“Fuck them,” Jill says succinctly. Khan smiles.

They take down a few more thugs, although Jake and Jill don’t insist on killing them all. Khan appreciates that—not that he cares for himself, Marcus will be enough—but Cat gets…cranky when denied a proper target.

Only a few hundred meters away from the bridge, the computers come back online. Matthew grimaces. “I knew that was going to happen, but I hoped it would take longer.”

“Hope and all that,” Cat says. “It was enough for now, and we will take this man down before he can fire again, da?”

“Da,” Khan says and walks onto the bridge. “Hello, Alexander.”

Marcus gets to his feet. “You—” He stops, confused, looking at the others. “Who the hell are you all?”

“My family,” Khan says pleasantly. “And witnesses.”

“To what?” Marcus demands, his face turning red.

“Come now, Alexander,” Khan says, letting his wings stretch. “I promised you I would end your life. I promised you, on my word, that I would kill you for your actions toward me. You murdered my family, Marcus, sixty of them helpless in cryosleep.”

Marcus’ face hardens. “You must be mad if you think I came here unprepared to deal with you,” he says and flips the switch of some handheld—Khan realizes what it is as soon as the first waves hit and he staggers back, fighting to keep his feet in the force of the sonic attack. Marcus smiles, and sits down, watching.

“Khan—what—“ Jill says, or he thinks she says.

Alona collapses to the ground; Ekaterina hits the floor behind her. Khan sinks to his knees, hands clutching his head. He can’t think, he can’t answer Jill—

“Right then,” Jill says and runs around the bridge, diving over into the captain’s chair and wrestling Marcus to the ground with the force of it. “Jake, a little help?” she asks, fighting to keep Marcus on the floor.

Jake slams the hilt of his sword down on Marcus’ head with enough force the man slumps to the ground, mostly senseless. Jill wrestles the device out of his hand and hits the switch.

Khan collapses like a puppet whose strings were just cut, aching all over. He knows this will pass, and quickly, but he needs a moment.

Jill runs over to him, crouching next to him. “Dragon, what—“

“We are vulnerable to certain types of sonic damage, frequencies normal humans can’t hear,” Khan says hoarsely. “It does not kill us but it is incapacitating. Causes seizures if it goes on long enough. But once the stimulus is gone, the damage heals.”
“So you do have an Achilles heel,” Jill says softly, brushing his hair back. “I wondered.”

“He’s not going anywhere anytime soon,” Jake says. “Take the time you need.”

Khan appreciates that, truth be told, and takes a minute until his body no longer aches with every breath. He stands up, seeing his family do the same. “Status?” he asks.

“Clear,” Alona says, as do the others.

“Good.” Khan looks at Marcus, half-senseless on the ground, and smiles again. He reaches down, grabs Marcus by the throat, and lifts him into the air, holding him easily as Marcus struggles for breath. “Let’s try this again, shall we?” he asks pleasantly. “Hello, Alexander. I’m here to kill you. Do you believe me yet?”

He lowers Marcus to the floor, loosening his grip enough to let the man talk. “You—betrayed—Federation,” Marcus says. “You—"

“I just spent four days on Qo’noS winning the right—very brutally—to negotiate for peace with the Klingons, Alexander,” Khan says, tightening his hold on Marcus’ throat again. “You won’t get your war. I promised you, Marcus, I promised I would end you and all you held dear. You held me captive, Alexander. You tortured me, experimented on me, used me, and I do not take kindly to being used. I gave you the opportunity to try and convince me of your point of view, I gave you multiple chances to work with me. I could have been your greatest ally, Alexander. I could have made you unstoppable. I know war. I lived war, for years. I could have given you the greatest war you could ever imagine.”

Purple probably shouldn’t be his color yet, so Khan loosens his grip and lets Marcus suck in air. He continues, his voice still calm, almost gentle. “But that isn’t the path you chose, and so here we are, Alexander. I hold you accountable for your crimes against me, against my family that you murdered. And the price…is your life.”

“You can’t do this,” Marcus wheezes. “You can’t possibly think you’ll get away with it.”

“Matthew, are we in Federation space?” Khan asks idly.

“We are not,” Matthew says cheerfully. “While you were explaining to the good admiral exactly why he’s going to die, I moved us to the Klingon border of the Neutral Zone and let them know who we were. Gowtek says hi, and he wants proof of the kill.”

“By all means,” Khan says. “Cat, if you and Jill would, please.”

It pleases him to have two women—and those women—force Marcus to his knees. “Wait,” Jake says. “Before you do this.”

Khan gestures to him, and Jake comes forward. “Captain Aaron Lawrence Jacobs, Intelligence undercover operative, sir,” he snaps. “I reported directly to Viola Cathcart. She was my mentor, and my CO. I really hope you burn in hell for what you did to her, and her daughter.” He looks Marcus over with contempt and spits in his face before walking off.

“Also, while we’re on that,” Jill says. “Lieutenant Commander Jill Drendara Calastinova, sir. Last shipboard assignment, USS Marshall, first officer, time in position three years. I served Starfleet proudly for fifteen years and you make me want to burn my uniform. You’re a disgrace to the position, a disgrace to Starfleet, and I only hope it can recover from your rot.” She doesn’t spit on him, but she punches the back of his head. “Asshole.”
“Khan,” Konstantin says, handing him the hilt to his sword. “This will work better.”

It will. Khan’s own blade might not decapitate Marcus on one swing; this will. “Spasiba,” he murmurs.

“End it, Khan.” Konstantin touches his shoulder and steps back.

Khan unfolds the blade and sees Marcus pale in terror. “Alexander Marcus,” he says. “For your crimes against me, for your crimes against my family, I have judged you and found you guilty. Your sentence is execution, to be carried out by me.”

One swing, and Marcus’ head drops to the floor. The stench of urine arises a moment later, and Jill wrinkles her nose, getting up. “I think I have blood all over me,” she says, looking at Khan. “Does that turn you on, dragon?”

Khan grabs her by the shoulders and pushes her up against the wall, kissing her even as she laughs into his mouth. “Covered in the blood of our dead enemies, it’s a good look for you,” he says, biting her lip.

“Avenging warrior, it’s good one for you,” Jill says, biting his earlobe. “And we need to stop making out before Cat throws knives at us.”

Khan laughs. “Yes.” He kisses her again, though, and Jill laughs as she slides down the wall.

“All right,” she says. “Someone distract me from my desire to play soccer with Marcus’ head and contact the Enterprise?”

“Hailing them now,” Khan says, activating the controls. A moment later, the Enterprise bridge shimmers into view—remarkably whole, considering, although Jasmine has a knife pulled on Kirk. “My claw, status.”

“Nothing of import, my lord,” she says, not lowering her knife. “Kirk and I were merely discussing discipline. I offered to show him a demonstration, and so now we are stuck until he yields. He apparently does not think I can do this for a while.”

“Kirk, the last time she held a knife on a prisoner she stayed there for thirteen hours,” Khan says. “And it would have been longer but the man finally caved. You will not win. Apologize for whatever you did wrong and let her drop the knife so we can be done with this.”

“Why does everyone always assume I did something?” Kirk asks plaintively.

“Because you usually did, asshole,” a cranky voice says. Khan looks over and sees signs of surgery—medical, but he doesn’t remember Kirk’s CMO. “Are they done firing on us? Can I get back to fixing people without fearing the damn ship’s gonna come apart?”

“I’m pretty sure that is what Khan’s on the screen to tell us,” Kirk says. “Unless this is your point to tell us otherwise.”

“I could,” Khan says, considering it. “We have superior firepower, my people can get off your ship in time. I could destroy you.” He smiles faintly. “But no. We did make a deal, captain, and you still have a part to play. The Vengeance, however, is staying with me until I return it to Earth.”

“Why?” Kirk asks.

“Because I designed it, Kirk, and before I hand it over to Starfleet I would actually like to see what
it is capable of,” Khan says. “I was, at one point, an engineer. For a time here I was again, and I want to see the results of my work.”

“That is…logical,” Spock concedes.

“Jasmine, what insult did he give you?” Khan asks, noticing that she hasn’t moved.

“The boy—“ Jasmine’s voice drips with contempt. “—seems to think I am some kind of uncontrolled killer, unable to stop myself from taking victims at will. Undisciplined, was the word he used.”

Khan winces before he can stop it, and all his siblings groan. “Oh, boy,” Alona says. “Oh, Kirk, you very pretty idiot.”

“I will stand here, Kirk, and hold this knife on you until you concede you were wrong,” Jasmine says calmly. “I have that discipline. I have the discipline to cut your clothes off and not touch your skin once. I trained, for years, to be the best soldier, the best captain, for Khan. Do you know what soldiers have in spades, Kirk? They have discipline. So we will stand here, and I will wait until we both die of starvation before I lower my knife.”

“You see, Kirk, you gave her perhaps the most offensive insult you possibly could,” Khan says, wondering how the man did it. “By insulting her discipline, you not only insult her own skills but mine, because she was my aide, my captain. If you say she is undisciplined, that means I chose poorly in her, and I am ill-served. And while she might—might, and I am not certain of this—let it go if it was just about her—you insulted her service to me, and she will never forgive that.”

“Are you sure I can’t kill him, my lord?” Jasmine asks calmly.

“Not at this time,” Khan says. “One punch, Jasmine, and let it go. Try not to break his nose.”

Jasmine flips her knife in the air, tucks it away, and slams her fist into Jim’s face. He stumbles back and falls on his ass. “I could have broken your nose, or your jaw,” she says. “I gave you a bloody nose but your medic will find I did not break anything. Khan told me to let this go, so this will be the end of this. But I do not forget, Kirk. You are…necessary to the plan my lord has, and thus I let you live, but one day, that may change. Until then…I can wait. I have the discipline to do that.” She smiles and blows him a kiss.

Kirk gets to his feet, wiping blood off his face with his sleeve. “Okay, I deserved that,” he says. “And I apologize for insulting you, and insulting Khan. I still reserve the right to feel like you want to kill me and the barest of threads is holding you back.”

“Perhaps, but I am well aware of that thread,” Jasmine says. “It is what makes me, and my siblings, apex predators. We know when to attack—and more importantly, we know when not to.”


At once she steps back, inclining her head. “My lord.”

“Kirk, how badly damaged is your ship?” Khan asks. “Are my people needed?”

“We lost some, and there are still some areas where we could use help in sheer physical labor, if your people are willing,” Kirk says. “Your people are all alive and healthy, though, and Bones says he appreciates the help.”

“Was it your idea to send extra medical?” Bones—grumpy brunet—asks.
“It was,” Khan says. “I figured either the CMO would be smart enough to appreciate extra help, or he’d be a useless idiot in which case my people would be useful anyway.”

“I like to think I’m neither useless nor an idiot,” Bones says. “At this point my staff and I have things handled enough yours can go back, though.”

Khan considers his options, how best to proceed. “Kirk, you have my people for another four hours, then I want them back,” he says. “Those on the Vengeance, if you have the desire to assist the Enterprise, by all means head on over. I will be staying here to ensure we have no unwanted guests still lingering.”

“While we have the chance we should contact Andy and the bird,” Jill murmurs in Russian; Khan nods slightly.

“Jasmine, are you needed to stay on the Enterprise?” he asks.

“I would like to stay, my lord,” she says, not really a surprise. “You entrusted Kirk’s safety to me and until we are done, he is my responsibility.”

“Oh, shit,” Kirk mutters under his breath.

“Don’t torture him too much, my claw,” Khan says in Farsi.

“Only as much as he deserves, my lord,” she answers in the same language.

Khan can’t really argue that point and decides to leave best alone. Jasmine may be unshakably loyal to him but he can only command her to a point. “In four hours, I want everyone to beam back to the Vengeance,” he says. “From here we will return to Qo’noS and finish this business.”

“We have to get back to Earth,” Kirk says.

“Your ship needs to return to Earth, yes,” Khan says. “You, however, are needed on Qo’noS.”

He does appreciate the position Kirk is in, believe it or not. His duty to his crew means he needs to take them back to Earth. His duty to the Federation…

“Better question, will the ship be capable of warp in four hours?” Jill asks. “Because otherwise no one’s going anywhere.”

“I honestly can’t answer that,” Kirk says. “Marcus targeted Engineering and I don’t know how extensive the repairs need to be on top of what he already did to the warp drive.”

“So let’s re-evaluate in four hours,” Jill says. “I am going to stay on this ship with Khan, because I can’t contribute much in sheer physical labor and this euphoric is going to wear off eventually.”

“Kostya and I will go to the Enterprise,” Cat says. “We can be of use.”

Anandi opts to stay on the Vengeance, as does Jake, but the others beam over to the Enterprise to assist with repairs. “Before we do anything else, we need to contact Gowtek,” Jill says once it’s just them and the link is shut down. “Explain what happened and maybe see if we can get a time period to go home and stuff before we start talking?”

Khan smiles a little. “I did have that thought, yes.”

He uses the ship’s communications system to contact Gowtek. “Our concerns have been dealt with,” he says, gesturing to Marcus’ body on the floor. Jill lifts his head briefly and sets it down.
with a grimace.

“Did he die with honor?” Gowtek asks.

“He was a dishonorable liar,” Khan says. “He had no honor to die with and he was executed.”

“As should be done with dishonorable liars,” Gowtek says, satisfied. “You do think like a Klingon, my winged brother.”

“Khan,” he says with the gesture the Klingons use.

“Your name sounds almost Klingon,” Gowtek says. “So. It is well. What assistance do you require from Qo’noS?”

“None at this time,” Khan says. “We are repairing damage to our ships, but our Federation witnesses wish to return their damaged ship and its crew to Earth. At the same time, my people would appreciate a moment to refresh ourselves and find suitable attire.”

“Yes, I see,” Gowtek says. He nods. “Will three days be enough time?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “While we are discussing terms, I have a question. Fifteen of us took the field against your warriors, but we had two in our unit that did not accompany us to Qo’noS. They are not fighters in that aspect, but without them none of us would have reached you. Would it be allowed for them to join us when we return?”

“They are not fighters, you say,” Gowtek says, frowning. “So how are we to judge their honor?”

“They are my family,” Jill says. “They are my sworn siblings, and my honor is theirs. If I have honor, so do they, and if they have none, neither do I.” She looks at Gowtek calmly. “Surely the Klingons have warriors whose fight is other than a battlefield.”

“Your mate is clever,” Gowtek says to Khan. “She must have led you a merry chase to catch her.”

“Oh, I let him catch me,” Jill says. “But I didn’t make it easy for him to keep me.”

Khan curls his hand around her wrist. “My lioness,” he says softly.

She smiles. “My dragon.”

“What is a dragon?” Gowtek asks. “Lions I have heard of, but dragons?”

“They are mythical beasts, capable of flight and depending on which version you believe they can breathe different kinds of weapons, fire or acid or whatever,” Jill says. “They’re beautiful, and dangerous, and some say they don’t exist at all, that they never did.”

“What do you think?” Gowtek asks.

“I think everything exists somewhere, you just have to know where to find it,” Jill says.

“Speaks a true adventurer,” Gowtek says.

Jill smiles. “Always. And we have digressed from the matter at hand, which is whether my siblings will be allowed to claim a space with us when we return to Qo’noS. We do not ask that they be allowed to negotiate, just that they be there to witness with us.”

Gowtek nods, considering it. “Your honor will stand for theirs,” he says. “If they cause dishonor
“They won’t,” Jill says. She smiles. “I understand you were surprised by my survival in the arena.”

“I admit the odds were not in your favor,” Gowtek says. “But. You are a skilled warrior, and a cunning one.”

Jill makes the head back gesture. “Thank you.”

“Do you speak our language?” Gowtek asks.

“I do not,” Jill says. “I can understand more of it than I can speak, but I can only speak a few phrases.”

“Ah, well,” Gowtek says. “You have time to learn.”

“I do,” Jill agrees. “With your leave, we will return to Qo’noS in some hours to gather our belongings, and then return three days later with two more people. Is this accurate?”

“Hijja’n,” Gowtek says. “Yes. I will leave you to attend to matters.” He tips his head back and disconnects.

“Well, that was convenient,” Jake says. “Also, while you were talking I ran a few scans of the ship’s systems and couldn’t find any life signs other than our own. We’ll probably want to space the bodies, because they tend to stink really fast.”

“Spoken like a man who has had to do this,” Anandi says.

“Pretty much,” Jake says. “Space is big, bodies are small, it’s an easy way to dispose of something you don’t want found. Although most starships have a way to cremate dead bodies and compact them before you shoot them out an airlock. No idea if this one does, though.”

“You know I’m honestly not sure,” Khan says. “I doubt it, but there were some elements of the design I didn’t influence.”

“Not a big deal, I figure we’ll haul them into an airlock, vent to space, and be done,” Jake says. “There are six bodies, plus Marcus, and I don’t know what the fuck you want to do with him.”

“I am not about to preserve his head or his body as a trophy,” Khan says with a grimace. “He can be spaced with the others.”

“We are savages, not barbarians,” Anandi says. “We kill our enemies, but then we dispose of the bodies.”

“Practical,” Jake says with a grin. “I like it.”

“You are quite practical,” Anandi says. “Bueno.”

“Anandi believes there are not enough practical people in the world,” Khan says.

“She’s right,” Jake says. “But I have noticed Anandi usually is.”

“Oh, I like this one,” Anandi says, laying a hand on Jake’s arm. “Hermano, what is it exactly you want from me?”

Jake grins. “That was honesty, I swear. However, the fact is that you and Khan are both
substantially stronger than myself and Jill as well as uninjured, which we are not. So help dragging bodies to an airlock would be appreciated.”

“But of course we would do that,” Anandi says. “That is practical. You need to heal, we do not. However, if you would like to accompany us as we go, since you seem to have marked the locations of the bodies.”

“I’m not staying here with Marcus’s body,” Jill says. “So let’s go deal with this.”

It may be practical but it’s also somewhat macabre, Khan thinks, dragging two dead bodies through the halls of the Vengeance. However it’s also darkly amusing, and really not as though they have much else to do.

Jake checks medbay, or what passes for one, but can’t find any kind of crematorium. Khan shrugs. “Marcus likely thought it would never be an issue, and removed it. You see how sparse the medbay is.”

“I do,” Jake says. “Makes me glad we’re not keeping it. We’re not, right?”

Khan smiles. “No, we are not.”

“I quite dislike this ship,” Anandi says. “I will be glad to leave it.”

That makes Khan frown, because Anandi doesn’t usually dislike inanimate objects. “Why do you dislike it?” he asks.

She looks at him and he stops, rocked by the compassion in her face. “I dislike this place because it was created on forced labor from you, hermano,” she says. “I dislike it because you paid for this ship in blood and lives. Our lives. This is a ship built for war and you have said, Khan, no more war for us. We are tired of war. This ship was built with hate and fear and anger, and I do not wish to spend one more second on it than I absolutely must.”

“Why didn’t you go to the Enterprise?” Khan asks.

“Because I am not leaving you on this ship of hate with only two injured people to guard your back,” Anandi says. “I mean no offense to Jake or Jill, but really.”

“None taken,” Jake says in unison with Jill.

“We may be alone on this ship but…” Anandi shakes her head. “I do not think this is over. Not yet.”

“That’s not ominous or anything,” Jake says. “Did you dream last night?”

“Not that I recall,” Anandi says. “And I may be wrong. It just…frankly, this feels too easy.”

“You have a point on that one,” Jill says. “Although I feel like at some point we reach the top of this hill and then it gets easier. Maybe killing six hundred something Klingons was it.”

“Perhaps,” Anandi says.

“Well, look at it this way,” Jake says. “We’re close enough to Earth that if Kirk contacts them, and they decide to send reinforcements after us, we’ll know about it before we go back to Qo’noS.”

“What a charming thought,” Jill says. “Taking out Marcus and his thugs was one thing. I really don’t want to fight officers.”
“I have faith in our ability to avoid that eventuality,” Jake says. “Mostly because we have superior firepower.”

“That we do,” Jill says. “Are we almost at an airlock? And then maybe a washroom? I have blood all over my hands and arms.”

“The airlock is only a couple hundred meters away, down this hall,” Khan says. “There is a toilet one level up, or the medbay just here.”

“I’ll use the medbay, but let’s deal with the bodies first,” Jill says. They haul the bodies into the airlock, not bothering to be gentle with them, and Jill sets Marcus’s head on top of the pile. Khan snorts when he sees it.

“Sending a message, kitten?” he asks.

“We should take a picture,” Jill says. “For posterity, or evidence, or something.”

Jake takes out his link and snaps a few photos. “There. Not that I know what the hell we’ll do with it, but we have it.”

“Just in case we need it,” Jill says.

“We might,” Anandi says. “I have no idea. Khan—he needed to die, of course, but how difficult a position will we be in as a result?”

“Less than it could be, I think,” Khan says as they leave the airlock and seal the door. “Marcus was a traitor to Starfleet, and the Federation, and attacked a Federation starship. We don’t have to explain the circumstances of his death necessarily, simply that we killed him to prevent him from destroying the Enterprise.”

“I think it’ll depend on who succeeds him,” Jake says. “But I don’t know who that will be.”

“We’ll figure it out when we go back to Earth, eventually,” Jill says. “For now—here’s my thinking. We have four hours here. We should contact Andy and Magpie, let them know what’s going on, and then maybe take this ship for a spin or something. When we get our people back, we’ll go to Qo’noS, get our things, then go back to the Femarans. We can leave the Vengeance with them, beam back to Earth, take actual showers and get real clothes and get Andy and the bird. Then we go back to the Vengeance and fly it to Qo’noS and then return it to Earth when we’re done negotiating.”

“This seems logical to me,” Anandi says. “How long do you expect negotiations with the Klingons to take?”

“Honestly I’ve no idea but we should prepare for a week or two,” Jill says. “I’m not a diplomat, I don’t know how this usually works.”

“Ideally we are not sorting out all the details, but rather establishing a framework of rules and agreements that can later be detailed,” Khan says. “The Federation can fill in those points. For the overall peace accords, I should think a week to ten days would be sufficient.”

“Do you know what you want to accomplish in the negotiations?” Jill asks. “I was so focused on getting to them I didn’t spend a lot of time thinking about them and I’m not a diplomat so I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“I do know,” Khan says. “Bishop and Konstantin and Katsuro and I discussed this at length, and
we know what we intend to ask for and what will be acceptable.”

“Not to—how did you figure that out when you don’t know all the ins and outs of the Federation?” Jake asks.

“Some things never change,” Khan says simply. “Also, Marcus was quite verbose about the Klingons and their interests within the Federation. I know what the Klingons want of the Federation’s resources, and I know what the Federation wants from the Klingons. Marcus spent hours upon hours talking to me about why this war was inevitable and why we had to win it. Obsessed, honestly.”

“Well now he’s dead and can obsess from beyond the grave,” Jill says. “And if you would kindly open the airlock, then I can go wash up and we can call Andy.”

“Yes,” Khan says and pulls the lever.

They do stop in medbay to wash up, and then return to the bridge. “We should use the one-shot link and then tell them to call us,” Jill says. “Yes?”

“Yes,” Khan says. He has the one-shot link in his pocket, and takes it out, dialing the one contact programmed into it.

A series of clicks and beeps follows and then silence for a moment. Then—“Please tell me you’re alive,” from Magpie.

“We’re all alive, bird,” Jill says. “Things got, um, interesting, but we all survived and we defeated the Klingons. And Marcus. But this is a bit complicated, so can you contact us via a video link so we can explain? We’re on the Vengeance, so if you just hail the ship, it should work.”

“Why the fuck are you on the Vengeance?” Magpie asks. “Okay, never mind, tell me in a minute. I have to go get Andy, he’s meditating, so I will call you in about five.” She disconnects before anyone can say goodbye.

Jill shrugs. “I’m taking the captain’s chair because I actually need to sit down, and find morphine.”

“I have some,” Jake says. “If you need it.”

“I think I have some on me,” Jill says, taking a seat. She digs a twist of paper out of her pocket and swallows the pills hidden inside. “That should kick in soon.”

“When we return to Earth to gather our things, if I have about six hours and access to a lab I can synthesize more of the euphorics,” Anandi says.

“We may not have that time or access, but we’ll see,” Jill says. “Jake, do you think Gabe could get Anandi into one of the Starfleet labs?”

“Maybe,” Jake says. “I can send him a message and ask.” He takes out his comm-link again.

Khan lets his wings stretch a bit, taking advantage of the space on the bridge to let them relax. After all the flying and fighting of the last few days his wings are actually much more relaxed than usual, but any chance to stretch.

A couple minutes go by, and then the ship receives an incoming transmission. When the video kicks in, Khan sees Andy and Magpie in a smallish room, but the angle of the camera means he can’t get a good view of anything but the two of them.
“Oh good, you really are alive and okay,” Magpie says when she sees them. “So what the fuck happened?”

Jill laughs. “So much. So very much.”

“Well, then, tell us,” Andy says reasonably.

Khan smiles, and does.

Chapter End Notes

You'd think it would be over, but there's a surprising amount left in the story. We are through most of it, though.
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

We have a bottle of Andorian red. And I think we've earned it.

Chapter Notes

I won't say the finish line is in sight, but I will say it's getting a lot closer. Stay with me, I promise I'll do my best to make it worth it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Enterprise is mostly safe to fly by the time four hours are up. Scotty and Chekov both think the warp drive will last long enough to get them back to Earth; beyond that, no one's willing to commit to a positive answer.

“In three days, you will meet us on the Femarans' home planet, or at least you'll be in orbit around it,” Khan says. “Just the three of you, Kirk. Your crew does not accompany you this time.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kirk says, not sounding happy about it. “We’ll be there. Not quite sure how, but we’ll be there.”

It’s not his problem to solve; Khan simply shrugs. “Three days.”

“We’ll see you then,” Kirk says. “And…thanks for the help.”

Khan inclines his head. “You’re welcome.”

The Enterprise drops into warp a moment later. “So…now what are we doing?” Alona asks.

“Right now, we are taking the Vengeance back to Qo’noS, where we will gather our belongings,” Khan says. “Then we will take the ship to the Femarans’ home planet and leave it in orbit. We have three days to get our belongings from Earth, or at least those we may need for negotiations, as well as retrieve Andy and Magpie.”

“We probably shouldn’t all go to Earth at once,” Jill says. “Or some of us maybe shouldn’t go at all.”

“If we are careful, and stay out of sight, it should be okay,” Jake says. “Although I’m not sure about Khan.”

“I packed a bag before we left,” Khan says. “It is at the secure storage facility. Whoever goes to Earth can retrieve it.” He’s not happy about having to stay away from Earth but recognizes the necessity.

Jill slips her hand into his. “Also, there is something we are doing once we retrieve Andy and Magpie and get everyone and our stuff to the Femarans.”
“What is that?” Khan asks.

“We have a bottle of Andorian red,” Jill says, smiling. “And I think we’ve earned it.”

“Yes,” Alona says slowly. “Yes, I think we have.”

Khan smiles a bit. “Then let us go.”

It takes them one full day to get their things and their missing people, mostly because they go in groups of two or four. Jill, Cat and Konstantin take the last trip to Earth, and when they return with their belongings they also return with Andy and Magpie.

“And now we are complete,” Cat says with satisfaction. “We have our things, we have our people.”

“We’ve also all had some amazing showers, my God the Femarans believe in civilized plumbing,” Jill says in contentment. “I am so ready for this, and we’ve got a day and a half left.”

“Which, I think, means it is time to try this Andorian red,” Matthew says hopefully.

“Yes,” Jill says. “We should find somewhere comfortable, though, because no one’s going to want to move when it kicks in.”

When Khan asks him, Aktok smiles and leads them to a natural cavern deeper into the mountain, clearly designed for entertaining. Deep couches and chaise lounges scatter through the cavern, and a small kitchen stands near the back. “Enjoy your spicewine,” he says. “We will not disturb you.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. “For your generosity.”

Aktok smiles again. “You put our creations to good use, and we appreciate that. When you are sober again, before you leave we would like to host a banquet in your honor and hear the story of your battles on Qo’noS.”

“Yes, of course,” Ekaterina says. “We would be honored.”

“Then we will make our preparations,” Aktok says. “Enjoy your day, my friends.”

He leaves them to it. Cat and Andy rummage through the kitchen cabinets to find glasses, coming up with exactly seventeen. Andy sets them in a row on the kitchen counter and puts the bottle of spicewine next to it, drawing it out of its bag.

“That is gorgeous,” Jasmine says, looking at it. “And…what is this again?”

“It’s Andorian wine mixed with a really awesome Andorian drug,” Jill says. “It basically feels like a full-body orgasm that lasts a long time.”

“Good lord I want to try it,” Jasmine says, grinning.

“Andy, you pour,” Jill says. “You’ll be fair.”

“Will there be enough for all of us?” Alona asks as Andy opens the bottle.

“A bottle of Andorian red is generally designed to be shared among eighteen to twenty people,” Jill says. “So we’ll be fine.”

Khan watches Andy pour the spicewine, the golden flecks catching light and shimmering in the glasses. The scent of it is like nothing he’s smelled before, but heady and already a bit intoxicating.
He sees Jill lick her lips unconsciously and Alona moves a little closer to the counter.

Andy manages to divide the entire bottle among the seventeen glasses evenly, and begins handing out glasses once she’s done. When she hands Khan his glass she kisses his cheek. “I’m really glad you’re all right, uncle,” he mumbles.

“As am I,” Khan mumbles back, returning the cheek kiss. “And I am glad you are with us now.”

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” Jill says when everyone has a glass and a seat. “We did it. We accomplished the almost impossible, even with some unexpected twists and turns, and now we’re mostly left doing cleanup. We rock, and we should celebrate ourselves.”

“Yes, we should,” Cat says. “But, sestrenka, none of this would have happened without you, and thus we drink the spicewine in your honor.” She raises her glass. “To our lioness!”

“To our lioness!” the room answers. Jill blushes, ducking her head, and Khan smiles.

“Without you,” he says, touching her cheek. “My lioness.”

“My dragon,” Jill says softly, kissing his palm.

“We have earned this,” Alona says. “So let’s enjoy it.”

“Yes,” Jill says. “So I say l’chaim. To life!”

“To life!” the room choruses again, and Khan raises his glass to his lips to drink.

The euphoria hits quickly, even before he’s finished drinking, and when he sets his empty glass down Jill snuggles into his chest with a contented sigh. Khan kisses her hair and holds her, his body feeling too heavy to move but also feeling more relaxed than he has in…centuries.

He feels like he’s floating, almost, warm and safe and sated like he’s just had a mind-blowing orgasm. Jill’s breath comes soft and even against his chest, but when Khan brushes her hair back she smiles a bit.

Really, though, that’s about all Khan can manage, because he’s just too relaxed to bother with anything else. More than relaxed, though, he feels…good. Happy, maybe, or at least extremely content.

He closes his eyes, letting himself drift. They did it. They accomplished the almost impossible. Khan honestly isn’t sure how they pulled it off; looking at everything, they should have failed a dozen times over. The Klingons should have rejected their unorthodox proposal, or killed them, or…

But they didn’t, and now Khan gets to negotiate peace accords with the Klingons on behalf of a governmental system he doesn’t particularly care for. The thought strikes him as particularly funny and he laughs quietly. He could sell the Federation down the river, honestly, but…he won’t. Personal feelings aside, they signed up to represent the Federation in these accords and that is exactly what they will do.

It also amuses him that Kirk will be there but not allowed to speak or negotiate; he knows that won’t go over well, and he looks forward to seeing Kirk’s frustration. Petty of him, perhaps, but the man gravely insulted Jasmine and Khan will not forget that any more than she will.
To be fair, Kirk didn’t ask to get caught up in this mess, and has in Khan’s estimation done a decent job of going along with it, but that does not mean Khan has to enjoy having him around. Perhaps he’s not as neutral on Starfleet as he thought he was.

It doesn’t matter. Khan lets the thought go—easy enough—and focuses instead on physical sensations: the warm, floaty feeling in his body; Jill snuggled against his chest; the smile he can’t quite seem to banish from his face.

He understands why this is mostly illegal and highly expensive now; it’s a high like no other, and would be almost irresistible to an addict, assuming one taste didn’t create an addiction in the first place.

Fortunately, Khan and his siblings are not prone to addiction, and Jill and hers—well, aside from Andy Khan has no concerns. He does wonder how Andy reacted to the spicewine and if she regrets that decision, but speech is beyond him at the moment and frankly he doesn’t even want to open his eyes to look for him.

Jill sighs a little and stretches before settling back down against his chest. Khan tightens his arm around her, able to do that much at least; she sighs again in contentment and brushes a sleepy kiss over his collarbone.

At some point Khan falls asleep and only realizes it when he becomes aware he’s dreaming, caught in swirling mists and a seemingly endless plain. He’s not sure what he’s doing here but starts walking, picking a direction at random. The mists swirl around him, almost pulling him forward, and when they clear he looks around at the formal throne room he used centuries ago.

“Hello, my beautiful idiot,” a voice says and Khan freezes, afraid to turn and see her but also afraid to turn and not see her.

He turns, and sees her standing on the dais, dressed in gold with her hair spilling down her back. She smiles when she sees him. “Did you miss me?”

Khan honestly has no words for her; he walks over to her, reaching for her hands and expecting them to be insubstantial, but when his fingers close around hers he feels them, soft and warm and solid. “Rani,” he whispers, sinking to his knees, his throat tight and tears stinging his eyes. “Oh, my queen…”

“Shh,” she whispers, cradling his head against her stomach, stroking his hair. “I’m here. It’s all right, my lion. I’m here.”

He doesn’t quite cry, but a couple tears slip down his cheeks. He doesn’t know how long they stay like that, but eventually he gets to his feet, taking her hands again. Even with her standing on the dais, he’s taller than she is.

“You can’t stay,” she says softly, touching his cheek. “And neither can I. This isn’t your place, and…my time with you is over, my lion. It wasn’t enough but we couldn’t change it, and now…you don’t need me anymore. You have her.”

“I still need you,” Khan says, matching her tone. “I always will.”

“I know,” Rani says. “And if I can come to you again, I will, but I do not know if I will be able to. But…she takes care of you, my lion, and she matches your passion, your fire. I love you, Khan, and I always will, but she loves you more. I never thought that would be possible, but…it is.”

“I know,” Khan says quietly. “It doesn’t change the fact that I still love you. She knows that.”
“Of course it doesn’t,” Rani says. “Love isn’t finite. But she is your mate now, not me, and she’ll be with you for a long time. Be happy with her, Khan.”

“I will be,” he says. “And you know that, do you?”

She smiles and says nothing. “How many pieces did you set into motion, Rani?” Khan asks. “What have you been doing?”

Rani shakes her head. “I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Khan asks.

“Can’t,” she says, quietly but with finality. “And…you need to go, Khan. Kiss me and I’ll send you back.”

She winds her arms around his neck and he holds her close, leaning down to kiss her. He smells jasmine but it’s not familiar the way it used to be; he’s used to sandalwood and spicy-sweet now.

“As it should be,” Rani murmurs against his mouth. “I’m your past, my lion. She is your present and your future.”

“Come to me again, if you can,” Khan murmurs back. “Please.”

“If I can,” she promises. She kisses him one last time, fiercely, and steps back as the mists swirl around him.

Khan opens his eyes to see his family still scattered around the room, most of them looking either asleep or too high to move. For himself, he can sense that the spicewine effects are starting to wear off, or at least fade, but they do so gently, easing him back to sobriety one step at a time.

He doesn’t know how long the wine will affect Jill or her sibs, but she hasn’t moved since Khan woke up and her breath comes slow and even. “My lioness,” he says softly in Russian.

A thought occurs to him and he nods to himself. He doesn’t want—can’t have, really—a tattoo as big as the dragon on Jill’s back, but…he wants one for her, something permanent on his body. For a moment he doesn’t know what he wants, then realizes he needs to get her name-sign, from the pidgin language Zach transcribed.

Rani was his guiding light, his lion-tamer. Jill is his lioness, and her light is fire.

And Rani is right. Jill loves him more than she did. Khan knows Rani loved him with all her heart, enough that she persisted after death to help him. But Jill loves him more.

She may think him silly for wanting a wedding, but Khan doesn’t really care. He wants her as his wife when they leave Earth. In the face of the unknown, he wants that formal bond.

Although that does make him wonder how they’ll plan and throw a wedding, and who the hell might actually officiate it. Later for that; for now, he has his lioness almost purring in his lap and feels more content than he possibly ever has.

Slowly, the others return to sobriety, stretching and sitting up and yawning. Anandi gets up first and goes to get water; Maeve joins her and starts filling water glasses, handing them out as people come over or raise a hand.

Khan looks around and sees Jake sprawled on one of the couches, either asleep or still high;
Magpie he thinks to be asleep, curled up on her chaise. Andy—well, isn’t that interesting, Khan thinks, seeing Andy fitted against Matthew’s side, the little spoon to his big spoon. Matthew’s arm drapes over Andy’s waist and Matthew’s head tucks against the back of Andy’s neck.

Andy has a faint smile on his face, but Khan can’t see Matthew’s expression.

Maeve comes over to him with two glasses of water. “Is Jill still high?” she asks softly, setting them down on the end table next to their chaise.

“Either that or asleep, I know not which,” Khan says, taking a glass of water and drinking.

“’m awake,” Jill mumbles, sounding anything but. “I feel too good to move.”

Maeve laughs and pats Jill’s shoulder. “Take your time, sister. You have earned the right to do nothing.”

“We all have,” Jill says around a yawn. “Oh, God, that was incredible. I feel so, so good right now.

Khan smiles, rubbing her back gently. “I admit that was a wholly pleasurable experience.”

“It truly was,” Maeve says with a contented sigh. “Definitely well worth it.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jill says. She stretches and raises her head, blinking her eyes open. “I’m not sure if I slept or not but I feel amazing.”

“Aye, me as well,” Maeve says. “It is probably a good thing Andorian red is so difficult to come by.”

“It’s not really if you can afford it,” Jill says. “But it’s really expensive. The bottle we shared tonight was probably worth a couple million. And Andorian red needs an occasion. You don’t just sip it with a meal, you need a reason to drink it and get high. And it is addictive. Spice doesn’t cause physical dependency, but spicewine is a bit trickier sometimes.”

“No, it’s not really,” Andy says, yawning. “Spicewine can cause physical withdrawal symptoms if you somehow get too much of it in too short a time, but there’s nothing in it or in spice to cause physical dependency. Psychological addiction, oh, yeah, but it’s like cannabis, you can’t get physically addicted to it.”

“How do the effects of spicewine differ from the effects of spice itself?” Matthew asks.

Andy pushes himself to sitting, rubbing his eyes and pushing his hair back. “Spicewine is gentler,” he says. “With the wine, you kind of float along and slowly come down. It’s a very relaxing high. With spice, it hits like a hammer to the skull and you get caught on that edge where ecstasy just becomes pain and…stay there. Until eventually you pass out and wake up sober.”

“Really, really wishing you could get another dose,” Magpie says. “I tried it exactly once, and my God.”

“What time is it, even?” Jasmine asks. “How long were we out?”

“It’s…about nine hours after we drank,” Jake says, looking at the clock.

“Oh, my.” Jasmine laughs. “Well worth the time.”

“Does repeated exposure build tolerance or habituation?” Anandi asks.
“I don’t know,” Andy says. “I know that I never had it often enough to get habituated to it or develop tolerance. We tried not to think about it much on the street because we knew we couldn’t get it often. I know it has a slightly less potent effect on Andorians, and I want to say it doesn’t affect Vulcans at all but I don’t entirely remember. If you go to Andor, the drug itself is available as a kind of open secret if you know who to ask, and the spicewine is a highly regulated and expensive product. I only ever had the wine once before, at Trevor’s party. The drug itself was easier to get on the street.”

“I would be interested in researching more about it,” Anandi says. “I would like to understand the mechanism by which it works.”

“There’s some stuff out there,” Andy says. “I never looked at it much because when I was using spice I didn’t really care about any of it, and then I got clean and didn’t look at it because it wasn’t part of my life.”

“Before we leave Earth, we will be able to outfit our ship with areas of study for us all, I should think,” Anandi says. “Certainly I will require a laboratory, and I should think we will need at least one more for medical research. Andy will need workspace, and so on.”

“We’ll need to research what our options are,” Jill says. “I know the basic ship models Starfleet uses, but they’ve not specifically designed something for long haul travel and frankly we don’t need anything like the Marshall. My crew complement was a hundred and fifty. There are seventeen of us.”

“Yes, but even seventeen of us will all require personal space and workspace and we will require storage and so on,” Ekaterina says. “And what is the ruling on private ships and weaponry?”

“It’s generally frowned upon but I’m pretty sure we can get around it,” Jill says. “It will, however, take us some time to set everything up.”

“Of course,” Anandi says. “We will be embarking on a grand journey, it will take careful preparation. For now, we must determine our plan for the Klingons. Khan, you know them better than any of us save perhaps Jake. What will you have us do?”

“Certainly they will not expect all of us to speak,” Khan says. “I will take the lead. For secondary, I would have Bishop, Cat, Konstantin, and Jill.”

“Me?” Jill blinks. “But I’m not a diplomat.”

“You are my mate,” Khan says. “And this was all your idea. If you say nothing, the Klingons might get offended.”

“Well, fuck,” Jill says. “If I fuck it up, I told you this was a bad idea.”

“You will not,” Khan says patiently. “Jasmine, I would have you be my eyes.”

“Always,” she says. “With the caveat that I know almost nothing about Klingon body language.”

“It’s fairly close to human,” Jake says. “The thing to remember with Klingons is that they’re always angry. Like they just are angry as a state of being. So you have to adjust for what’s just usual Klingon crankypants and what they’re actually upset about.”

“Also everything is about honor,” Jill says. “In case that hadn’t been made obvious.”

“Honor is important,” Khan says. “I don’t think it necessarily matters to the degree the Klingons
do, but there is some truth in it. I honestly don’t think the Federation ever understood or tried to understand how critical it is to Klingon society, and what is required to earn it. There was never going to be lasting peace between them with that disconnect.”

“Enter us,” Jill says.

“So many things lined up just right for this to work,” Maeve says. “Somewhat eerie.”

“Among other words,” Khan says. “We may very well be a chess game on someone else’s board.”

“Possibly,” Cat says. “But I think—I have done some thinking about this, about the dreams and the situations in which our ghosts put themselves, or put us. And it is clear to me that whatever or whoever around us is influencing things, they cannot actually make decisions for us. Situations present themselves in a way that we are likely to react, but truthfully, there has been nothing to indicate our free will has been taken from us. So while we may be a game, it is one in which we can influence the outcome.”

“What else have you been thinking?” Khan asks, curious.

“Many things,” Cat says, laughing. “I think…there must be balance. I believe, for a multitude of reasons, that there needs to be karmic balance. So. We have a ghost on our side, or some kind of supernatural force, that is influencing things in our favor, da? But there must be a cost. For all things, there is a cost, and we have incurred perhaps a greater one than we know. Our family, our brothers and sisters, may have been part of that cost, and the hundreds of Klingons who died on that field. The loss of Kirk’s crew, and his mentor.”

She gets up, gesturing as she walks around. “And yes, Khan, I wonder about Rani. Was her death the cost of her help? But without it, where would we be now? And you wonder why I said nothing earlier.”

“No, I do not,” Khan says. “I wonder the same. I think…it very well may have been.”

“My hypothesis is that she was given a choice,” Ekaterina says, stilling. “I know not what choices she was given, but she chose the path that would allow her to continue to help you.”

“Everything is about choices,” Andy says softly. “When she saved me, she couldn’t actually stop me from doing anything. We talked, and she talked me out of OD’ing but she didn’t actually stop me from doing it.”

Cat gestures to her. “And so. None of us dreamed about winning, because that outcome was dependent upon our actions on the battlefield. Our victory was not assured. And unless I am mistaken, none of us have dreamed since that day.”

Khan says nothing.

“I believe that we are currently in flux, in whatever scenario exists,” Cat says. “That we have come to the end of Rani’s influence, or at least are in a position that cannot be influenced. Negotiations are highly dependent upon the individuals involved, and there are too many variables to warn us.”

“When did you consider all this?” Matthew asks.

“I had time, on our trek,” Cat says.

“Clearly,” Khan says. “What other conclusions did you draw?”
“Kostya and I talked about this,” she says, looking at him. “We would like to better understand the circumstances under which Nero and the other Spock came to this reality, because as we understand it that was a one-time singularity effect, but...everything in this reality shifted as a result, and our own story did not play out the same as our ship was discovered earlier. So instead of whatever happened to us there, here we have a chance to negotiate peace and fly away free. We wonder what karmic balance was incurred against us, to give us this opportunity. We would like to know what happened to us, in that other universe.”

“We may never find out,” Khan says. “Only one person knows, and he is not likely to speak to us about it.”

“But we are not his enemies, in this universe,” Konstantin says. “We have established our own path already, and surely can at least be civil if not allies.”

“Jim can help us if we want to talk to him,” Jake says. “Since, you know, he’s Kirk.”

“I wonder if Jim has already asked,” Jill says. “Or will be asking before he sees us again.”

“If he’s intelligent, he will,” Khan says. “We will find out soon enough.”

“This presumes we ever were discovered in that reality,” Matthew says. “Maybe we weren’t. Maybe we’re still drifting somewhere in space.”

“For whatever reason I’m pretty sure they found you at some point,” Jill says. “Some people are important enough they get woven into the narrative in some fashion, no matter what.”

“Yes, so that raises the question of what you were doing in that universe,” Ekaterina says.

“Couldn’t tell you,” Jill says. “But honestly I don’t care much. This is the reality we have, this is the one we need to deal with, the rest we can figure out later if we ever get a chance.”

“So practical,” Cat says, laughing. “And da, of course this is true. Khan asked me my thoughts.”

“I did,” Khan says. “I am curious what you all think of this.”

“I think Cat’s explanation is logical,” Anandi says. “We know that for all things there is a cost. My question is whether we have finished paying ours, or whether there will be a reckoning ahead.”

“And as to that, I know not,” Ekaterina says, spreading her hands.

“There is little we can do about it either way,” Anandi says. “We should presume there will be a cost to pay, and be pleasantly surprised if there is not.”

“Speaks the endlessly practical,” Cat says, but she laughs. “But it is true. For now, we should worry about the negotiations. Khan, I will of course follow your lead.”

“Wear your knives openly,” Khan says. “All of you. Wear your weapons openly. We fought our way here, we have earned the right to show our weapons. However, we need not come armored for battle. Those whose weapons fold, keep them folded save Alona. The rest of you, wear yours openly. Cat, wear your knives.”

“Some of them, anyway,” she says.

“Always keep one hidden,” Jasmine agrees. “At least.”

A chime sounds at the door and Jill goes to answer it. “Aktok, welcome,” she says, gesturing for
him to enter.

“I trust you had an enjoyable afternoon,” he says.

“We did,” Khan says. “We are, as ever, grateful for your hospitality.”

“Ah, well,” Aktok says. “In a few hours, we will have a feast, and you can tell us of your adventures, of your battles. That will be the price of our hospitality.”

“A fair one,” Cat says. “We have no formal attire.”

“We are not a formal people,” Aktok says. “Be comfortable, by all means. Bring your weapons. We may ask for demonstrations. If it suits you, Melcian will come by in about three hours to bring you to the banquet hall.”

“Yes, thank you,” Khan says. He clasps shoulders with Aktok and sees him out.

He spends the next few hours making notes to himself and talking with Bishop, Cat, and Konstantin about negotiation tactics. Jill starts with them, and after about an hour shakes her head, claiming defeat. “I’ll keep my mouth shut unless I absolutely have to speak,” she says, getting up from the couch. “I’m going to go snuggle with Andy and Magpie for a bit.”

Khan kisses her goodbye and turns back to his siblings. Truthfully, it’s easier this way; the four of them have shorthand Jill doesn’t, and the old tactics come back to mind as they discuss options.

When Melcian arrives, it takes them a moment to finish making notes and get up. Then a few more minutes to freshen up, and such; fortunately, she doesn’t seem to mind waiting. “You are our guests tonight,” she says as they walk through the halls of the mountain. “Eat freely, drink freely, enjoy the evening.”

Everything goes smoothly until the Femarans bring out the forge water, and Cat decides to challenge him and Katsuro and a few of the Femarans to a drinking contest. The Femarans think it’s the best idea ever, Katsuro shrugs, and Khan knows this will end badly but honestly, he doesn’t care. Things get…blurry…after that.

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Khan doesn’t open his eyes because right now he doesn’t particularly want to be alive. Awake is too much to ask for, and if he keeps his eyes closed maybe he can play unconscious for a bit longer.

Soft fingers touch his cheek. “Do you even remember last night? Actually, wait. Do you want to die right now? Grunt for yes, answer me if you’re not actually hungover,” Jill says reasonably.

He manages a grunt, but actual speech is beyond him. “Oh, my dragon,” Jill says sympathetically. “Okay. Tip your head back. Like—yeah, there you go.” She gets him with a hypospray and a few seconds later Khan starts to feel more human. “Now sit up.”

It takes him a moment, but he manages, setting his feet on the floor. Jill hands him a large glass of water. “Drink all of that.”

Good plan, and he does. “Okay, one more,” Jill says, handing him a small green sphere. “Eat that. Trust me. Just eat it.”

Khan looks at it, shrugs, and pops it into his mouth. It tastes of mint, with the texture of some kind
of chewy candy, but as it slowly dissolves in his mouth he realizes it’s also acting as a stimulant. Or maybe that was the hypo. He’s not sure, but when it’s gone he realizes he could almost pass for human. Almost. He’s not quite ready for coherence yet.

“Okay, now we wait,” Jill says, running her fingers through his hair. “In about twenty seconds…”

Curious, Khan counts down, and on two he feels his brain click into gear and shake off the last of the hangover. His head no longer aches, his mouth tastes of mint rather than whatever died in it, his stomach has settled and he feels…rather good, all things concerned. “Who came up with that cure?” he asks. “It’s bloody brilliant.”

Jill laughs. “That’s everyone’s reaction. The answer is that it’s a combination. The hypo is standard Federation hangover treatment, a stimulant and a blocker and some other stuff. The water is self explanatory and the green thing is the Femaran hangover treatment. Jake discovered the one and only time he got drunk here that if you combine those things, and give it about twenty seconds, it’s like a magic bullet and you’re back to normal. So after last night…do you even remember it?”

“I don’t think I want to,” Khan says reflectively.

“Oh, no, it was awesome,” Jill says, giggling. “You and Cat, it was amazing. We caught it on video. The Femarans were very impressed.”

“Who won the drinking—no. I know the answer,” Khan says. “Katsuro won the drinking contest because Katsuro has an iron body and can consume enough alcohol to poison me without showing the effects. Katsuro is likely not even hungover this morning.”

“I’ve no idea but I actually think he passed out before you did,” Jill says. “Although it’s kind of hazy, because that was when Jasmine and I were dragging you down this hall, and Konstantin was carrying Ekaterina down that hall, and Katsuro kind of fell over on Bishop but I didn’t see what happened next.”

“I did not even think I could get drunk to that extent,” Khan says, standing up to stretch and move around a bit. “Did anyone else?”

“Everyone got a little blitzed, but you and Cat and Katsuro went for the gold medal,” Jill says. “Along with Aktok and Dyval and Oleana or whatever her name was, Melcian’s cousin.”

“I don’t think I ever caught it,” Khan says. “How embarrassed should I be?”

“No, seriously, it was awesome,” Jill says, taking his hands. “You didn’t insult anyone, you didn’t offend anyone, you didn’t break anything. You and Ekaterina and Katsuro got into a drinking contest with some of the Femarans and then there was demonstrations of dancing on both sides, and more drinking, and knife throwing, and more drinking, and more dancing and knife throwing and drinking, and then the rest of us decided we were putting you guys to bed. The Femarans were very impressed with Cat’s ability with knives even while shit-faced.”

“The day Cat misses a knife throw is the day I burn her body,” Khan says. “Even completely drunk she is better with knives than I am sober.”

“I don’t know if I would go that far,” Jill says. “But anyway, everyone had a good time, Melcian made sure we had plenty of these green things and the Federation cures, because they laid in a supply knowing we were coming, and now we’re ready to head back to Qo’noS once we dress appropriately.”

Khan smiles, leaning down to kiss her lightly. “I admit I did not have anything that could be
“considered formal attire. Did you?”

“In a sense,” Jill says. “Well, I brought one outfit that I think will work at least for the first day.”

“What is it?” Khan asks.

“I’m wearing it, honey, look at me,” she says more patiently than Khan figures he probably deserved.

He steps back and looks at her. She wears close-fitted black pants and Marveek’s boots, and one knife straps to her right thigh. Two more in forearm sheaths, over what Khan realizes is a bodysuit, not just pants. The utility belt she wore on missions sits snugly around her hips. “Is there something I am—” he starts and then Jill turns around, pulling her hair over a shoulder.

The bodysuit has no back. It closes behind her neck, but skims the line of her shoulders before plunging down the sides, leaving her entire back exposed. Even the very bottom of the dragon shows thanks to how she adjusted the belt.

“It’s a statement piece, Khan,” Jill says. “So let’s make a statement.”

He smiles and reaches for her hand. “My lioness.”

“Damn right.” Jill leans up and kisses him, biting his lip sharply. “My dragon.”

“Let us go find the others,” Khan says. “Also, how drunk did you get?”

“Mm…I stopped at the point where I was happy and blissed out and totally watching your ass as you and Cat were demonstrating dancing,” Jill says. “I figured I could have kept drinking, but really I was happy and loose and life was good, so I switched to water, and then all the ladies except Cat and I ended up talking about girl stuff in between admiring those showing off, and then eventually we realized we needed to drag the two of you to bed.”

“Girl stuff?” Khan asks. “What does that encompass?”

“You’re not a woman, you will never know,” Jill says. “There are just some things that are universal truths to being a woman in this universe, and we were discussing the current state of those truths while we were drunk and could laugh at them.”

“I had once thought this century a bit more advanced than that,” Khan admits.

Jill laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “I did tell you about my Academy research project, right? Of the current Starfleet admirals, or the lineup as existed before Marcus killed some of them and then we killed Marcus, the vast majority are white human men. Less than a third are either female, of color, or another species entirely.”

“How much harassment did you put up with as an adolescent, or at the Academy?” Khan asks.

“Don’t even ask,” she says, shaking her head. “Because it’s all skewed because I was an Olympian, so I got a ton of attention. Most positive, some not.”

“Even at the Academy?” Khan asks.

“No, there everyone thought I was some instructor’s kid,” Jill says. “Or they knew me as that gymnast. I was still getting mistaken for a kid my senior year there, but at least most of the instructors knew me by then, and my classmates.”
“And this is how things are everywhere?” Khan asks.

“Not entirely,” Jill says. “Vulcans are scrupulously equal because to do otherwise would be illogical. Femarans I don’t know much about. But most other alien species either started from a patriarchal society or are still there. And being small, cute, and female tends to make everyone think you’re harmless. Even Vulcans.”

“And Klingons,” Khan says.


“As will everyone else,” Khan says, brushing a curl off her cheek. “Your instincts are good, kitten, and you are better at reading situations than you think. This is just another poker game.”

“I remain unconvinced,” Jill says, but laughs. “But we’ll see.”

“Yes,” Khan says. He leans down and kisses her lightly. “Are you ready to go back to the ship?”

“I am,” Jill says. “Shall we?”

They materialize on the bridge, which still has large bloodstains on a section of the carpet. “Man, this thing must be fun to fly,” Jill says, taking a seat in the pilot’s chair. “What modifications did you make to the warp drive? How much faster or more responsive is it?”

“We have a few hours before we have to be back on Qo’noS, and it will take a bit to get there,” Khan says. “Fly it and find out.”

Jill grins. “Really?”

“I want to see it as well,” Khan says. “You and I should take it out for a spin before everyone else gets on.” He calls Cat, lets her know he and Jill will be back with the ship in a couple hours, and hangs up.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Jill says, turning to face the console. “Where are we going?”

“Plot a random course,” Khan says. “Some kind of loop that returns us here in an hour and a half.”

“I will keep us in Federation space just because it will be easier and also we’re in there now,” Jill says, fingers flying over the controls. “You ready?”

“Let’s fly,” Khan says and Jill punches the throttle.

She takes them out of warp close enough to a nebula to observe it, skimming around it in a showy display of piloting that makes Khan laugh. “Not subtle, lioness,” he says.

“You told me to test it out,” Jill says, laughing with him. “It’s incredibly responsive, which for a ship this size is amazing. It maneuvers easily given the size of the ship. But—okay. How much of this specifically did you design? Because warp drive existed before you came around, and the basic ship design is Starfleet’s. The weapons are amplified versions of ones we traditionally use. What makes this ship yours?”

“In truth most of it was built by the time Marcus woke me,” Khan says. “I had virtually no say in the physical design or the mechanics of the ship. My main refinements were to the weapons systems and the warp drive. The ship has advanced capabilities—it can overtake another in warp, for one—and I designed those.”
“How the hell did you do that?” Jill asks. “How can you overtake a ship at warp?”

“By building transwarp theory into the navigation,” Khan says. He explains what he did, unsure how technical a background Jill has or how much she understands, but she asks a couple questions and then holds up a hand.

“Okay, we’re past my level of knowledge and I’ll just go with it,” she says. “It’ll take about twenty minutes to get back to the Femarans, with no detours.” Jill hits a few spots on the keypad. “And since we have more than that to go… you wanna break in the bridge the way it should be done?”

Khan laughs. “Are you actually asking me to have sex with you on the bridge?”

“In the captain’s chair,” Jill says, grinning as she turns around and gets out of her seat. “It’s an old fantasy of mine. Want to help me fulfill it?”

“Yes,” Khan says, walking toward her. “Yes, I believe I do.”

She’s not wearing anything under the bodysuit and it peels down easily, and while they start by the chair they end up on the floor, Jill braced on her hands to prevent friction burn. Her hair falls over her face and Khan sees the dragon on her back and smiles, his fingers curling tighter in her skin. “My lioness.”

“I want a tattoo,” Jill says, breathless. “I got one for you, you got one for me.”

“Yes,” Khan says, and then neither of them have breath for anything else.

After, they lie on the floor for a time until something beeps on Jill’s belt. “We have five minutes to clean up before we have to get back to the Femarans,” she says, rolling over to grab the belt. “I have body wipes.” She takes two for herself, passes Khan one, and in five minutes both of them are back to normal.

“Let’s go back,” she says, sliding into the pilot’s chair.


When they arrive back at the Femarans’ planet, another, small ship is in orbit. Khan presumes it to be the Starfleet officers, but doesn’t hail it. Instead, he calls Cat and lets her know he and Jill have returned. “We might as well put all our things on the ship,” she says. “Tell us the coordinates of a hangar bay or such, and then we will come to the bridge.”

Khan gives her the coordinates for the small hangar bay; it’s far too big for their needs but the ship has remarkably few areas to put things. Given its purpose, he doesn’t find it that surprising, and yet. All battles involve treasure, or trophies.

As the bridge fills up, Khan leaves the captain’s chair empty simply because it won’t be comfortable to sit in with his wings. Jill keeps the pilot’s seat, and Andy slides into navigation, but no one takes the captain’s chair. Khan appreciates the sentiment, but it does make the bridge a bit more crowded.

At exactly the designated time, the other ship hails the Vengeance. Jill answers it. “You made it, I see,” she says when the video kicks in and they can see the three Starfleet officers, in formal uniform.

“We did, and we explained the situation to Admiral Cathcart, who appears to have taken over,” Kirk says.
“Viola’s alive?” Jake demands, coming to the front of the bridge.

“She is,” Kirk says. “She’s in a wheelchair and may be for a while, but she’s alive, and mentally all there, and the only one left who was willing to take over. Admiral Rafferty is suspended pending review of section 31, and Barnett isn’t being trusted either because he was tight with Marcus, so Admiral Cathcart is now head of Starfleet. She says to tell you that you did her proud, for the record, and she’s refusing to accept your resignation.”

“Your what?” Khan asks.

Jake looks at Jill. “We submitted our resignations, back-dated to when we left Earth for the Femarans,” Jill says. “We didn’t want any link. We wanted it very clear that when we went to Qo’noS we did so as ourselves, not as Starfleet officers.”

“Besides, we knew we were quitting anyway,” Jake says.

“Yeah, well, Admiral Cathcart says you’re not, so you can argue that with her later,” Kirk says. “But she said you did her proud, and was emphatic on me telling you that.”

“Thanks,” Jake says seriously. “I…that means a lot from her. Thanks.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Kirk says. “As to us—we are your official Federation representatives to negotiations on behalf of the Federation in which the Federation is not taking part. No one likes that, including us, but when I explained what you had to go through to win a seat at the table no one tried to argue otherwise.”

“Wise choice,” Khan says.

“Is there any problem with Marcus’ death?” Jill asks.

“Well, it’s not like they can arrest you for it,” Kirk says. “And pretty sure Admiral Cathcart had her own opinions on whether he should have lived or not, so…I think you get away with it.”

Spock doesn’t look pleased, Khan notes, but he doesn’t care. “Are you using that ship to go to Qo’noS?” he asks instead. “Or will you be joining us?”

“We are leaving this ship here and going with you,” Kirk says. “If that is acceptable?” He grins a little and Khan almost smiles. Under other circumstances, he thinks he would like Kirk. Under very different circumstances…but never mind that.

“We’ll beam you over,” Jill says.

The bridge is slightly crowded with twenty people on it, and Kirk almost sits in the captain’s chair before a couple cleared throats clue him in and he wanders away. “Jim, you wanted to meet Andy,” Jill says, pointing to him. “This is our hardware genius. Andy, this is Jim Kirk.”

“Hi,” Andy says, raising a hand.

“Hi,” Kirk says. “I have an engineer who’s dying to pick your brain.”

Andy grins. “Maybe when this is over.”

“Okay, we ready?” Jill asks, looking at Khan.

“We are,” he says. “Take us to Qo’noS, my lioness.”
Jill grins and punches it.

Chapter End Notes

Kinda...convenient, isn't it, that the admiral who took over Starfleet is Jake's mentor and on the augments' side. One might wonder why Viola got the idea to resign as and when she did, and what she intends to do now.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Let the games begin.

Chapter Notes

We're still getting there. Slowly, but we're getting there.

To folks who may have just come into this recently--welcome to my madness, and thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The seat of Klingon government is housed in a building that Jim’s pretty sure was a hell of a fortress once upon a time, although honestly he wonders how recent that time might be. They’re greeted upon transport by Gowtek and his two deputies, who he introduces as Kahsor and Ny’lana. The latter is…surprisingly pretty for a Klingon, although the smile she gives Khan looks a bit too predatory for Jim’s liking. Jill seems to think the same thing, from the way she discreetly coughs and gives Ny’lana a look.

To give her credit, Ny’lana immediately backs down.

Jim finds it amusing, honestly, but knows better than to let anyone see that. He follows Gowtek and the others to the diplomatic hall, which has seating arrangements on three sides. They seem to be in favor of the number five, he sees; five chairs at each table, and two sides have extra chairs. “You must select one of your number to sit with the Federation witnesses,” Gowtek says. “They will be permitted to confer with you between rounds of discussion.”

“My lord,” Jasmine says, and Jim knew she was going to say it and plasters a pleasant smile on his face as he hears Khan give his approval.

“I will sit with you as well,” Kahsor says.

The five of them move to the designated chairs. Jasmine takes the end, and rather than fight the inevitable Jim takes the seat next to her. Uhura next to him—which makes sense; she can translate if necessary—Spock on her left, and Kahsor on his left.

“Were you at the arena?” Jim asks him.

“I was,” Kahsor says. “Two of my cousins died in the fight. It was glorious.”

“Did you witness anyone?” Uhura asks rather than comment on that one.

“I did,” Kahsor says. “It is why I am sitting with you. I witnessed the black haired human, and thus I join her in this hall. All the humans were witnessed, and whoever you had chosen to sit here, their witness would sit with you.”
“What was my count?” Jasmine asks. “Also, my name is Jasmine.”

“Fifty-one,” Kahsor says. “It was well done of you. You and the woman with many knives had the highest count save for your giant.”

“Her name is Ekaterina, and his is Konstantin,” Jasmine says. “They are a mated pair.”

“I had heard about that,” Kahsor says. “She refused to be separated from him in the trial.”

“She did,” Jasmine says. “She always will.”

“Kahsor, how many warriors died on that field?” Uhura asks.

“Six hundred and eighty,” Kahsor says with a tinge of pride. “It is well done.”

“So many,” Uhura says softly.

“Yes, but this is the way of it,” Kahsor says. “The warriors who died, their deaths determine the length of the peace accords. These will last for six hundred and eighty years, unless something disrupts them sooner that is out of our control.”

“How many years would have been added for a human’s death?” Jim asks.

“One hundred,” Kahsor says. “Since there were so few.”

“So you knew that many people could die,” Jim says.

“Indeed,” Kahsor says. “The stronger the fight, the stronger the accord after, is this not true? And Klingons are not afraid to die. This was a battle that altered Klingon history. Its warriors will be celebrated for centuries, all of their names recorded in our histories. They died bravely and with honor, for the glory of the Klingon Empire. Truly, there is no greater way to die.”

“Why didn’t you take the field?” Jim asks, not really sure that’s a good question but curious anyway.

Kahsor growls softly. “I was told to witness, rather than fight,” he says, not sounding happy about it. “We could not lose all our best warriors on the field.”

Jim wants to know more, like how almost seven hundred Klingons signed up to willingly die at the hands of humans, but the Klingon diplomats file in then and take seats so he shuts up. When everyone has a chair, Gowtek stands up.

The introductory speech is fairly standard, at least Jim’s starting to think it is for Klingons—all about honor and valor on a battlefield and how these humans are true warriors. Gowtek asks for their names, to ensure they are recorded correctly, and everyone introduces themselves. Konstantin gets a murmur when he stands up, as does Jill—likely, Jim thinks, for different reasons.

“Gowtek,” Jill says when she rises. “You asked what a dragon was.”

“I did,” Gowtek says.

Jill turns around and sweeps her hair over her shoulder. “This is what a dragon looks like.”

That gets a bit more of a murmur, and a really old Klingon at the table frowns like he’s trying to remember something. “What is the meaning of this tattoo?” he asks finally.
“It’s my dragon,” Jill says, turning around again. She jerks a thumb at Khan. “So is he.”

“So the tattoo represents your mate,” the old Klingon says.

“Yes,” Jill says. “Hijja’.”

“That is…a powerful thing,” he says, considering. “To mark one’s body for a mate.”

“Do Klingons have tattoos?” Jill asks.

“We do not,” the old Klingon says. “Our skin is too thick for tattooing to be successful. We use scarification to mark ourselves for our mates, or piercings, but it is a profound statement, and not one done lightly.”

“Neither was mine,” Jill says, taking her seat again. The old Klingon smiles faintly.

Jim has to admit the dragon is fucking gorgeous; he’s never seen work that detailed and realistic before. He’ll have to talk to Jill later about the design and the artist.

He’s curious how the humans intend to negotiate. At the table, Khan has the middle, obviously. Jill sits on his right and Ekaterina on his left. Konstantin sits on Ekaterina’s left and Bishop sits on Jill’s right. Jim wonders why those people—Jill is obvious, but why the other three? He’ll be curious to see how it plays out.

The Klingons introduce themselves and Jim memorizes names and faces as best he can; honestly he has a hard time telling some Klingons apart, but he can at least memorize the names. He knows Uhura does the same, and Spock. Next to him Jasmine has her hands folded carefully. “What is that for?” Jim asks when the introductions finish.

Jasmine lets her hands relax. “A memory aid,” she says. “Photographic memory does not always let us remember relevant information when we need it.”

“No you rely on memorization alone?” Kahsor asks.

“It’s impossible to study the scene carefully enough to remember the relevant data without notes,” Jasmine says. “Anyone who says they can get by without notes is lying and either hasn’t figured it out yet, or is just lying.” She reaches into the slim shoulder bag she carried in and takes out a thin tablet and a stylus.

“Andy’s work?” Jim asks, nodding at it.

“Yes, it’s rather ingenious,” Jasmine says. “It functions somewhat like an old-style paper notebook, which is what I used to use. And this time I can’t smudge the ink.”

“Tell me something, Jasmine of the humans,” Kahsor says. “In your original time, what role did you play?”

“I was Khan’s chief aide,” Jasmine says, and like she’s done before her spine stiffens. “His most trusted advisor and captain.”

“A difficult position,” Kahsor says. “I have served that role for my uncle. How old were you when you swore fealty to him?”

“I swore my loyalty to him when I was twelve, and killed my first man when I was thirteen,” Jasmine says. “I have served him ever since, over four decades now.”
“He is a good leader to follow, then,” Kahsor says.

“The best,” Jasmine says simply. “There will never be another one like him.”

“On this, I think you are correct,” Kahsor says. “I cannot imagine another human having the qajunpaQ to challenge us like this.”

“What does that word mean?” Jasmine asks. “I have not had time to learn your language.”


“Audacity is a good one,” Jasmine says. “But remember, that wasn’t his idea.”

“Yes, but I think his mate is quite simply mad, in the way of the best warriors,” Kahsor says.

“Sounds about right,” Jim says.

“Ah, and they are beginning,” Kahsor says. Jasmine turns her attention to the tables in front of them, as does Jim.

It may be a poor choice on his part but Jim opts to watch the body language and the reactions of the humans rather than listen too closely to the subject matter. He figures Spock and Uhura will remember that stuff, as well as the other humans. He wants to figure out how these five people work together.

It becomes fairly evident about fifteen minutes into the first round that the humans know exactly what they’re doing. Khan plays the calm leader, with Ekaterina his more quick-tempered second. But she works her way under the Klingons’ skin with a murmured barb that Jim doesn’t catch, and Konstantin steps in to soothe ruffled feathers and offer something a bit more reasonable that—amazingly—the Klingons agree to.

Although to be perfectly honest Jim’s not sure most of them wouldn’t just agree to what Konstantin asked for anyway, after the battlefield. He doesn’t know how many Klingons the man killed and really kind of doesn’t want to find out. But the image of him in the arena—Jim can’t forget that. Konstantin took a fully grown Klingon, by the wrist, threw him into the air over his head and slammed him against the ground like he was a dishtowel. Not once, but twice. Jim can’t even comprehend the strength it takes to do that.

Jill stays quiet mostly, which doesn’t surprise Jim; she’s commented more than once that she didn’t want to be a diplomat. But at some point, one of the Klingons says something in Klingon that makes half the humans snarl. Jill looks at Khan, who murmurs something in her ear, and she blows out a breath. “Right then,” she says and vaults over the table and over to the speaker. She has a knife at his throat before he can defend himself. “I suggest you apologize, sir.”

“What just happened here?” Jim asks.

“He insulted her,” Kahsor says, frowning. “Gravely. She would be within her rights to demand a duel to settle her honor.”

The Klingon, whoever it is—Jim can’t remember right now—snarls at her. “I do not apologize to children.”

“Are you seriously trying to get me to kill you? Because believe me, I will if I have to, and I have over a dozen people in this room who will back me up,” Jill says. “I don’t know what the everloving fuck your problem is, but I don’t think it’s with me at all. If you’re in this room, you
saw me on the battlefield, and you know I’m more than capable of being here. So what is it, I wonder? What have you got to gain by trying to throw a wrench in the process that so many people died for?”

She pulls her knife back from his throat and steps back. “I’m not playing your game. You want to die to further a cause, get someone else to do your dirty work. The adults in this room have work to do.” Jill looks him over with contempt and spits at his feet before turning and walking back to the table.

A rumble of sound follows her, the Klingons arguing among themselves. “Fascinating,” Kahsor says. “She refuses to engage, and yet she wins the exchange.”

“The mark of a wise warrior is knowing when not to fight,” Jasmine says. “Khan refused battles, when we fought our wars.”

“You fought in wartime,” Kahsor says. “But the humans have had peace for centuries.”

“I’m from the twentieth century,” Jasmine says. “I was in cryosleep until a few weeks ago. In my original time, we were warriors, and we fought a war to lead the planet. We won, for a time.”

“Are all of you from this time?” Kahsor asks.

“No,” Jasmine says. “Jill, Jake, Andy and Magpie are from this century.”

“And you?” Kahsor asks Jim.

“I’m from this time,” he says.

Kahsor mutters something in Klingon. “This explains so much. None of us could understand where humans gained these skills, where they learned the ways of war. I must—excuse me.” He jumps to his feet and hurries over to the still-arguing Klingon contingent.

Jim looks at Jasmine. “Did you miscalculate?”

She shakes her head. “No. Now he knows we know the rules of war, and we lived it. It gives us more gravitas, and earns us more honor and more respect.”

“Is that really necessary, even now?” Spock asks.

Jasmine looks at him evenly. “Would you have us negotiate for the Federation with anything less than our absolute best chances? We won our way onto this battlefield, but this is simply another one.”

She has a point. “Excuse me,” Jasmine says and gets up to go speak with Khan. Jim watches her lean down and murmur in his ear, speaking for longer than Jim would have expected. When she straightens up, Khan looks at the Klingons and then back at Jasmine, asking a question. She answers, waves a hand back and forth, and makes what looks to be an idle gesture but Jim thinks pointed out the specific Klingon to Khan that she wanted.

Khan actually smiles, and says something that Jim reads as ‘Well done’. Jasmine winks at him and comes back to her seat. “What have you been observing?” Jim asks her. “That you were telling him about?”

“What I saw of the Klingons,” Jasmine says. “Body language, dynamics within the group, what I thought their intent was behind their words.”
“Will you share those observations with us?” Spock asks.

“Maybe but not now,” Jasmine says as Kahsor comes back over to them. Spock inclines his head, seeing the logic.

There are a couple more scuffles through the day—at one point one of the Klingons barrels over to the human table. Konstantin rises to his feet—and is actually bigger than him, Jim realizes. “My friend, rethink your anger,” he says pleasantly. “No insult was intended. Surely you recognize that. If not, I suppose we can settle this here.” He reaches for the hilt of his sword—the weapon isn’t extended, but he carries the hilt in a back harness—and the Klingon immediately steps back, mutters something, and goes back to his side of the room.

Konstantin takes his seat again and leans over to murmur something to Ekaterina. She nods and flips a knife idly.

The third—and final—scuffle of the day comes when Ny’lana insults Khan. Deliberately, from what Jim can tell, and he’s not sure what she intends to gain by it. All the humans growl, but before Jill even stands up Jasmine has flown across the room and grabbed her by the throat, lifting her into the air easily. “You dare insult my lord,” she growls. “You dishonorable bitch.” She throws Ny’lana into a wall and stalks over to her body. “Get up,” Jasmine hisses. “Get up and fight me or I’ll take your head right now.”

“Jasmine,” Khan says—Jim’s kind of reminded of a man calling his dog to heel. “No one dies today.”

Jasmine snarls at him, sounding not really human and a lot like a big cat screaming. “Jasmine,” Khan says firmly. “No one dies.”

“No one dies,” she says after a moment. “Today.” She hauls back and kicks Ny’lana squarely in the ribs, then shoves a knife between her ribs for good measure. “If she gets medical treatment, she won’t die, I presume,” she says, taking her knife back and walking over to her seat.

“We are rather hard to kill,” Kahsor says, but even he sounds a bit…cautious. Other Klingons move to take Ny’lana out, and Gowtek calls for a half-hour recess. Kahsor takes advantage of this to leave them, fleeing the room with the other Klingons.

Jim moves his chair a little away from Jasmine, because shit.

She snorts. “Relax, Kirk. Unless you insult Khan to that extent, I’m not likely to try for your head.”

“Really not intending on it,” Jim says. “I’m not sure what she was intending.”

“She wanted Jill to come at her,” Uhura says. “She insulted his honor, but she also insulted his… virility, I guess, is the right translation. Abilities as a lover.”

“She called him impotent,” Spock says.

“Yeah, basically,” Uhura says. “With a lot more negative connotations. But she wanted Jill to come at her because that axe she carries—Jill’s short enough that it could have hit her in the neck.”

“Jill probably would have,” Jim says. “Except we have Jasmine the terrifying.”

“She insulted my lord’s honor and his skill at ruling,” Jasmine says. “She called him ineffectual, a weak leader. Bitch.” She spits on the ground. “No one insults him like that when I can hear it.”
“We get that,” Jim says.

She laughs. “They called him the lion. They called me the claw.”

I was the lion-tamer. Of course and holy shit, who the hell is she? “He was married,” Jim says. “Who—who was she?”

“How did you know of her?” Jasmine asks.

“You all talked of ghosts and I put pieces together,” Jim says. “Who was she?”

“Her name was Rani,” Jasmine says, giving the word a lilt. “She was his queen, every inch of it. But she had cancer, and we could not save her. They had six years together.”

“But Jill’s the lioness,” Uhura says. “Who was Rani?”

“She was the lion-tamer,” Jim says quietly.

“Who told you that?” Jasmine demands. “Where did you hear that?”

Jim rubs the back of his neck. “She told me, I think. In a dream. I didn’t—I didn’t know what it meant at the time. Jill calls him her dragon, so…”

“The word means lion in Sanskrit,” Uhura says. “Khan, that is.”

“And he was,” Jasmine says. “That was his sigil.”


“Dragons have meaning to her,” Jasmine says. “Andy and Magpie have dragon tattoos for each other and for Jill, and I believe Jill intends to get hers for them before we leave Earth.”

“Would Khan get a tattoo for Jill?” Jim asks her.

“Likely,” Jasmine says. “If she wanted, and he wanted. I don’t know if they’ve discussed it.”

“Jasmine,” Khan says, just loudly enough to get her attention. He motions her over and she hurries to him.

“You dreamed of her?” Spock asks. “How is that possible?”

“I really wish I knew,” Jim says. “I’ve dreamed of her twice, once before we made the trek to the arena and once the night after the combat. She said she couldn’t show me a vision because I wasn’t part of it I hadn’t bled for it yet. I think blood’s the key somewhere, but I’m not sure where.”

“Have you bled for this?” Uhura asks. “I mean, how do you even define it?”

“Dead crew, a broken ship, the death of the head of Starfleet and oh yeah, some scrapes and Jasmine gave me a bloody nose,” Jim says. “So however you look at it, I’m pretty sure I have contributed blood to this scenario.”

“I don’t want to see anything purple for another century,” Uhura mutters. “Speaking of blood.”

“I admit it was…off-putting,” Spock says.

Jim says nothing but yeah. He gets up, walking around a bit to stretch out his legs, and Jill motions
him over. “What do you think?” she asks.

“Pretty sure you have the upper hand.” Jim says.

“Of course we do,” Jill says. “The question is by how much.”

“Hopefully enough,” Jim says.

As the day winds on, he doesn’t see anything to challenge that hope. They close for the night with a general framework in place, and Jim and both his crew agree it’s fair to both sides. If anything the Federation has an advantage, but no one is about to point that out.

The Klingons show them to diplomatic quarters—Jim hadn’t even known these existed, but they’re actually pretty nice, if heavy on the ambient purple lighting. The humans divide into pairs to share rooms, Spock and Uhura take one, and Jim wonders if they have singleton rooms.

Jake comes over to him. “You want a roommate?” he asks.

“Sure,” Jim says. Maybe Jake can explain a little more of this to him. Or something.

Each room has its own bath, and they all circle a common living space. Gowtek says that in light of the long day, they will not have a formal banquet until the end of the negotiations and instead dinner will be served in the common space in approximately an hour.

“Aisha, please handle the baggage,” Khan says once Gowtek leaves them.

“Already did,” she says, looking up from her tablet. “As we went along I transported baggage, so if your things are in the wrong room kindly check with your neighbors.”

Jim wonders what Aisha was to Khan, during the original time.

A murmur of thanks runs through the group and Aisha waves it away, poking at her tablet with a stylus. “My lord, do you want the food in the common area or in your quarters?” she asks without looking up.

“Common area,” Khan says.

“Good, that’s easier.” Aisha continues to poke, and a few moments later three large cases materialize.

“I doubt they’d use poison at this stage of the game,” Jim says.

“Likely not, but from what we know of Klingon cuisine we may be best served avoiding it as much as possible,” Aisha says. “This is a backup, in case what they do feed us is inedible.”

“Everyone, find your quarters, take a bit to wash up and relax,” Khan says, catching Jill’s wrist when she strays too far. “We’ll meet back here for the meal.”

Jim and Jake find their room easily enough, but finding their bags takes a couple moments longer because Jim’s things ended up with Spock and Uhura’s—next door—but Jake got Matthew’s bags instead of his own and has to find him to trade. But it’s easy enough to sort and then they close the door.

Jim falls down on the nearest soft flat surface, blinking his eyes open after a moment to determine that he’s on a bed, or futon, or some kind of sleeping pad. Jake drops onto the other one, looking a lot less exhausted than Jim feels. “Hard work being a witness,” Jake comments.
“Just so much to remember,” Jim says. “We’re all studying different things. Uhura focuses on the language the Klingons use and their body language, Spock listens to the text, I study the humans.”

“What have you learned so far?” Jake asks.

“They’re scarily smart,” Jim says. “I mean, I knew it, but now I really know it. Also, Jasmine is fucking scary.”

“I thought Cat was going to get to him before Jasmine did, honestly,” Jake says. “But man, Jasmine just flew.”

“She has a really, really deep loyalty to him,” Jim says. “It’s kind of—you know how some people have one fundamental truth about them that defines everything else about them? Jasmine’s fundamental truth is that she is there to defend Khan and serve him however he sees fit. That’s pretty much all she exists for. Which is why it’s scary, because if anything ever happens to him…”

“If anything ever happens to him, the rest of his family won’t leave a stone standing,” Jake says. “Can we not think about it? I’d have to swear blood feud with the rest of them and I don’t want to contemplate that right now.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jim says. “This just…I never like it when the psychotic villain is the one holding back the more psychotic villains.”

Jake throws a pillow at him. “They’re not villains,” he says. “They may possibly be psychotic, though.”

“Possibly?” Jim forces himself to sit up. “Fuck, Jacobs, you guys killed almost seven hundred Klingons. How do you even do it?”

“You stop counting, unless you like to track your kills,” Jake says. “I liked to keep track. But it’s just swing, parry, strike, hit ’em where you can, as often as you can, and hit ’em until they stop moving. If they fall down and keep moving hit ’em some more until they stop.”

“Not the most elegant way of fighting,” Jim says.

“No, but it gets results. And really, all fighting is about hitting someone else until they stop moving, in varying forms and ways.” Jake shrugs. “I’m special forces, we dumb everything down. That’s the target. It’s moving. It needs to stop moving.”

“You are not that dumb,” Jim says with a snort.

“Of course I’m not,” Jake says. “Makes things easy to explain, though.”

“How did you get into this?” Jim asks.

“I ran into Jill randomly in London,” Jake says. “Well, not so randomly, I was looking for her. She pulled me in, introduced me to Khan, and I said I would help because it’s Jill and she’s my sister.”

“Not literally, though,” Jim says.

“You mean not legally or biologically, and no, not those ways,” Jake says. “Everything else, though, she’s it. Has been for years, since the Academy.”

“How did you meet her?” Jim asks, copying Jake and pulling off his boots.

“We were partners in unarmed combat, our second semester,” Jake says. “We didn’t hit it off well,
then she threw me over her shoulder and we became best friends.”

“I can see that,” Jim says, thinking about it. “You never tried to get her for Intelligence, though?”

“I tried, begged, pleaded, everything,” Jake says. “She’s perfect for it. But she kept turning me down. And to be fair she was on the fast track for command for a while, so I didn’t want to screw that up either.”

“Where were both of you at Vulcan?” Jim asks, maybe a little more sharply than he meant to, but.

“We missed it,” Jake says. “I was doing things I shouldn’t talk about and Jill’s ship was on a medical supply mission to New Vega, nowhere near Vulcan and unable to get there in time.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says, anger fading as quickly as it spiked. “Shit, man.”

“Yeah,” Jake says. “Jill almost got promoted to captain after Vulcan, due to all the deaths, but she fought the assignment and stayed as first officer.”

“She didn’t want command?” Jim asks, surprised.

Jake shakes his head. “Not then, and not like that. And now it doesn’t really matter. I know Viola said I can’t resign but I can’t stay in Starfleet either, not if we’re leaving Earth for good.”

“You guys are really sold on that,” Jim notes.

“What else would we do?” Jake asks. “There’s no place for the augments on Earth, and they have no reason to like or want to stay in the Federation. There’s a lot of the galaxy out there we haven’t seen yet, even me. We might as well find out some of what’s out there and see if we can make a home for ourselves.”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “Yeah, it makes sense, just…there’s going to be a big mess to clean up.”

“There is, but it’s not our job to clean it,” Jake says. “We exposed the rotten sections of Starfleet, and now you and Viola and everyone can figure out how to cut them out and rebuild.”

“Thanks so much,” Jim says, a little irritated by it. “You all know the problems, and I’m sure you have ideas on how to fix them, so why aren’t you helping?”

“Because section 31 medical labs kept Khan prisoner for six weeks,” Jake says. “You don’t want to know the details. He has no reason to want to help Starfleet, at all, and no one else really does either. Marcus killed five dozen people who couldn’t fight back, Jim. We’ve done our part. You know what Marcus was up to, and the full extent will come out during further investigation. I’m not going to ask Khan to revisit old memories by having him discuss section 31 practices with Viola or anyone else.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says, rubbing his hands over his face. “Just…if he hates Starfleet that much, why the hell are you all here?”

“No one wants the disruption of the Federation falling apart or becoming entangled in a war,” Jake says. “And we figured—we have plans of our own, but we’ll need help with resources to get everything squared away. This way we go back to Viola or whoever like ‘Hey, we just saved you a war, you can help us out in this fashion’.”

“That’s smart,” Jim has to admit. “And it was all Jill’s idea?”
“No one else was crazy enough to think of it,” Jake says, laughing. “Come on, let’s wash up and go find the meal.”

Chapter End Notes

Poor Jim. Jasmine won’t kill him, really...
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the insomniacs club.

Chapter Notes

Hi my name is becc and I like to redeem bad guys...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days in and Jim thinks they’ll finish tomorrow. He’s been gratified to see that there have been points—several of them—where the humans have negotiated a general pact with the Klingons but noted that details will have to be decided by the Federation or Starfleet. The Klingons accept it, which Jim didn’t exactly expect but he’s not going to complain.

But the Klingon rooms are just a little too warm and a little too purple and Jim can’t sleep well without the thrum of ship engines underfoot. So he finds himself in the common area at some odd hour of the night, having raided their small kitchenette for some kind of tea that tastes pretty decent if he ignores the lime green color.

He doesn’t expect to see anyone else and yet he’s not surprised when Khan walks into the common area, shirtless and in black pants. “Kirk,” he says when he sees Jim. “Why are you up?”

Jim shrugs. “Couldn’t sleep. You?”

“Jill had nightmares,” Khan says, going to the kitchenette. “I am making her tea.”

“Does that happen often?” Jim asks, watching him move, the way the wings on his back shift as he does. He’s never seen anything like Khan before and honestly he’s—well, beautiful.

And deadly. Jim reminds himself not to forget that one. He doesn’t know how Khan killed Marcus—the Vengeance had cut comms and been silent until Khan and Jill hailed the Enterprise to let them know what had happened. He doesn’t entirely think he wants to know, either.

“Often enough,” Khan says, setting the kettle to heat. He turns to look at Jim, his wings mantling and shifting before they settle around his shoulders. “You have questions. Ask. I might not be willing to answer in the morning.”

“How did you kill Marcus?” Jim asks, which wasn’t entirely the question he wanted to ask but.

“I used Kostenka’s broadsword,” Khan says. “One swing, took off his head. We spaced his body, and the others of his…thugs.”

Jim takes a sip of tea. “Did he say anything? What actually happened on the ship?”

“He almost won,” Khan says quietly. “We have an Achilles heel, and he knew what it was and
how to exploit it. He came prepared for us, and had us on the floor before we could react. Jill and Jake were unaffected, and disabled the device that was incapacitating us, and then I explained to Alexander exactly why I was going to kill him. Jill and Jake contributed their opinions of him and his influence on Starfleet, and I took his head.”

“What is your Achilles heel?” Jim asks. “Why weren’t Jill and Jake affected?”

“Sonic,” Khan says. “We can hear higher frequencies than most, and the right combination of tones at the right frequencies will disable us, and cause seizures if we are exposed to it long enough. It will not kill us, and we will recover from it quickly, but it is the one thing other than mortal injury that can render us helpless.”

“You’re taking a risk in telling me that,” Jim observes.

“Am I?” Khan raises his eyebrows and his wings, just a little. “I have not given you details on the exact tones and frequencies that would cause this effect, and I will not. And let us be honest, Kirk, at this point you need me and my family.”

“Yeah, I do,” Jim says, watching Khan make tea. “But you need us, too.”

Khan inclines his head, conceding the point.

“Do you play chess?” Jim asks on impulse.

“I do,” Khan says. “Do you have a board?”

“I have a holographic one,” Jim says. He shrugs. “I figure if you’re not sleeping and I’m not sleeping and we seem to be somewhat getting along, we could try a game. I’m fairly certain you could beat me but hey, who knows? Spock should be able to beat me and he doesn’t always.”

“Get the board, then, while I bring Jill her tea,” Khan says. “She may join us.”

“That’s fine,” Jim says. “Does she play chess?”

“She does not,” Khan says. “She plays poker, and I have been told not to play her as she will win.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Jim says after thinking about it for a moment. “Can I ask you a question?”

Khan gestures with a hand.

“You were built for war,” Jim says. “You and your family. Why are you fighting for peace?”

“Precisely because we lived through war,” Khan says. “Humans are infinitely adaptable, and just because my family was created for one purpose does not mean we cannot have another. We will always be warriors, Kirk, with a taste for violence and savagery you don’t understand and likely never will. But there are ways to fight that do not involve plunging the galaxy into war, and while I have not the most optimistic view of the Federation I do acknowledge that it has done a relatively decent job of holding together a collection of species in relative harmony.”

“Save the Ventraxans but they left,” Jim says.

“Yes.” Khan’s voice is cold on that, and clipped.

“Did you have an interaction with them?” Jim asks, curious.

“I did not,” Khan says. “Jill did.”
Jim sucks in a breath. “Did—I mean—“

“She still has nightmares from it,” Khan says. “The Ventraxans are a war I would be willing to fight, but not now, and not for some time.”

“Did you intend to get her help?” Jim asks. “When you met her?”

“I had no idea who she was,” Khan says. “Even after I knew that, I had not intended to confide in her. It was too risky, I thought.”

“Riskier to go it alone,” Jim points out.

“She did convince me of that,” Khan says dryly. “And none of this would have been possible without her.”

“Is that why you love her? Because she helped you?” Jim asks.

“It is one of the reasons,” Khan says. “I owe her a life-debt I will never pay, and so does every member of my family. But I do not love her because of that. Rather because she does not consider us to owe her anything. She helped me, us, because it is what she does. I am not…was not used to that kind of unselfishness, that level of generosity. She asked for nothing from me, only that I let her help me.”

“To be fair I kind of pushed you into that one,” Jill says, coming into the common area, dressed in an oversize t-shirt and soft pants. “I heard voices and decided to find out who else couldn’t sleep. Is that the Klingon tea or the Femaran tea?”

“This is actually Earth tea,” Khan says. “Andy packed a few tins, and I made you a cup of green tea.”

“Oh, brilliant,” Jill says. “Spasiba.” She walks over to Khan and wraps her arms around his waist, tucking her head against his chest. Khan smiles a bit and folds his wings around her.

Jim looks away, feeling like he’s intruding on something private. But after a minute Khan folds his wings back and Jill comes over to Jim’s couch, taking a seat at the other end. “Conversations at this hour tend to be philosophical,” she says. “What was your philosophy?”

“Avoiding a war in order to continue fighting,” Khan says.

“Good philosophy,” Jill says.

Jim looks at her. “You served Starfleet,” he says. “For fifteen years. I looked up your record when we were back on Earth. You have four commendations, two reprimands. And you want to continue fighting?”

“I survived in Starfleet because my captain let me break the rules,” Jill says. “I like fighting. I like surprising people with what I can do, because everyone underestimates me, and I get tired of it. There’s—there’s a kind of savage joy in a fight, in the bloodlust and how it comes down to you and your opponent and the stakes are high. I’ve looked up your record too, and you’ve had your share of scrapes. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah, but—I want those occasions to be the exception, rather than the rule,” Jim says. “And on a downward trend.”

“To repeat something I told you earlier, the price of peace is that you have to be willing to defend
it. Not everyone is suited for that task. But those who choose to represent the Federation on the frontier of the unknown had best be.” Khan brings over two mugs to the couch and hands both to Jill before kicking the ottoman over and taking a seat.

“Are these the same?” Jill asks, looking at them.

“Yours is in your left hand,” Khan says.

“Why is yours different?” Jill asks, looking at him.

“Mine is the Femaran tea,” Khan says. “I thought to try it.”

“Let me try a sip,” she says, handing him the mug. Khan nods, but doesn’t drink from it just yet—letting it cool, Jim guesses. It’s weirdly domestic given everything.

“You don’t want to represent the Federation, though,” Jim says after a pause. “When you leave Earth, when you leave the Federation entirely. Are you even going to acknowledge Federation citizenship or anything else about it?”

“You mean to ask if we intend to obey the Prime Directive,” Khan says. “About as much as you do, I would think.”

Jim opens his mouth, realizes he doesn’t quite have a leg to stand on, and shuts up. “It was only the once and it was to save his life,” he says.

“Three times, and the first two were also to save someone’s life but both from situations you shouldn’t have been in,” Jill says. “I didn’t look up the third to find out if it was the same thing.”


She sighs. “Pax. Sorry. Just—the irony of you asking that did not escape me. Or him, really. Our intent is to respect the Prime Directive unless we come across a situation in which we feel it absolutely needs to be broken or is a moot point.”

Khan takes a sip of his tea, then another. “What do you think?” Jill asks.

“It’s interesting,” Khan says. “It—do you know, it reminds me of their air.”

“So rather energizing,” Jill says.

“Somewhat,” Khan says.

“What is their air like?” Jim asks. “I’ve never been there.”

“There’s a scent,” Jill says. “It’s hard to describe, but it’s this marvelously invigorating thing that is just—it wakes you up mentally and makes you feel generally _good_ physically. Although that may be the climb.”

“Both,” Khan says. “Having done it multiple times.”

“What climb?” Jim shifts, leaning forward. “Where were you climbing?”

“We dealt with the weaponsmiths,” Khan says. “And as artisans should, they require respect. Their workshops and forge are partway up a mountain, and to get to them requires a bit of a climb up the mountain.”
“That’s actually pretty clever,” Jim says. “I’ve never met a Femaran. They don’t tend to join Starfleet or leave their planets much.”

“They keep to themselves unless you need a weapon, and then everyone is equal before them,” Khan says. “But they will only make weapons for those they consider worthy of them, at least some. Anyone can buy the knives, if they can afford them.”

“And if you know how to find them to ask,” Jim says. “Was there anywhere else you went between here and there and Earth?”

“Yes, but I’m not certain I ever got the name of it,” Jill says. “It’s a planetoid out near the Neutral Zone that does a lot of gray market trading, and has the people who made our coats and boots. Jake knew them through his job.”

“Jake knows a lot of people, I’m noticing,” Jim says. “Me among them.”

“It’s what makes him a good operative,” Jill says. “He knows someone everywhere, and has an appropriate persona for whatever that environment is.”

“He says you were suited for it, too,” Jim says.

“I was,” Jill says. “Am. But I wanted to fly, and operatives don’t generally travel on ships except to get from one point to another. I was a pilot, and then I moved up the command ranks to XO.”

“You were offered your own ship after Vulcan,” Jim says. “Weren’t you?”

“Yeah, I was,” Jill says. “And I turned it down. I wasn’t ready and I wasn’t willing to give up my role on the Marshall. We all make command at different rates. Were you ready?”

“Fuck no,” Jim says and everyone laughs. “But, you know, we got through it, and then with Pike recovering and in light of everything…they gave her to me.”

“Do you wish they hadn’t?” Jill asks.

Jim shakes his head. “She’s my ship.”

“Your chief engineer likely disagrees,” Khan says.

“He does, but why do you say that?” Jim asks.

“Because if you want to know who truly owns something, you look to those that keep it alive,” Khan says.

Jill looks at him. “My dragon.”

“My lioness,” Khan counters, and she smiles.

Jim thinks that they kind of act like newlyweds, but also like the oldest married couple he’s ever known. It’s oddly endearing, and humanizing. The augments seem so alien sometimes, he appreciates the reminders that they’re homo sapiens, even if they are engineered ones.

“What do you even intend to find?” he asks, changing the subject.

“What do you?” Khan counters. “Eventually, we hope to find a home for ourselves, or a purpose. Or both. But for now, it will be enough to choose our own paths and simply find out what else may exist in the cosmos.” He takes a sip of tea. “We thought, in my time, that one day we would
conquer the stars, the way we conquered the planet. We made plans, designed our ship, and the cryotube technology. And when we left, we fled into exile. This time we choose where we go, and will be awake to see it happen.”

Jim looks at his mug. “I feel like I should tell you something and I’m not sure how you’ll react to it,” he says carefully.

“I won’t harm you,” Khan says.

“That wasn’t actually what I was—I dreamed of your wife,” Jim says abruptly. “Twice. Once on Qo’noS before the arena, and once the night after.”

He doesn’t know what he expects to see on Khan’s face, but the calm way Khan nods doesn’t give him any clues. “What did she say to you?”

“She told me not to be scared of Jasmine,” Jim says. “That just encourages her.”

“It does,” Khan says. “She smells fear.”

“She’s somewhat fear-inducing,” Jim says.

Khan smiles. “She was my best assassin, among other roles. What else did Rani tell you?”

“You seem remarkably calm about this.” Jim notes.

“You’re not the only one she spoke to,” Khan tells him.

Jim blinks, licks his lips, tries to figure out how to ask. “You’re okay with that? With speaking with your wife from beyond the grave?”

“She loved me with all her heart,” Khan says, and his voice shifts slightly, accent dropping into something Jim can’t quite pinpoint. “She loved me enough she chose to help me after death, in any way she could. She left me a message, in the hope I would one day read it, and she spoke to me, one last time. I love her, I always will, but she is a ghost, and I am at peace with that.”

Jim looks at Jill. “What? I’m not jealous of her,” Jill says. “How could I be? Without her, none of this might have happened either. Sadly she hasn’t spoken to me.”

“Do you know I’m rather glad of that,” Khan says. “She was a practical jokester when she wanted to be, and I do not want to think of what you and she could do together.”

“Was she really? You never told me that,” Jill says.

“Only to me,” Khan says. “And usually only when she felt I was working too hard. Once she rigged up a bucket of water to dump on my head when I walked into my office. It was her subtle way of telling me to pull my head out of it and go bathe.”

“Oh, but your poor wings,” Jill says.

Khan shrugs. “They dried.”

“How did you even meet her?” Jim asks.

“I conquered her city,” Khan says. “I took her father and her brothers as prisoners, and she negotiated for their release. I told her I would let them go if she stayed with me, and she agreed, and over time I fell in love with her, and she with me.”
“Well, that’s one way to do it,” Jim says. “Did her father ever forgive you?”

Khan smiles a bit. “No. Neither did her brothers. After she died, however, we made peace, or somewhat of it.”

“Do—are any of her descendants alive?” Jim asks. “I mean, from her brothers?”

“Interesting you should ask that,” Khan says. “Why do you?”

Jim shrugs. “I just figured if there were any, it would be a tangible link to her.”

“He is,” Khan says. “Andy is descended from Rani’s brother Hitesh, and…in many ways is similar to her aunt.”

Jim blinks. “How did you find him in the first place?”

“Through me,” Jill says. “Andy is one of my siblings, Magpie and Jake are the other two.”

Carefully, Jim sets his mug down. “That kind of stretches the limits of belief,” he says. “I mean—how does that even happen?”

“We call it the Jill Zone,” Khan says. “A somewhat fantastical and yet tangible effect that causes very unlikely coincidences to happen.”

“Or just weird shit in general,” Jill says. “But come on, you’ve dreamt of his long-dead wife, so is this really any harder?”

“Did she—your wife, I mean—influence this or something?” Jim asks Khan.

“Yes,” Khan says. “In some ways. But that isn’t my story to tell.”

“One thing that is important to note, though,” Jill says. “Choosing to help Khan was entirely my decision. No one and nothing influenced my choices.”

“Trust me, I believe you,” Jim says. He looks at Khan. “You do seem to inspire a great deal of loyalty.”

“I always did,” Khan says. “My own men were the ones to make sure our ship was safe before we left, and the ones who guarded our safety until we were aboard and launched. They were…people I respected greatly, and I did not intend to lose their respect of me. The best leaders don’t lead by speaking, but by doing. Simply by being someone people choose to follow, you will inspire loyalty, and as you demonstrate that loyalty is returned, the sentiment feeds into a loop that can only be broken by someone acting in a disloyal fashion. But loyalty should be hard earned, and not something given lightly.”

“You don’t have a lot of use for hypocrites,” Jim says.

“Absolutely none.” Khan says it calmly, but with complete implacability. “Marcus spoke for ideals he perverted. I did give him a chance to be my ally, at the beginning. But he never saw me as anything but a being he could control, and I killed him for it.”

“He killed your family,” Jim says.

“He killed your mentor,” Jill counters. “Point is, the man was a bastard and deserved to die, and did.”
“You know…I can’t argue that one,” Jim says. “He killed Pike, and he made me think you did it.”

“Here’s what I want to know, though,” Jill says. “Marcus would have destroyed the facility one way or another. But how much notice did he have that Pike and Viola were going to be there at that specific time? Or was that a really, really odd coincidence? I already found it odd that she chose then to retire, setting up a really unlikely chain of events. How did Marcus even know we’d left the planet?”

“Do you know, I am uncertain he did at all,” Khan says. “Kirk, how much notice did Viola give him when she submitted her formal resignation and appointed Pike as her successor?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Wait. Pike told me about a week and a half before this all went down that he needed to talk to me about something, and I hadn’t done anything at that point because the Nibiru mission got scrapped. So my guess is she gave him about two weeks.”

Khan tilts his head, and Jim reflects he can almost see the man thinking it over. “He’d rigged the building to explode long ago,” Khan says, almost to himself. “It never showed up on our scans because it’s completely inert until ignited. But he in all likelihood set it up after he moved the cryotubes there, as a last resort. Viola and Pike would have been an opportunity too great to ignore. He likely had faked evidence Jake and I had gone to Qo’noS, and it would have been the perfect opportunity to get all his enemies out of the way and start his war. Even if we hadn’t been on the planet, he would have stranded the Enterprise too close for comfort, and when he arrived he would have found a way to provoke the war, destroying the ship in the process.”

“He did have evidence you’d gone off-planet,” Jim says. “Jake has a bone-deep tracker that’s supposed to activate in case of his death. One of Marcus’s computer techs found a way to activate it remotely, but then it went out of range, which meant he’d left the solar system.”

“So he presumed,” Khan says. “I always said he was intelligent.”

“Well, technically you said he was not unintelligent,” Jill says.

Khan raises an eyebrow at her. “Oh shut it, I’m allowed to be punchy,” she says, covering a yawn with her hand.

“As for what made Viola decide to retire now, and in this fashion…I would like to know that,” Khan says. “I look forward to asking her, when we return to Earth.”

Jill says something in Russian, and Khan nods. “Possible.”

She yawns again and sets her mug down. Khan holds out a hand and Jim’s inwardly amused as hell to see Jill crawl into Khan’s lap, tucking her head against his shoulder. He murmurs something in her ear and she nods. “Now might be a good time for chess,” Khan says to Jim, one hand sliding up Jill’s back to rub the back of her neck.

Slightly odd, but then again…”I’ll grab the board,” Jim says, getting up.

Khan wins the first game, but to his surprise Jim ekes out a victory in the second. “Well done,” Khan says, tipping over his king. “You should play Andy.”

“No,” Jill says without opening her eyes. “Not without warning.”

“Warning?” Jim asks.

“Andy will clean your clock at chess in less than fifteen minutes,” Jill says. “If you accept that
going in, it’ll be fine.”

“I kind of need to see this,” Jim says.

“Well speak of the devil and wee hours and she shall arrive,” Jill says, looking up as a door opens and Andy slips into the common area, dressed in black with his hair spilling down his back. “I was telling Jim you’d beat him at speed chess.”

“I could use a game to settle my nerves,” Andy says. “Uncle? Or Jim?”

“Play Jim, this time,” Khan says, and Andy comes over to them, taking Jill’s vacated seat as Jim resets the board. Khan says something to Andy in a language Jim doesn’t quite recognize—Japanese, maybe—and Andy laughs.

“I’m not infallible,” he says, tucking hair behind his ear. “Just I can calculate in my head the faster I go.”

“I really want to see this,” Jim says. “Hit me with what you’ve got.”

Andy looks at him over the holographs. “I will, but remember you asked for it,” she says.

Nine minutes later Jim stares at the board in disbelief. “How is that even possible?” he asks.

“Andy takes no prisoners in speed chess,” Jill says. “If she slows down to normal the games are more even, though.”

“But—how did you learn it?” Jim asks. “How did you get this good?”

“I lived on the streets,” Andy says, getting up to go make tea. “I was a junkie, and I hustled chess games to score drugs and computer parts. You get really good at something when you’re addicted and it’s your way to score.”

“I…really don’t know what to say to that one,” Jim says carefully.

Andy glances back at him and smiles. “It’s all right. I’ve been clean for about twenty years now, and I got off the streets a long time ago. But I like chess, and I still play games in the park when I have time. Central Park, that is. I live in New York and there’s a series of chess tables where you can usually find a partner if you look. So I go there sometimes and play the old men and the school kids and the secondhand parts dealers.”

“Do you win?” Jim asks.

Andy laughs. “Usually. There’s a couple of kids who are pretty damn good, though, and we trade tips and things. A few of the old men like me even if I confuse them.”

Jim almost asks why Andy confuses them and then thinks better of it. “Okay but how did you get this good in the first place?” he asks. “Did you study it or something?”

“Kind of,” Andy says. “I studied a lot online before my parents kicked me out, because for two years I didn’t go to school but I had to do something, so I hopped around in cyberspace and learned what I could. I already knew how to play chess and I stumbled across this whole site and archives and I memorized a lot and I can calculate really quickly in my head if I don’t think about it.”

“Also you’re a genius,” Jill says. “Even Bishop says that.”

Andy smiles a bit and ducks her head. “Maybe, but building hardware is different than playing
“The things you made, for the trek,” Jim says. “How did you do it?”

“Which thing in particular?” Andy asks. “There were a few different ones.”

“The white ball, the one that glowed,” Jim says. “How did you make that?”

“It’s based on a concept from Orion,” Andy says. “Well, kind of. The ball is a lightweight polymer that’s flexible and resilient, and reflects light. In the center of a ball there’s a tiny anti-grav chip that pairs with the base in an earbud, so it’ll hover about a meter above the base, and the light and power source. When you squeeze the ball, you activate both the light and the anti-grav, and they’ll hold until the power source is drained, at which point it falls down and becomes a boring ball of plastic.” She comes back to the couch with a mug and takes her seat.

“Is the polymer from Orion?” Jim asks.

“The idea of it is but I sourced the material on Earth,” Andy says. “The anti-grav chip is my own design, and the light source is one I’ve used before. It’s basically a big spotlight that feeds through the polymer of the ball to create a more diffuse glow.”

“But how did you design the anti-grav chip?” Jim asks.

Andy grins. “Trade secret.”

Jill snorts. “That’s Andy-speak for ‘I’m not quite sure how I accomplished it but it works.’”

“No, I actually know how this works,” Andy says. “I’m just not giving it away. That could be worth something someday.”

“There are a lot of engineers at Starfleet who would love to pick your brain,” Jim says. “And probably Magpie’s, given what I’ve heard. Hell, I’ve heard of her, and there are things I’d love to know.”

“Keep hoping,” Andy says but smiles. “Neither Magpie nor I have a lot of interest in sharing our designs with Starfleet.”

“Word of warning, Jim, just don’t ask Magpie,” Jill says. “She might punch you.”

“Clearly there’s backstory,” Jim says.

“Yes.” Andy doesn’t say anything else but resets the board. “Uncle, a game? If you don’t mind us using your board, Jim.”

“I don’t,” Jim says, gesturing to it. “I want to see this.”

“I’m not a trick pony, you realize,” Andy says mildly.

“No, of course not,” Jim says, realizing he’s skating close to rudeness. “It’s just—I’m good at chess. I’m really good at chess. I play Spock sometimes, and he’s Vulcan so it’s all logical to him and we’re about even. I’ve never had someone take me down that fast and that brutally. And I can’t even begin to figure out how good Khan is, since genetically engineered brain, so…I’m curious what happens.”

“Okay, you’re good,” Andy says. “I give you credit for charisma.” She smiles, dimple flashing in her left cheek, and takes a sip of tea. “And really I want to see Khan play Spock, if there’s ever
“I often wonder why I find myself at the losing end of these demonstrations,” Khan says, but gestures to the board.

“Because you’re too powerful otherwise,” Jill says softly. “Because dragons terrify people.”

A thought occurs to Jim and he refuses to let it show on his face. If he’s the dragon and she’s the lioness, does that make any future kid a gryphon?

Although…”Does everyone have a fantastical beast identity?” he asks. “I mean—Andy?”

“Magpie and I have dragon tattoos for each other, and one each for Jill, and I have one for being clean for five years,” Andy says. “But she’s the bird, and I’m the phoenix.”

“Why are you the phoenix?” Jim asks.

“I’m an addict who got clean and stayed clean,” Andy says. “There is pretty much no greater effort of rebirth.”

“That is absolutely true,” Jim says. “Is congratulations the wrong thing to say?”

Andy laughs. “No, it’s not. Thank you.”

Khan clears his throat quietly a moment into awkward silence. “Not to interrupt, but I was promised a chess game I would lose,” he says.

“You were,” Andy says, looking at the board. “All right, uncle, let’s do this.”

It takes eight minutes.

Jim shakes his head. “Andy, you’re a bit terrifying with a chess board.”

Andy laughs and tucks a lock of hair back. “Now that is a compliment.”

Jim also thinks Andy is kind of fascinating, and if things were different, he really wouldn’t mind getting to know her better. But there’s not really time and this really isn’t the place. Still, though—“Are you and Magpie going with everyone, when they leave?” he asks.

“We are,” Andy says. “There’s no way Jill is leaving forever without us. Neither of us have ever been off-planet, so this will be really, really new, but as long as I have tech to play with I’m good.”

“And Magpie?” Jim asks.

“All kinds of new things to hack out there,” Jill says. “We’ll be fine.”

Jim wonders what time it is, and whether anyone else will be getting up soon. There are no windows in this part of the fortress, which he can understand for a variety of reasons, but it does make relative time difficult. He looks at his empty cup and decides he doesn’t want more tea, but he does get up to look for a glass of water.

When he comes back over to the couch, he can hear Khan and Jill talking quietly in Russian. Andy seems unconcerned, hands busy with—“What is that going to be?” Jim asks, trying to figure out what she’s even doing.

“It won’t be anything for a while yet,” Andy says, carefully fitting a wire into place. “And it may
be nothing, but if I can make it work, it’ll be a fail-safe transporter lock.”

“I don’t follow,” Jim says.

“If I can make it work, you’d wear it and be able to be beamed out of wherever, no matter what,” Andy says. “Interference, or motion, wouldn’t matter.”

Jim stares at it covetously. “What even gave you the idea?” he asks. “Okay, maybe a stupid question, but…why now?”

“Because I have some time now, and no other projects,” Andy says. “Well, except the personal shield that won’t die.”

“That may be a lost cause,” Khan says, startling Jim. “If between you, Katsuro and myself we still cannot achieve a workable prototype I think it rather impossible that anyone ever could.”

“I’m not giving up yet,” Andy says stubbornly. “I’m setting it aside for now, though.”

“Wise choice,” Khan says, although he sounds irritated by the thing.

“But the lock you’re making now,” Jim says. “How easily could you mass market it?”

“If I can get it to work—which, again, not a guarantee—it’ll end up being expensive to produce on a mass scale, because there are a lot of finicky parts involved and they’re not cheap,” Andy says. “It would, however, be a physical object that could be used on different people, so you could pass it around.” Andy studies the parts in his hands and makes some small adjustment.

“I don’t know whether you should tell Spock about that or not,” Jim admits.

“We spoke about it,” Andy says. “During the afternoon hiatus, we started talking, and he told me what happened on Vulcan, and how his mother died. So of course my first practical thought was ‘how do you prevent this from happening again?’ and I mentioned that to Spock and he appreciated my logic. But I don’t think he meant me to actually start something.”

Jim blinks. “He doesn’t tell people about Vulcan,” he says.

“I’m a good listener,” Andy says, shrugging. “People talk to me.”

Khan smiles a bit. “My counselor.”

“Keep me paid in interesting hardware, that’s all I ask,” Andy says. “Oh, and tea.”

“Which comes first, hardware or tea?” Jim asks.

Andy’s mouth opens, closes, and she looks at Jim with utter dismay. “I can’t choose,” he says. “That’s like choosing between food and water. You need them both.”

She sounds genuinely distressed by the concept. “I promise, you will always have tea,” Jill says, quickly and firmly. “If I’m making a demand for coffee, I promise we will have tea. The hardware’s on you, though.”

“I’m sure I’ll find things along the way,” Andy says, relaxing a bit.

“It’s easier to find tea out there than coffee,” Jim says. “Most planets have some kind of tea, although it varies a lot what you get. But pretty much every culture I’ve ever seen or heard about has some kind of plant they use as tea. And most of the Earth-based groups brought actual tea.”
“There’s one planet, I can’t remember the name, where it’s pretty much the global crop,” Andy says. “All kinds of tea. I want to go there someday, but I might never leave.”

“I know what you’re talking about and I can’t remember the name either,” Jim says. “I haven’t been there, though.”

“Yeah, but you’d rather coffee anyway,” Jill says, lifting her head from Khan’s shoulder. She pushes her hair back and grins at him.

“Yeah, but how’d you know?” Jim asks, but he smiles back.

“Because you’re a Starfleet officer holding command rank,” Jill says. “Name me one of those who survives on tea alone.”

“Spock would have, when he was in command,” Jim says, although…

“Amend my question to species that drink coffee and tea,” Jill says, shrugging.

Jim thinks about that one. “Yeah, okay,” he says. “You may have a point.”

“I’m sorry, there is no way to survive emergency calls on gamma shift without coffee,” Jill says. “Especially not when beta shift involved problems with the ship’s septic system. I think I was up for forty-three hours by the time someone tranqed me and I fell over.”

“Forty—what the hell happened?” Jim asks. He’s had his share of long nights, but what the fuck?

“Okay, so. The thing to note is that I was acting captain at the time because Mikael was home on emergency medical leave for his son,” Jill says. “And you can blame the Jill Zone or whatever, but basically the clock started ticking after Mikael’s shuttle left us—we were headed to Lafayette station, for record. This was the beginning of alpha shift, so I was up for that anyway. Beta shift, as I said, involved issues with the septic system that you really, truly, do not want to know about. That took all of beta shift and two hours into gamma, by the time we tracked down the source of the problem and fixed it. I went back to my quarters, intending to sleep, and got paged to the bridge by an incoming electrical storm that was going to scramble everything. It was a freak anomaly, and no one had detected it in time for us to move the ship. So the storm passed over us, and then we were sitting blind and deaf until our systems could come back online. I was not going to sleep while my ship was at that much risk. By the time we got at least basic sensors and comms back, we were into alpha shift again, so at this point I’d been up for about twenty-eight hours.”

Jill pauses to take a drink of tea, and Jim is pleased to note Khan is looking at her with the same ‘what the fuck?’ look on his face. “I stayed through alpha shift—so clock’s at thirty-two—and I honestly, truly, intended to go to sleep on beta shift. The Jill Zone had other plans and engineering paged me about half an hour after I got into bed because the storm had misaligned a thing that needed to be aligned, or we were going to end up off-course, and the systems that would have told them this earlier had just come back online. I stayed awake until they told me they’d realigned the thing, which put the clock at thirty-five. And then I just couldn’t sleep, because I was running on stims and fumes and I’d caught my sixteenth wind or something, and when it hit forty hours my crew decided enough was enough. They waited a few more hours because I kept not putting myself in situations where they could get me—I was restless, so I was wandering the ship, but they kept not catching me, and then our CMO stuck his foot out, tripped me, and got me before I could get up. I slept for eleven hours.”

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Khan says something to her in Russian and she gives him one hell of a look, then laughs. “Okay, if I am ever up for longer than thirty-six hours and I need to collapse I give you permission to tranq
“Trust me,” Khan says. “If you are up that long, Maeve or Bishop will get you long before I would. Probably Maeve. She likes putting people to sleep.”

Jim wonders if that’s like putting dogs to sleep and decides not to ask.

“Good to know,” Jill says and laughs. “So anyway, that’s the story of the longest day ever. I started keeping an eye out for our CMO after that if I’d been up for a while.”

“The other thing to note about this is that Jill never sleeps through the night to begin with,” Andy says. “So we’re used to her being up for over twenty-four hours. But forty-three is extreme.”

Jim looks at Khan. “Even for you?”

“If we have to we can stay awake for a few days,” Khan says. “But we need far less sleep than a regular human.”

“Now that’s handy,” Jim says. A thought occurs to him, and he doesn’t let it show but he looks at Jill for a moment, wondering how…

As if she knows what he’s thinking, she looks back, and grins, slow and like the cat that caught the canary, the mouse, and the bowl of cream. Jim coughs and takes a sip of water, completely not envious.

If he didn’t think Jasmine would kill him during it, he’d consider seeing if she wanted to maybe… but he likes his dick and he likes it attached to his body and he’s not convinced she would keep it that way.

It might be worth the risk to try and find out.

Another door opens and Anandi slips into the common area, hair hidden under a dark blue wrap. “By my internal clock it is an hour before dawn,” she says, coming over to them. “How long have you all been up?”

“A while,” Jim says. “Long enough that I’ve lost multiple games of chess.”

“Yes but one of them was to Andy so it barely took any time,” Jill says.

Anandi smiles. “And yet Andy will not play Go with me.” She draws over another chair and takes a seat, folding her hands in her lap.

“No, because I know chess,” Andy says. “Go is new and different and I’m not convinced I could be any good at it.”

“I will teach you,” Anandi says patiently. “We’ll have time aboard ship. You will like it.”

“You just won’t win,” Khan says. “Unless she lets you.”

“I expected that,” Andy says.

“When we have time, I will teach you,” Anandi says calmly. “And anyone else who wishes to learn.”

“Not I, thank you,” Jill says. “I do games of bluffing and chance. I don’t do chess, even.”
“What’s the most you ever won?” Jim asks. “Gambling, that is?”

“Five million,” Jill says. “Last year’s charity tournament for the Starfleet survivors’ fund. The deal was, however much people donated, the sponsors of the tournament would match it as a donation to the fund. It broke the record for most donations ever, and the prize pool was five million in the end.”

“What’d you do with it?” Jim asks.

Jill shrugs. “Donated it to the fund. I didn’t need the money and I didn’t feel right keeping it.”

“I can respect that,” Jim says, nodding. “I probably wouldn’t have either.”

“Didn’t you have to buy in again on that one?” Andy asks.

“I did,” Jill says. “Which I’d come prepared to do, I mean, because you were allowed to buy in again once and maybe twice depending on the level of the tournament. So I played to lose the first few rounds, to gauge everyone else, and then I bought back in and cleaned up.”

Jim snorts. “You sharked them.”

“Damn right I did,” Jill says, grinning. “I can’t play chess, I’m not usually one for puzzles although I love a good locked room mystery, but poker, oh, poker is my game.”

“Where did you learn?” Jim asks, kind of fascinated.

“We played a lot of poker at the Olympics, and when I stopped being interested in trading for sex I started figuring out things like card combinations and how to read people,” Jill says. “It’s really easy to study people when you’re all mostly naked.”

“Wait, I’m sorry, Olympics?” Jim holds up a hand. “What?”

“I went to the Olympics at sixteen,” Jill says. “I took home a gold medal for floor, a silver medal for beam, and our team had the gold. My life’s kind of had three parts so far. There was the gymnastics part, the thieving part, and then the Starfleet part but now we’ve moved into the Khan part and I have no idea what’s next.”

“Nor do any of us,” Khan points out. “That is rather the point.”

She grins, pushing back her hair. “I know, and I really am cutting a lot of this off. Are any of you good at that?”

“Aisha,” Khan says. “She was the only one I trusted with scissors around my face, although I kept my hair longer then.”

“Really,” Jill says, almost a purr. “How long?”

Khan looks at her. “There’s irony in this somewhere,” he says. “I had it long enough for a basic ponytail. It was practicality more than anything else.”

“I wonder if any photos from then survived,” Jill says.

“I think Magpie looked, once, and couldn’t find anything,” Andy says. “But I don’t know how in depth she looked.”

“Jasmine likely has files in her personal devices, if we had a device capable of reading them,”
Khan says, “But those are image files from the early twenty-first century.”

“My collection goes back to the mid-twenty-first,” Andy says, looking up from her work. “But depending on the storage medium I might have something capable of reading it. I’ll talk to Jasmine when we get back to Earth.”

Jim smiles a bit, taking a sip of water. It reminds him a bit of the time he spends with Bones or Spock or both between missions, the casual intimacy of it. Although he and Bones usually have a drink—but no one’s touching alcohol on Q’noS until everything’s done. Khan laid that one down when they gathered for the first meal, and while Jim and his crew aren’t exactly under Khan’s oversight here it’s just a good idea on principle.

“It will take some time for your ship to be outfitted and for you to be ready to leave,” he says to Khan, considering it. “We both know Starfleet is going to give you whatever the hell you want, but it’s still going to take some time to pull it all together.”

“Your ship will likely be in drydock for a time,” Khan counters. “From the damage Marcus did.”

“I’m aware,” Jim says. “Believe me, I’m aware. They hadn’t figured out how long it’d take when we left to meet you. Anyway, I was thinking that if you had time while we’re both stuck on Earth, we could try this chess thing again. Maybe without Andy the speed demon, though.”

Andy snorts. “If I slow down I’m less impressive.”

“Okay, so maybe then,” Jim says, earning himself a laugh from the group.

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because Marcus wanted me to kill you,” Jim says. “But in a weird thing, you and yours are rather the champions in this situation. I keep wondering what happened in the other timeline, if we met, or what happened.”

“Your ambassador Spock likely knows,” Khan says. “Did your current one ask him?”

“He did,” Jim admits. “All the older Spock would say was that you were one of the most dangerous men he’d ever known, and not to be underestimated.”

Khan shrugs. “Accurate enough, and could be spoken by an enemy or an ally.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you were allies over there,” Jim says. “But I don’t really want you as my enemy. Now or ever.”

“Wise choice,” Khan says, but he smiles a bit. “Presuming we have time on Earth, then yes, I will meet you for a game or three.”

“Also, Jill, I want a poker game with you and a few other people before you leave,” Jim says. “I have some friends I’d like you to scalp.”

She snorts. “How much are you going to pay me for doing it?”

“I’m sure we’ll work something out,” Jim says, laughing. “Although Chekov might surprise you. He’s got a baby face and an angelic smile and then he takes your money.”

“Da, of course, he’s Russian,” Jill says. “So this will be interesting. I also want it noted that I’ve never said I can’t be beaten. No one’s that good.”
“Says the Olympic medalist,” Andy says.

“I didn’t say it was likely,” Jill says, but she laughs. “And I see Cat and Konstantin emerging, which means it’s just about time for coffee and breakfast.”

“How is it we are the late risers? It is still an hour to dawn,” Konstantin says.

“We’re the insomniacs club,” Jill says.

“Ah. Of course.” Konstantin inclines his head. “I will put on the coffee.”

Chapter End Notes

"Tea. Earl Grey, hot." --I grew up with TNG, and Picard is my captain in so many ways (my crush on Patrick Stewart, let me show you it) but Jill and Jim are officers in a more...turbulent time, and coffee is required.

Don't think I've forgotten about Ny'lana.
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Our last night.

Chapter Notes

A bit of graphic violence in this chapter, as a note. But it's a Klingon banquet; what did you expect?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When it’s over, when all the agreements and concessions and disputes have been settled, Jim and his crew have to admit it’s fair to both sides. He promises, as the Federation representative, to take the accords back and have them signed and witnessed.

Somehow it doesn’t surprise him that the signings have to be witnessed—but thankfully not actually signed—in blood. Khan makes a cut in his wrist as Gowtek does the same, and both of them let blood fall onto the seal, where it sizzles in the hot wax. Gowtek stamps the seal, and a roar of celebration almost deafens Jim.

The formal banquet that evening is actually mostly edible by human standards, if Jim doesn’t think too hard about it.

When Ny’lana saunters over to Khan, Jasmine rises from her seat, slowly and without taking her eyes off the Klingon. “What do you want?” she asks coolly.

“I challenge you to personal combat,” Ny’lana says, pointing a knife at her. “Now that the negotiations are complete, I challenge you.”

“Oh, by all means,” Jasmine says. She smiles, slow and predatory. “Khan?”

“As you will,” Khan says and Jasmine’s smile sharpens.

“After the banquet is over,” Gowtek says, coming over to them. “We will set up a formal dueling circle. The combat will continue until one party either dies or yields.”

“I’ll dance on your grave,” Ny’lana promises Jasmine.

“Oh, darling,” Jasmine says. “You have no idea how much I’m looking forward to killing you.”

Ny’lana smiles, baring teeth. “You can try,” she says. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

“You won’t kill me,” Jasmine says calmly. “I, however, intend to take my time with you. No one insults Khan like that and lives.”

“Is he unable to fight his own battles?” Ny’lana sneers.
Jasmine raises an eyebrow. “You saw the combat in the ring and you ask that? Are you blind as well as stupid? Certainly he’s capable of taking you down, but you challenged me, bitch. You fight me.”

“After the banquet ends,” Gowtek says firmly. “Enough. We will establish the circle after the meal. For now, we celebrate.”

Jim thinks the mood might have been ruined, but Ny’lana says something in Klingon and walks off. He looks at Uhura. “What did she say?”

“She said she’d celebrate when Jasmine dies,” Uhura says quietly.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to happen,” Jim says, looking at Jasmine.

“No,” Spock says. “Neither do I.”

The banquet does feel a bit more subdued after that, but only a little. Jim half pays attention during the speeches, but he doesn’t think he’ll need to remember the content for anything. Gowtek speaks, and one of the old Klingons, and then Bishop gets to his feet and gives what Jim thinks is one of the best speeches he’s heard in the last five years. He doesn’t speak long—maybe ten minutes—but he gets a standing ovation when he finishes.

“But of course, we would be remiss if we did not answer your song with one of our own,” Gowtek says after everyone takes their seats. Next to Jim, Uhura perks up, and Ekaterina almost rises out of her seat. “The eight performers you will hear tonight are our elite chorale and performing group, the Citadel Warriors. I will let their music speak for the rest.” He gestures, and eight Klingons in formal robes and purely ceremonial armor arrange themselves in the open space in the middle of the tables.

Klingon voices are typically deeper than human, Jim knows, but the height their…soprano, maybe—starts off as surprises him, and he thinks back to the arena, to Ekaterina’s opening. Okay, maybe not so surprising, and while Ekaterina had the higher voice, Jim’s pretty sure she always does.

He resolves to ask Uhura for the translation later and watches the performance, which consists of some kind of dialogue, Jim thinks. One singer makes a statement, backed up by the rest as a chorus, and then another singer responds. Challenge and response, he realizes, and then slowly the singers take sides—physically moving to face each other, taking turns to issue his or her own declaration along the way. The back-and-forth of the four against four hits harmonies Jim honestly doesn’t think exist in human music—he’d swear they have six or eight part harmonies in there.

Okay, so he plays guitar, or played. It was generally a decent way to pick up dates, but he ended up liking the guitar for its own merits, and at least Frank didn’t give him grief about it. Since Jim had picked up the instrument on one of his mother’s rare six month leaves, finding peace at home had been semi-important. So Frank didn’t give him grief if he practiced, as long as he played something recognizable as music, and his mom introduced him to really classic rock—and some rap, which surprised Jim, honestly—and it was an actually tolerable span of time.

He smiles a bit to himself, thinking about it. He gave up the guitar when he started at the Academy. Too determined to do it better, there.

Putting one on the Enterprise shouldn’t be difficult, and he knows Spock and Uhura practice forms of Vulcan music, so maybe they can trade performances or something. Really, really casual ones, Jim amends, because he hasn’t played in five years and his calluses are for shit.
The differing sides of the chorus build toward something but Jim can’t figure out which side is winning, and then all eight join and he sits back in his seat, staggered by it. The final, triumphant chorus leaves him somewhat speechless; he’s never heard anything quite like it before, and doubts he will again.

After the applause and the cheers quiet down, Ekaterina steps forward. She starts speaking—in Klingon, which surprises Jim, but one of the singers nods and answers her, and then Ekaterina sings a passage that Jim’s fairly certain that singer just did. How the fuck did she pick out an individual part in that chorale and memorize it off one hearing?

Superior fighting skills are one thing, and he knew Khan was brilliant, but…damn. Jim looks at her with serious respect.

Although from the look on the singer’s face, she is wondering the same thing. Ekaterina finishes, asks a question, and sings the passage again—but differently. Same melody, he thinks, but the phrasing is different and it sounds…Jim frowns, not entirely certain.

“I’m not entirely certain what she did,” Uhura says, also frowning. “It’s the same language but she accented things differently and I don’t have enough familiarity with Klingon to understand entirely what that does.”

“She used an archaic form of the language,” the singer says in English. “That hasn’t been spoken or sung in hundreds of years. How did you learn it?”

Ekaterina shrugs. “I am a linguist. I study languages, because in order to properly study a language one must study the culture in which it originates, and I like to learn about people. I studied Klingon language, and while I did not find a complete dictionary of the older form of your language I found enough texts that I was able to understand its syntax.”

“How many languages do you speak?” the singer asks.

“I truthfully cannot remember,” Ekaterina says. “Dozens, certainly. Some that are long dead, some that are dying, but as long as I live, they live with me. It is how I speak for the dead. I studied Klingon, because I knew I would come here to kill many of them. We knew we would, we prepared for it, and of course there is always the rush of killing and the bloodlust of a good fight. But six hundred and eighty of your warriors died, and my family and I will carry those deaths. We will also carry your language, and words of your honor and your warriors.”

She smiles, shrugs. “Pardon. I am Russian, and we get…emotional.”

“What is Russian?” the singer—Jim starts calling her Brunhilde because it amuses him—asks.

“Oh, my friend,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “Russia is a vast and cold land, and so, so beautiful. Only the strong thrive in Russia. Well, and the beautiful, for we are a passionate people, and as prone to weep as to fight.”

“Sing me a song of Russia,” Brunhilde says. “If you would.”

“Da, but of course,” Ekaterina says. “But I need my wolf. Kostya?” She turns, but Konstantin is already going to her.

“What is a wolf?” Brunhilde asks.

“A fierce predator,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “And a protector. The wolf lives in packs, and the alpha protects his family. They mate for life.”
“How long have you two been mated?” Brunhilde asks.

“How long have you two been mated?” Ekaterina asks. “Because if that is involved then over two hundred and fifty years. Otherwise, forty-four.”

Brunhilde frowns, clearly not buying it. “You are not even forty now, from what I know of human ages.”


“Is this medical technology you can share with others?” Gowtek asks.

“Nyet.” Ekaterina’s negative is quick and final. “No. Ghobe’.”

“Katya,” Konstantin says after a moment. “Sing them the one you wrote.”

“Which one?” Ekaterina asks, but the mood eases.

“Of wolves,” Konstantin says.

She smiles, and Jim gets staggered by how much she loves him. But it’s interesting, to compare them to Jill and Khan. Ekaterina and Konstantin are two halves of a whole, each incomplete without the other. They are a unit. Jill and Khan are two definitive individuals.

He wonders, uneasily, how either Ekaterina or Konstantin would cope with losing the other. He’s not convinced she would and remain sane.

“I need my wolf to sing it properly,” she says. “Da?”

Konstantin nods. “Count it, Katya,” he says.

“Odin. Dva. Tre. Chitere.” She counts it off, quickly, and Konstantin sets the pace with—Jim listens for a few bars, and realizes it’s the rhythm of something walking, slowly. Then a bit more quickly, and when it starts to run Ekaterina comes in, matching him and then soaring above him.

It’s a chase, Jim realizes, with Konstantin’s wolf chasing Ekaterina’s…something, although Jim figures it’s something feline. But not…he’s not hunting her. He’s courting her, and she’s flirting with him, and when she eventually lets him catch her the harmony sends chills down Jim’s spine.

They finish on that, and Ekaterina smiles at her wolf, raising a hand to touch his cheek. “My Kostya.”

He covers her hand with his own and turns to kiss her palm. “Always and forever.”

“Now this is a love story for the ages,” Brunhilde says, smiling. “You must tell us, so we can write a song about it.”

“Oh, my friend,” Ekaterina says, smiling back. “I will, certainly, but not tonight. To tell the story properly requires vodka, and we have none.”

“What is this vodka?” Brunhilde asks.

“It is a special liquor, made from potatoes,” Ekaterina says. “Russians invented it, because Russian winters are cold and long and dark, so we invented new ways to drink, because potatoes were cheaper than grain.”
“Oh, but we must share a toast of bloodwine,” Brunhilde says. “To the story you will tell us.”

Ekaterina raises her eyebrows. “What is bloodwine?”

“We had not yet gotten to the toasts,” Gowtek says. “Bloodwine is what we drink. And yes, of course, we must have it. I must caution you, it is rather potent.”

Ekaterina smiles. “By all means.”

So everyone gets a warm glass of bloodwine, and the first toast starts, and Jim takes a sip and his head spins.

“Katsuro, what say you?” Ekaterina asks.

“It is an interesting beverage,” Katsuro says. “Certainly potent, but not overly so.”

“You will think differently by the time you finish yours,” Brunhilde says.

Katsuro smiles politely. “I have been told that before.”

“Wait,” Gowtek says. “Before we can entertain this interesting question, we have a challenge that must be satisfied. We must build the square.”

Jim watches in no real surprise as the Klingons quickly establish a low platform and cover it with sand. Some kind of force technology keeps it on there, and it looks to be enough to provide solid footing.

Jasmine steps forward, as does Ny’lana, Jasmine carrying her sword openly and Ny’lana all but brandishing her axe.

Gowtek steps between them, holding up his hands. “Once you enter the dueling circle, you may only leave by winning. There is no first blood. A challenge of honor is to the death.”

“As it should be,” Jasmine says calmly. She’s tied her hair back, Jim sees, some kind of knot at the back of her head. Her clothes don’t look all that practical, but he doubts it will matter.

Ny’lana’s lip curls.

“There will be no poison,” Gowtek says. “No tricks. This is a fair fight.”

It really, really isn’t, Jim thinks, watching the women climb onto the platform and face each other. Ny’lana twirls her axe; Jasmine snorts. But neither of them move to attack. “You challenged me,” Jasmine says, watching her. “Bring it on, bitch.”

Ny’lana snarls and springs at her. Jasmine spins out of the way just before Ny’lana would have hit her—the axe does slice her shirt—and slams her knife into the back of Ny’lana’s neck. Jim didn’t even see her draw it; suddenly she had it in her hand.

He wonders uneasily how bad this is going to be to watch, but at least for the first couple passes they do go back and forth, and Jasmine takes a couple slices to her torso—nothing that appears to cause major damage, though. She gets in a few slices of her own, too, and Jim feels like she’s waiting for something, like some cue or something.

The Klingons have been muttering and calling to Ny’lana, but the humans have been relatively quiet. One more pass at each other, though, with misses on both sides, and Khan’s wings stretch. “My claw, enough,” he says. “Take her down.”
Jasmine laughs, and shifts her grip slightly on her sword. “All right, bitch,” she says. “Now it’s my
turn to play.”

It’s...both disturbing to watch and impressive as hell, Jim thinks, watching Jasmine destroy
Ny’lana. She moves fast, inhumanly so, and her sword does not miss its target, while Ny’lana keeps
swinging wide—probably because both her arms are bleeding profusely and one shoulder looks…
wrong.

Enough, though, he thinks. She’s made her point, hasn’t she?

Khan clears his throat. “End it.”

In two quick moves Jasmine has Ny’lana on her knees and disarmed. “If you had insulted me, I
would have taken offense but let you live,” she says evenly. “You insulted Khan, and I do not let
that go. I don’t even know what you intended to accomplish, truthfully, but neither do I care.”

Jim wonders if she’ll give Ny’lana a chance to say something, but the Klingon doesn’t and
Jasmine’s sword takes off her head before she really gets a chance.

Jasmine looks at Ny’lana’s body and sniffs, then spits on the corpse, muttering something in
Arabic Jim doesn’t want a translation for. She bends to scrub her sword clean on the sand, but
when she straightens up Ekaterina holds out a hand and Jasmine tosses her the weapon.

Jim looks at her, and damn. She’s terrifying and also incredibly hot, even spattered with purple and
red and her shirt sliced open in a few places. “My honor is satisfied,” she says, looking at Gowtek.
“Does anyone challenge me?”

Dead silence. Jasmine smiles faintly and looks over at the humans, specifically at Khan. Jim
glances at him and sees him smile faintly, his wings stretching a bit before he pulls them in. At
that, Jasmine grins. She puts her right hand on her heart and bows slightly. “My lord.”

Then she walks off the dueling sand, and Jim blinks when he realizes she’s heading directly for
him. “You’re coming with me,” she says, hooking her finger in his belt loop.

Jim blinks, then grins. “Am I going to survive?” he asks.

“Oh, habibi,” Jasmine says, patting his cheek. “You’ll be telling stories about this one the rest of
your life.”

He laughs. “Good enough.” Also fuck yes. Literally, and he’s really good with any way that could
play out.

Jasmine laughs and starts walking toward their quarters, keeping her finger hooked in his belt loop.
Jim hears Uhura snicker, but doesn’t look back at anyone else because he’s kind of afraid of their
reactions.

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Khan says nothing, but inwardly—well, Alona giggles and Aisha snorts and Cat outright laughs,
and he quite agrees. “She always did that,” he says, half-remembering. “She would win a duel and
find someone to bed.”

“She was usually particular about who, though,” Aisha says.

“Hey,” Uhura says.
“Oh, ducky, I mean no insult toward Jim,” Aisha says. “Jasmine likes to win things, and when she win things she likes to fuck. She has standards, though, and she’s particular about who she will take to bed. There was just one time she wasn’t.”

“I never heard this story,” Cat says, raising an eyebrow.

“Because the only people who know it are either long dead or Jasmine, Khan, and myself and we’re not telling it,” Aisha says.

“You have so many of those,” Jill says. “Do I get to know any of them?”

Aisha studies her for a moment. “I’ll consider it, ducky. Maybe we’ll trade stories over coffee.”

“Aisha doesn’t sleep,” Khan says. “Literally. You could usually find her around the kitchens at night, with coffee or tea and whoever else was up.”

“Surely you require sleep at some point,” Spock says to Aisha.

“In a very odd quirk of genetic programming we couldn’t identify then and likely can’t now, no, I don’t,” Aisha says. “I can become fatigued and rest, but I don’t actually sleep then and under usual circumstances I simply do not sleep.”

“I would give so very, very much for that ability,” Jill says.

“No,” Khan says. He keeps an eye on the Klingons as they carry out Ny’lana’s body and clean up the sand and the platform. Gowtek comes over to him, but to Khan’s surprise he smiles.

“It would be a strange celebration indeed without at least one duel of honor,” Gowtek says. “This was well done. Ny’lana was in truth wrong to insult you so, and Jasmine made her answer for it. We will drink to Jasmine’s success and also to Ny’lana’s death, for she was a Klingon warrior.”

“I would expect nothing less,” Khan says, meaning it. He understands the Klingon code, how they value honor and savagery. Marcus just saw them as savages, he thinks, but even if he had understood their code he would not have understood how to use it.

Marcus wanted to use Khan’s savagery, the thirst for battle he acknowledges usually exists. But there was so much more Khan could have done for him—before killing him and taking his place, or the equivalent, to be honest.

But honestly, this may be the best of all possible outcomes given the original scenario. He doesn’t know whether to credit his dead wife or his lioness with it, but the truth realistically lies between them.

Gowtek smiles, not showing teeth. In Klingon, he says “I envy you your mate. She has the recklessness of a true warrior and the cunning of the best thieves. You are well honored by her.”

“I am,” Khan says. “She led me quite a chase.”

“Klingon men spend quite a lot of time ducking,” Gowtek says. “Klingon women are famed for their tempers.”

“Have you a wife?” Khan asks curiously.

Gowtek shakes his head. “My wife died in childbirth years ago. Neither she nor the baby survived.”
Khan instinctively puts his fist over his heart—symbol of apology, compassion, whatever. He hadn’t used it in centuries but Jasmine still does, and Khan has noticed a few others picking it up again.

“Ah, but it is ill done of me to bring sad thoughts,” Gowtek says in English. “So! I understand that Katsuro thinks our bloodwine not all that powerful?”

“I did not say that,” Katsuro says politely. “I said that while I find the bloodwine potent, I do not find it overwhelming.”

“Humans usually can only handle a small amount of bloodwine,” one of the other Klingons says. “Although it is rare for them to be offered it at all. But in general humans do not handle alcohol well.”

Katsuro comes forward. “Would you care to wager on it?”

And that’s how the first drinking competition starts. Katsuro outlasts eight Klingons and Cat, although he barely does the latter. Khan, all too mindful of the Femarans, decides to abstain entirely.

Somewhere in there they toast the dead, and Jasmine in her absence, and Jim gets a round and a laugh mixed with appreciation, because Khan is fairly certain most people in that room have gone in search of sex after a fight.

Eventually the banquet winds down and they say their farewells, intending to leave early in the morning. Gowtek clasps arms with Khan and with Jill, the Klingon singer named Khan thinks Talethna exchanges information with Cat, things like that, and it takes a while but eventually they end up in their common area.

“We leave tomorrow, early,” Khan says, pitching his voice to carry over conversations and murmurs. “Sleep while you can.”

“Or something,” Alona says. “Is Katsuro all right?”

“He is fine,” Bishop says. “He’ll sober up in a few hours.”

“Are my quarters safe, or do I need to offer someone a bed?” Jake asks. “Who was Jasmine staying with?”

“Me,” Aisha says. “So it’s really fine, ducky. I’ll read and have tea.”

Jake shrugs. “You mind company for a bit?”

“I rarely do,” Aisha says.

A few people move toward the kitchen, but mostly they disperse into their rooms. Khan looks at Jill to see what she wants to do and she jerks her head toward their quarters, so he follows her inside.

“Our last night,” Jill says, closing the bedroom door behind Khan and locking it. “Should we have slept on the ship instead?”

Khan shakes his head. “We have said our goodbyes, we can leave in the morning. To sleep on the ship now might be rude, as if we can’t wait to leave their hospitality.”
“Point.” Jill stretches her arms over her head, then bends forward to touch her toes. She shifts into downward facing dog, then a couple other yoga poses. “And hey, only one more person died.”

“Yes, and she rather brought it on herself,” Khan says, watching Jill move. “I can’t bring myself to feel guilty about it, or even remorseful.”

“No, nor should you,” Jill says. She bounces to her feet and walks over to Khan. “I’m refusing to talk about anything Klingon related the rest of the evening.”

“Are you,” Khan says, catching her wrists and drawing her in against him. “What are you going to talk about?”

“How many times and ways we can have sex before the morning,” Jill says, smiling. “It’s been a few days and I really, really want you.”

Khan laughs and bends to kiss her. The kiss deepens and he picks her up, letting her wrap around him with her arms and legs. When he presses her back against the wall, she laughs against his mouth and scratches her nails over his scalp, just hard enough he groans. “You want to know what I packed?” Jill murmurs, kissing the corner of his mouth.

“Did you actually pack the cuffs?” Khan murmurs back, kissing her jaw and biting her throat lightly.

“Damn right I did,” Jill says, pleased. “I want…I want a lot of things, but I want your hand tonight.”

Khan inhales sharply and kisses her again. “Yes,” he says against her mouth. “Yes.”

“And then, when we get back to Earth,” she says, biting his lower lip. “I have plans for you.”

“Do you,” Khan says, pushing Jill’s wrists over her head. “What plans?”

“You told me, once,” she says, tipping her head back against the wall. “You told me that when I trusted you, we could switch, that you’d let me top you.”

“I did,” Khan says, remembering that conversation. “Do you want that?”

“I want to fuck you,” Jill says, opening her eyes to meet Khan’s. “I won’t hurt you and I bet you’ll love it.”

“Likely,” Khan says, kissing Jill’s temple. “But not tonight. Tonight, lioness, you are mine.”

Jill laughs and stretches up to kiss him, pulling against his hold on her wrists. “If we’re doing this, though, I don’t want to be against the wall. My shoulders will never forgive me.”

“No, of course not,” Khan says. He kisses her again and carries her over to the bed, laying her down. “Where are the cuffs?”

“In my bag,” Jill says, sitting up. “Top front pocket.”

He nods. “While I get those, you should undress.”

“So should you,” Jill says, reaching for her shirt. Khan watches her pull it off and toss it to the side, along with her bra.

“I will,” he says, looking away from her to get the cuffs. “But not just yet.”
“That’s always your answer,” Jill says, but she laughs.

Khan smiles and opens the pocket in Jill’s bag. He finds the box easily enough and takes out the cuffs, coming back over to the bed. “Beautiful,” he says, almost to himself. Jill sits in the center of the bed, nude, her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. He rests a knee on the bed and leans down to kiss her, pressing her back against the bed. “Hands over your head, kitten.”

Jill smiles and stretches her arms over her head. Khan fastens the cuffs around her wrists, making sure they’re not too tight or too lose. “Is this comfortable for you?” he asks when he has her the way he wants her.

“It is,” Jill says, flexing her hands. “I’m okay.”

“Good.” Khan nips her lower lip and locks the cuffs in place before he takes one of the pillows and settles it under her hips. Jill sighs a little and spreads her legs for him; he can already smell her, and when he brushes his fingers between her legs, barely touching her, she’s already wet. “So eager for me,” he says, pulling back to find the lube.

“Always,” she whispers. “I don’t think I’ll ever stop wanting you this way.”

Khan tosses the lube onto the bed and crawls over Jill, not quite resting his weight on her. He kisses her, again and again, until she moans and squirms under him, trying to wrap her legs around his waist. “Patience, kitten,” he says softly, kissing her jaw and her throat, biting over her pulse. Jill shivers, but lets her legs drop to the bed, and Khan leaves a path of kisses and bites down her body, watching the flush in her skin deepen, following the path his lips have left.

“Please,” Jill says softly, her legs spreading wider. “Touch me, dragon, please.”

“Patience,” Khan repeats, but he kisses her stomach, just above her pubis, dragging a finger between her labia, not quite pressing into her. Jill shudders, hips pushing into his touch. “I want to know how many times you can come for me,” he says, licking his finger clean from her. “Can we break the record, do you think?”

“I don’t even know what the record is anymore,” Jill says, shivering. “But I’m pretty sure we could, whatever it is.”

“Until you beg me to stop,” Khan says. “Come whenever you can, kitten, as often as you can, until you beg me to stop.”

“Touch me,” she whispers. “Please, dragon.”

Khan kisses her stomach again and slowly presses a finger into her, swallowing his own groan at the way she feels, hot and slick and tight. He doubts he’ll ever stop wanting her this much, but says nothing out loud.

Instead he crooks his finger slightly, shifting his hand a bit to get the right angle that allows him to press his thumb against her clit. Jill’s breath hitches when he does, and when Khan glances up he sees her eyes are closed and the color in her cheeks spreads down her chest. He spares a moment to wish he had a camera, but only a moment.

Maybe another time.

For now, he sets the thought aside, focusing on Jill. He rubs her clit with his thumb, small tight circles that make her moan and twist under his hand; when he pushes another finger into her she cries out. “Can you come from this, kitten?” he asks, pressing her clit firmly. “Like this?”
“Please,” Jill breathes, head tossing on the pillow. “Don’t stop, please—“

He has no intention of it. Instead he increases the pressure on her clit, just a little, twisting and crooking his fingers inside her. Jill’s breath comes in shuddering gasps, the whine in her throat getting higher and higher until she cries out, hips bucking up against his hand and clenching around his fingers.

Khan lets her catch her breath, gentling his hand, but when she stops panting he pushes a third finger into her and scrapes his thumbnail over her clit. Jill gasps, head tossing on the pillow, legs starting to tremble. “Come for me, lioness,” he murmurs. “Come for me.”

Even for him, his hand almost cramps before she comes, and she spasms around his fingers hard enough that it almost hurts. Khan relaxes his hand but leaves it where it is, and slowly Jill’s breath returns to normal. “Oh, God,” she mumbles, blinking her eyes open. “That was so, so good.”

“And we’re just getting started,” Khan says, smiling a bit.

“Tell me what you want, dragon,” Jill says, licking her lips.

“I want to take you apart,” he says simply. “I want to break you into pieces and put you back together.”

“Just so long as you do put me together,” Jill says. “Dragon, do we have water? I’m thirsty as hell.”

“We do,” Khan says. He eases his hand out of Jill and goes to get her a glass of water, unlocking the cuffs so she can sit up to drink it.

“Thank you,” she says after draining the glass. “I needed that.”

“Do you want more?” Khan asks, setting the glass down.

Jill shakes her head. “No, that was all I needed for now.”

Khan leans over and kisses her. “Lie down on your stomach,” he says.

“You are practically obsessed with this tattoo,” Jill says, laughing. But she stretches out on her stomach, pillowing her head on her crossed arms. Khan waits for her to get comfortable and locks the cuffs.

“To be fair, lioness, it is an amazing work of art,” he says, returning to her comment. “And it means you are mine, that you belong to me.”

“With you,” Jill says. “And you belong with me. What tattoo will you get for me?”

“Your name sign,” Khan says. “From the pidgin speak. I thought I would get it and my own sign on the inside of my left wrist.”

“Oh,” Jill says softly, surprised. “Yes. That…I like that.”

“I was not certain if you wanted me to get a dragon,” Khan says, sliding his hands up her back, over the tattoo. “Do you?”

“Only if you wanted one, but I’m the lioness, not the dragon,” Jill points out. “I mean, dragons are a theme with me and Andy and Magpie, but I don’t think you need to have one. Besides, where would you put it?”
“Likely on my bicep,” Khan says. “I had thought of getting one for you, and one for Andy.”

“Oh,” Jill says after a moment. “What would Andy’s dragon look like?”

“Blues and purples, similar to the one Magpie has of him,” Khan says, more interested in kissing Jill’s throat, biting just at the line of her shoulder. “And yours, of course, would be red and gold.”

“Well, obviously,” Jill says, tipping her head to the side for him. “Honestly, Khan, it is your decision what art you do or don’t put on your body. I mean, I want you get inked for me because I did it for you, but as to what you do, that’s entirely your call. You could ask Magpie for help, though, if you want to design something.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. He slides his hands up Jill’s back again and scratches her on the way down. She groans, twisting under his hands. “We can discuss it later.”

“Later is good,” she says, a little breathless.

Later doesn’t happen until the wee hours of the morning, when Khan thinks by all rights Jill should be sound asleep but she cuddles into him, sleepy but very clearly awake. He holds her, runs a hand up and down her back in hopes he can coax her back to sleep.

“What did you see, in the spicewine?” Jill asks softly.

“What do you mean?” Khan asks.

“It’s known to give visions,” Jill says. “People are divided on whether they’re real or hallucinogenic, but usually you see…something. What did you see?”

It’s not that he doesn’t want to tell her, and yet Khan hesitates. “Rani,” he says finally. “I saw…I spoke to her.”

“Oh,” Jill says. “Oh, Khan. Was—I mean, you haven’t talked to me about it, but is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Khan says and smiles, kissing her hair. “More than. I love her, I always will, but she is a ghost. A somewhat alive one, or at least able to manipulate events around us, although she did not tell me anything about that.”

“Of course not,” Jill says. “She probably has rules she has to follow, too.”

“She said something to that effect,” Khan says. “But…no. I am grateful, immeasurably so, that I was able to both get the message she left me and to speak with her one last time. Whether that was due to her or the spicewine or a combination, I know not, but I am grateful for it.” He brushes a curl back from Jill’s face. “What did you see?”

“A child,” Jill says after a pause. “One with my hair and your eyes. She was maybe five or six, I think, although I’m not good with kids’ ages, and we got to play on a giant playground.”

“What was her name?” Khan asks, not entirely certain the proper questions to ask here but also not certain where the devil Jill’s vision came from.

“She didn’t tell me,” Jill says. “I asked, and she giggled and ran off to another part of the playground. I got the message after I asked a third time. It was…she was beautiful, Khan, but I have no idea what to think about it. You can’t have children, I don’t know as I ever want to be pregnant although I do think you and I would make…interesting parents someday.”
“Perhaps, but unless we can reverse whatever was done to me it is not going to happen naturally,” Khan says. “Do you really want children? With me?” He feels somewhat adrift here, uncertain how to proceed. He and Rani had talked about it, but they ran out of time, and given how uncertain things are now…

“I told you when I met you that I thought I wanted kids someday,” Jill says. “And I still think that. And since you’re it, my dragon, I do think that I want to have a child with you. Not immediately, God no, because I’d like us to establish a baseline for how we are while traveling before we throw anything else into that mix, but yeah, I do. I don’t think it necessarily has to be your kid or mine DNA wise, because you know more than anyone the value of chosen family over biological. That having been said, I think having your kid would be…kind of incredible.”

“I don’t know if my advantages would transfer to a child,” Khan says, thinking about it. “Rowena’s daughter had some of our abilities, but not all. The father was a regular human, but Rowena was ours.”

“Yeah, but you’re exceptional even for your kind,” Jill says. “I guess we’d see what happened, but first we have to fix you.”

“It may not be possible,” Khan says, not wanting her to get her hopes up.

“I know that,” Jill says patiently. “I’m not saying we have to have a child the old fashioned way. We haven’t invented an artificial womb yet, although they’ve come close, but…sorry, if we’re going to create a baby with your sperm and my egg I’m not outsourcing its gestation.”

“I think that fair,” Khan says, amused. “We can talk to Bishop and Maeve, I suppose. We will have time before we leave Earth, so they might be able to do some research. Are children on spaceships these days?”

“It depends on the ship and its mission,” Jill says. “The general rule is that children can’t be on any ship that’s out for more than eight months, or they can’t go more than eight months in space without a break somewhere planetside. Artificial gravity can still fuck up your growth if you spend too much time in space, and kids on ships tend to be a small number so the psychologists feel it’s important for them to spend time off-ship socializing and learning with other kids. Which I think is bullshit, but anyway. They also don’t generally allow children on ships that have any chance of encountering unfriendlies or weird space phenomena, because again, space can fuck you up.” She sits up, pushing her hair back. “Starfleet tries to reduce the risk of unplanned offspring by enforcing that all fertile crewmembers use long acting birth control in whatever fashion is species appropriate. For human women, it’s a five-year implant. For human men, it’s I think a hypo once a month.”

“How easy are they to replace?” Khan asks. “Your implant?”

“Oh, it’s simple,” Jill says. “It needs to be done by a medical professional because the implant goes in my uterus, but it’s really easy to pull one out. I have to wait two weeks before I get the new one, though.”

“You told me you had…three years left on it,” Khan says, also sitting up. “Yes?”

“I think so,” Jill says. “But before we left I was going to go through getting it pulled and getting a new one. I’m in no particular hurry to have a period again, and this way we can figure out a kid when we’re ready.”

“Reasonable enough of you,” Khan says. He takes her hand, looking at it, so small against his.
Tries to imagine a child’s hand on top of hers, smaller still, and the idea makes something tighten in his chest. “Tell me more about the girl, the one you saw on the spicewine,” he says.

“She was really…she made me happy,” Jill says, a little wistfully. “Because nothing mattered except playing with her, and how many times we could go down the slide or who could go higher on the swings. We talked about favorite colors—hers is red—and warrior princesses, because princesses are awesome but princesses who kick butt are even better. I started calling her Eowyn because talk about a warrior princess.” She smiles a bit, shrugs. “It was like I didn’t have to think about anything but having fun, and teaching Eowyn how to do cartwheels and somersaults and some other stuff. It was incredibly freeing, and this was a really awesome playground where the whole ground was this springy mat thing. We were outside, I think, but it was that kind of magical outside where the sun’s perfect and it’s not too warm but not too cold. Then again, it was a spicewine hallucination.”

“You never had a childhood,” Khan says in Russian.

“Not as such, no, but I liked what I had,” she answers in the same language.

“We will, of course, need a gymnasium on the ship,” Khan says. “With, I would presume, ample open space with mat floors.”

Jill laughs, enough that she falls over. “You are just…oh, my dragon. Oh. Every time I think I can’t possibly love you more, you prove me wrong. Trust me, if we have room to put gymnastics equipment in it, I’d like to do so. I actually have some sketches—us ladies talked about what we’d want on the ship while we trekked, and at checkpoints Alona made up some sketches.”

“Did the Starfleet crew have any suggestions?” Khan asks, honestly curious.

“They did,” Jill says. “Some of it was pretty decent, too. Nyota got pretty specific about the types of long-range communicators out there and the best ones, and how to hook into the various networks. I wish Cat could have been there with us, or Andy and Magpie, but we took notes. Spock had some good discussions with Anandi about scientific equipment, although he admits he isn’t much of a biochemist, but they found some common ground, and Alona has decided she wants to study stellar cartography so they had that to talk about, too.”

“Have you studied it?” Khan asks.

“Nope,” Jill says. “I’m the pilot. Someone else tells me where to go, I just get there. Jake has, though. He has to be able to figure out where he is in a pinch.”

“Has he ended up on unexpected planets?” This conversation is taking odder and odder turns, but Khan can’t find he minds. Besides, he wants to know the answer.

“I don’t think so exactly, but I think once he landed on a system’s inhabited planetoid instead of their inhabited planet, and had a hell of a time getting to the right place,” Jill says. “We’re going to have to figure out how to calibrate yours, though.”

“Mine are based off stellar cartographic coordinates based on Federation mapping,” Khan says. “We will rather need a cartographer if we explore into the unknown, and in truth I am not quite certain how the transporters would work long-range once we get there.”

“We’ll worry about that when we get there,” Jill says. “You and Magpie and Alona can figure it out.”

“Why am I always the one figuring it out?” Khan asks ruefully.
“Because, my dragon, you are the first among them, and the smartest,” Jill says. “Also, darling, because you designed the bloody transporters.”

“Clearly you’ve spent a lot of time with Alona and Maeve,” Khan says, laughing. “Maeve more than Alona. Alona generally prefers variants on fuck.”

“Yes, and she can get pretty creative,” Jill says. “Especially when her leg’s broken and we’re holding her down so Maeve can set it. She wasn’t even trying to fight us but…it was a bad break.”

“You couldn’t knock her out first?” Khan asks then winces. “I retract the question.”

“We couldn’t, unfortunately, and we’d given her morphine already but it hadn’t hit when Maeve set it,” Jill says. “She screamed, got very creative cursing Klingons, and then the morphine hit and she almost passed out.”

“It does rather do that,” Khan says.

“You don’t take it if you can help it,” Jill says. “Does it affect you badly?”

(Of all things, I have a sensitivity to it,” Khan says, irritated about it. “Opioids in general. They affect me more strongly than the usual person, and at lower dosages. I never take them unless I absolutely cannot help it or needs must.”

Jill laughs. “Me, too, but I kind of like the rush sometimes. But only if I’m safe.”

“I know,” Khan says, reaching out to lay a hand on her stomach. “You only show your belly to those you trust, my lioness.”

“What’s the dragon equivalent of exposing the underbelly, or one’s throat?” Jill asks.

“I would think exposing the throat,” Khan says after a moment to actually contemplate it. “Since a dragon can be killed by that as easily as any other creature with a head.”

“Fair point,” Jill says. She laughs and props herself up on her elbows. “This has been the weirdest conversation. I love it.”

“I was reflecting that, as well,” Khan says. “You do have a way of twisting conversations to odd ends, lioness.”

“It’s part of my charm,” Jill says. She covers a yawn and stretches. “I think I’m up for good, which means I badly want a shower and a chance to do some yoga.”

“The showers hold two,” Khan says. Advantage of Klingons being generally bigger than humans; their plumbing is more than sufficient for both him and Jill, even with the wings.

“They do and I totally want company,” she says, getting up. “But maybe not sex.”

“I would be surprised if you did,” Khan says, also getting up. Still, he catches her wrist and pulls her in against him, leaning down to kiss her lightly. “My lioness,” he murmurs.

She smiles against his lips and nips the bottom one. “My dragon.”

Chapter End Notes
Klingon words I think are understandable from context; hopefully so is the Russian; let me know if you have questions.

I have no idea if Jim Kirk in any universe plays guitar but I studied music for years and so Jim-as-guitar-player gave me a chance to geek out a bit. Also, I think it suits him.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

It was risky, reckless, rather insane on the surface, and yet you pulled it off.

Chapter Notes

Hey, they made it back to Earth! I expect this story will have a few more chapters but we really are near the end which means I'm trying to wrap up all the loose ends I left dangling. With a story this long it's likely I will miss one or two, but I'm doing my best!

By sunrise everyone has gathered in the common area, which honestly surprises Khan; he’d thought some of them would sleep longer. But by ones and twos his family and the Starfleet crew slip out of their rooms, although Kirk makes a quick detour into his own room. Jasmine, though, smiles when she sees Khan and comes over to him once she has coffee. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Khan says, amused. “I trust you had an enjoyable post-fight night?”

She laughs and raises her mug. “I rather did. Inight look him up again if we’re on Earth at the same time.”

Now that is unusual, and somewhat impresses Khan. Jasmine has high standards to begin with but she rarely looks for the same person twice. On the other hand, Jake had mentioned Kirk’s keen interest in women, and perhaps he learned something along the way.

“He rides bikes,” Jill comments. “You should race him.”

“I rather need a bike first, although,” Jasmine says, looking at Khan and he knows already what the outcome will be. He still has to play the game, though.

“What do you want?” he asks. “And why?”

“I want a bike, to go on the ship,” Jasmine says. “One that can handle most situations—Jim and I talked a bit about options. I think it would be practical to have both a two-wheeled and four-wheeled vehicle on the ship for use on planet as necessary.”

It’s a fair argument and he agrees, thinking about it. “Do the research first on both,” he says. “And while you do, find out who else might want one, because if we only get one Cat will never let me hear the end of it.”

Jill coughs and raises her hand. “Count me in.”

Khan thinks he should have expected that one. “We will, of course, need to ensure we have the budget for it, so all purchases are on hold until that is confirmed.”
“Of course, my lord,” Jasmine says demurely but her eyes sparkle.

“I’m impressed he was awake to talk to you about bikes,” Jill says, grinning.

Jasmine laughs. “This was between other things.”

Khan doesn’t particularly want to know more and gives Jasmine a look. She gets the message.

When all of them have gathered and had some kind of caffeine, Khan stands up. “We said our farewells last night. We can leave directly from here. Aisha, the baggage, please.”

“You may have missed it but the common supplies are already gone,” Aisha says. “Personal baggage please put where it was and I’ll get it.”

“I feel like we need to have someone scope out the Vengeance before we all beam onto it,” Jill says. “Call me paranoid, but… I’m paranoid.”

“I think it unlikely but in truth I intended to go up alone at first,” Khan says.

“No,” Jill says. “I’m going with you.”

He won’t win that one either, and doesn’t bother to try, inclining his head. “After we set our bags, we will beam up,” he says. “Then signal the rest of you.”

“Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you,” Matthew points out. “I’m all for a scout but maybe it shouldn’t be you?”

“It will be,” Khan says, ending that line of discussion before it starts.

Matthew raises his hands. “I’ll go get my bags, shall I?”

That seems to be the general cue to do so; Khan ducks into his own room with Jill and picks up his blade and his bag, amused at how natural it feels to wear the sword at his side. He rarely went armed within his own lands, and yet.

Jill settles her own blade in its back harness, not as easily drawn but also secure. “This is surprisingly comfortable and I forget I’m wearing it sometimes,” she says, picking up her bag. “Probably not a good idea.”

“It is generally not wise to forget you are armed,” Khan agrees.

“Also, while we have a moment,” Jill says. “I am fascinated by how you and Aisha and Jasmine work together, and I really want to hear all the stories about your life there.”

“Before I do that I need to explain something,” Khan says.

“What is it?” Jill asks.

“I was the undisputed leader of everywhere but my own home,” he says, and smiles a bit. “There was an old fortress we used as our home base, we called it the keep. For anything relating to affairs within the keep and how it was managed, Aisha was the supreme ruler and we all knew it. She occasionally deferred to Rani, although as Rani became more ill we gave her anything she wanted.”

“What—you know what, let’s get to the bridge or we’re going to be talking all day,” Jill says, opening the door.
He had had this with Rani, as well—an ability to talk about anything, easily and at length, although he admits with Jill the conversations usually take stranger turns. Khan smiles, and thinks he really needs to stop comparing them.

They drop their bags with the others and beam to the bridge of the Vengeance, arriving to slightly cold and stale air from a life support system running on minimal. Khan goes to wake up the environmental system and Jill moves to the ship’s internal sensors, running a few basic scans.

“Everything looks just as we left it,” she says after a moment.

“It was fairly likely that would be the case, but I am still glad we came up first,” Khan says. “What did you want to ask me, earlier?”


“She was weaker, and more fatigued,” Khan says. “Both increased as she became more ill. She had terrible headaches, and so we gave her all the pain medication she wanted, but the doses she had to take meant she slept a fair amount of the time. So between the sleep from the drugs and the general fatigue, by the end she only left the bed when I carried her to the bathing room. She had specific weakness in her right side, and her vision on that side became poor. But she was left handed, so that could have been worse, or so she said.”

Jill steps close to him, reaching for his hands. “This is going to sound really trite, but…she’s healthy now.”

“It doesn’t, and yes, I have some comfort in that,” Khan says. “That wherever she is, she is healthy and free of pain.”

He leans down and kisses her lightly. “But. Let us go back to Earth.”

The twenty of them gather on the bridge and Kirk again almost sits in the captain’s chair before Jasmine clears her throat and he leaves it alone. It amuses Khan, honestly, both Kirk’s propensity for the chair and his family’s insistence that Kirk not sit in it.

Andy sets course for Earth, with Alona watching over his shoulder, and Jill gets them there. In truth Khan hadn’t been entirely certain what role Jill would have on the ship but apparently she has designated herself their primary pilot. He doubts anyone will challenge her for it, although they will need others.

As they slow out of warp and approach Earth, Jill flips on the comm system. “Nyota, you want to hail whoever?”

“I do,” Uhura says. She hails the traffic controller and has a brief conversation explaining who they are. The traffic controller manages to sound matter-of-fact through the explanation and his agreement to hail the admiral; clearly, he’s good at his job. He sends Jill the path to park the Vengeance in one of the empty hangars, and although it doesn’t take that long for Jill to get them settled, by the time they take a shuttle down to the surface a convoy of officials stands there to greet them. Well, is there, Khan amends, seeing Viola Cathcart in a wheelchair that covers her legs.

She rolls forward, and Khan, Jake and Kirk all step forward at the same time, Jake and Kirk instinctively drawing to attention. Viola sees them and smiles, waving a hand. “I don’t think this is quite the place for formality,” she says. “Well, Aaron, you always did have the most interesting assignments.”
“To be fair, Vi, I submitted my resignation before we left,” Jake points out, grinning.

“Yes, I’m ignoring it,” Viola says. “We’ll talk about that in a moment. Right now, Khan, I understand I have you to thank for averting a war.”

“It was rather a joint effort,” Khan says. “And not my original idea.” He is determined Jill get the credit.

“Yes, which is also why I’m ignoring Commander Calastinova’s resignation,” Viola says. “Speaking of, where is she?”

“Admiral,” Jill says, stepping forward but not saluting.

“Commander.” Viola nods. “Captain Kirk, I understand you have official accords that need to be witnessed and signed?”

“Yes, Admiral,” Kirk says. “There are some points still to be negotiated, and the Klingons will send a diplomatic envoy from their side to meet a Federation diplomat at a neutral location. The Federation has two weeks to put together their party and then the Klingons will convey the coordinates of a meeting point. They give their word it will be a neutral place.”

“And it is your belief these accords are fair?” Viola asks.

“It is,” Kirk says. “As well as Commander Spock’s and Lieutenant Uhura’s.”

Viola nods. “Commander Rosen, here, will debrief the three of you. He’ll be tasked with setting up the Federation party, and will need your assistance. I very much want to know what happened, but it has been impressed upon me the dire necessity for these accords and thus they take precedence. I will speak with you three later.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Kirk says. Rosen—middling height, neat beard and mustache, solid build—steps forward and introduces himself, and the Enterprise crew head off after him. Most of the other officials go with him, until the only people left are Viola, Khan and his people, and someone he presumes to be Viola’s aide.

“So,” Viola says, looking up at Khan. “How the hell did you do it?”

“Which part?” Khan asks.

“Actually, before we get into that, I have a more pressing question.” Viola looks at Jill. “What the hell ran through your head to think challenging the Klingons—on their home planet—was going to lead to anything but disaster?”

Jill grins. “I’m a gambler,” she says. “We were in a pretty tight pinch, we needed something dramatic to make the odds work in our favor, and I gambled on the Klingons’ love for fight combined with their fascination with honor and we…won, because it’s what Khan and his people do.”

“It was risky, reckless, rather insane on the surface, and yet you pulled it off,” Viola says. “I like officers like that, Commander. I need officers like that.”

“I’m not staying on Earth, Admiral,” Jill says. “None of us are.”

“I’m aware of that,” Viola says. “I would like to speak with you, Jake, and Khan about how this all transpired. For the rest of your people, we’ve arranged quarters for you, and if you follow Ellie
she’ll take you to them and talk to you about anything else you might need—for the next week or two, mind.”

“We appreciate that, admiral,” Ekaterina says. “Spasiba.”

Viola’s aide comes forward and gestures for the humans to follow her, already making arrangements for baggage on her tablet. They leave, and then three not quite Starfleet officers look at Viola.

“The current discussion, so you three know, is whether to celebrate your triumph and proclaim loudly your heroism and bravery, or whether—given the delicate situation that Marcus put us in—we should be quiet. Jill and Jake, there will be commendations in your files and medals to go with them, and Jill at least will be getting a promotion. Jake we’re less certain about because flag rank is wasted on him.” Viola folds her hands in her lap, over the cover of the chair. “I can’t say I am upset that you killed Marcus but we are in a bit of a tight spot right now.”

“I understand,” Khan says. “Perhaps we should go somewhere more private and talk.”

“Yes, we should,” Viola says. She touches a few buttons on the chair arm and it whirs quietly and turns to leave the hangar. The other three humans follow her, and in short order they find themselves in Viola’s office.

Khan elects to stand because the chairs won’t accommodate his wings. Viola parks herself behind her desk, and Jake and Jill move to stand in front of her, not quite at attention. “At ease, officers,” Viola says, waving a hand. “Have a seat so I don’t have to keep looking up at you.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Jill says, taking a seat as Jake does the same. Khan reflects he’s never seen Jill quite this formal before, and it interests him. He doesn’t particularly think it suits her.

“So,” Viola says after a moment, looking at Jill. “Where the hell do you get your ideas?”

“There are so many possible answers to that one,” Jill says, starting slowly and picking up speed. “In this case, it was of knowing that the stakes were tremendously high for us personally and potentially the galaxy, and knowing as well that the odds were really, really high against us. We had nothing to lose by challenging the Klingons, and everything to gain from it, and to be completely honest I had no other ideas and it didn’t seem anyone else did either.”

“But there are two parts to this,” Viola says. “One, certainly, is averting the war with the Klingons. But was that truly the only path forward for you personally?”

“I thought it was probably the only way we stood a chance of getting what we wanted, which is resources to outfit a long-haul ship and freedom to go our own way,” Jill says. “It—everything connected. Without taking down Marcus we had no way to get the resources. In order to take Marcus down we needed to defuse the situation he was trying to set on fire. So by going to Qo’noS, we set the pieces in motion to later take down Marcus and now get our own ship.”

“I believe about that I’m supposed to tell you we will discuss it and get back to you, but realistically start looking into what you’ll need. Ellie drew up a few preliminary lists of things. For the ship itself…here is where things get interesting.” Viola smiles a bit.

“Vi, what are you doing?” Jake asks warily.

“We’ve been building a new type of ship,” Viola says. “Within the overall redesign of ships Marcus started, our engineers had thoughts on ships designed for long journeys, and are working on putting some of those thoughts into test. The prototype they constructed completed QA testing
three months ago, and the first actual ship is in the process of being built. It includes some of Khan’s theories on warp core shielding and transwarp modifications, and is designed to hold thirty with ample space for storage, workspaces, and private quarters. I am willing, under one condition, to give her to you and let you work with her engineers to get her customized exactly how you want.”

“What is the condition?” Khan asks before Jake or Jill can.

“I meant what I said, Commander,” Viola says, addressing Jill. “I badly need officers who can think like you. I want to transfer you to Intelligence, and put you and Jake on deployed assignment with your only requirement being to check in every few months or sooner if you have anything the Federation needs to be aware of.”

“Indefinite deployment gets expensive by Starfleet pay scale,” Jake says.

“Aaron, you just saved us potentially trillions of credits in war spending and millions of lives,” Viola says. “We can’t possibly do anything but give you anything you ask for, and paying indefinite deployment salaries is the least of it. Although will you even need the money?”

“No,” Jake says. “I want mine to go to my mom. All my benefits, all that, just give it to her.”

“Commander?” Viola asks Jill.

“Honestly I want mine to go to his mom, too,” Jill says. “My parents don’t need it and my family is coming with us.”

“We are also missing the point,” Khan says politely. “Which is that you want Jill and Jake to report back to you on things we encounter once we leave Federation space.”

“Periodically, yes,” Viola says. “Do you object?”

“It is not my decision,” Khan says. “However, I want it clear that information is the only requirement—you do not get to press Jake or Jill back into active service unless they agree. We make no agreement of assistance, in whatever situation the Federation finds itself following information we have provided.”

Viola nods. “We can do that.”

Khan looks at her. “Does this ship have weapons?” he asks.

“Technically civilian ships don’t carry weapons,” Viola says. “Therefore, technically, it’s not a civilian ship. It’ll carry phasers and a phaser cannon, and have a stock of torpedoes.”

Khan finds that amusing. “The ones I designed?” he asks.

“Yes, although I don’t think these will have cryogenically frozen people in them,” Viola says. She pauses. “I am sorry, Khan, for the loss of your family.”

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“I don’t know if it’s any comfort, but the forensics we received from the site indicated that they… never woke up,” Viola says quietly. “They never felt it.”

“Somewhat,” Khan says, but at the same time it reminds him that his family were executed while helpless, and that…he closes his eyes for a moment, remembering the swing of Kostenka’s sword,
the way Marcus’s head just…fell.

*That* helps.

Jill looks back at him, and he crosses to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. “What do you intend for us to do now? How long will the ship take to outfit?” he asks.

“It should be ready within six months but that estimate may take longer depending on how many modifications and customizations you want to include,” Viola says. “As for what we do with you now—well, presumably you need quarters, and some kind of income to purchase things for the ship, so unless you object we’re assigning you and Jill to one of the diplomatic suites on Starfleet campus.”

“Diplomatic?” Jill asks.

“Well,” Viola says and smiles again. “You did rather go and negotiate with a foreign interplanetary empire on behalf of the Federation, therefore we’ve decided that for now we’re giving Khan diplomatic status and the rank of ambassador.”

“I beg your pardon,” Khan says, taken aback.

“John Harrison no longer exists,” Viola says. “Whatever ID and credentials you’ve been using, they’re probably no good and definitely not with your actual name. We gave you credentials, and a role, and it comes with what I’m told is a quite generous pay rate—since we’re backdating that to the day you left for Qo’noS, with bonuses and things, Ellie will have the numbers but I don’t think you’ll object.”

“Also you get diplomatic immunity,” Jake says. “So, you know, you could kill people and get away with it.”

“Do you know, I think I have killed enough people in the last month,” Khan says mildly.

“How many Klingons died?” Viola asks.

“Six hundred and eighty,” Jill says. “No, eighty-one because the stupid bitch brought it on herself.”

“And there were…fifteen of you,” Viola says.

Khan nods. “It is rather what we do, Admiral.”

Viola shakes her head. “I don’t think anyone other than your specialized group of people could have pulled this whole thing off. Luck, or fate, or whatever you want to call it.”

“A little of both,” Khan says. “And quite a bit of work.”

“Yes,” Viola says. “I see that.”

“Begging your pardon, admiral, but I have a place,” Jill says. “Unless it’s no longer habitable.”

“No, your apartment is fine, but I thought you might prefer more room and water bathing facilities,” Viola says.

“I’ll just go pack a bag,” Jill says quickly. “Although my things are so, so scattered right now.”

“If you give Ellie a list of where your things are, she will arrange for them to be packed up and delivered wherever you wish,” Viola says. “What else can we do for you?”
Jill coughs and Khan looks at her. “What is it?”

“Admiral,” Jill says slowly and with a wink to Khan. “Do you have anyone capable of planning a wedding?”

Jake almost chokes, and Khan can’t stifle the laugh. “That seems unfair to outsource, kitten,” he says in Russian.

“We have six months and a lot of other work to do, I don’t care,” Jill says in English.

“Believe it or not, we do,” Viola says. “You will still have to make a fair number of decisions, but we can likely do most of the logistical work.”

Jill looks at Jake. “You’re walking me down the aisle.”


“Because no one is giving me the fuck away, I belong to myself, and I have two fathers and if I pick my real father my biological father will be upset, but if I pick my bio dad Abba will—“

“Be fine with it,” Jake interrupts. “But okay, no one’s giving you away. Trust me I don’t think we could auction you off at this point. But why me?”

“Because you’re my brother, and Khan already has a best man,” Jill says. “Well, he has twelve of them, so he gets to decide who stands up for him.”

“Kostenka,” Khan says immediately. “Always.”

“Okay, so there we go,” Jill says. “And if you’re willing to have a quasi-Jewish wedding we could already get an officiant.”

“Would a rabbi marry two non-Jews?” Khan asks.

“My uncle would,” Jake says. “He adores Jill, but then again so does most of my family.”

“As amusing as this exchange is, I think we can continue it another time,” Viola says politely. “I think the easiest thing is for us to just assign you an aide who can handle details and logistics and things.” She touches a button on her desk.

“Yes, Admiral?” a female voice says over the comm link.

“Khan needs an aide, but he doesn’t get to have you,” Viola says. “Who can we assign to him?”

“Does the aide have to be within Starfleet, or can they be a liaison with it?” Ellie—at least Khan presumes it’s Ellie—asks.

“Oh, no,” Viola says. “No. You are not giving him to them.”

“He’s reliable, good at his job, capable of managing a thousand details without dropping any balls,” Ellie says. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want any of Khan’s people to kill him if he becomes irritating,” Viola says. “And he has an unerring tendency to do that.”

“I do think we are capable of restraining ourselves,” Khan says dryly. “If we cannot work with whoever this is, we will simply tell you and request a new aide. What is his name?”
“Travis,” Viola and Ellie say together. “He is an aide with the diplomatic corps,” Viola continues. “He is extremely good at what he does—but he is…Ellie, how do you describe him?”

“Flamboyant comes close, but really there’s no description for Travis, you just have to meet him,” Ellie says. “I’ll message him and tell him to come by your office to meet his new assignment.”

“Well, this should be interesting,” Jill says after Viola hangs up. “How long has he been with the corps?”

“Five years,” Viola says. “If I didn’t have Ellie and if he was actually Starfleet I’d have grabbed him for my own aide long ago, but I do and he isn’t.”

“Who is in charge of the ship design and build?” Khan asks, changing the subject.

“Well, that’s somewhat problematic, because the chief engineer was killed in the strike on the London facility,” Viola says. “Her team are still on the job, but things are somewhat on hold until we get a new leader. I presumed that would be you.”

“We did say we’d write our own ticket,” Jill murmurs in Russian.

Diplomatic rank and the ability to custom build their own ship. Khan has to admit he hadn’t quite seen things going this well.

A chime sounds at the door and Viola taps a button. “Enter.”

Khan turns to see a tall, thin man walk in, dressed in what Khan presumes to be current fashion, with a Federation insignia on his shirt collar. Mixed-race, Khan thinks, with close-cropped dark hair and dark eyes. He carries a tablet in one hand and a travel mug in the other. “Admiral Cathcart,” he says, sketching a bow. “I understand my services are needed.”

“Something like that,” Viola says. “Meet your new boss. Khan, this is Travis Wilson. Travis, this is Khan, and he just saved our planet so be nice.”

“Oh, I’m always nice,” Travis says. He sets his tablet and mug down and walks over to Khan, extending a hand. “Pleasure to meet you, darling. How may I be of service? Any kind?”

“Down, boy, he’s mine,” Jill says.

Travis holds up his hands. “Line established. How may I help?”

“We need to plan a lot of things, including a wedding,” Jill says. “How are you with those?”

“Oh, honey,” Travis says, laying a hand on her shoulder. “I am fantastic at planning big parties. Or small parties. It’s what I do. You just tell me what you want and I’ll make the magic happen.”

“I like you already,” Jill says. “You still can’t have Khan, though, he’s mine and I don’t share.”

“Ah well.” Travis sighs. “Disappointed, but I’ll live. Now, how may I make all your dreams and wishes come true?”

Khan begins to see what Viola meant, but Travis seems harmless enough and Jill laughs. “You can find all my belongings, which are scattered somewhere between London, my apartment in San Francisco, and my quarters here. Just pack everything up and put it in my apartment and I’ll go through it.”

“Easy enough,” Travis says. “I’ll need your access codes and addresses and I’ll go start on that
right away. If you lend me your comm link, for just a moment?” Jill hands it over and Travis quickly programs in his details. “Now you can reach me anytime, unless I’m asleep.”

“How much do you usually sleep?” Jill asks. “This is an honest question, we’re a group of insomniacs who tend to be up at all hours.”

“I can function on minimal sleep if there’s maximum coffee,” Travis says.

“Oh, we are going to get along just fine,” Jill says. “Here.” She takes out her own tablet and taps at it for a moment. “There. Now you know where my things are.”

“They will be packed, collected, and delivered to your apartment within two days,” Travis says. “Is that acceptable, my lady?”

Jill snorts. “I’m no one’s lady. You can call me Jill. And yes, two days is fine. Call me when it’s done and I’m sure we’ll have a whole list for you.”

“Accomplishing the impossible or at least the difficult is how I work,” Travis says cheerfully. “Although, sugar, my powers are somewhat limited after we escape Earth orbit.”

“That’s really fine,” Jill says, looking up at him. “We’re not leaving Earth for a while yet.”

“Travis, if you head to the diplomatic suites you’ll find Ellie, and you can talk to her about what else Khan and his people need,” Viola says. “There are seventeen of them in total.”

“I’m on my way already,” Travis says, scooping up tablet and mug. “If you need anything else, you have only to call.”

He breezes out and Jake snorts. “Can he actually do what he claims?”

“Somewhat annoyingly, yes,” Viola says. “He’s far from modest but he has the skills to back it up. I’ve yet to be disappointed in something he’s done for me.”

“I can kind of see why he’s not Starfleet, though,” Jake says.

“Just a bit,” Jill says. “Admiral, is there anything else we can tell you?”

“Yes,” Viola says. “Khan, is it your belief these accords are fair?”

“If anything the Federation has the advantage,” Khan says. “I give you my word, Viola, we did not sell you down the river.”

“I believe you,” she says. “I just don’t understand why you did it. You have no cause to trust Starfleet, or the Federation, and yet.”

“I want freedom for my family, the ability for us to leave this planet behind and set our own journey,” Khan says. “How else do you think we could have achieved that?”

Viola smiles. “Fair point. I’ll let Ellie know to arrange a meeting for you with the engineers, but it likely won’t be for a couple days. I thought you and your family might appreciate a chance to relax for a day or two, figure out what you intend to do on Earth for the next six to eight months. I did not think all of you were going to work on the ship design.”

“No, we will not, but we will need to supply it,” Khan says. “While I am certain Starfleet has a suggested list, I want my people to use it as a starting point. There are things we will need or want that I doubt Starfleet would have considered.”
“I’m certain,” Viola says. “Will any of you want to study current fields?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I am not, however, certain of who will study what.”

“Whatever you decide, we’ll make it work,” Viola says.

“Vi,” Jake says. “Why did you resign then? What made you finally pull the trigger and insist on Pike getting your position?”

Viola sighs, folding her hands in her lap. “I finally got access to the medical files from section 31,” she says. “And I couldn’t let that go without doing something about it. I knew Alexander would never let me come back, and I knew Liam wouldn’t give up the medical and scientific sections without a fight, but I trusted Chris to have that fight. And I knew you had ghosted, which meant I was running out of time to do something, because you wouldn’t have done that without telling me unless something was seriously wrong. I never thought Alexander would actually attack us like he did.”

“I am not certain he planned that,” Khan says. “More that he took advantage of the situation. How did you get access to the files?”

“Gabe got them for me,” Viola says. “It took him a lot of work, but he was able to get into the system and get me access.”

“Speaking of Gabe, how is Marika?” Jake asks.

“Still recovering, I’m afraid, although she’s getting better,” Viola says. “Gabe will have more information.”

“I’ll follow up with him tomorrow,” Jake says. “Where am I staying?”

“Wherever you want, Aaron,” Viola says. “There’s a room for you with everyone else if you want it, or you can go back to your apartment in New York.”

“I’ll stay here for now,” Jake says. “Although eventually I’ll need to pack up my stuff.”

“I’m certain we can help with that,” Viola says. She sighs. “I don’t know how much I can emphasize to you what you’ve done for us here. Alexander wanted the war, the rest of us did not, but we thought it was going to be inevitable at some point, and frankly I wasn’t sure how we would survive. The seventeen of you averted a war that could have killed billions of people, cost trillions of credits and potentially ruined the Federation and the Klingon Empire. You wanted to write your own ticket—well, I’m telling you that at this point you could ask for almost anything and get it.”

“Which was basically our goal, so hey, it worked,” Jill says.

Khan squeezes her shoulder gently. “Because of you, lioness,” he says in Russian.

She ducks her head. “Admiral, for what it’s worth, I don’t want a public celebration, or anything like it.”

“Neither do I,” Jake says. “I mean, I’ll take the commendation and the awards or whatever but I don’t want a public ceremony or any of that bullshit.”

“Duly noted,” Viola says, smiling. “Do the three of you need anything else right now? I really do need to check in with Kirk and his crew about the substance of the accords.”
Khan shakes his head. “No. We will go find the others and our quarters.”

“We’ve arranged a quiet dinner for you,” Viola says. “Since we didn’t think you’d want to go anywhere. There’s a private dining room in the diplomatic quarters we’re reserving for your use. Basically we’ve blocked off two floors for you, including a private dining room and common area.”

“Thank you, Vi,” Jake says. “We appreciate it.”

She nods. “If you need anything at all, your best bet is to tell Travis. If for whatever reason he can’t manage it—unlikely but possible—tell Ellie. If you run into any problems with red tape or difficult people, tell me immediately.”

“We will,” Khan says. “Where exactly are our quarters?”

“I know where they are,” Jake says. “It’s a couple buildings over. With your permission, Vi?”

Viola snorts. “Do I actually have to dismiss you? Go on, get out of here. Go find your family and your things, and I’ll check in with you tomorrow.”

Jill and Jake get to their feet, but neither of them salute Viola. Jake, however, ducks behind Viola’s desk to give her a quick hug. “I’m glad you’re alive,” he says. “And I’m really glad you’re in charge.”

“You know, I am too,” Viola says. “There are a lot of things that need to change around here.”

“Yes,” Khan says simply.

Chapter End Notes

Travis is an OC of mine from another universe I’m borrowing for this one. If you want to read more about him, you can check out my NCIS series Geometry, in which he has a role. I love him, personally, and I hope you do too.

Did you forget about Marika? I almost did :P
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

You're mine to take care of, dragon.

Chapter Notes

This one gets intense and then kind of silly, so hang on to your hats, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Between questions and logistics and then a quiet dinner, Khan and Jill don’t actually get back to their rather opulent suite until after the meal. They find their bags and toiletries—although the suite has an array of bath goods which Jill looks at covetously—and Khan sits down on the edge of the bed, actually tired for once.

“So, dragon,” Jill says, walking over to him. “I had plans for tonight but you look tired, so maybe tonight isn’t the best night.”

“What were your plans?” Khan asks, leaning his head against her chest when she runs her fingers through his hair.

“I was going to take our transporter and go back to my place,” she says, scratching over his scalp and down the back of his neck, a pleasant sensation that makes him shiver a little. “Then I was going to pack up a few personal items and raid my toy armoire and then come back here and put them to good use.”

“I may be tired, but I’m not dead,” Khan says, considering it.

Jill laughs. “Yeah, but I want you fully aware and participating.”

“I will be, lioness,” Khan says, kissing her collarbone. “With you, how could I not be?”

“You say the sweetest things,” she says, kissing his hair. “And seriously, I want to top you so much right now—but we don’t have lube, or gloves, or a lot of other things that could be useful. So I am going to get those things, and while I do I suggest you take a very thorough shower.”

“You could join me for it,” Khan points out. “The shower facilities in this suite are…generous.”

“Dragon, we could fit four people in that shower, including you,” Jill says. “And trust me, I have plans for sex in it tomorrow, or later, but right now this is for you. And I think, honestly, we could use a little space. Not more than an hour or two, but I think you could use some quiet time without me and I could use a chance to decompress.”

She has a point. Khan doesn’t find Jill’s company wearisome, or tiring, but it has been a long stretch of time and the idea of a couple hours completely to himself sounds more appealing than sex. “I will be here when you get back,” he says instead of commenting.
“Don’t bother getting dressed,” Jill says, laughing. She leans down to kiss him, but pulls away before it gets too involved. “I’ll be back.”

Khan smiles a bit. “I love you.”

“I know,” she says, smiling back. “I love you too.”

She takes the transporter, but leaves through the door—Khan presumes she intends to walk to her apartment, or take transit. When it closes behind her, he doesn’t get up immediately, taking a moment to just…sit.

It’s over. Not entirely, not completely, and they’ve got six months before they can leave Earth behind for good, but…it’s over. The difficult part is over. The difficult, insane, risky, nearly impossible part.

Khan smiles a bit and gets up, pulling off his shirt and stretching his wings and arms fully. He has room for that, here, and appreciates it. With all the flying and fighting lately, his wings are less tense and sore than usual, but the ability to stretch fully is not something he takes for granted.

They will, however, need to ensure the ship has room for it.

He moves through a few gentle yoga poses, using it to clear and calm his mind as much as his body. He is tired, there’s no denying that; even for him, these last few weeks have been…draining. He’s not entirely certain how Jill hasn’t flagged yet, but presumably she’ll dissolve into tears in the next few days and sleep for fourteen hours.

He’ll be interested to see how she functions on the ship.

Eventually Khan finishes undressing and walks to the lavish bathroom. He turns on the shower—well, he turns on two of the showerheads, leaving the rest alone for now—and stands under the spray, deliberately thinking of nothing but the water falling on him.

After a bit, he bathes. Thoroughly.

Khan doesn’t know how long he spends in the shower but the water hasn’t run cold by the time he gets out, smelling a bit of wet feathers and some kind of bath soap he can’t identify but rather likes. He spreads towels on the bed and stretches out, lying down to stretch out his wings and let them dry and also just…relax a bit.

At some point he dozes off, and only realizes it because when he wakes up Jill sits on the bed, near his head, running her fingers through his hair. “Hi, sleepyhead,” she says when he turns his head to look at her.

“How long was I asleep?” Khan asks, reflecting that he honestly does not want to move right now.

“I got back about an hour ago,” Jill says. “Took a shower of my own, and wow, that was amazing, but I was beginning to get a little concerned that you hadn’t realized someone else was in the room.”

Khan shrugs. “You don’t register as a threat,” he says. “I have no cause to be alarmed by your presence.”

She laughs. “Well, there is that. Do you still want to do this?”

“I do,” Khan says, propping himself up on his elbows to better look at Jill. “Do you?”
“So much,” she says, leaning down to kiss him. “I want two things from you before we start.”

“Name them,” Khan says.

“I want your word that if you need to stop anything, you will tell me,” Jill says, brushing her fingers over his cheek. “I’m not even talking pain, just…this can be intense.”

He considers pointing out that he has experience with this, just…not personally. Then again, that makes all the difference. “You have my word,” he says, turning his head to kiss her palm. “What is the other?”

“That you’ll trust me enough to let me control this,” Jill says. “I know you, dragon, and I know your need for control, and I’m telling you not tonight.”

“I can’t promise I won’t try otherwise,” Khan points out.

“Do your best,” Jill says, leaning down to kiss him. “It’s just you and me, my dragon, and we’re completely safe here. I will keep you safe.”

She scratches her nails over his scalp and down the back of his neck and Khan sighs, leaning into it. Jill laughs and keeps scratching, down the line of his shoulders. She encourages him to lie down again and moves around behind him, sliding her hands up his back, between his wings, and scratching lines back down. Khan gasps, twisting under her. “Oh, you like that,” she murmurs, doing it again. This time he loses his breath, and his cock goes hard almost immediately.

Jill laughs again, lazy and a little wicked, and licks a line down his back, barely touching where feathers meet flesh. Khan doesn’t quite know the sound he makes but he thinks maybe he should be embarrassed by it. “Oh, my dragon,” Jill says. “Oh, this is going to be so good.” She kisses the small of his back, then scrapes her teeth over the same skin. Khan jerks, hissing out a breath. “You like biting, my dragon?” she asks, nipping his hip.

“Yes,” he manages. Jill sinks her teeth into his skin and he cries out, shifting against the bed.

“Too much?” she asks, raising her head.

“No,” Khan gets out, although he’s more breathless than he likes. “I will tell you if it is, I promise.”

“I wish these would stay,” Jill says, brushing a finger over the bite mark she left. “At least more than a few minutes. I’ll just have to keep leaving them.” She bites him again, and again, scratching him between bites and kisses. Khan tries to catch his breath, but doesn’t quite manage it, and he realizes she’s working toward something but it takes him a moment to realize she has a finger pressing at his opening, just press and release, not even working into him. It feels…odd, but not in a bad way.

He swallows, licks his lips. Jill rakes her nails down his back and he almost comes off the bed—and then realizes she pressed one slick finger into him when she did it. “Breathe, my dragon,” she says, not moving. “It’s just one finger, I promise.”

It doesn’t hurt, but it takes him a moment to adjust. Khan takes a slow breath, lets it out carefully, consciously relaxing his body. “There we are,” Jill says, running her hand up and down his back, soothing instead of arousing. “The advantage here is that I have small hands. The disadvantage is that I have small hands, which is why I went to my apartment first. You okay, love?”

Khan nods against the bed, not entirely trusting his voice. He’s not entirely certain he likes the
feeling—and then Jill twists her hand slightly and shifts her finger and he starts to get the idea. “Just let go, my dragon,” she says, her free hand resting in the small of his back. “Just let go and let yourself feel it.”

He feels—well, honestly, vulnerable in a way he’s not used to, but also…safe. It’s just them, and he trusts Jill with his life. Khan takes a breath, lets it out, and as he does Jill shifts to press herself against his back, biting the nape of his neck. “My dragon,” she says, biting him again, hard enough he shudders.

“Yes,” he murmurs, breath catching when she crooks her finger.

“We’re in no rush,” Jill says, sliding down his body. She stays in contact with him, skin on skin, and he appreciates it; he feels more grounded, less like he’s free-falling, but every time she moves her hand he loses his breath. “Oh, you like that,” she murmurs, twisting her hand and pressing deeper into him, her knuckles rubbing against his opening. Khan swallows, wanting more but not quite ready to ask for it.

She seems to know, though, and Khan’s breath catches in his throat and he shivers when Jill enters him with a second finger, twisting and scissoring them. “You’re so hot,” she says softly, scratching down his back. “You feel so good, Khan, and we are totally doing this on a regular basis because this is…I don’t know if I have the right words for this, for how you make me feel. I want you to let go for me, dragon. I want you to stop trying to think, stop trying to analyze this, just feel it. I know you like this, I can tell, but you’re still too much in your head. You’re not in control tonight, my love, and what I want from you is what you want from me. I want you to find that point where nothing else matters but me and what I’m doing to you.”

She twists her hand sharply and presses and Khan muffles his shout in the pillow. Lightning flashes down his spine and through his body and if Jill says anything else, he can’t hear it over the sound of his heart pounding. He thinks he hears her laugh softly, and then she presses just so again and he makes a strangled sound, pushing back into her touch.

“Do you want more?” Jill asks, running her free hand up and down his back. “Tell me, dragon. Tell me what you want.”

“More,” he gets out, breathing hard, and he swallows first but—“Please.”

“Yes,” Jill whispers. She eases her hand back for a moment—Khan swallows the whimper that wants to escape—and presses back into him with three fingers, twisting and pressing and stretching him. He feels full and yet it’s not quite enough and his fingers curl into the covers. He shifts against the bed, trying to get friction against his cock, and Jill smacks his hip sharply. “Don’t,” she says. “You come when I let you, tonight.”

That seems unfair but Khan doesn’t have the breath to protest. This is like nothing he’s ever felt before and all he wants is more, but he can’t find the words to ask for it. “Tell me,” Jill says softly. “Ask me for what you want, dragon. You can have it, but you have to ask me.”

“Please,” Khan whispers, trying to catch his breath. “I want…I want more. Please.”

“God, do you have any idea what it does to me to hear this from you?” Jill blows out a breath. “Yes. As much as you can take, Khan. I want to see how much it takes to make you come apart.”

This time he does whimper, unable to hold it back. Jill laughs quietly and scratches down his back, right where feathers meet skin and enough to make him squirm under her, twisting between her hand on his back and her hand inside him. “And this is where we change things up a bit because
She pulls her hand out of him and Khan grits his teeth against the whine, feeling empty and not liking it. “I know, baby,” she says, kissing the small of his back. “Just a moment, I promise.”

He hears sounds he can’t quite identify and then something presses against his opening, smooth and blunt and slick. “Tell me if this hurts,” Jill says, slowly pushing the toy into him. “But I think you can take it.”

“It—it doesn’t hurt,” Khan manages, but it’s bigger than her fingers were and he feels almost impossibly full.

“That’s all of it,” Jill says, and Khan realizes he can feel the base of it against his buttocks. “Take a moment to adjust, dragon.”

Good idea. Khan licks dry lips, shifting a little just to try and get used to the feel of it inside him, thick and solid. “You okay?” Jill asks after a moment.

“Yes,” he says, barely more than a whisper. “It…I like it.”

“Yeah, you do,” Jill says, sounding pleased. “I thought you would, but you’re still not where I want you yet.”

She presses something, or—Khan doesn’t know what she does but the toy starts buzzing inside him and he cries out. “Jill, I can’t—“ he says, shifting against the bed, trying to get away and get more at the same time.

“Yeah, you can, baby,” Jill says, sliding her hands up his back and moving up to lie on top of him. She sinks her teeth into his shoulder without warning and Khan makes a strangled sound, caught between the sharp pain and the buzzing toy. “You can take this,” she whispers in his ear. “Because it’s what I want from you and tonight you’re giving me everything I want. Just let go, dragon. Let go and fly with me.”

Khan whimpers, tipping his head to the side when Jill bites him again, her hands sliding up and down his arms. “Mine,” she says softly, biting his earlobe. “All mine.”

“Yes,” he breathes, swallowing. “Yours, lioness.”

Jill shudders against him. “The things you do to me,” she says, and he realizes he can feel her, wet against his skin. “I want your mouth on me, dragon.”

He’s not entirely certain he can manage that with the toy still buzzing away, but when Jill bites him one last time and moves off him Khan sucks in a breath, his heart pounding. She crawls up the bed to sit in front of him, drawing her knees up. He can smell her and his mouth waters, enough that he swallows and licks his lips.

“Make me come, dragon,” Jill says, tangling her fingers in his hair and pulling him closer, his head between her legs. Khan breathes her in for a moment before he licks her, dragging his tongue over her clit. She groans and her fingers tighten in his hair, nails digging into his scalp for a moment.

Between the sharp pain of her nails and the toy still buzzing inside him and the taste of her, Khan has a momentary fear he’ll come before she lets him. He swallows and does his best to focus on Jill, scraping his teeth over her clit to hear her moan.

“More,” she says, pulling his head closer. “I don’t want you to tease me, Khan, I want you to make
me come.”

It’s difficult to focus on that, with his own body tingling all over and his cock achingly hard, but he
tries, licking her and sucking on her clit, using careful scrapes of teeth until Jill cries out and her
hips buck up against his mouth. Khan gentles his mouth and after a moment Jill’s hands loosen in
his hair and she pushes him back. “That was so good,” she says, breathing hard.

“Please,” Khan whispers, shivering all over. “Lioness, please.”

“What do you need, dragon?” she asks. “Tell me.”

“Let me come,” Khan manages. “Please.”

Jill laughs. “No. Not yet.” She moves away from him, shifting to lie on top of him again. “Not yet,
dragon,” she says, biting the nape of his neck. “Not until you break for me.”

“Jill, I can’t,” Khan says, not even sure what he means.

“You can,” she says, biting his shoulder before she slides down his body. She presses the base of
the toy and it stops buzzing; Khan groans in both relief and disappointment. “Can you take more?”

“I—I don’t know,” he says.

“I think you can,” Jill says, and she twists the toy and it hits the right spot and Khan almost comes
off the bed, pushing back into it. “There we go,” she murmurs. “God, you’re so beautiful.”

“Please,” Khan says, his voice cracking. “Jill, please.”

“No,” she says gently, beginning to fuck him with the toy, slowly enough that it feels like a tease.
“Not yet.”

Khan whines, hating the sound and unable to stop it. He feels taken, unable to control anything,
including the sounds he makes and the way he squirms under Jill. “Please,” he says again.

“No,” she says kindly. “Not yet.”

He could make her—but the thought vanishes almost as quickly as it appeared. Jill pulls the toy
back and pushes it in, hard, enough that he cries out, head flying back. She does it again, twisting it
on the way back, and when she thrusts it into him she hits the button that makes it vibrate. Khan
bites down on the pillow to keep from shouting,

He can’t think, can’t even plead with her. It’s all too much and all he can do is try to breathe,
desperate for release. His body feels like one exposed nerve and his cock almost hurts, he’s so
hard.

Jill slides a hand up his back and closes it around the back of his neck, holding him tight. “Mine,”
she says, low and firm. “Mine, dragon. Do you get that? That I could do anything with you right
now? I could keep you like this for hours. I have other toys, my love, and I could so easily do this
all night, and you would just take it, wouldn’t you? Because you’re mine, because you gave me
control tonight.”

Something in Khan just breaks when he hears it and he shudders all over, his mind quieting past
the desperation. He’s not in control here, and whatever his lioness wants, she’ll have from him. It’s
not his decision, not his choice, and something about that is so freeing that he feels tears prick at
his eyes.
“There we are,” Jill murmurs, not letting go of his neck even as she fucks him with the toy, hard and steady. Khan gulps in a breath, grateful for her touch, clinging to it to steady himself. She tightens her hold, nails digging into his skin, enough that he groans, bowing his head to expose more of his neck.

He stops thinking, because he doesn’t have to, because nothing matters except his lioness and what she wants. The need for orgasm is less desperate now—he’s still achingly hard but it doesn’t matter. He won’t come until Jill lets him. Can’t.

Khan loses track of time, of everything but Jill’s hand on the back of his neck and the toy moving inside him. Need coils tighter and tighter inside him but it doesn’t matter, even though he shifts against the bed helplessly and it would take almost nothing to push him over the edge.

“Now,” Jill says in his ear, biting his earlobe. “Come for me, dragon.”

If he makes a sound, he can’t hear it over the rush of blood in his ears and his heart pounding. He doesn’t pass out—quite—but everything goes gray and blurry for a moment and when he comes back to himself he realizes he’s shaking, his cheeks wet with tears.

“I’ve got you,” Jill says, shifting to lie next to him, pulling him into her arms. “I’ve got you, love. You’re safe.”

Khan clings to her, not quite crying and not quite not crying. She holds him tightly, strokes his hair, murmurs to him in English and Russian until the shakes stop and he lies in her arms, exhausted and spent and sated. He’s in no hurry to move, though, and Jill doesn’t let go.

“You are possibly the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” she says finally, kissing his temple. “That was…amazing.”

“Thank you,” Khan whispers.

“Can you get under the covers?” Jill asks, smoothing his hair back. “You feel a bit cold to me.”

It takes him a moment, but he nods, and they kick the towels off the bed and crawl under the covers. Khan realizes vaguely the toy’s still inside him but it’s not buzzing and he doesn’t want to deal with it right now so he doesn’t say anything about it.

He curls around Jill, needing her close. She kisses his jaw and nestles against him, her hand over his heart. “I love you,” she murmurs. “So damn much.”

Khan closes his eyes, not having the words even to answer her.

When he opens his eyes again the room is dark and the chrono on the wall tells him it’s three in the morning. Jill cuddles against his chest, breathing soft and even, her head tucked under his chin. Khan lowers his head to her hair, breathing in her scent.

He doesn’t entirely know how to feel about the scene from earlier. He’s never surrendered control like that before, to anyone. He would have with Rani, he thinks, if she’d wanted it, but she never had.

But Jill did, and does, and Khan doesn’t know how to feel about his reactions. He’d expected to enjoy it, but the intensity of the scene—that he hadn’t expected, at all, and he feels a little shaken by how much he’d wanted it, how much he’d willingly surrendered to Jill. It’s not like him to be that submissive and he isn’t sure how to feel about it, now that it’s over.
He runs a hand up and down Jill’s back, smiling a bit when she sighs and nestles closer to him. *His* lioness, he thinks.

There’s no weakness in submission, and Khan knows that. He doesn’t feel ashamed about the scene, just…a bit shaken by how readily he’d let Jill dominate him, how much he’d wanted her to take him apart.

She sighs and stretches, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder. “Stop thinking so loudly,” she mumbles in Russian. “You okay, dragon?”

“I think so,” Khan says in the same language, keeping his voice quiet. “Just…thinking about earlier.”

“What are you thinking about it?” Jill asks, blinking her eyes open and shifting to look at him.

“I…hadn’t expected to react that strongly,” Khan says, glad for the hour, for the hushed voices and darkness. It’s easier to be honest, to admit things like this.

“I had,” Jill says softly, surprising him.

“You had?” Khan shifts to look at her more easily.

“Mm-hmm,” she says, laying a hand against his cheek. “You…you always want to be in control, dragon. You’re used to it, you want it, you expect it. But it has been my experience that the biggest control freaks are also the ones who need to give it up the most, now and again. We’ve just been through a really, really intense span of time. You needed, badly, a chance to surrender control in a safe environment, to just let someone else take care of you for a bit.”

She has a point. Khan turns his head, kissing her palm. “I understand the logic,” he says. “But I still feel a bit…unsettled.”

“Are you ashamed of how you reacted?” Jill asks gently.

“No,” Khan says and sighs. “Perhaps a little. I felt so out of control, and it’s not something I am used to.”

“I know, baby,” Jill says, brushing her thumb over his cheek. “And I can tell you over and over that there is nothing to be ashamed of, that you were beautiful and amazing and I am so, so proud of you.”

“You are?” Khan asks, not entirely certain why he’s surprised but also not certain why it matters so much.

“So much,” she says, leaning up to kiss him. “That was all new to you, and I know it was difficult to give in, but you didn’t fight me, dragon. You could have. You could have stopped the whole thing, and you didn’t. You trusted me to take care of you.”

“I trust you with my life,” Khan murmurs.

“Yes,” Jill says. “And I trust you with mine. But it’s one thing to trust someone with your life and a very different thing to trust them with your submission, and the latter is scarier.”

“It is,” Khan admits.

“It gets easier,” Jill says, kissing his jaw. “The first time is always the hardest, and then it gets
easier. Because, dragon, we’re doing this again. You need to give up control once in a while, to let someone else take care of you in a safe environment. You’re the oldest brother, the leader, the one who takes care of everyone else. But who takes care of you? Who lets you fall to pieces and puts you back together?”

“You do, lioness,” Khan says softly.

“Damn right I do.” Jill kisses him, biting his lower lip. “You take care of me, I take care of you.”

Khan smiles a bit, nipping her lip in return. “Will you show me exactly what you used on me tonight? And whatever else you brought back with you?”

“I will,” Jill says. “Do you want me to show you now?”

“Well, neither of us appear to be sleepy,” Khan says and Jill laughs.

“Get the lights, I’ll get my bag,” she says, scrambling out of bed. “After you crashed earlier, I cleaned up a bit. Did you realize you still had the vibrator inside when you conked out?”

“I did but honestly had no energy to care,” Khan admits a little sheepishly.

Jill laughs. “Trust me, I understand.”

Khan turns on the lights at thirty percent and Jill brings a bag back over to the bed. “I grabbed a bunch of stuff because I figure we’ll be here for a while,” she says. “So. Lube, gloves, toy cleaner, nothing exciting there.” She reaches into the bag and takes out a black vibrator with a flared base. “This is what I used on you tonight.”

Khan takes it when she hands it to him. It seems…smaller than he remembers it feeling, but solid and heavy. It feels like some kind of silicone, and when he touches the base it starts vibrating, buzzing quietly. He touches the base again and hands it back to Jill. “Where did you get this?”

“Trevor gave it to me for my birthday a while ago,” Jill says. “I’ve used it a couple times but I thoroughly sterilized it after each use.”


“The cuffs, obviously, and a blindfold,” Jill says, tossing them on the bed. “Well, the cuffs we had already, but I got a blindfold. Two, because one is sized for me and one is sized for a regular human. A couple pairs of nipple clamps, because they’re fun and I bet you’d love them.”

“On me?” Khan asks, not sure how he feels about it.

Jill reaches out and pinches his nipple, hard. Khan’s body jerks and his breath catches in his throat. “Yeah, on you,” she says, smiling. “Or me, because I like them, too.” She sets the clamps aside and reaches into the bag again. “My favorite vibrator, which you’ve seen before, and one more for you, a little bigger. We’ll work our way up to it.”

The toy for him is thicker than the one she’d used earlier, and when Jill pushes a button the shaft rotates as well as vibrates. “It’s not exactly a beginner toy but I think you can handle it,” she says, turning it off and setting it to the side. “But we’ll work our way up. I have a couple lengths of rope because sometimes it’s more fun than the cuffs, and then I have this.”

The last item she pulls out is a black glove, relatively thick and bigger than Khan would expect to fit Jill’s hand. She pulls it on, flexing her hand. “It’s bigger, because my hands are small, but the
way it’s designed it fits fine,” she explains. “It gives me the equivalent of bigger fingers, and then there’s this.”

When she flexes her hand just so, the glove starts vibrating. “I can activate it finger by finger or just the whole hand,” Jill explains. “I thought about using it tonight but this can get really intense so I opted to save it for another time.” She flexes her hand again and the glove stops buzzing.

“Are you going to bring the entire contents of your armoire on the ship?” Khan asks.

Jill laughs. “Probably not all of it, but a large portion of it. We are totally going to have to make sure all quarters are soundproofed and privacy sealed, though.”

“Yes, of course,” Khan says. He watches Jill put the toys away in her bag. “That is standard, is it not?”

“It is but I think we can improve upon the standard,” Jill says.

“Undoubtedly,” Khan says. He reaches for Jill’s hands, rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles. “I want something from you,” he says.

“Name it,” Jill says.

Khan smiles a little. “The club we talked about,” he says. “I would take you there.”

Jill’s breath catches in her throat. “Yes,” she says after a moment. “Yes.”

“What would you let me do with you there, lioness?” Khan asks, tugging her a little closer.

“Anything,” she says softly. “Well, anything within club rules.” She shifts to her knees and leans in to kiss him. “What would you want to do with me?”

“I would show you off,” Khan says, cradling her cheek in his hand. “Display you, nude save my collar and cuffs. Everyone would want to see you, would want to touch you, have you.”

“You wouldn’t let anyone touch me,” Jill says, smiling a bit.

“No,” Khan agrees. “I would not. I would let them look, watch you, but no more. You are mine, lioness, and no one else gets to lay a finger on you.”

“The club has cages,” Jill says. “Perfect for showing someone off without letting them be touched.”

“Yes,” Khan murmurs, leaning in to kiss her. “So many things I want from you, kitten. And we have six months to explore them.”

“Da,” Jill says against his mouth. She smiles and bites his lower lip, soothing the sting with her tongue. “I still want something from you, my dragon.”

“What is it?” Khan asks, pulling back slightly to look at her.

She smiles. “I still want to watch you dominate someone I pick out for you.”

He laughs. “I admit, kitten, I am confused as to why you want this.”

“You want people to watch me, look at me,” Jill says. “Because I’m yours, and you want to show me off. I want to watch you break someone else apart, because you’re mine and you’re beautiful
and you are so, so good at it.”

“To be clear,” Khan says. “This only goes one way. No one else gets to touch you.”

“I know,” Jill says calmly. “That’s fine.”

Khan shakes his head, but smiles. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “For tonight.”

“You’re welcome,” Jill says simply. “It was incredible, dragon. Watching you fall apart like that, for me, because of me—I don’t even know how to put it, just…I love you so, so much, and I am so grateful you trusted me enough to do this.”

“I told you,” Khan murmurs. “I told you when you trusted me, when you trusted that I love you, I would let you.”

“And I do, and you did,” Jill says. She leans in to kiss him again. “Do you want a shower?”

“I do,” Khan says, considering it. Some of his muscles feel stiff, and although Jill did clean him up a bit he thinks a shower a good idea. “Join me?”

“Of course,” Jill says. She squeezes his hands and hops out of bed.

Under the showerheads, Khan pulls Jill in against him, holding her close. “My diplomat dragon,” she says, laughing. “God, who’d have thought that?”

“Not I,” Khan says, smiling a bit. “Truly, lioness, I feel rather like this is too easy now, that they are giving us everything we want without even a token fight.”

“Khan,” Jill says patiently. “We killed almost seven hundred Klingons and executed Alexander Marcus. They’re probably a little wary of not giving us everything we want, in case we get… irritated. And…I think we’ve earned this. We accomplished the almost impossible. Now we can relax and celebrate and plan a wedding.”

“What kind of wedding do you want?” Khan asks, reaching for Jill’s pouf and body wash.

“A big one,” Jill says firmly. “We’re doing this once and we’re doing it right. We’ve earned one hell of a party.”

“You have, certainly,” Khan says.

“So have you, dragon,” Jill says. “So we’ll have one hell of a party and get married and for our honeymoon we can take fifteen other people on a ship into the unknown.”

He laughs. “Perhaps we can go away for a few days by ourselves, before we leave Earth.”

“I would like that,” Jill says, sighing when Khan begins bathing her. “This is ridiculously self-indulgent and I love it.”

“I like doing this for you,” Khan says, dragging the pouf over her skin. “You are mine to take care of, lioness.”

She laughs, turning when he nudges her. “And you’re mine to take care of, dragon.”

“Yes,” Khan murmurs, pausing to kiss her, holding her close for a moment.

Their suite has a small kitchenette, and after they get out of the shower Khan pulls on pants and
goes to see what they have in the way of tea. He finds a few options and decides on a plain green tea, brewing a pot. While he does, Jill goes through her post-shower routine and pulls on some clothes. It’s remarkably domestic and ordinary and Khan values it for that alone.

They end up back on the bed because the couch won’t accommodate Khan’s wings and the table is just a bit too low to sit on. Jill folds herself into lotus and takes her mug; Khan sits down on the edge of the bed, facing her. “Tell me what you need to have on the ship,” he says.

“Space to do yoga,” Jill says. “I mean, we’ll need a big gym, so I want space in it for yoga and tumbling. I want enough room in our quarters to personalize them, because standard Starfleet ship quarters are boring and all alike. A constant supply of coffee. Enough space to find somewhere to be alone when I need to be.”

“Reasonable enough,” Khan says, meaning it. “How easy is coffee to acquire out there?”

“Pretty easy,” Jill says. “Although once we get out of Federation space I’m less certain, but I mean we never ran out on the Marshall.”

“Do you think we will need hydroponics?” Khan asks. “You have more knowledge of that than I do.”

“I think it would be a good idea to have some, yeah,” Jill says. “I don’t want us to necessarily rely on that for our main food source, but there are some vegetables and other things that grow really well with hydroponics. We had a whole herb garden on the Marshall, and our chefs kept experimenting with other plants.”

“Anandi likes plants,” Khan says. “She always had some kind of garden, wherever she lived and worked. Often they were poisonous plants, but that is what she does.”

“Pretty much,” Jill agrees. “Andy is also good at keeping plants alive.”

“What did you do on your ship, during your free time?” Khan asks.

“I read a lot,” Jill says. “Studied some, there was always something new to learn about. Worked out, obviously. A few crewmates and I had a semi-regular poker game, and there were other board games or card games we played. I found ways to keep busy. I’m sure we all will.”

“Undoubtedly,” Khan says. “We should put in some kind of entertainment system, screens or the like.”

“If nothing else for the news,” Jill says. “And I want something on the ship but I’m not sure how well it would work.”

“What do you want, kitten?” Khan asks.

She grins a little. “I want a piano. I want to hear you play. I know they can go on ships, because there are traveling orchestras and all, but I’m not sure what’s involved in maintaining them. But you and your siblings sing so beautifully, and I want to hear you play piano too.”

He has to admit he hadn’t expected that one. “We can likely work it out,” he says, considering the options. “Although since you want it, you can do the research on what is required and how we get it on the ship.”

“You,” Khan says, smiling faintly. “The rest depends on situation.”

“You can have me,” Jill says, smiling back. “In fact, I’m going to insist I get on the ship.”

Khan laughs. “I should hope so, kitten.”

She reaches over, taking his hand. “I thought you’d leave me,” she says quietly.

“I know,” Khan says, also quietly.

Jill takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “I love you,” she says. “I love you so much it makes me stupid sometimes, because you’re the best thing that ever happened to me and I am terrified of losing you, dragon. Because I’m just this short crazy girl, and you…” She shakes her head.

“And I love you,” Khan says when she stops. “I want you with me as my wife, Jill. Wherever we go from here, we are going.”

“I know,” Jill murmurs. She looks up at him, her eyes bright. “I don’t know what kind of karma I incurred somewhere else to get this lucky, or what you did in the other universe to get this much here. I don’t know how much Rani influenced things or is still influencing them. But here we are, my dragon, and we’re going to have one hell of a wedding because it can be our wedding and goodbye party in one. We’ll have to invite the Femarans.”

“Not,” Khan says, “with their forge water.”

Jill dissolves into giggles. “Once was enough, I take it.”

“More than,” Khan says, but he smiles. “Perhaps we should also invite Gowtek.”

“Mm…let’s not push our luck,” Jill says. “We can send him video.”

“That would be the wiser course of action,” Khan agrees. “Do you intend to wear your dress uniform?”

“I don’t,” Jill says. “Because if we’re having the big fancy wedding I want the big fancy dress, not my formal uniform. I mean, I clearly have to wear something without a back.”

“Clearly,” Khan says, amused. He takes a sip of tea, reflecting that he feels remarkably relaxed, and well content with the night. He honestly can’t remember the last time his mind was this quiet.

*If you want to know who truly owns something, you look to those that keep it alive.*

“Dragon,” Jill says, rubbing her thumb over his knuckles. “What are you thinking?”

He shakes his head. “Only that I think I needed tonight more than I realized.”

“I know,” Jill says. “Khan, you’ve needed tonight since I met you, but we didn’t have the chance until now. That, and I was stupid and you wouldn’t have let me for good reason.”

“You were not stupid,” Khan says. “You did not believe in your own value. Lioness, without you none of this would have happened and my entire family would likely be dead now. Do you have any idea how grateful I am for that?”

“All because I tripped into you,” Jill says and laughs. “Because you looked sad and unhappy and I couldn’t stand it.”
“I always wondered, did you do that often?” Khan asks. “Or was it just me?”

“I don’t like seeing people visibly unhappy,” Jill says. “So yeah, there have been a bunch of occasions where I’ve contrived to bump into someone, or find an opportunity to just ask if they’re all right. You, though, there was a story there, and I wanted to know it.”

“You would not leave me alone until I told you,” Khan says lightly and Jill laughs.

“Damn right I wouldn’t. Because I’m stubborn as the devil.”

“No,” Khan says. “You are as stubborn as Cat. She’s worse.”

“I think she has me beat, but I’m only half-Russian,” Jill says. She smiles, though, and threads her fingers through Khan’s. “Although I really wasn’t going to give up until you told me what was wrong.”

“I did get that impression,” Khan says. He raises their hands to his lips. “And here we are.”

“Ambassador,” Jill says and Khan laughs, shaking his head.

“I did not anticipate that,” he admits.

“You know, I really didn’t either,” Jill says with a snicker. “I kind of thought killing Marcus would prevent them from celebrating us too much.”

“They’ll likely spread the story that it was some kind of self-defense,” Khan says. “I did get the impression Viola is rather glad he’s dead.”

“I like her,” Jill says. “She’s really practical and sarcastic. Jake used to tell me stories about her. She was one hell of a field operative until she got promoted, apparently.”

“Now she is one hell of an admiral,” Khan says and Jill laughs.

“ Pretty much. I do wonder what Carol Marcus thinks, though.”

“I rather feel like I should see her to find out,” Khan admits.

“I would recommend somewhere public,” Jill says. “Just in case she decides to punch you.”

“Likely a good idea.” Khan smiles a bit. “Although she had already started to pull away from him.”

“True.” Jill takes a sip of tea. “Dragon, will you tell me something?”

“What do you want to know?” Khan asks.

“You and Rani never did anything like this?” she asks. “Not the physical, but the rest?”

“She had different ways of quieting my mind,” Khan says. “Usually when she thought I was too tense, or too upset, she would arrange for dinner in our quarters, and she wouldn’t talk. We had dinner in silence, and then she would make me bathe with her, still in silence, and then we would get into bed and I would hold her, and she wouldn’t say anything until I was ready to talk about whatever it was.”

“Did it work, usually?” Jill asks.
“Always,” Khan says. “The best way I can describe it is that usually by the point Rani decided to do this, I felt as though everything around me was far too loud and discordant. The silence literally made my ears ring, but was incredibly relaxing, and she let me decide when I was ready to talk again.”

Jill smiles a bit. “She was a lot gentler with you than I am.”

“The lion-tamer rather than the lioness,” Khan says. “It has occurred to me. But I don’t like to compare you to her.”

“That’s human nature, I think,” Jill says. “It doesn’t bother me. I know where I stand, and I know you’ll always love her. I wouldn’t love you if you didn’t.”

“Even from the beginning, you wanted to know about her,” Khan says, remembering that dinner.

“When did you know she was yours?” Jill asks. “Not that you loved her, but when did you realize she was yours?”

“When I met her,” Khan says and Jill blinks. “I looked at her and knew she was coming back to the keep with me, whatever it cost me. I looked at her and knew she would be mine.”

“And I thought you claimed me quickly,” Jill says, laughing.

“I knew there was a connection,” Khan says. “And when you were dosed with Dante, I knew you were mine.”

“Yes, I remember that,” Jill says. “I don’t remember much else about that night but I remember that part.”

“Likewise,” Khan says.

Jill sighs. “I hate that Andy had to go through it.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I rather wish we could have killed him more than once.” He means it; after seeing the “pets” he thinks all his siblings would have liked a turn.

“Agreed,” Jill says. “But—do you know what’s up with her and Matthew?”

“No, actually,” Khan says. “Do you?”

“I’m not sure,” Jill says. “I know that before we left for Qo’noS there were a couple times Matthew slept at his loft, and I did see that they were together for the spicewine. I’d love to know what Andy saw, actually. But I don’t think they’re having sex, but I’m not sure, and Andy hasn’t said.”

“It is not really our business,” Khan says. “I agree with you, though.”

“The important part is that they’re comfortable around each other,” Jill says. “Otherwise things on the ship could have gotten really awkward. Did you know Matthew was likely going to be interested in Andy?”

“Andy once talked to me about wanting to find a partner who could accept all of her,” Khan says. “And I immediately thought of Matthew. And then when they met…”

“Maybe Rani decided to matchmake for her descendant,” Jill says.
“Oh, lord,” Khan says with a groan. “She used to matchmake all the time. It really would not surprise me if she had done something here. The problem was it usually worked out, so she had no incentive to stop.”

“But if it usually worked out what was the problem in the first place?” Jill asks.

“And that was her argument,” Khan says.

“Well, it’s logical,” Jill says. “If it results in happy couples, why is there a problem?”

“I conceded the argument eventually,” Khan says. “So, in all likelihood if Rani could have influenced things—except for one. She never would have arranged for Andy to be drugged.”

“That I believe,” Jill says. “Okay, I do find it a bit odd that we’re discussing your wife’s influence on present day romances like it’s a real thing. The problem is that it might be a real thing.”

“If it results in a happy couple is there a problem?” Khan asks and Jill smacks his arm.

“Okay, I deserved that,” she says. “But still. I’m thinking I’m awake enough I want to go find breakfast, and I actually know a local café that’s open all night and has the most amazing pancakes I’ve ever had. You want to put real clothes on and go find them?”

“All right,” Khan says, amused at the continuing domesticity. He rather likes it, truth be told.

Jill squeezes his hand and scrambles off the bed. “I don’t want to tell anyone else,” she says. “Is that okay?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “I don’t want to either, truth be told.”

“I like this,” Jill says, rummaging in her bag for clothes. “I like that you’ve finally given up on my sleep enough to talk to me all night.”

“I prefer you being awake to you having nightmares, yes,” Khan says. “But I am optimistic you will have fewer nightmares now that this is all over.”

“I might, but I’m still not going to sleep through the night,” Jill says.

“I am aware,” Khan says and Jill laughs.

“Pancakes,” she says firmly. “Get dressed.”

Khan smiles and does just that.

Chapter End Notes

So apparently there will be a wedding in the future of this story. Thoughts?
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

We needed to have this conversation.

Chapter Notes

I made myself a bit teary when I wrote parts of this chapter so I'm curious how you guys will react. Let me know, mkay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four months go by almost unnervingly quietly. Khan enlists Katsuro and Amir to assist in the ship design and build—he finds it deeply entertaining that it’s being built where the Vengeance was constructed—and his other family members find their own areas of study, things to research or ways to spend time. Jill spends a good amount of time with Aisha and Jasmine, working to figure out what supplies they need to lay in on the ship and what they’ll likely find once they leave.

“You know, of course, that you’ll be able to stop in at any Federation station to resupply,” Viola says one afternoon on the Jupiter station.

“I am aware,” Khan says, not looking up from his computer screen. “You know, of course, that we intend to leave the Federation.” The two of them have taken over a small office that looks out onto the ship’s construction; private, at least for the moment, and with the computer access Khan needs.

“That’s less easy than it used to be,” Viola says. “But, yes, I know. Even so.”

Khan finishes inputting his calculations and straightens up, turning to look at her. She still uses the wheelchair, but it no longer covers her legs and Khan has seen her walk a few steps here and there. “You do realize I could have met you on Earth,” he says.

“I wanted to see the ship,” Viola says. “Perks of being the boss, I get to go where I want mostly.”

Khan smiles faintly. “I always found that being in charge gave me simultaneously more and less freedom.”

“That does sound about right,” Viola says with her own smile. “Also, I wanted the chance to speak with you.”

“About what?” Khan asks.

“I want to know what your original plan was,” she says, folding her hands in her lap. “Before you met Jill and she turned your life upside down and inside out.”

“A fair analogy,” Khan admits. “It involved quite a few more deaths, and the destruction of section 31’s London headquarters.”
“I will be honest with you, Khan, I was surprised you didn’t destroy it,” Viola says. “Not the facility Alexander targeted, obviously, but the Kelvin archive. When I finally got my hands on the records…I am somewhat surprised it’s still standing.”

Khan shrugs. “I could blow it up now if you would feel better about it.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Viola says dryly. “Did Jill ask you not to?”

“Not exactly,” Khan says. “We developed other plans that did not require its destruction, and determined that blowing it up for the sake of vengeance was not worth the cost we would pay.”

“And yet I’ve had over half the medical and scientific staff from that organization go missing,” Viola says. “Where did they go?”

“I can honestly tell you I do not know,” Khan says. He doesn’t. Cat and Kostenka have been the ones in charge of eliminating loose ends; all Khan knows is that their list grows shorter every week. He doesn’t know who’s helping them, although he has suspicions, but he does not know who they’ve killed and how.

“Do you know how many more I’m going to lose?” Viola asks calmly.

Khan shakes his head. “Do you actually care?”

“I care in that I’ve had a dozen officers go missing over the last three months and in four cases we haven’t even found the bodies,” Viola says. “Anyone who worked at section 31 is edgy.”

“Anyone who worked in section 31’s medical laboratories has no conscience to feel guilty,” Khan says. “They would have killed me, had they been able to, and I am not apologetic for their deaths.”

“I didn’t ask you to be,” Viola says. “But it would be helpful to know how many more people I’m going to lose before this is all over.”

“I do not have that information, admiral,” Khan says simply.

“What happened to Ikan?” Viola asks.

“Was he one of your boys?” Khan counters.

Viola shakes her head. “He was always Alexander’s protégé. He technically reported to me but he was invariably on assignment for Alexander.”

“He had information we needed,” Khan says. “After we had the information, we had no use for him. You likely will never find his body.”

“And you don’t know where it is either,” Viola says.

“I do not.” Khan considers how much to tell her. He doesn’t trust her exactly, but they have formed a fairly solid working relationship. She lets him do what he wants, and in exchange he gives her most of the details on what design changes he makes and why.

He still won’t tell her about the transporter, though, which he knows irritates her, but Khan refuses to give Starfleet any information about it beyond that it exists. As far as he can tell they haven’t managed to reverse engineer it yet, but that doesn’t surprise him. He doubts most people are capable of understanding the transwarp theory behind it, let alone figure out how to make it portable.
Viola shakes her head again. “You and your family have been an invaluable help to us, but I think I’m glad you’re leaving us in two months.”

“We do not kill without a purpose,” Khan says calmly. “I should think you know that better than anyone.”

“Yes but what you define as purpose and what I define as necessity are often different,” Viola says. “Call me an optimist, but I held out hope for rehabilitation of some of those men and women.”

“We did not,” Khan says.

“No second chances, Khan?” Viola asks pointedly.

His wings stretch before he folds them back. “I did not ask for a second chance in this time, Viola.”

“But when you left Earth the first time, you did so with the hope of a second chance, someday,” Viola says. “It didn’t exactly come the way you thought, but nothing ever does, and really, you got Jill out of it and averted a disastrous war so I’d say you more than balanced the scales.”

“We started a war, once,” Khan says. “This time we stopped it.”

“Some of the brass don’t understand that,” Viola says. “Why you went to so much trouble and effort to prevent something you’re good at.”

“We have been asked that multiple times,” Khan says, letting his wings relax a bit and fold around him. “And I will give you the same answer I have given everyone else. We lived through war, Viola, and we have no desire to do that again. We are intelligent enough to know when to pick our battles. A war would be, as you said, disastrous. I have to live in this galaxy and I am not eager to live in a galaxy at war.”

She nods, conceding the point. “So now you’re an ambassador marrying a Starfleet captain,” she says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Sometimes I am uncertain how I got here, I must admit.”

“Honestly, looking back at your story I’m not certain how you got here either,” Viola says. “So many things could have gone wrong at any point.”

“I am aware,” Khan says. He feels a vibration through the station and frowns, turning back to his computer. He gets through one scan before a medley of sirens and klaxons go off and he feels the shockwave of an explosion.

Viola pulls out her communicator. “All sections, report,” she says crisply.

Various parts of the station report in, but the second level—the one with access to the actual ship—stays quiet and Khan can see a breach. “Stay here,” he says to Viola. “I can survive exposure to vacuum better than you can.”


Khan nods and sprints for it.

When he gets there he sees two burned bodies on the floor and a lot of wreckage that was once a wall and part of a computer. The breach looks sealed for the moment, though, and the quick look Khan gets tells him the ship hasn’t been touched.
One of the engineers—Khan can’t remember his name at the moment, but that doesn’t matter—comes running over to him. “The ship’s safe, sir,” he says breathlessly. “Nothing got through to it.”

He nods. “Thank you, Lieutenant. How serious is the damage?”

The engineer shakes his head. “Not bad enough that we couldn’t seal the breach, which means that it was a localized explosion and likely did little damage beyond the visible. And.” He gestures at the bodies.

“And,” Khan agrees. “What triggered it?”

“Near as we can tell, sir, remote detonation,” the engineer says. “Nearby but we don’t think it was on the station. There was a shuttle that left the station five minutes before this happened.”

“Get it back here,” Khan says flatly.

“We’re working on it, sir.” The engineer looks nervous but not terrified, which Khan appreciates; it’s harder to get information from terrified men. “At least, Security is, but sir, I need to start working on fixing my station.”

“Did you help build it?” Khan asks, curious about the possessive.

“My dad designed it, sir,” the engineer says. “The station’s been in existence for about ten years, and my dad was one of the lead architects on it. I went into Starfleet and specifically asked to be assigned here. She’s beautiful, but right now she’s hurt and I need to fix her.”

Khan steps aside, gesturing. The engineer doesn’t quite salute but hurries off; Khan sees medical teams come and gather the bodies.

Stupid. Stupid. Worse than that—careless of him, to think the danger past. He takes a breath, letting it out slowly and releasing some of his anger, but it burns inside him and he can’t let go of it as he talks to Viola, works with Security to scan the station for other explosives—they find two, one near the station’s medbay and one in personnel quarters. Stable without a detonator, however, so easy to remove and destroy in space. They don’t catch the shuttle, or its pilot, but Viola intends to find out who signed it out. Khan rather thinks she will.

He beams himself back to San Francisco as soon as he can, in no mood to be reminded of his failure with every breath. When he walks through the doors of their suite, Jill sits cross-legged on the bed, clearly waiting for him. “How bad is it?” she asks.

Khan shakes his head. “The ship is undamaged, and the security around its code and design are intact. All they managed to do was damage part of the station and kill two engineers.”

“Oh, is that all,” Jill says. “And you blame yourself.”

“I should have realized this was too easy,” Khan says, his throat tight, anger and self-loathing choking him. “I should—“

Jill slides off the bed and walks over to him. “This isn’t your fault, dragon,” she says, taking his hands. “You can’t control everything.”

“I should have anticipated this, or something like it,” Khan says, not quite able to meet her eyes.

“Hey,” Jill says, tightening her grip on his hands. “Look at me.”
He does, slowly. “Right now, it’s just us,” she says. “You’re safe here. No one is trying to attack us, no one is trying to harm us. It’s just us, and we will deal with the rest of this nonsense tomorrow, but for tonight I need you to trust me.”

Khan realizes what she intends, and almost pulls away. “This isn’t the right—”

Jill’s grip on his hands tightens almost painfully. “You would do this for me,” she says quietly. “You know you would. Let me take care of you for a night, dragon.”

“Lioness,” he murmurs. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“I believe you can,” Jill says, easing her hold. “It doesn’t have to be like last time. Trust me to take care of you, Khan. Trust me to know what you need.”

Khan closes his eyes, leaning down to rest his forehead against hers. He breathes in her scent, sandalwood and spicy-sweet, and she curls her hands around the back of his neck. “You’re my dragon,” she says, scratching her nails over his neck, up into his scalp and back down. “Trust me to take care of you.”

“I do,” Khan says, almost a whisper. He still doesn’t know if this is a good idea, or the right time, or anything, but his lioness seems to have made up her mind and Khan remembers all too clearly what happened last time. He can’t say he doesn’t want it now, the chance to surrender control like that, to forget everything else for a while.

Honestly the thought sounds incredibly appealing and he trusts Jill with everything he is. Khan breathes out slowly, feeling tense muscles start to relax. “Come on,” Jill says after a moment. “The shower’s big enough for five.”

It is, really, and Khan smiles, letting Jill take his hand as they walk to the bathroom. She flips on the water and both of them undress, stepping under the sprays together. Khan reaches for Jill, pulling her in against him. “I’m here, dragon,” she says, laying a hand over his heart. “I’m right here.”

“I know,” Khan says, but it takes him a minute before he can let go of her.

“Here,” Jill says, handing him her body wash and pouf. “You’re going to bathe me, and then I’m going to show you how to condition my hair and make you do it.”

He realizes her intent, but it does actually work. The simple act of sharing the shower, bathing with her, focuses his attention on her and the moment, instead of back on Jupiter. By the time they get out, he feels cleaner both physically and mentally.

Jill kisses him lightly and nudges him toward the bed. “Lie down, dragon, and get comfortable,” she says. He smiles and goes to stretch out, watching her pull on a tank top and panties and bundle her hair back in a ponytail.

She comes over to sit on the edge of the bed, near his head. “You’ll tell me if you need to stop,” she says, not a question.

“I will,” Khan says. Jill scratches her nails over his scalp and down the back of his neck and he sighs a little, closing his eyes.

“Keep those closed,” she says, still petting him. Khan does, and a moment later he feels something soft over them. When he blinks his eyes open he can’t see anything; it’s both a little unnerving and somewhat...relaxing, especially with Jill’s hand on the back of his neck. “You okay, dragon?” she
asks softly.

“Yes,” he says, adjusting to the darkness. It’s easier if he keeps his eyes closed.

“Lift your head for a moment,” Jill says, stuffing a pillow under his forehead. “Suffocation by mattress is not in my plans for the evening.”

“I appreciate that, lioness,” Khan says, giving her his right wrist when she tugs on it. It is a decidedly odd thing, to feel the cuff he usually uses on her—and he wonders if it actually will hold him, but when she locks it, the cuff does not move no matter how hard he tugs.

“Dragon, trust me, you’re not going anywhere until either I let you or you ask to stop.” Jill says, running her hand up his arm. “Those will hold no matter what you do. I had Konstantin test them. He didn’t move.”

If these cuffs can hold Konstantin, he’s really not going anywhere. Khan isn’t sure how he feels about that and shifts a little; Jill closes her hand around the back of his neck and he settles, part of him amused that his own techniques work on him, but the rest of him starting to relax into the moment. “It’s just us, and you’re safe,” she says calmly. “I have you, dragon. You’re safe with me.”

“I know, lioness,” he murmurs, relaxing into the cuffs. Jill scratches down his back and he shivers; when she brushes a finger over the line where feathers meet skin he hisses in a breath.

She keeps a hand on him as she moves; Khan feels the bed shift and realizes she’s moved to kneel next to him. “Draw your leg up, like that,” she says, nudging him gently. “There we are.”

Jill arranges two more pillows, and the end result is that Khan really, really does not want to move. Even if he could, which he can’t at the moment, he really does not want to. He honestly can’t remember the last time he felt this comfortable. “You falling asleep on me, my dragon?” Jill asks, trailing her fingers up his spine.

Khan shivers a bit. “This is…exceedingly comfortable,” he admits and she laughs.

“It’s meant to be, but don’t fall asleep on me yet. I have plans for you.” She slides her hands up his back and scratches back down and lightning flashes behind Khan’s eyes. He groans and Jill laughs again. “There we go.”

But she doesn’t scratch him again. She does keep touching him, always having one hand in contact with him, and he appreciates that, feeling more disoriented than he expected by the lack of sight.

He feels the bed shift, not entirely certain how she moved, and then she runs her knuckles up either side of his spine, pressing in hard enough he groans in sheer relief. “And…there,” Jill murmurs and her elbow digs in right at the spot that almost always hurts. Khan makes a choked sound, not sure if that hurt or felt incredible but as she eases the pressure he realizes it was a bit of both. “I asked Maeve if she thought I could walk on your back without damaging your wings but she didn’t know if that was likely, so she taught me this instead,” Jill says, somehow finding every sore spot in his back and easing them, one at a time. It’s not a complete fix but his back feels so much looser by the time she slides her hands down his spine one last time.

“Clearly I need to do this more often,” she says, laughing a little. “Oh, baby. You never even thought to ask, did you? And to be fair I could have offered, but you never even thought to ask?”

“I didn’t,” Khan says, wondering if at some point he became one with the bed. His mind feels…hazy, and he hasn’t been this completely relaxed in possibly centuries. It’s…strange.
She sighs. “My fault as much as yours, dragon, but we’ll fix it. But really my fault more than yours, because I don’t know if you would have let me before I trusted you. You wouldn’t have let me see you this vulnerable, I don’t think. And that’s fair.” Jill kisses the small of his back, her hair brushing his skin. “So I am sorry, again, for…that.”

“I knew you would trust me eventually,” Khan says softly. “But I will not say it didn’t hurt that you did not.”

“I know,” Jill says quietly. “I know, and dragon, I am sorry.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, anymore,” Khan says. It’s easier to be honest like this, when he can’t see her, can’t read her face or watch her body language.

“How were you so certain?” Jill asks softly. “When I wasn’t. How were you so certain?”

“You gave me my family back.” Khan says, his voice almost breaking. “Jill, I had nothing. I had a desperate hope, a chance that maybe, possibly I could save them, but more than that…and you asked me what was wrong. You were the first person I saw in my entire time on this Earth who honestly asked how I was and meant it. I thought—” He takes a breath. “You believed me when you had no reason in the galaxy to, and you offered me your help when you had no reason to do it. You turned your life upside down for me, lioness, and how could I not have loved you? How could I not have wanted you as mine? I have a dozen of my family back now when odds are I would have had none without you, and we carry those life-debts whether you wish us to or not. How could we not claim you as one of ours, lioness? Do you realize how much you changed, how much happened? I don’t know what karmic balance I incurred in the alternate timeline but I am certain, Jill, my counterpart never had you.”

Her breath hitches and Khan realizes she’s crying, but he thinks he might be as well. “I told you once,” she says, taking a shaky breath. “I love you so much it makes me stupid.”

Her hands stay on his back, warm and solid, and he appreciates that even as he feels a tear hit his skin. “I’m your lioness,” she says, her voice a bit thick. “But you’re my dragon.”

“Yes,” Khan says softly.

Jill slides her hands over his back in soothing patterns, Khan thinks mostly because she wants to touch him and frankly he’s enjoying it. “This was not exactly how I thought tonight would go, I admit,” she says sheepishly.

“No but I am glad it did,” Khan says. “We needed to have this conversation.”

“We did, and maybe this was the only way we could,” Jill says. “We’ve lived inside each other’s pockets for so long that maybe a bit of visual distance was best.” She sighs. “Why do you say your counterpart never had me?”

“I spoke with Ambassador Spock once,” Khan says. “He actually requested the meeting. He would not tell me much of what happened in that timeline, only that I and my crew had been a very dangerous enemy, and that he, frankly, did not trust I had the Federation’s best interests at heart. I told him that I had the Federation’s best interests at heart so long as they aligned with my own goals, and I had never denied that. He asked me what would happen if someone gave me reason to turn against the Federation, and I said I was unlikely to ever be an enemy, but once we leave Federation space I no longer need to be a willing ally, either.”

“I somehow didn’t think he liked that,” Jill says.
“He gave me credit for honesty,” Khan admits, smiling. “And said that he did acknowledge the work I had done on behalf of the Federation, and that he appreciated the chance to see my skills from the perspective of an ally, instead of an enemy. But he said he still considered me possibly the most dangerous man he would ever know.”

“Pretty much,” Jill says, laughing.

“Essentially what I told him,” Khan says, smiling a bit. A little more tension eases out of him, and he’s not sleepy but he’s just…completely content and relaxed and comfortable. He’s not too hot or too cold and Jill keeps touching him and while he’s not anywhere near the headspace he was last time…that wasn’t what he needed tonight.

“How do you know?” he asks softly.

“How do I know what, dragon?” Jill slides her hands down his thighs and back up to his lower back.

“What I need,” Khan says.

“Because I’m your mate,” she says, continuing to slide her hands up his back. “Because you know what I need. Because you tell me, in so many ways, the same way I tell you.”

He sighs. “What were you even doing today, lioness? I had not seen you since I left for Jupiter.”

“Wedding planning,” Jill says, laughing. “I am not going to tell you anything about it because you told me to make all the decisions and gave me a couple of rules and beyond that I think it would drive you mad.”

“How big is this event going to be?” Khan asks cautiously.

“Well, we’re having an argument over that at the moment,” Jill says. “Viola is bound and determined that our wedding will also serve as a celebration of what we accomplished, so that has somewhat…embiggened things.”

Khan groans. “Who is winning and in what direction?”

“At the moment she is, so there will be a lot more Starfleet people present and I am apparently actually getting married in my formal uniform,” Jill says. “But I’m damned well changing into the fun fancy dress before the party.”

“Kitten, if you don’t want—” Khan starts.

“Dragon, I promise, it’s fine,” Jill says, and he hears the smile in her voice. “I kind of did want to do that because damnit I earned that uniform and I look good in it. I will actually willingly wear the miniskirt for once.”

“I asked Viola what the point of it was,” Khan says. “Well, Matthew insisted I ask. She told me it was changing as soon as she could order a full uniform refresh but there were other priorities at the moment and she has at least made pants an option for female officers in standard situations.”

“See, this is why we’ve needed a woman in charge,” Jill says. “We get shit done.”

“I did realize that,” Khan says. “Our family may look to me as their leader but let us be honest, lioness, about where the power lies.”
“Except—no, not exactly,” Jill says. “I mean—you have to have a captain on a ship. You have to have one person in charge and a clear chain of ownership of various functions or people get really, really confused and things go wrong. That’s you, dragon, that’s not me. For decisions about our family and what we will do together or what you and I will do, then yes, I want equal say, because as a group they look to you and me.”

“They do, which I like,” Khan says. “And yes, I agree about a ship’s chain of command. I did wonder where you would put yourself, because I had…concerns about you and Jasmine arguing over who would be my first officer.”

“I didn’t see that ending well for either of us either so I decided I get to fly the ship,” Jill says. “You know, I don’t want to have command rank except as a secondary resource. I just want to fly it and see what’s out there.”

“Her engines should be ready for short flights next week,” Khan says. “I did think you would want to be her test pilot.”

“I am there,” Jill says immediately. “Do we have a name for her yet?”

“We don’t, because no one can agree on one,” Khan says. “Do you have a suggestion?”

“Kind of,” Jill says, audibly hesitating. “I thought…we could call her the Rani. Our past carrying us into the future. And maybe if we name the ship after her, she might show up again in our dreams.”

Khan says nothing for a moment, processing it. “I think I like it,” he says slowly. “I like the concept, and I think she would like it. She wanted to be remembered. She didn’t want me to forget her.”

“What was your favorite memory of her?” Jill asks. “Or one of?”

Khan laughs a little. “The one that comes to mind involves sex, honestly.”

“So? I’m aware you had sex with her,” Jill says. “At least I really hope you did.”

“Fair point,” Khan admits. “It—I had had a very unsuccessful meeting with my counselors, but Rani and I had been passing messages between each other during it and were both ready to start laughing at the slightest pretext. We finally fled, and got back to our chambers, and somewhat landed on the floor laughing because it had just been so absurd. Somewhere in there laughing turned to kissing and then I got impatient and put my head under her skirt. She was still giggling occasionally, I was trying not to laugh but when I did she quite liked it, so you see how this went, and our clothes were hopelessly twisted after and she still couldn’t stop snickering for a full fifteen minutes.”

“I love it when you laugh,” Jill says affectionately. “You don’t do it nearly often enough.”

“She said the same thing,” Khan admits. “I never claimed to be a jokester. That was always Matthew.”

“Yes, and now he and Andy are…something,” Jill says. “Andy won’t say and I am not about to ask.”

“No,” Khan agrees. “Lioness, would you come here? I would like you closer.” It’s an odd thing to say, but it’s easier to say when he can’t see her.
“Yes, of course,” Jill says. She moves to unlock the cuffs and Khan shifts to hold her as she fits herself against him. She doesn’t take the blindfold off and Khan actually doesn’t want it off; he likes this.

“You fit against me like you were made to,” he murmurs. She does; her head tucks right under his chin and it’s remarkably easy to hold her comfortably.

“Maybe I was,” she murmurs back. “This really, really wasn’t how I intended the night to go, and I still want to do what I planned at some point. But I think this was better for both of us.”

“Yes,” Khan says, his hand idly running up and down Jill’s back.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks quietly.

He sighs. “I should have realized this was too easy,” he says, but the anger feels muted, distant.

“None of us thought it would be otherwise,” Jill points out gently. “We’ve had no reason to think anyone would be angry with us. Starfleet put out the story that we killed Marcus in self-defense and given what he did to the Enterprise no one has questioned it. At this point who would want to hurt us, or the ship?”

“I do not know,” Khan says. “Which is the problem.”

“Yeah,” Jill says with a sigh. “But dragon, I promise you did not fail here. You had no reason to expect something like this and it is possible the explosion wasn’t aimed to target you. You found other explosives in areas where you weren’t likely to be, remember? Marcus was a bit paranoid and likely planted them ages ago. We just need to find out why someone detonated it today. Are there any loose ends? Any of Marcus’s people who could be out for us?”

Khan considers it, thinking back. “The Ikan impostor,” he says after a minute. “We never did determine what his actual role was or what he was doing.”

“We should find him and find out,” Jill says. “Starting tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Khan agrees, holding Jill a little closer.

“Do you want to sleep?” she asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Khan says. “I want this, with you. It has been a while since we have had some quiet.”

“Like this, yeah,” Jill says. “We’ll have to make time for it on the ship.” She laughs a little. “Even lionesses rest with their mates.”

“What kind of lair would a lioness and a dragon have?” Khan asks because…well, just because.

“Apparently, a starship,” Jill says and Khan laughs. “When do we get to start personalizing our quarters?”

“In about three weeks,” Khan says. “Have you made your decisions yet?”

“I have narrowed our choices down to about two or three in each category and then you need to decide the rest,” Jill says. “I am not decorating our home for the foreseeable future without your input.”

“I really do not care, lioness,” Khan says patiently. “I trust you not to pick anything too bright or
garish."

“I’ll give you two choices in each category and you can pick one,” Jill says stubbornly.

“If you insist,” Khan says but he really, truly does not care that much. He’d trusted Rani to decorate their quarters, and after she died he hadn’t wanted to change them.

“I do,” she says and kisses his collarbone. “Just be glad I’m not making you do that with the wedding.”

“I told you,” Khan says. “All I care about is that my family are there. Literally everything else is up to you.”

“Well, me and Travis and Viola,” Jill says. “Who is more interested in planning this than I thought she would be, but I think she was a bit miffed Jake and I refused any public ceremony.”

“I do believe she was,” Khan says. “At this point who is officiating the ceremony itself?”

“Starfleet wedding ceremonies allow for the use of any officiant the couple wants, so it’s still Uncle Andrew,” Jill says. “And Aunt Ava. However they do want to meet with both of us at least once before the wedding just to go over what we want in the ceremony. And yes, it has to be both of us.”

“This I have an interest in,” Khan says. “Set it up, lioness, and we can discuss it.”

“I still don’t understand entirely why you were so insistent on us getting married,” Jill admits. “I mean, I am really looking forward to the party and being married, but…it’s just a piece of paper in the end, isn’t it?”

“No,” Khan says, remembering Cat’s words from so long ago. “A marriage is not a contract, it is a covenant, a sacred promise of two people who intend to spend their lives together. I want to marry you for the same reason I wanted to marry Rani—because I love you, lioness, and I want us to have that covenant. I want that promise.”

“You are, possibly, the most romantic man I’ve ever known,” Jill says after a moment. “Or at least you have the most idealistic view of love and marriage I’ve ever come across.”

Khan smiles a bit. “I have had the fortune to experience and observe ones that worked well,” he says. “I never saw a reason to dislike the concept.”

She laughs a little. “There is that.”

They talk quietly for a while, about little details and mundane things, both of them winding down slowly. Khan starts to drift without realizing it and falls asleep for real somewhere in there, but when he opens his eyes again the blindfold is gone and sunlight comes through the windows.

“You with me, dragon?” Jill asks, walking over to the bed when he sits up. She wears exercise clothes and sneakers, her hair pulled back into a simple ponytail.

“More or less,” Khan says, rubbing a hand over his face. “What time is it?”

“Just past seven,” Jill says. “If you want to come watch something amusing, you’re welcome to. Jake and I want to run the obstacle course, to see if after all this training we’ve done we can beat our score from last time.”
“I would like to see that,” Khan says, also curious about the end result. He gets out of bed; Jill makes coffee while he gets dressed, and then they head over to the Academy physical fields.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think they were going to get off without any more trouble, did you?
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

I am glad we had this chance to talk.

Chapter Notes

This story will not end. I keep trying to end it--and believe me, I know exactly how it will end--but it keeps throwing things at me. Like this chapter.

The good news is I'll have a lot more time to write soon so I live in hope of finishing this by the end of the year.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jill shows him the viewing platform for the course. “Anyone’s welcome to watch,” she says. “But while we do this, you get to start thinking about what happened yesterday and who might be responsible and why. I have faith in your ability to multi-task.”

Khan laughs. “I should hope so. Is it customary to wish one good luck before the course?”

“The usual is ‘May you make it through intact’,” Jill says. “There have been some injuries on the course.”

“I have faith in your ability to do so,” Khan says and Jill laughs.

“I do love you, dragon.” She stretches up to kiss him and runs off to the start of the course. Khan watches her for a moment, then climbs the stairs.

For a moment, he studies the course. His estimation of the Starfleet officers who designed it rises; this isn’t easy, and he can see an area or two that would be difficult even for his family. Parts of it resemble damaged starships, and parts various planet surfaces. There’s even a water feature although if he understands correctly the idea is to avoid getting wet.

A few other people come up, but Khan doesn’t recognize them. He does move slightly so his wings won’t block the view for anyone. Then a slim blond man with a neat beard walks directly to him. “I’m Mikael Knight,” he says, extending a hand. “Jill’s captain.”

Khan smiles, meaning it, and shakes his hand. “I am glad to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Mikael says. “I always knew she was going to change the galaxy someday. I just didn’t expect this.”

“I really do not think anyone did,” Khan says. “Including me. What was she like, as first officer?”

“Dedicated,” Mikael says. “She wouldn’t leave anyone behind, and she would go to anyone’s aid in a heartbeat. I don’t know if she told you but we were usually a medical supply ship, and
whenever we needed an away team to deliver things on the planet she led it. Everyone adored her on the ship, although after the horror of the forty-three hours we started watching her a bit more closely.”

“She did tell me about that,” Khan says. “Then she told me if she were ever up that long again I had permission to tranq her.”

“She learned something, Hallelujah,” Mikael says, laughing.

“Will you tell me about something?” Khan asks. “What happened, the mission that left the scars on her back?”

Mikael blows out a breath. “For that let’s go somewhere else.”

Khan looks back at the course for a moment, then decides this is more important and gestures to the stairs.

They end up standing by the side of the course, somewhere they can see most of it. “There was a disease on one of the frontier planets,” Mikael says. “It was settled by a mix of humans and Bylans, a humanoid species with the ability to hold objects in a pouch on their stomach. The disease affected both of them, but the medicine they found healed the humans and had little effect on the Bylans. They believed the humans were cheating them out of the medicine, and a minor civil war broke out. Federation doctors managed to find a fix for the Bylans, and we got it there, but on their way to get the medicine to the first hospital the party got captured by humans, who didn’t want the Bylans to get it. Somehow Jill managed for one officer to escape with it, but the rest of them couldn’t leave. The humans who captured them wanted to know where the rest of it was, because we’d sent down two parties. Jill wouldn’t tell them. They didn’t like that.”

“No,” Khan murmurs, remembering clearly what the scars looked like. “What ended up happening, in the war?”

“We got enough of the cure to the right people that they were able to figure out how to replicate it, so as it got through the population we managed to defuse the rest of the war,” Mikael says. “Well, the ship that replaced us, because we lost two and we almost lost a third, and I wasn’t staying. We had to get Jill to the nearest Starbase for help, because she developed a serious infection after… that, and it took a while for us to make sure she was going to be all right.”

“Tell me something,” Khan says. “How long was her hair before that mission?”

“A little below her shoulders,” Mikael says. “I know. Believe me, I know.”

“I know you do,” Khan says. His impression of the man is someone…steady, and someone determined to take care of his people. He can see how Jill would have worked well with him.

“Did she tell you about the Ventraxans?” Mikael asks quietly.

Khan can’t quite suppress the growl and Mikael snorts. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“She did, yes,” Khan says, looking at the course. He can see Jill and Jake standing at the beginning of the course, apparently waiting for something. When he turns and looks up at the viewing platform, it’s full, and more people come to stand in their general area.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” a voice says over a loudspeaker. “We have here our record-holders, trying to beat that record. This should be something to see. Remember, you get points for method of execution as well as speed, so make it look good.”
“Honey, I always look good,” Jill calls and everyone laughs.

“Okay, that’s true,” the voice says. “So make it look great. When the horn sounds, start running. And as always, may you make it through intact!”

The crowd cheers—it’s grown quite a lot, Khan notes, looking around. Even in the last few moments.

Jill turns to Jake and says something Khan can’t hear; he laughs and nods. Then a long, sonorous horn blows and they take off, dodging through a field of irregular rocks. “Ten o’clock, dive!” Jake calls and both of them dive for cover as one of the rocks explodes. Not a particularly large explosion, but enough that bits of rock get blown everywhere.

“Clear?” Jill asks, bouncing to her feet and giving Jake a hand.

“Clear,” Jake says and they take off again.

When they get through a starship section, Jill calls for cover at two o’clock. Jake dives under a console and Jill grabs a bar and swings herself up onto it.

This time the explosion is followed by a small fire, but they ignore it as they keep moving.

They’re halfway up a ramp of logs when both of them curse and dive in different directions, Jill up and Jake down. Two of the logs simply fall…about ten meters to the ground below.

“Well,” Jill says, getting to her feet. “How’s your long jump?”

Jake studies it for a moment. “Think you can catch me if I don’t make it?”

“Probably,” Jill says, kneeling down. “Let’s find out. If not, I’m sorry in advance.”

“If not, you’re telling my mother you let me break something,” Jake says, backing up a little.

“For the love of God don’t miss,” Jill says, laughing.

Jake takes a breath, runs forward and leaps. He almost makes it, but comes short at the last moment. Jill grabs him as he starts to fall, arms locked around his torso, and falls over, taking him with her.

“All right, that actually worked,” Jake says, getting to his feet carefully and giving Jill a hand.

The interplay amuses Khan, but he is impressed by how they get through the course. He loses sight of them just before the end but sees Jill cartwheel off the final landing platform and slam a hammer against a gong sitting there. The crowd—which has again increased in size, Khan notes—erupts into cheers.

Jill turns to Jake and they high five, clasping hands for a moment. “So how’d we do?” Jake calls.

“Well,” the announcer says. “According to our judges here, your final score was 172.5. Which, in case you cared, is 5.5 points higher than your last score. Congratulations, you crazy kids, you’ve set a new record.”

Jill whoops and jumps on Jake in a hug. When she jumps down, she looks out at the crowd, clearly looking for Khan; when she finds him, she grins and starts getting to him. Jake follows, and Jill stops to talk to a couple people before she reaches Khan. “Okay, that was awesome,” she says and jumps on him; Khan was mostly expecting it and balances her, but was not quite expecting her to
kiss him as hard as she did. Not that he’s complaining, exactly, but from the cheers in the crowd they have more of an audience than he usually would like.

“Well done, lioness,” he murmurs when they separate, her forehead pressed against his. “Well done indeed.”

She grins. “It really was. Did you come up with any ideas?”

“I somewhat got distracted by talking to your captain,” Khan says.

“Mikael?” Jill looks, realizes he’s standing there, and blushes, dropping to the ground. “Hi, captain,” she says.

“You know, when I asked you if you’d met someone,” Mikael teases and pulls her into a hug. “Hell of a thing you did.”

“I didn’t do it alone,” Jill says, laughing.

“No, but you started it,” Mikael says. “So what’s this I hear about a wedding?”

“Oh, God,” Jill says with a laugh and a groan. “We’re getting married. It’s turning into a really big party.”

“Good,” Mikael says. “You deserve one.”

“You better be there,” Jill tells him.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Mikael says.

“Who took my place, captain?” Jill asks. “Who’s your XO now?”

“We got a new one,” Mikael says. “Her name’s Delia Akanbo, and she’s not you but she’s good.”

“I’ll meet her at the wedding,” Jill says. “Or before. We should all go out some night, senior staff.”

Mikael smiles. “I’ll let Foxglove know to set it up.”

“She’s comms,” Jill tells Khan. “Speaks not quite as many languages as you, maybe, but she knows a lot and she’s one of the folks who works to improve the universal translator. They keep refining it.”

“Does she know Uhura?” Khan asks.

“She does,” Jill says. “She and Nyota wrote a paper together, along with a couple other comms officers. They won an award for it, I think.”

“It earned them each a commendation, actually,” Mikael says. “She was the one to tell us what was going on with you, actually.”

“Wait, what did she find out?” Jill asks. “And when?”

“Before the Enterprise left for Qo’noS, Uhura got a message to Foxglove and I think one other comms officer, a really quick ‘this could get ugly’. Foxglove, because she’s not stupid and we had no idea what you were doing but we knew that if there was Starfleet trouble brewing on Qo’noS you were right there—“ Mikael pauses to take a breath. “We know you, Jill, and I knew when you told me you were moving to London you’d gotten into something big. I didn’t know what and I
trusted you to handle yourself, but you went radio silent and then Starfleet listed you as off-planet family emergency. So. We knew you were into something big, and when Lieutenant Uhura let Foxglove know her ship was headed to Qo’noS of all places, Foxglove started searching every news frequency and transmission she could find. We moved the ship, actually, to give her a better range, and after a few days she caught something in Klingon—which she was able to translate, and we learned all about the honorable pack of humans that won the right to negotiate for peace with the many adjective Klingon Empire, and we went out that night and got drunk in your honor because what the hell had you done?”

Jill buries her face in her hands, seemingly caught between mortification and laughter. Khan rests a hand on her back, between her shoulderblades, and feels her shaking. “Why does everyone say that?” she asks finally, raising her flushed face. “Why is everyone’s first reaction what did I do?”

“Because we know you, dearheart,” Mikael says. “And we all knew you were going to move the galaxy someday. Anyway. We didn’t get word of the Vengeance out there, and we had to make a run to New Vulcan and back, and by the time we got back the Enterprise had limped home and Uhura told Foxglove what had happened. Then we went out and got drunk again in your honor because now we knew what you’d done and by all that I hold holy, Jill, I don’t think you’re quite human.”

“Superior human,” Khan murmurs, remembering the phrase. It seems so useless, now.

“I was really, really determined,” Jill says. “And also, I had a lot of help.”

“Yes but you rather were the one to acquire that help,” Khan says. “Quite literally.”

Jill opens her mouth, then shuts it. “Can we move on past you getting drunk over me?” she asks plaintively.

Mikael laughs. “We had every intention of finding you and taking you out to get drunk with us, along with everyone else on this mad journey, but then we got sent out on what turned out to be a really long run to a few different places. We just got back a few days ago.”

“I did wonder why you hadn’t seen them,” Khan tells Jill.

“I did look, but yeah, you guys were shipped out,” Jill says. “Which was really disappointing, honestly.”

“For us as well,” Mikael says. “But we’re back on Earth for a while, we have quals. And we would very much like to take you and Khan and whoever else out to get drunk.”

“He’s not likely to get drunk, but what the hell, I have yet to be blitzed at one of these celebrations,” Jill says. “I guess it’s my turn.”

“Just don’t use forge water,” Khan says, all too mindful.

“No,” Jill says, laughing. “No, if I’m getting drunk with my crew it’s on vodka, and whatever else they order. But mostly vodka and vodka in things.”

“Foxglove will set it up,” Mikael says. “How many of you are there?”

“Figure max of seventeen,” Jill says. “I’m not sure we’ll all be there, though.”

“We will,” Khan says. “Do you honestly think any of our family would miss the chance to hear tales of your life in Starfleet?”
“Oh, God,” Jill says and turns to thump her head against Khan’s chest. “I’m definitely getting blitzed. But. Wait. We’re not doing that until we figure out what blew up on Jupiter.”

“I have thoughts about that,” Khan says. “I actually think it unlikely the ship or I were targets, but rather the intent some of the data on the station’s computers. That particular area on the station is what provides physical access to the ship, which means its computer banks are some of the most advanced.”

“I did say it was possible you weren’t the target,” Jill says. “But what about the faux-Ikan?”

“I think it worth following up on him but he must realize that our standing within Starfleet is remarkably high right now, and anyone or anything related to Marcus suspect,” Khan says. “There would be nothing to gain by targeting me, and quite a lot at risk.”

“Anyone intelligent who supported Marcus has either ducked and run for cover or outright resigned,” Mikael says. “Admiral Cathcart has been…let’s say energetic about clearing out anyone associated with some of Marcus’s programs.”

Khan finds it interesting that none of the Starfleet officers he knows or have spoken to will call Marcus by any kind of title. He’s fairly certain he’s seen a couple of the engineers on Jupiter spit at the mention of his name.

He’d been so lost in his own mind, his own battles, he hadn’t looked to see what Marcus had done to the humans he commanded. Hadn’t, in fact, thought them able to be useful in any way, let alone people who needed help.

Jill would have looked, he thinks, tightening his arm around her. Jill had looked.

“We probably should still dig into what they wanted, since if it’s after the ship we want to know what whoever it was wanted,” she says, looking up at him. “I have a ton of stuff to do today, so I’m leaving that to you, my dragon.”

“I have some thoughts on it,” Khan says. “What are you—do I want to know?”

“You really don’t,” Jill says, laughing. “But my bike arrived this morning so I am actually headed there next to get it, and then I’m going to break a few driving laws, and then I have stuff to do.”

“Just don’t break yourself,” Mikael says.

“I’m a good rider,” Jill protests. “Anyway. You go deal with explosions, I’m going to go get my bike and race Jake around, and we’ll meet up later.”

“Yes, dear,” Khan says, amused more than he should be. Rani did this to him, too; ordered him around like it was habit. He didn’t always listen to her.

He doesn’t always listen to Jill, for that matter, but this seems straightforward enough. “Do you need the transporter?” he asks.

“No, I’m staying around San Francisco,” Jill says. “Or close enough. Are you going back to Jupiter?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Don’t get blown up.” She leans up and kisses his cheek. “I’ll see you later, dragon.”
Khan kisses her back and she darts off, ponytail bobbing as she hurries. He looks at Mikael, though. “I do not need to return to Jupiter for a bit,” he says. “I do wish to speak with Admiral Cathcart, but I likely do not have to return to the station. Do you have time for a coffee?”

Mikael smiles. “I do, and I would like that,” he says. “There’s a shop Jill used to go to—has she taken you?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “A few weeks after we arrived in San Francisco she took me to a small shop with a blue sign and an illegible name.”

“That would be it,” Mikael says. “Best coffee anywhere around here, and easy enough to walk. Although you probably want a bit of privacy to call the admiral. There’s a private comm room on the way.”

Khan finds these surprisingly useful—instead of phone booths, which in his time had been on the way out, the Federation has installed small, one or two person public comm rooms throughout the city—London had them, as well. Much easier to step inside and have a five minute conversation than talk outside and either be overheard or misunderstood.

So on the way to the coffee shop he ducks into one of the small booths and calls Viola, relaying his thoughts in more detail than he’d given Jill. “I would agree,” she says after he finishes speaking. “We ran two scans of the computer network here after you went back to Earth, and we saw someone tried to access the system shortly before the explosion but failed. After the explosion we saw nothing out of the ordinary.”

“What area of the network were they trying to access?” Khan asks.

“The weapons database,” Viola says. “Which is related to you but not directly your project, so I think the odds of this person or persons being after you or your family is minimal. You’re all capable of protecting yourselves, however I would ask that you be a bit cautious until we identify who was responsible and take them into custody.”

“Yes, of course,” Khan says. “Also, Viola, what are you doing to this wedding?”

She laughs. “Your fiancée wanted a big party. I am ensuring that this will be a big party no one forgets anytime soon.”

Khan mutters a few choice curses in Arabic under his breath, but truthfully it’s just for show. He doesn’t need the big party; he needs Jill to marry him. She, however, both wants and completely deserves the big party, and Khan thinks it a fitting end to their time on Earth. Let them depart as victors, for once, feted and celebrated and sent on their way with good wishes and the option to return, should they ever want it.

Viola snorts at him. “You don’t mean any of that, and yes, I understood most of it.”

“You speak Arabic?” Khan asks.

“Jake taught me a few things,” she says. “Mostly involving how to curse someone.”

“It’s quite good for that,” Khan says. “Along with Russian.”

“Yes, he taught me some of those, too.” Viola smiles. “I’m on Earth today if you wish to come by. Are you going to Jupiter?”

“Likely at some point,” Khan says. “Is there anything you want me to look for or at in particular?”
“See if you can identify any other intrusions into the station’s network that we didn’t find,” Viola says. “Or anything about it that seems…off.”

Khan considers something. “In that case, I’m bringing an assistant,” he says. Andy should appreciate this. He’d take Magpie except even with Marcus gone and everything after it, she has little love for Starfleet.

“You have assistants?” Viola raises her eyebrows.

“I have a niece,” Khan says. “You’ve met Andy.”

“I have,” Viola says. “Now there is a brain I would love to see in Starfleet red.”

“No,” Khan says. “But I’m taking him to Jupiter with me to see if he sees anything I don’t.”

“If I think of anything else, I’ll send you a message,” Viola says. “Feel free to do the same.”

“I will,” Khan says. He says goodbye and disconnects the video, then exits the booth to find Mikael still waiting for him, sitting on a bench next to it. “Shall we?” he asks.

“Yes,” Mikael says and pushes to his feet.

“Are you from Earth?” Khan asks as they walk.

“I am not,” Mikael says. “Well, technically I am because I’m human, but I was born and raised on Vesh. It’s a colony planet that is mostly agrarian, and my family were farmers. I opted to join Starfleet instead of grow things.”

“How long have you been in at this point?” Khan asks.

“Twenty-three years,” Mikael says. “I started as a navigator. It turned out that was a good skill to have because I love Jill dearly but she does not have a good sense of direction.”

“Surely your ship had a dedicated helmsman,” Khan says.

“Oh, we did,” Mikael says. “It still was helpful that I had a background in it. We went some odd and far-flung locations, sometimes, and what the ship’s computer says is your best path there doesn’t always agree with reality.”

“How many times did you get lost?” Khan asks. “How do you get lost?”

“It’s difficult to get completely lost,” Mikael says. “At least within Federation mapped space, which is fairly big at this point. All Starfleet computers use the same cartographic coordinates and mapping, and are programmed to orient upon emerging from warp. Theoretically your ship emerges where you want it to, so this is easy. And there are kind of warp paths between planets to follow. But it is very possible for calculations to be ever-so-slightly off—or for your warp drive to take a few seconds more or less than programmed, and for you to emerge not quite where you want to be. This usually isn’t a big deal but, say, once we came out close enough to a black hole we almost tore the ship apart trying to get free. Two minutes at warp and we’d’ve been clear.”

“And when you leave Federation space, it becomes less certain altogether,” Khan says.

“Yes,” Mikael says. “But—okay, so there’s a difference between Federation mapped space and Federation-governed space. Federation mapped space is vast, because it adds each new species’ stellar cartography when they join, but I mean Earth had thousands of light-years mapped before
we had warp, so you see how it goes. There’s a vast, vast expanse of space mapped with stellar cartographic coordinates but nothing else, not even local names for planets. So wherever you’re going might not be Federation-governed space—yet—but it will likely have coordinates you can use to plot your course to wherever you are going.”

“How does one know when one has reached the frontier of Federation-encountered space?” Khan asks.

“You know, I’m honestly not sure,” Mikael says. “I mean, I know Starfleet keeps a list of all Federation planets, and all planets that haven’t met the Prime Directive yet, so my guess would be to see the farthest out and go from there.”

“Logical,” Khan says. “Did your ship ever come close to violating it?”

“There’s one planet that was a mistake,” Mikael says. “The western continent was colonized before they realized there was an indigenous species on the eastern continent that hadn’t achieved warp yet. So right now we’re being very careful and hoping no one notices anything.”

The levels—multiple, because really—of incompetence needed to colonize a settled planet make Khan dearly wish he had more time with the Federation, because oh, he could make it something glorious. That they achieve something close to it on the one hand—intergalactic peace is no small feat—while still allowing levels of basic incompetence pains him. It honestly does; he may have had his flaws as a ruler but at the least he demanded his people be competent.

He could have done so much more for them. But at this point, Khan thinks he’s done more than enough. The Federation can sort out its problem with incompetent staff without his aid. He has a galaxy to explore.

“How did Jill get assigned to your ship?” he asks instead, changing the subject.

“She had a lot of solid experience at that point, between the Wells and the Bradbury, and we needed a steady pilot,” Mikael says. “I read over her record and requested she be assigned to my ship when her deployment on the Bradbury ended, and then when my previous first officer left to captain his own ship I promoted her. I never regretted it. The brass tried to give her her own ship after Vulcan, but she turned it down.”

“She did mention that,” Khan says. “She intends to pilot our ship.”

“Couldn’t ask for better, and she’s got nerves of steel,” Mikael says. “Which you already know, but specifically as a pilot, nothing rattles her until everything’s over.”

“That seems to be a quality of hers,” Khan admits. “It’s a particularly useful one.”

“Yes, it is,” Mikael says.

At that point they reach the shop and go inside. Mikael orders a latte, and Khan his usual black coffee. He pays for them both without thinking about it and takes his go-cup from the barista.

The weather’s nice enough to sit outside, and frankly it gives Khan more room, so he says as much to Mikael and goes to get one of the small tables outside the shop. A few moments later Mikael comes out with a go-cup of his own and takes the other seat. “She’s one of a kind, our Jill,” he says. “But then again, so are you.”

Khan inclines his head; it’s an obvious fact. “In my original time, we considered ourselves superior,” he says, taking a sip of coffee. “Destined to lead by virtue of our genetics, because we
were so much *better* than anyone else.”

Mikael takes a sip of his own drink. “And now?”

“A small human woman tripped into me on the street and I subsequently reconsidered my view on superiority and what makes a superior human,” Khan says, but smiles a bit. “Along with most of my views on everything else.”

“What introduced you to the Jill Zone?” Mikael asks.

“My nephew,” Khan says.

“I…beg your pardon?” Mikael blinks. “You have a descendant?”

“It appears that if one traces back the family history, Andy is a descendant of my wife’s brother,” Khan says. “Something neither she nor I knew until we met.”

Mikael takes a careful sip and sets his cup down. “Okay, that I think wins for most improbable,” he says. “That is one hell of a discovery.”

“Yes, rather,” Khan says.

“Did you and your wife have children?” Mikael asks.

Khan shakes his head. “Part of the genetic engineering rendered most of us sterile,” he says. “But…it appears to be correctable with modern medicine, at least for the men.”

“I’m trying to envision Jill as a mom,” Mikael says after a moment.

“I think she would be a good one,” Khan says. “If somewhat chaotic.”

“Somewhat chaotic, that’s a good description for her,” Mikael says. “Chaotic good, really.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “That does rather describe her. I still don’t understand how she survived within Starfleet’s confines for so long.”

“Honestly sometimes I’m not sure either,” Mikael says. “But she wanted to serve. She wanted to fly but she also wanted to serve, so she made it work. Jill is like—you know how most people will push for something but eventually admit they won’t succeed at it? She never got the hang of the second part. She honestly believes that if she pushes hard enough she can do whatever she intended.”

“She averted a war,” Khan points out.

“This is the somewhat terrifying part about her,” Mikael says. “She always *does* what she sets out to do. If she wants something badly enough, she will make it happen.”

“I have learned this,” Khan says. “Believe me.”

“Well you’re marrying her, so I should hope so,” Mikael says.

Khan smiles a bit. He likes Mikael, at least on the surface, but he also can see why the man frustrated Jill at times. His attitude is simultaneously paternal and professional, and he can understand Jill’s irritation with that.

“There’s a lot of pride among my crew right now, because of her,” Mikael says. “We’re all
incredibly proud of what all of you did, but that it started with one of our own—we’re lucky we had her, and we’ll miss her.”

“Did you know her at the Academy?” Khan asks.

Mikael shakes his head. “I did some teaching over the years but not when she was a cadet.”

One of these days, if he has time, Khan wants to look up Jill’s instructors and find out what they thought of her. He just hasn’t had time to pursue it yet.

He also, at some point, wants to talk to her friends from gymnastics. It fascinates him that she refuses to talk about that part of her life, that she considers it closed. But it shaped her life for over thirteen years; Khan wants to know why she walked away and never looked back.

He expects he’ll meet her friends and possibly her coach at the wedding, although if he gets a moment with her friends before then he’ll take it. There are actually a few people he wishes to speak with before the wedding—among them, her biological parents. Khan realizes Jill isn’t close to them but he figures they should at least meet her mate before the actual wedding day. But then he also wishes to meet Jake’s brothers. He and Jill have both been to see Sarah once, since returning to Earth, and Jill has gone back a few more times but Khan has not.

That, however, is something he intends to remedy within the week. Sarah invited him for coffee and babka, specifying he come alone. She didn’t indicate whether or not he should have told Jill, and thus Khan has not so far. He isn’t quite sure what Sarah wants with him, or if she wants to pass something on for the wedding, but he’ll find out on Thursday.

His lioness is at once the most straightforward and most complicated person he’s ever met, and he wants to know how other people perceive her, what they think about her.

“Are you two getting any kind of a honeymoon?” Mikael asks, distracting Khan from his thoughts.

“I have no idea,” Khan says. “I told Jill she was in charge of absolutely everything wedding-related. She has so far been quite considerate about not telling me anything.”

“You don’t strike me as a man who fears death by flower arrangements,” Mikael says.

“I don’t, but neither have I any interest in how they are arranged or where they are placed. I told Jill that as long as our core family of seventeen were there, I would be happy. I have no desire to immerse myself in party details, and it makes her happy, so we have a fair arrangement.” Khan shrugs, taking a sip of coffee. “The party is essentially for her. She should be able to have exactly what she wants.”

“She’s marrying you, so isn’t it also for you?” Mikael asks.

“The wedding is for me,” Khan says softly. “For us, but because I insisted on it.” He smiles a bit. “I am old fashioned that way.”

“Marriage never goes out of fashion, really,” Mikael says. “My wife and I have been together twelve years now.”

“Does she serve on your ship?” Khan asks.

Mikael nods. “She’s my head engineer, and far smarter than I’ll ever be.”

“So is it her ship or your ship?” Khan asks.
“It’s our ship,” Mikael says. “I captain her, my Alania keeps her running. Who will your ship belong to?”

“All of us,” Khan says. “She will be our home.”

“But she’ll be yours first,” Mikael says.

“Yes,” Khan says simply.

Mikael smiles and takes a sip of his latte. “This should be one hell of a wedding.”

“So everyone tells me,” Khan says but has to smile.

“Was your first wedding similar?” Mikael asks. “I mean—if you don’t mind talking about it.”

Khan shakes his head. “Rani was Hindu, so our wedding and festivities were in accordance with Hindu customs. Quite different from what Jill is planning now.”

“I don’t know much about Hindu customs,” Mikael says. “Vesh was pretty much completely secular.”

“The Federation as a whole mostly is,” Khan agrees. “Hindu wedding traditions are, or were, extended affairs. Because I ruled areas of Earth that had a large Hindu population, namely India, it would have been an insult to them to not give my wife the ceremonies she was entitled to, by marrying me. So we compromised. We had a quiet, secret wedding with some of my family, and then we gave her extended family the expected everything.”

“Do you still have pictures of her from then?” Mikael asks softly.

“I do, actually,” Khan says. “But not with me or easily accessible. Jasmine had quite a large number of photos from our time that Andy was able to convert into readable formats for modern technology. So we have those, now, and she took literally hundreds of pictures of the wedding festivities.”

“I would love to see them, sometime, if you don’t mind,” Mikael says. “Alania and I are hobbyist anthropologists, and we like to learn about different types of wedding customs. We’re slowly building a database with every new culture we talk to.”

“I can tell you what I know, with the caveat that I was not personally Hindu,” Khan says.

“I would like that,” Mikael says. “Here, let me send my info to your link, and then you can let me know when would be convenient for you.”

Khan appreciates that. “You mentioned quals, earlier,” he says, taking out his link to let Mikael send over his information. “I presume you meant qualifying exams?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Mikael says. “We’re stationed on Earth while they give our ship its thorough maintenance and repair and we prove to Starfleet we’re good enough to be officers still. Generally takes about six weeks, but I’ve requested we stay on Earth for a while so we can attend the wedding.”

“Somehow I doubt you’ll have a problem with that request,” Khan says, thinking of Viola.

“It’s already been approved,” Mikael says amiably.

“We’re going to end up with a planet-wide spectacle, aren’t we,” Khan says, torn between horror
and laughter.

“I don’t know if it’ll go quite that far, but we’ll see,” Mikael says.

Khan has to smile a bit at that. “I must go find Andy and head to Jupiter,” he says, realizing he’s finished his coffee. “But I will let you know about the photos.”

“Thank you,” Mikael says, getting to his feet. “I’m glad we had a chance to talk.” He extends a hand and Khan takes it.

“As am I,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

I kind of realized belatedly that Jill probably shouldn’t get married without telling her parents and, y’know, letting them meet her fiance. See prior notes about story throwing things at me.
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

I'm not entirely certain what I'm looking for but I'm hoping I'll know it when I see it.

Chapter Notes

This chapter perhaps got a wee bit self-indulgent.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Andy proves amenable to going to Jupiter when Khan asks her, and uses her own transporter to find him. “We may, uncle, may want to consider upgrading these to one per person,” he says after he materializes. She has a bag slung crossbody, and pulled her hair back into a smooth braid. It’s interesting, Khan thinks, looking at him. With his hair pulled back, Andy looks both more and less masculine; the sharp planes of his cheekbones suggesting the former but the line of her jaw suggesting not. “Andy, may I ask you something that may be unforgivably rude?” he asks carefully.

Andy snorts. “At this point, uncle, I think we’re past that. What do you want to know?”

“Did you ever use hormones or other medical treatments?” Khan asks. “I know some of what existed when I was alive, but have little clue what technology is available now.”

“Not the question I was expecting,” Andy says after a moment.

“I am not asking, nor would I ask, to find out your birth sex because that is none of my business,” Khan says. “Simply that physically, you balance genders almost perfectly, and biologically I know that unlikely.”

“It is,” Andy says. “But it’s not impossible, and the answer is that I have always looked more or less exactly as I do now. My face was softer, as a child, but I always looked like neither gender, and I always felt like neither gender. I have used some medical tech for various reasons, but I’m not currently using anything and I haven’t for a very long time.” He tilts his head, studying Khan. “Do you actually want to know my birth sex?”

Khan shakes his head. “It isn’t my business, but I have one caveat.”

“What is that?” Andy asks.

“On the ship,” he says. “Maeve or Bishop should know in case they need to treat you medically for something.”


Khan nods, having somewhat expected that. Matthew knows, of course, and Maeve would be easier to approach than Bishop. “Bishop was always more interested in surgery, but Maeve enjoyed
emergency medicine,” he says. “I expect that both of them will act as medics on the ship but Maeve likely more so.”


“I should hope we would need you more for building new creations than repairing existing ones,” Khan says.

“Hope is not a strategy,” Andy says and Khan snorts out loud. “And yeah, obviously, but things break, so I get to fix them.”

“Of course you do,” Khan says. “Speaking of fixing, shall we to Jupiter?”

“Yes,” Andy says and they beam to the station.

The station personnel are used to Khan these days save a few new transfers, so he doesn’t merit a second look when they arrive. Andy, however, is a new face and earns a round of curiosity and one brave engineer coming over to them—the one who’d gone to fix the station, Khan remembers. The one who called it his station. “Sir?” he asks politely.

“This is my assistant Andy,” Khan says. “He will need access to the physical computer banks that were damaged. You did repair her by now, I should think.”

The engineer looks slightly offended that Khan would question it. “Of course we did, sir,” he says. “We had her fixed within hours. Well, we had the breach sealed and then repaired within hours, enough that the section of the station is safe to visit, but a full repair is pending some parts that won’t be delivered until next Tuesday.”

“I would really love to hear how you repaired it and how that’s structured,” Andy says. “On top of the computer banks. I’m Andy, and you are?”

“Lieutenant Crusher, sir,” he says. “I can escort you down there and explain. May I ask what you’re looking for?”

“I’m not entirely certain but I’m hoping I’ll know it when I see it,” Andy says with a quick grin. Crusher grins back.

“This way, sir,” he says, but glances at Khan. “Ah, by your leave?”

“I rather think I don’t need a guide, Lieutenant,” Khan says but smiles. “Andy, let me know if you need anything or discover anything interesting.”

She smiles. “Likewise, uncle.”

That earns a few second looks and Khan ignores them all although he’ll ask Andy later what was intended by that. He watches her and Crusher head off and turns in the other direction to head for the ship’s computer command center.

Khan thinks there are advantages and disadvantages to the way the station computer network is constructed. The one overall system has advantages, but he finds it less flexible and reactive to outside intrusions than a network comprised of multiple smaller networks linked to each other. However, no one asked his opinion on station network design or security and he has thus far declined to give it.

He and Katsuro, however, have designed their ship’s network differently, with the ability to
separate sections if necessary—specifically, they gave themselves the ability to isolate the life support systems, and the ship’s engines and warp drive. Within that, though, they have the ability to isolate the warp drive.

However, the advantage to the station’s network as designed is that it’s easier to run forensics on and easier to maintain.

So he takes himself to the command center and starts calling up queries and writing his own. He sees the failed intrusion, and then the system reset as parts of the network went abruptly offline and power was diverted to emergency resources. Frustratingly, it results in seconds of missing data here and there, and he almost misses the whisper. But—there. A copy of a file that didn’t have or need a copy.

When he digs in on it, the damn thing impresses him in its subtlety. It just sits, passively collecting data. But it doesn’t actually copy anything until it’s being accessed…at which point it would drain quite a lot of data and cause a network-wide slowdown.

Khan presumes that process can be triggered remotely but has no wish to find out by example. However, extracting it proves to be more difficult than he anticipated—it wove itself quite a web, and he has to unravel each thread. Fortunately the web has a pattern and he can unravel more quickly as he goes, until he has the file itself isolated. He’ll run deeper forensics on it later, and possibly enlist Matthew and Magpie’s assistance. This is clever, subtle work, and not something Khan usually associates with Starfleet methods.

For now, he copies it to a memory chip and wipes every trace of it from the station’s systems. The chip goes in its pocket on his shirt collar, and he erases all traces of his work from the station’s systems out of habit even though he’s done nothing requiring deletion.

Old habits die hard. Then again, so does he.

He hadn’t told Jill that the elder Spock had asked him if he’d known someone, a woman. Khan hadn’t been familiar with the name and had indicated as such, but had asked Spock if he’d known Jill. He hadn’t gotten any kind of recognition, which frankly didn’t surprise him.

Khan believes in karma as much as he believes in any spiritual or cosmic force, and he wonders often what karmic balance his counterpart incurred to cause this much pain and this much reward. They lost five dozen. They gained their freedom, averted a war, and Khan found his lioness.

And a nephew, he adds, coming into sight of Andy and Crusher. Well, sort of. He sees Crusher, but half of Andy disappears inside the computer bank and Khan can only see her legs and feet. “What exactly are you doing in there?” he asks since neither Andy nor Crusher appear to be talking.

“Looking for something,” Andy answers, muffled by the computers. “Most of the storage in these systems is local because no one wanted it to be available on a wider network. But I’m not finding the storage crystals I should be and so I’m looking for the evidence they were destroyed in the blast.”

“If you don’t find it, what conclusion would you draw?” Crusher asks.

“I’m not really sure because that would be a hell of a trick, to transport out specific memory crystals of a specific shielded computer bank,” Andy says. “And I’d really like to meet whoever could do it, because I’m pretty sure I couldn’t. But—oh there you are. Oh, well, now that’s clever design. Who designed these computers?”
“We can look it up later,” Khan says, amused. “What is the design?”

“The memory crystals flipped into secure storage,” Andy says. “It’s the equivalent of storing your hard drive in the freezer. It detected a shock to the system and protected the data.”

“Can you extract them now, though?” Khan asks.

“Well I’m attempting to but you keep asking questions,” Andy says politely and Khan laughs. A moment later, though, Andy makes a questioning noise. “How many crystals are usually in one of these banks?”

“Six,” Khan says. “How many have you found?”

“Seven,” Andy says. “I thought it was six, too, which is why I asked. But it’s a crystal in storage that doesn’t have a corresponding slot in the computer frame. So I think it’s a backup in case something fails. I’m going to take it out anyway, but if I’m right it’s a blank crystal.”

“Sir—remind me again where you went to school?” Crusher asks.

“I didn’t,” Andy says. “I never graduated secondary school let alone college or university. I like hardware.”

Crusher looks somewhat gobsmacked by this, and Khan smiles faintly. “Andy is honestly a genius,” he says. “I don’t use that word lightly.”

“No, sir,” Crusher says, still looking a bit dumbfounded.

“Could one of you please look in my bag for a tool with a blue handle?” Andy asks. “It’s like a pair of tweezers only a little bigger. And there should be a case with compartments near it.”

Khan picks up Andy’s bag and finds the tool and the case easily enough, passing both to him through the hole in the console. “Thank you,” Andy says, wriggling farther back into the computer. “These don’t want to come out easily, because they’re not designed to, so this will take a bit of effort.”

“Sir, may I ask you a question?” Crusher asks Khan a moment later.

He gestures for Crusher to go ahead. “Forgive me if I’m out of line, sir, but I thought you were from the early 21st century,” Crusher says. “How do you have a relative from this time?”

“I was married, once,” Khan says, not looking at him directly. “Andy is descended from my wife’s brother.”

“That’s…a bit of fortune smiling on you, isn’t it, sir,” Crusher says.

Khan smiles a bit. “Yes, essentially. Was your father the first generation of your family in Starfleet?”

“Kind of, sir,” Crusher says. “My father joined Starfleet after his older brother did. Unfortunately my uncle was assigned to a ship that didn’t survive Vulcan. My father retired after that.”

Khan touches his fist to his heart. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, sir,” Crusher says. “Starfleet as a whole lost a lot of talented people that day, and there’s no longer a planet where Vulcan used to be.”
“Yes,” Khan murmurs. “And had none of that happened, I would likely not be here now.”

“Life is strange,” Andy says, wriggling out of the console. “I have six chips, the ones for storage, but the one I think is a backup is permanently installed in there and to get it out I’d have to break it. I could probably repair it after but I’d rather not take the chance.”

“We likely do not need it,” Khan says. “For that matter, I am uncertain we will recover any usable forensics from these.”

“We may not but I’m going to try,” Andy says, standing up and brushing himself off. “Although I would guess you likely don’t want the contents of these chips going off-station so is there a lab I can use?”

“Yes, sir,” Crusher says. “Will you be joining us, sir?” he asks, turning to Khan.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Andy will need credentials to access anything in the system, and I likely have higher clearance than you do.”

Crusher grins. “Yes, sir, but I’m a network admin. I may technically not be allowed to look…”

Khan snorts. “We’ll just use mine, Lieutenant. Which lab is open?”

“The fourth level, sir,” Crusher says.

They go to the fourth level and run three layers of forensics on the chips, each individually, but find nothing to indicate the data was compromised or even accessed. Khan falls into old working habits with Andy and somewhat leaves Crusher out by accident, but it does go smoothly between them.

“I would very much like a tour of the station, if we have time,” Andy says when they decide to stop and store the crystals. She looks at Khan, but in truth he expected it.

“We have time,” he says. “And you can get yourself back to Earth without me, should I need to leave. I trust you don’t need my holding your hand.”

Andy snorts. “I didn’t even like holding my mother’s hand when I was a kid,” he says. “Although to be fair she was usually mad at me and held my hand too tight.”

“Ouch,” Crusher says.

“My mother and I had a complicated relationship,” Andy says. “Let’s move on. Where do we start with the tour?”


“Let’s go, then,” Andy says, smiling. It seems to relax Crusher and he gestures, heading for the lifts. Andy goes with him, and Khan follows at a short distance but before he gets to the lifts his comm link buzzes.

“Yes,” he says briefly, answering.

“If you want to talk to Jill’s Academy advisor, he’s around and available now,” Travis says briskly. “He’s in the main academic building, first sub-level, office T1879.”

Khan looks at the link for a moment. “How the devil did you know I wanted to talk to him?” he asks after a moment.
“I have my ways, darling, and I perhaps anticipated you wanting to speak with him,” Travis says. “It’s what I do.”

“Clearly,” Khan says. “I appreciate you letting me know. I’ll be there shortly.”

He lets Andy and Crusher know he’s returning to Earth, then sets his transporter for Starfleet Academy and takes himself to San Francisco.

When he approaches the door in question he sees a collection of physical books, some old enough to be from Khan’s original time. Is that—he steps forward, looking at a volume on one of the guest chairs. “Is that the original German?” he asks, picking the book up carefully.

“It is, but my German’s shit so it’s on the back burner until I can find a good translator,” a gruff voice says. Khan turns to his right and sees a scruffy redhead sitting behind a desk, left arm folded close to his chest. “ Couldn’t resist picking it up, though, it was a good bargain.”

“I haven’t seen this book in three centuries,” Khan says, turning a page. “I can translate it, if you give me a few hours.”

“I’ll think about it,” the redhead says. “Chris Keaton. Jill was my advisee for four years, poor bastard. Have a seat, if you can.”

One guest chair is covered with books; the other has a clutter of tablets, and Khan gathers those and sets them on the one clear spot of shelf before turning the chair around to straddle it. He already likes Keaton; this is the office of a born academic, and anyone who prefers physical books in this day of digital media has Khan’s appreciation immediately. He does wonder what is wrong with Keaton’s arm, though.

“Some shit still can’t be fixed,” Keaton says, apparently seeing Khan’s glance to his arm. “Cerebral palsy is one of them. Lucky me. But you got wings so I’m not sure which of us bastards got the worse end of the deal.”

Khan snorts. “Depends rather on how you view the outcome, I should think. What do you teach?”

Keaton grins, surprisingly bright and a little wicked. “Philosophy.”

“I need to introduce you to my brother Konstantin,” Khan says. “But tell me about Jill first.”

“What do you want to know about her?” Keaton asks.

“Why was she your advisee?” Khan asks.

“Randomly assigned,” Keaton says. “Entering first year cadets get assigned an academic advisor, and at the end of their first year can choose to request a different advisor or stay with their current one for the rest of their academic career. I can only presume she’s a fucking masochist because she signed on for three more years of my charming presence.”

Khan studies him for a moment. “How many of your original advisees stay on? And how many try to get assigned to you?”

Keaton snorts. “About forty percent of my advisees flee me before the end of the year. Of the ones that remain, about sixty percent of them stay with me and the rest depart for parts unknown. I don’t have numbers on who tries to get assigned to me, just that I can’t take everyone.”

This doesn’t surprise Khan. Keaton seems the kind of professor students would either love or hate,
with very little indifference. “Who takes your courses?” he asks. “Did she?”

“I teach a class on medical ethics that’s required for any cadets in that track,” Keaton says. “I teach a class on the philosophy of command that’s required for cadets who want to go command track, and I teach a seminar beyond that for cadets who want more depth to that topic. Each class is one semester, and I teach one other class that changes depending on my mood. Jill, because she’s a glutton for punishment, took my philosophy class, the seminar, and then the wild card course which that semester was on I think ethics in diplomacy.” He reaches for a travel mug with his good hand and takes a sip from it.

“What was she like as a student?” Khan asks.

“Well she wasn’t scared of me, so that gave her a bonus,” Keaton says. “She wasn’t stupid, mostly. Occasionally she passed for halfway intelligent. She didn’t hesitate to argue her point, even if she was wrong. Stubborn idiot, really, but she was stubborn enough I figured she’d either change the world or die trying.”

“She didn’t die,” Khan says softly.

“No shit,” Keaton says. “Aren’t you supposed to be a genius? Because my kid can do better than that one.”

“Did you act as a counselor, as well as an academic advisor?” Khan asks, ignoring the gibe. In truth he feels more at home than he ever has on the Academy campus; he has always respected academics and gotten along well with them.

“That is my unfortunate role, yes,” Keaton asks. “Poor bastards have to put up with my version of it.”

“The cadet who hit her,” Khan says. “What did she say to you?”

Keaton studies him for a moment. “You really want to marry her,” he says.

“I am going to marry her,” Khan says simply.

Keaton nods, thinking it over. “Close the door,” he says quietly.

Khan gets up and shuts it, his wings almost knocking over a pile of books on his way back to his seat. “Tell me,” he says quietly.

“He hit her twice,” Keaton states. “He hit her the first time when she wouldn’t fuck him, and bruised a rib. Second time, they’d both had a few drinks and she got angry and hit back.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” Khan asks steadily.

“Yeah,” Keaton says. “He was killed about ten years back. He’d attempted to assault someone who fought back.”

Khan regrets his death only because he’d like to kill the bastard, but at least he’s dead.

Keaton takes another sip from his mug. “Sometimes you get students that don’t fit in Starfleet,” he says. “I sure as fuck didn’t. I was the first gimp to make it through, and they didn’t make it easy. She didn’t fit, but she made it work.”

“Why do you say she didn’t fit?” Khan asks.
“You’re marrying her and you ask me that,” Keaton says, giving him a look. “I’m beginning to wonder what all is actually better about you.”

“I want to know how you saw her, what you thought of her,” Khan says patiently. “You would know, I should think, what she was like as a cadet, and a potentially new officer. I would appreciate your thoughts.”

Keaton sets his mug down carefully. “Starfleet has a mold,” he says. “If you fit, or mostly, you’ll do fine. If, say, you have a fairly useless arm and an unreliable leg, you end up doing a lot of fighting to prove you can be there. Or, for another example, if you’re the size of an instructor’s kid and have a bit too much impatience for stupid rules, you end up doing a lot of pushing just to hold your place. Don’t get me wrong, Firecracker was and is really fucking good at pushing, but eventually it gets tiring.”

“Firecracker?” Khan asks, but he smiles.

“Easier than her last name and more accurate,” Keaton says. “What’s she to you?”

Without thinking, Khan touches his heart. “My lioness,” he says.

Keaton grins again. “Except lions usually have a pride of those.”

“You asked what she was to me, not I to her,” Khan says. “She is my lioness, but she calls me her dragon, and those mate for life.”

“It’s certainly better than what we came up with,” Keaton says. “The asshole I married and I, that is.”

“What was that?” Khan asks.

Keaton shrugs. “He started calling me goatfucker so I started calling him the goat. We’ve stuck with it for over twenty years.”

“And children?” Khan asks.

“Twins, fuck help us,” Keaton says. “You want them?”

“Yours? No,” Khan says because he sees that opening and won’t take the bait. “Mine and Jill’s? She does.”

“Yeah, but do you?” Keaton asks.

“I never thought it possible,” Khan says. “Now… I would at least like us to find a baseline of normal before we introduce children into the equation.”

“That’s not stupid, all right, you may be slightly redeeming yourself from oblivious moron here,” Keaton says cheerfully.

“My thanks,” Khan says dryly.

Keaton laughs, absently massaging his left hand with his right. “Some cadets come through and you know they’re intellectual morons. The vast majority come through and they’re Starfleet mold, so perfectly competent at the technical and not all that fucking smart about why this all matters. Which has been the fucking depressing trend for a while. A few come through and they’re so patently unqualified for anything you write letters to their advisers and advise them to tell their
“Who else was?” Khan asks.

“Kirk,” Keaton says. “And his CMO, McCoy. Honestly I figured McCoy would find the cure to death or something, but he says he hasn’t had need to find it.”

“McCoy appears to be dating my sister,” Khan says, finding it ironic on so many levels. “She has spent much of her time on Earth working at Starfleet Medical in their emergency department, and they met.”

“Well, that’s a short-lived or long-distance relationship in the making,” Keaton says and Khan nods.

“What was she like, when she first got here?” he asks.

“Fearless,” Keaton says. “Which is not a stupid thing to be if you’re less than 1.5 meters around here. But she knew from the start it was going to get treated as a joke thing, former Olympian enrolls at the Academy and all, so she was determined to be twice as good as everyone else. So she was, because Firecracker does that shit.”


“You can ask whatever the fuck you want, doesn’t mean I’ll answer,” Keaton says.

“Are there truly no effective treatments for CP?” Khan asks. “I would have thought otherwise.”

“The damage happens at birth but isn’t detectable, and by the time it becomes evident what the problem is you can’t correct most of it,” Keaton says, sounding like he’s given this explanation many times. “There are some somewhat effective treatments for muscle spasms, but mostly the fucking quacks can’t fix what was never there to begin with.” He shifts slightly in his seat and reaches for his mug again. “I’m a gimp in a society that is fortunately designed to be accessible to the less mobile. You have fucking wings. How the fuck do you manage that in daily life?”

“With years of practice,” Khan says. “Before that, with a lot of knocking things over and improvised shirts.”

“Are they worth it?” Keaton asks. “Would you give them up if you could?”

Khan shakes his head. “They are part of me,” he says. “To give them up would be giving up part of myself. For all that I often find myself at a logistical or societal disadvantage, they have proven to be invaluable in the past and I expect they will again.”

“Are they why she stopped you?” Keaton asks. “She told me she did—she did come by once after you returned triumphantly in secret or some shit. But she didn’t say why.”

“I asked her that, and she said my wings were beautiful but not the reason she was inviting me to dinner,” Khan says. “I found out later the reason was because she decided I looked sad and wanted to fix it, or at least find out why.”

“That’s about Firecracker in a nutshell,” Keaton says.

Khan smiles, looking at the books on the chair next to him. “Yes, rather.” The top two volumes he...
doesn’t know, but the third…”Where on Earth did you get this?” he asks, carefully moving books to pick up the third, a plain navy volume imprinted in silver with Cyrillic. It’s in remarkably good shape, Khan thinks, but where did Keaton get it?

“The Academy acquired it as part of a deal with Russia,” Keaton says. “I, as ranking philosophy professor—there are a grand total of three of us—claimed it. I haven’t looked at it in enough detail to fully understand what it is, but I’m going on sabbatical next year and intend to find out.”

“It’s a proposal for an Earth-based government, with seven different capitals and regional governments, various sub-governments under that, and so on. I forget exactly how much detail he went into but he split the book between the proposal and the explanation of why the proposal would work.” Khan turns a page carefully. “But he only printed a small run of the book, perhaps a hundred copies, and as far as I knew it was never reprinted.”

“Who the fuck is he?” Keaton asks with actually more patience than Khan expected.

He looks up, smiling. “I said I needed to introduce you to my brother Konstantin,” he says. “He wrote this.”

Keaton thumps his head back against his chair. “And once again the Jill Zone works without her presence,” he says. “Fucking Christ, Firecracker.”

“What else has it done to you?” Khan asks.

“I’m not telling that story unless I’m drunk,” Keaton says firmly. “Well, fuck. All right, introduce me, but aren’t you fucks shipping out in a few months?”

“Yes, so talk quickly,” Khan says.

Keaton snorts. “Invite him over, so I can meet him and then you can go do something else,” he says. “Unless he’s busy doing whatever superhumans do in their off time.”

“I’m not quite sure, but let me call him,” Khan says, taking out his link. Konstantin answers quickly and readily agrees to come meet Keaton once he hears about the book. Khan gives him coordinates to the building and tells him the office number, and disconnects.

It’s not until he hangs up that he realizes he was using Russian the whole time. “Habit, my apologies,” he says.

Keaton shrugs. “So long as he speaks English.”

“He does, yes,” Khan says, amused. “We all do.”

A few moments later someone knocks on the door. “Yeah, come on in,” Keaton calls and Konstantin opens the door.

With the three of them in the office it’s remarkably crowded, Khan thinks, and his getting out without overturning books will be interesting. Keaton, however, looks up at Konstantin, and after a moment he grins, sharp and wicked. “Your partner must be a very happy person,” he says.

Konstantin roars with laughter. “My Katya,” he says, beaming. “And yes, she is. Forty-four years together and never a night apart.”

“Yes, I’m really not surprised,” Keaton says. “This is a first. Usually the authors I read are long since dead.”
“To be fair in all likelihood I should be as well,” Konstantin says. “But life is a strange thing, and so here we are and you have one of my books.”

“You wrote more than one?” Keaton asks.

“I published essays,” Konstantin says. “And as Katya’s consort, I wrote explanations of her judgments, of the laws she wished to enact. These things were eventually compiled into four volumes. I wrote two more individual books, on diplomacy and nature conservancy, and those were published although I doubt they ever reached much of an audience. And then I wrote a book on a proposed system for government based on what we had started and what we wished to continue, but I wrote that as a vanity project and only published so many volumes. So I am curious how this one came into your possession.”

“Through a bargain with the Russian government,” Keaton says. “Beyond that I have no fucking idea of the details.”

“Did you mark them, Kostenka?” Khan asks.

Konstantin shakes his head. “No, I thought that a bit of vanity too much.”

“I wonder if any of your volumes were found and put into digital form,” Keaton says. “I can look.”

“I will leave you two to it, then,” Khan says. He and Konstantin execute a very careful dance to get Konstantin to the open seat and Khan to the door without knocking anything over.

Twice, he thinks as he leaves. She never told him that, and he won’t betray Keaton’s confidence by telling her he knows. He understands the impulse, why she keeps it silent, but wishes she would have trusted him enough, at least.

Perhaps in future they can revisit it. For now—Khan looks at the time and decides to go see Viola and update her--and find out what else she has added to the wedding.

Chapter End Notes

1. Crusher is in homage to TNG, which was *my* series growing up, but is not necessarily meant to be Wesley or whoever or even related to him.
2. Chris Keaton is a favored character of mine who seemed rather perfect for Jill’s advisor. I hope you liked him.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

We somewhat got derailed, and I still want that.

Chapter Notes

Slightly shorter than usual chapter here but I think it's complete in itself. Also it took bloody forever to write so I decided to post what I'd completed.

By Wednesday, Khan’s handed off investigation of the file to both Starfleet and Matthew and Magpie, relatively certain the latter pair will figure it out more quickly but he supposes they’ll see. Initial investigation on his part pointed them at Vulcan technology, which Khan admits makes sense given the data collection operation and way it organized everything. But how Vulcan secret programs ended up hacking into Starfleet security, Khan doesn’t know and hasn’t honestly got time to find out himself.

It is, however, exactly the sort of thing Matthew thrives on, and Khan leaves him to it, pleased that he still has managed to keep his day clear to meet with Sarah the next day at ten. He might, possibly, have time to get in a quick flight with Jill before sunset, presuming she’s around.

But she doesn’t answer her link when Khan calls her; it goes directly to mail, indicating she doesn’t have it turned on. That worries him, and he heads for their suite, hoping perhaps she’s either there or has left him a clue.

“Hi,” she says when he opens the door. “Are you busy tomorrow afternoon at, like, fourteen hundred? Could you not be?” She looks as though she’s been pacing, and wears her favored in-suite outfit of knee-length yoga pants and a tank top, hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“If I use the transporter I can not be busy,” Khan says. “What is going on?”

Jill takes a deep breath and blows it out in a rush. “My parents are in town. Well, are getting to town tomorrow morning. Not Eema and Abba, my birth parents. The ones you have opinions about.”

“I do,” Khan says neutrally. “But I should think myself capable of being polite to my lioness’s family.”

“I know,” Jill says, rubbing her hands over her face. “I know, and I’m not—I’m not worried about you causing a scene. I’m not actually worried about anyone causing a scene because we’re meeting them at first in the small sitting room available on our floor, because we realized that we might get too many public eyes so Travis kindly arranged to have us catered afternoon tea and we’re meeting here. I’m just…I know you have opinions about them and I just do not want to have that discussion, dragon. They’re my parents, and for whatever it’s worth they did their best for me. I
will always be grateful that they gave me the opportunities I needed in order to reach the Olympics, and later the Academy. I love them and I’m not really going to miss them much, but I do want to keep in touch as best we can.”

“I know you do,” Khan says, letting his wings relax a bit in hopes it eases Jill’s tension. “And I agree that by some measures they did an excellent job of allowing you to find your identity and achieve your goals. I just think they did not provide you with nearly enough emotional support. Tell me something. Did you have nightmares at the Olympics?”

“No,” Jill says softly. “I slept like a log the nights before I competed, and after that I didn’t really sleep through the night because I was busy playing poker or having sex or hanging out while one of the above was going on. But I slept fine when I did sleep. I didn’t question it, just thanked providence for my good fortune.”

“Because the professional took over,” Khan says. “Your parents raised a professional gymnast with no concept of how to be a vulnerable human being, one with emotions in need of expression.”

“I don’t want to have this discussion, dragon,” Jill says. “Not when we’re seeing them tomorrow. Just…they’ll be happy for us, if a bit confused, and let’s just let them be happy for us and be done with it.”

“It’s not a discussion, lioness, just a statement of fact,” Khan says quietly. “It will be there when you are ready to deal with it, or not. But regardless, I would not argue with you in front of your parents. You are my mate, and we present a united front. I follow your lead, in this.”

He holds out his hands, thinking she’s finally settled enough, and Jill walks over to him, wrapping her arms around his waist and laying her head over his heart. He wraps his own arms and wings around her and says nothing.

Rani did this for him; now he does it for Jill. He thinks his former wife would appreciate that. Whatever threads of dreams and fate weave through their family, they don’t seem to be enough to allow Rani to talk to Jill directly. Khan’s grateful for that, on the whole, but he does think the two women would likely get along far too well for his comfort.

But it would please Rani, to know her failsafe technique with him works so well with Jill.

Khan slides his hands over Jill’s back, heavy and soothing, nails scratching enough that she sighs in pleasure. He feels her relax, tension flowing out of her until her breath slows and steadies, her heart settles to its usual slow pace, and she pulls back from him slightly to look up at him. “I did call them, when we got back,” she says. “I gave them the brief summary, kind of, and they were appropriately horrified and awed and all that, and then I told Viola to send someone appropriate to brief them on whatever they were actually allowed to know, just so long as I knew what that was. So Starfleet sent a suitably be-medaled captain—not mine—and a promising lieutenant to my parents’ house, and first started by promising I was alive, which they hadn’t actually doubted until then so well done Starfleet.”

Khan laughs. “To be fair, I doubt they usually go to families where the officer is alive.”

“Yeah, that’s what they said,” Jill says. “So they called me, because my dad was like ‘Why are you telling us she’s alive? Is this supposed to be news?’ and long story short they called me to verify I was among the living and caught me while I was out running, so we quickly verified I was alive, I explained the nice officers were there to explain what had happened while I’d been away, I’d be in touch, and hung up. I went back to my run, and that was that. Travis was in touch with them a few times over wedding stuff and apparently conveyed the impression that I was super busy
working on confidential Starfleet business and so he would happily convey messages back and forth. My love for Travis grows daily and I really wish we could take him on the ship except he said his powers don’t extend beyond Earth.”

“I don’t think our ship is large enough to contain him and his ego,” Khan says and Jill giggles.

“But he’s honestly worth it. He does the thing where you wanted something and had it down in the corner of your brain to look into, and you didn’t say anything, and then he calls you and tells you it’s arranged and go here. He has to have done that for you at least once, am I right?”

“You are correct,” Khan admits. “What did he do for you in this regard?”

“He put me in touch with a guy who does custom bike leathers,” Jill says. “Because I’m too small really for anything off the rack, plus this may be sacrilege but there are synthetics out there now that look and feel exactly like leather but are stronger and waterproof and I wanted them. So I had it in my head to go looking, and then he called me and told me there was a specific shop in Manhattan that did what I wanted, they were expecting me, and here was the address. This was like six weeks ago, maybe longer. I took the transporter to go visit Eema and stopped in the store, and they fit me for everything including fantastic boots—I sent Jasmine back there for boots—and didn’t actually charge me a damn thing because I was a hero or some shit. I argued back, for about ten minutes, finally gave up and asked them for what the total would have been so I could donate it to the survivors’ fund. So then we had to have a drink because the guy’s husband had been at Vulcan, on the Bradbury. Anyway, it took a while to get the not-quite-leathers but they arrived the day after my bike did.”

“I would quite like to see this,” Khan says and Jill laughs more.

“Yeah, but not tonight, dragon, I’m comfortable and I don’t want to get dressed up. What’d he do for you?”

“He arranged for me to speak with your Academy advisor,” Khan says carefully, wondering how she’ll take it.

“With Chris? Oh, dear. I’m sorry. Whatever he said, I’m sorry.” Jill laughs, though. “Not really though because Chris is awesome.”

“He reminded me of academics I have known in the past,” Khan admits. “He seems the kind of professor to be either loved or reviled.”

“He absolutely is,” Jill says. “He pulls no punches and he spares no one, and if you have a flawed argument he will tear it apart after inviting the class to figure out where you went wrong. Although he’ll give you credit for arguing, and he will always respect someone who talks back to him even if he calls them a dumbass turning the red uniform into a signal flare of stupid.”

“The Academy allows him to talk this way to cadets?” Khan asks, more surprised by that than the insult.

“One, he has tenure,” Jill says. “Two, his argument is that if cadets can’t stand up to one unfriendly professor they sure as shit won’t be able to stand up to anything out in space, like Klingons or Romulans, and to that end he has a really good point. He only gets inflicted on upperclassmen. The only freshmen who get him are assigned as his advisees, like I was.”

“You liked him enough to stay with him,” Khan says.

“I did, because the first time I met him, it was a private advising thing, and I went to his office and
stayed standing because there was nowhere to sit. And he looked at me, in my dashing red uniform, all not quite 1.5 meters of me, and he said nothing for a moment, and I waited, and finally he said ‘What the fuck are you trying to prove by being here and are you going to kill yourself by doing it?’” Jill laughs at the memory. “I laughed then, too, and said I wanted to fly and Starfleet was the fastest way into space, and I already knew I was going to have to be twice as good just to hold my place, and I wanted more than that. And he just studied me for a moment, and I had this moment of terror that he’d seen my escapades as a thief or something, and then he laughed, and said ‘You might do it and I want to be around to see the aftermath. All right, Firecracker, let’s talk about how to make this work for you.’ After that I was sold.”

“I can see why,” Khan says, relaxing his wings a bit, enough that they mostly drape around Jill but no longer enfold her. “He had a book Konstantin wrote, and blamed the Jill Zone. Again. What happened the first time?”

“Nope,” Jill says, shaking her head. “I gave him my word I would not tell another soul living or dead. It’s his coincidence, he decides how to handle it. Anyway. Are you headed to Jupiter tomorrow morning? Is that why you need the transporter?”


“That’s not ominous or anything,” Jill says, but she laughs. “Do let me know what happens, and oh man, I’m sorry you have to go from one set of parents to the other in the same day.”

“I actually think that will be an interesting comparison,” Khan admits. “What do you want to do with our evening, lioness? I had thought we might go flying.”

“I will never turn that down and you know it,” Jill says. “Except I don’t want to get dressed, I really don’t, and I’m going to get cold. But. Flying. Also I had other thoughts.”

“What were your other thoughts?” Khan asks, intrigued by the flush in her cheeks.

“The night of the explosion,” Jill says, her voice steady even if she bluses. “We somewhat got derailed from what I had intended, and I still want that. If you do.”

“I do,” Khan murmurs, brushing a curl back from her face. She has an appointment Friday to get her hair cut, he knows, and he’s not thrilled but it’s also not his decision and practicality would suggest she have less hair. Still, he’ll miss it.

She smiles, turning her face to kiss his palm. “I have to be honest, dragon, I’m asking because I want this, tonight.”

“Tell me why,” Khan says, laying his hand against her cheek.

“Because tomorrow you’re meeting with my mom and probably my dad, and I have zero idea what that’s about,” Jill says. “And then you and I are meeting with my birth parents, and that’s going to be awkward and sometimes I still get a little insecure that we’re in this together and so I would very much like to remind both of us that you’re my dragon before parental onslaught happens tomorrow.”

He understands completely, and rather than try to answer her verbally Khan leans down and kisses his lioness, catching her easily when she jumps on him. “Okay but seriously shower, I want one and you need one,” Jill says when they separate, breathing hard. “Before we get too involved.”

“Yes,” Khan says, carrying her to the bathroom. Jill punches him in the shoulder, but lightly.
“I did tell you not to carry me around randomly,” she says, but it’s an irritated grumble instead of actual anger.

“I told you I would refrain in public,” Khan reminds her.

“You drive me nuts,” Jill says, laughing. “But I love you anyway. Maybe because of it.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says, smiling. They reach the bathroom and he sets her down, letting her undress and start the water while he deals with his own clothes. “To be fair, lioness, you jumped on me.”

“Okay you have a point,” Jill says, giggling. “I just washed my hair this morning so I am not washing it again, so this will hasten things.” She bundles her ponytail into a knot at the back of her head and steps under the spray.

Khan finishes undressing and steps in behind her. Things do go remarkably quickly without the process of her hair, although a few other things take more time than Khan thinks they possibly need to but he’s not exactly complaining.

After they dry off Jill takes both their towels and spreads them over the bed. “Lie down, dragon, similar to how I had you last time if you remember it,” she says. It takes some adjustment of pillows but after a moment or three Khan realizes that he’s both supremely comfortable and not in a position to get much leverage to move at all. He shifts, just a little, but really it would take quite a bit of effort to change position and he doesn’t want to.

He doesn’t mind the blindfold but his skin prickles when Jill cuffs him, and like last time it makes him tense for a moment. “You’re safe, dragon,” she says softly, running her hand up his back to close around the back of his neck. “I’ve got you.”

Khan knows that but it takes him a moment to relax. Jill tightens her hold on his neck, her nails digging into his skin just a little, and he makes a low grumble, tension easing out of him before he realizes it. “Yeah, you like that,” she murmurs, sounding pleased. “I really wish I could leave marks on you that would stay. Are you going to show me the drawing of whatever you get for me before you get it?”

“No,” Khan murmurs back. “The sketch is done, but Zach had no time until next week because he wanted to ensure he could get the proper pigments. And no, I am not showing you in advance.”

“Magpie won’t either, because she says it’s your sketch and your choice,” Jill says. She relaxes her hold slightly but drags her nails down Khan’s neck, down to just above where the wings start. “Which is fair, even if you saw mine before I did.”

“When are you getting your dragons, lioness?” Khan asks, slightly distracted by the way she keeps scratching him, alternating between light, not-quite ticklish and hard enough he would twist into it if he could.

“Next week, amusingly,” Jill says. “On Friday. What day are you seeing him?”

“Tuesday,” Khan says and then Jill rakes the nails of both hands down his back, where wings meet flesh, and he cries out, stars exploding behind his eyelids. He honestly hadn’t known he could get that hard that quickly and to be honest he doesn’t really want to again because that wasn’t entirely pleasant.

It takes him a few moments to catch his breath, during which Jill slides her hands back up his spine, heavy and easing some of the jangled nerve endings. “Do I have your attention, dragon?” she purrs, crawling up to press herself against his back.
“Quite,” Khan says although it takes him a second try to get it out.

She laughs, low and wicked, and sparks coil in the base of Khan’s spine. When she bites the nape of his neck, he doesn’t know what kind of sound he makes because he can’t hear it.

“No one can hear you, dragon, but me,” Jill says softly, running her hands down his arms. “It’s okay. It’s just us and we’re safe. Just let go for me.”

Khan takes a breath, lets it out slowly, but his skin prickles with anticipation and when Jill scratches her way back up his arms he groans. She slides down his body, slowly, scratching him and sliding her hands over his skin, both arousing and soothing. It lulls him into drifting a bit, not dozing at all but not really thinking past physical sensation.

His brain abruptly comes back online when he feels her tongue against him there and he loses his breath when she licks him again. He can’t move really, between the cuffs and her hands on him, holding him open for her, and it’s a very odd exposed feeling, one he’s not sure he likes.

Jill’s hands tighten on him and her nails dig in a little, and as this always seems to do it makes Khan’s head quiet. He relaxes, not having realized he’d tensed, and she hums softly in approval before settling in to drive him mad, Khan thinks blurrily, trying to breathe.

By the time she raises her head all he can do is groan. Jill laughs, sliding her hands up and down his back. “Take a moment, dragon, catch your breath,” she says. Khan hears quiet chewing sounds and catches the scent of mint and presumes she used one of the Femaran green things. Other sounds he can’t identify, entirely, although he catches the rustle of latex and his skin prickles.

Breathing, though, is a good thing and he focuses on that, rather than whatever Jill is doing behind him. She runs a hand up his thigh, over his hip, and it helps him relax a bit more. He’s still mostly hard but it’s less immediate right now.

Jill scratches up and down his back, and she leaves her hand just above his tailbone. The other—he’s not entirely certain what she’s doing or what she’s using but it slides into him easily. He shifts a little, adjusting, but his body remembers this and remembers liking it, and it’s only a moment or two before he settles.

“Relax, dragon, I’ve got a while planned for you,” she says, scratching him just enough that her nails dig in and he groans. Khan’s not entirely certain how he feels about having that easy a trigger but he’ll deal with that later.

For now, whatever’s inside him—it feels too small to be a toy, but bigger than one of Jill’s fingers—shifts and turns and he catches his breath. It eases back, but when the thing presses back inside him there’s—two, he thinks, and this has to be her hand but his brain won’t track to why it’s different.

Then those fingers press and he almost shouts into the pillow, brain whiting out for a moment. “Stop thinking, dragon,” Jill says, giving him not enough time to breathe before she presses again and he makes a wholly uncontrollable sound. “Although have you figured out what it is yet?”

Khan shakes his head, not wanting to answer her verbally for some reason. He just doesn’t want to talk.

She doesn’t seem to care. “I showed this to you, at the beginning,” she says, and then she curls her fingers, flexes them and they start buzzing quietly. Khan can’t help the way he shifts against it, or just shifts in general, but Jill positioned him too well and he can’t really get anywhere. “I can
control this, finger by finger,” she says, showing him and teasing him at the same time. “But I think…I think I want to see your reaction to something.”

His lioness never bodes well when she uses that tone of voice, but Khan can’t exactly object, nor—to be honest—does he want to.

She twists her hand slightly, pressing her thumb against his taint. “Fly for me, dragon,” she says and her whole hand activates.

He doesn’t come, but it’s not for his body’s lack of trying, and he shakes hard enough the mattress vibrates. Flying is about the right word, he thinks with what little higher brain function he has left.

She eases the intensity of the glove, gentling it down to almost nothing, and he’s grateful for a bare moment before she flexes the two fingers still inside him and he sees lightning. “Enjoy the ride, dragon,” she purrs, flexing her thumb. Khan buries his shout in the pillow, and isn’t sure if he’s enjoying the ride so much as hanging on for dear life.

It takes him a moment, or three, but he does see what she means. He gets lost in the physical, the maddening buzz and the fullness, Jill’s free hand reassuringly on his back, nails occasionally digging in seemingly at random. She plays with the glove, increasing and decreasing intensity of different fingers, always edging back when he gets too close to coming, always giving him that moment to breathe although he’s wishing she wouldn’t and it’s starting to border on pain.

“Lioness,” he says, ragged, hoarse. “Please. I can’t anymore.”

Her nails mark his skin and he shivers. “Come for me, dragon,” she says, increasing the vibration on the glove and pressing just right against and inside him. Khan makes a sound into the pillow he can’t describe but he’s so bloody close and if she pulls back now…

She curls and flexes her fingers inside him (three, at this point) and he just comes apart.

It takes him a moment or five to be able to hear again, and as he slowly comes down he realizes he’s shivering, although he didn’t think he was cold. Jill slides her hands up and down his back, and it helps, and after a little he stops shaking. But Khan’s fairly certain he’s not really capable of movement or speech at the moment and rather hopes his lioness doesn’t expect either.

“I’m going to take the cuffs off, dragon,” she says quietly, still touching him. “You just take it easy, and take your time. I’m here.”

He hums something, but even after she uncuffs his wrists he doesn’t move. He reflects that he rather likes the new bedding solutions the Federation has in these quarters; the sheets absorb almost all liquid almost immediately. They still need to be sanitized, but it does mean he isn’t lying in the wet spot.

For a while Khan drifts, feeling boneless and warm. Jill keeps touching him, always having at least one hand in contact with him, and he appreciates it. He thinks she settles on the bed next to him, but isn’t entirely certain and doesn’t feel like asking.

After a bit, though, his brain starts coming back online and he shifts to his knees to stretch a bit. “Oh, now that is beautiful,” Jill murmurs. “I dimmed the lights, so if you want to take the blindfold off it won’t be too bright in here.”

Khan touches his heart, the old sign of appreciation he’s started using again thanks to Jasmine and Aisha and Amir. Easier than speech. But he does unfasten the blindfold and slip it off, opening his eyes slowly. They adjust almost immediately, of course, but it’s still disorienting for a moment to
have sight back.

Jill doesn’t ask him anything, but holds out a hand, and Khan takes it, drawing her in against him. She smiles and kneels in front of him, her hands on his face. “I love you, dragon,” she says softly.

He leans his forehead against hers. “And I you, lioness.”

Chapter End Notes

Uh. Yeah. Jill has actual parents that probably want to meet her fiance. This is gonna be interesting.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

It's a different thing, to be welcomed into his mate's family.

Chapter Notes

The birth parents, and the real parents.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Message me when you come back from Eema’s,” Jill says in the morning. “Just so I know you survived.”

Khan smiles. “Lioness, I promise, I will survive this meeting.” He doesn’t know what to expect, but is reasonably certain it doesn’t involve plans for his incapacitation or death.

“Message me,” she says stubbornly.

He laughs. “All right, I will.” He kisses her goodbye and transports himself to the street outside Sarah’s house. As he starts up the walk, he sees movement behind a curtain, and before he can reach the bell Martin opens the door.

“Good morning,” he says warmly. “Come in. Sarah’s in the kitchen, but I wanted to show you something before we get to babka, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Khan says, wondering what Martin has.

Martin smiles at him and Khan sees Jake’s easy grin in it. It makes it easy to smile back, at least a bit. “This way.”

In the living room, Martin goes to the right-hand bookshelf, opening the glass door and reaching up to the top shelf to take out a slim blue volume. “This is a translation from the original Russian, and I have it in my collection because there’s quite a lot of Judaic influence in it. But I think you might know the author.” He hands the book to Khan.

“You have one of my brother’s books,” Khan says, not even surprised, but he does look to see which one it was. Konstantin published four volumes on Cat’s laws and judgments, and this one is…the second, he sees, looking at the years. “Do you speak Russian?”

“I don’t, I’m afraid,” Martin says. “I’ve actually had this in my collection for some time now, because I collect both books on Jewish folklore and books on Jewish law, and while this is a secular court, it relies on some Judaic principles for its verdicts, and I found that fascinating. I’ve been looking for the other volumes since I acquired that one, but I’ve yet to find them.”

“I know Konstantin has electronic copies of his volumes in Russian,” Khan says. “He saved them when we left, and we were able to convert them into modern files. I cannot guarantee he could
translate them in time for you unless there is a particularly advanced translation program of which I am unaware.”

“The universal translator can be used on print,” Martin says. “It’s not perfect but it’s as close as the UT is in practice. There’s a place to upload files and have them translated into Standard or in some cases language of one’s choosing.”

The universal translator actually works reasonably well, but Khan doesn’t want his brother’s writings depending on its programming. However. “I have an idea, then,” he says, handing the book back to Martin. “I’ll see if Kostenka has time to run the books through the print translator and then do an editing pass himself. I think, for you, he will make time.”

The man is Jill’s father; Konstantin will literally move a mountain if he has to for him. Editing a translation of his own books is no trouble at all.

“I appreciate it, if he has time,” Martin says, shelving the book.

“I think that won’t be a problem,” Khan says, reminding himself to call Konstantin once he leaves here.

“Now, babka?” Martin asks and Khan smiles.

“By all means,” he says and Martin gestures for him to head for the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Khan had half expected to meet Jake’s other brothers, but instead he finds Sarah with a cup of coffee and a baby on her shoulder. “My granddaughter,” she says. “Forgive me for not getting up, but I trust you’ll be able to pour your own coffee into the mug already on the counter. She’s a bit fussy, and I just settled her down.”

“How old is she?” Khan asks, moving to pour himself coffee. He notes that one of the chairs at the table is missing, and was replaced with a cushioned stool. For him, he realizes, and that touches him in a way he hadn’t expected.

It’s a different thing, to be welcomed into his mate’s family.

He takes the mug over to the stool and perches, letting his wings relax a bit while he has the freedom to do so. The baby shifts, yawns, a small fist flailing in the air for a moment before it tucks against her chest. “She’s six months,” Sarah says. “She was born a month early. Her name is Leah, and she’s my third granddaughter. Perhaps it’s a balance for having borne three sons.”

Khan smiles a bit, sipping his coffee. “We will stay in touch, but I know not how often we can return to visit,” he says.

“I know. I knew that when they entered the Academy,” Sarah says. “Just…as you can, is all I ask.”

“We will,” Khan says. “Jake and Jill will make sure of it.”

“If you can create the transwarp transporter, could you create a transwarp comm link?” Sarah asks. “A paired set that were tuned to each other, that used a small amount of energy to connect the two via transwarp?”

Khan sets his coffee mug down and looks at her. “Where on Earth did you come up with that idea?”

“Quite honestly, the old Earth device of the walkie-talkie,” Sarah says. “Those were paired units,
and could communicate over a great distance, at least comparatively.”

He considers it. “The power cost would be high,” he says. “Warp drive sustains itself but there’s active energy involved in that, a ship in motion through space. Two stationary links have no energy to sustain themselves. But a transwarp communication link built into the ship, now that would be another matter entirely.”

“Perhaps you should look into that,” Sarah says.

“Perhaps I shall,” Khan says, taking a sip of coffee. “But I doubt you asked me here to suggest I build a transwarp link relay.”

“No, I didn’t,” Sarah says. “I asked you here to give you your wedding present. I have a different present specifically for Jill, and I’ll give that to her before the ceremony. But I have one for both of you.”

“Thank you,” Khan says because one does not protest to one’s mother-by-marriage that one doesn’t need wedding gifts. Also he wants to know what she has for them, because he has an idea but isn’t certain.

“Come upstairs with me,” Sarah says, getting to her feet easily, even with the baby. “You can bring your coffee. I don’t allow food in the craft room, but coffee goes everywhere.”

“Even the shower?” Khan asks, just because he’s curious, and she laughs.

“I promise I am not making this up, but Samuel’s bath has a covered shelf in the shower. He takes a sealed travel mug in with him and leaves it on the shelf. By the time he’s finished half of it he’s awake enough to get on with his day.”

“Samuel has children?” Khan asks.

“Two,” Sarah says. “A son and a daughter.”

“I am not surprised, then,” Khan says.

“Do you and Jill want children?” Sarah asks.

“We are…thinking about it,” Khan says. “Both of us would prefer to find a new normal, and daily routine, before we introduce children into the equation. We had thought I was unable to father children, but that bit of engineering is reversible with medical technology.”

“Reasonable enough, certainly, and Jill has a bit longer before it becomes problematic for her,” Sarah says. She nods to a door. “If you would, please. My hands are a bit full.”

Khan moves around her to open the door, letting her precede him into the room. She sets down her coffee and turns on the lights, then walks over to the frame at the end of the room. “I asked Jake to let me know the dimensions of beds on your ship, specifically for couples,” Sarah says. “Then I made this quilt for yours.”

He stares at it, completely without words. The upper left corner has an intricately patterned black dragon flying, one with pale blue underwings. The dragon flies down toward a beautifully detailed lioness, which looks up at him, their heads not quite meeting.

“This must have taken hours just to plan,” he says, afraid to touch it.
“There are some very good quilt modeling applications out there, but this was not the easiest quilt I’ve ever done,” Sarah says, touching the border. “However, the fabrics I used are very fade-resistant and stain-resistant, they’re the same fabrics I use in quilts for my grandchildren. It can, I promise you, be laundered in a machine and dried in one, but do try not to wash it on high speed or hot water.”

“It’s incredible,” Khan says. “Sarah, this…I thank you. It’s beautiful.”

She smiles. “Use it in good health, and call home once in a while.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Khan says.

Leah wakes up then, as if displeased by Khan’s statement, and begins fussing, screwing up her face and getting close to wailing before she sees Khan, who raises his wings slightly, then lets them fall when he sees her look at him.

She stares, entranced, and reaches out for him. “How are you with babies?” Sarah asks.

“I think I can avoid dropping her,” Khan says dryly. She laughs and hands over the now-squirming Leah, who puts her hands all over Khan’s face as if to examine him. “I’ve had worse exams from doctors,” he says as Leah grabs his nose.

“Haven’t we all,” Sarah says. “I’ll take care of transporting the quilt to your ship, but it’s finished and I wanted you to see it.”

“Truly, Sarah,” Khan says, evading Leah’s finger actually going up his nose. “It’s magnificent.”

“I will say this is one I’m particularly proud of,” Sarah says, touching the border again. “The fill should keep you warm in standard shipboard conditions and a bit colder but this isn’t designed to be a truly cold weather quilt. That would have been too warm for ship conditions.”

“Did you make Jake a quilt, too? For the ship?” Khan asks.

“I am making him one,” Sarah says. “It will be ready by the time you leave, but it’s still a work in progress. I feel I should be honest about something, which is that I would have made you and Jill a quilt regardless of your wedding. However, I would not have gone to this much trouble for a non-wedding quilt.”

“Perfectly reasonable,” Khan says. Leah starts fussing and he hums quietly to her, keeping his voice low. She scrunches up her face, then apparently realizes the vibrations feel good and smiles hugely, settling down immediately.

“Have you spent much time around children?” Sarah asks.

“I am the oldest of my brothers and sisters,” Khan says, still keeping his voice fairly low for Leah. “I was perhaps three when the last were born, but I remember what worked for them. At my home, we had children—it was an old fortress, we called it the keep—and I had children running around where they were allowed. I certainly didn’t want them terrified of me, and with the wings I knew it possible, so I worked to become a trusted adult in their eyes. It was practicality; these were the children of my most trusted men and women, and I didn’t want them caught between family loyalty and loyalty to me.”

“Some men wouldn’t have cared,” Sarah says.

“I always did,” Khan says.
“Oldest of a large family,” Sarah says. “Mine isn’t quite as big as yours, but I know something about that.”

“How old were you when your youngest sibling was born?” Khan asks.

“Seventeen,” Sarah says. “He was, to say the obvious, a bit of a surprise. For the five of us that they intended, I was seven when my youngest sister was born.”

“And you still had three children of your own,” Khan says.

“I was a kindergarten teacher once upon a time,” Sarah says. “I like children. I would have had more than three, but I miscarried after David, and at that point Martin and I decided we would count our three blessings and not try for another.”

Khan touches his heart. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Sarah says quietly. “I would say it doesn’t sting anymore, after all it’s been decades, but at times I still mourn the child I lost.”

“Is your craft room usually a place of confidences?” Khan asks after a pause.

She smiles. “Often, yes. Both by intent and not.”

He’s not sure which this was and declines to ask.

“Would you like babka?” Sarah asks. “I do have some, I promise. Fresh baked.”

“I would, thank you,” Khan says. Sarah picks up her mug and they leave the craft room.

Khan spends longer than he intends over babka but he and Martin get into a quite engaging conversation about principles of Judaic law and how or if any of them applied to laws Khan enacted in his lands. There’s more overlap than Khan had thought, which he finds intriguing. He wants to compare Judaic principles to some of his siblings’ laws, because they’d all had slightly different interpretations of justice and how it should be meted out.

Martin gives him a list of books on the subject and Khan notes to acquire them before they leave. Then he really does have to leave or he’ll be too late to calm his lioness before they meet her birth parents.

As it is he gets back to their suite at 1330 and she’s wearing panties and a bra, rummaging through her closet for something to wear. “Will they care that much?” Khan asks.

“I’m having guilt,” Jill says. “I have guilt about my parents.”

“Why on Earth?” Khan asks.

“Every time I see them I feel guilty that I don’t do more to keep in touch because I’m their only kid and all,” Jill says. “So I try to look nice when I do see them, because that’s few and far between and God only knows when I’ll see them again after this.”

“Do you think they miss you a great deal?” Khan asks.

“No, not really,” Jill says. “They’ve been used to life without me since I was twelve, you know? I didn’t get much time to get home during training for the Olympics, and after the Academy I tried to see them on downtime but it wasn’t always my first priority. Seeing Eema and Abba, though, that I always did. Eema would have guilted me if I hadn’t.”
“You wanted to see Sarah,” Khan says. He has no intention of changing; what suited one set of parents will suit the other. “Let us be honest there, lioness.”

“Oh, speaking of, how did that go this morning?” Jill asks, pulling her head out of the closet. “Also, what do you think?” She holds up a dress Khan hadn’t known she owned, simple and blue.

“I am certain that is fine,” Khan says patiently.

“You are not, you don’t know this crap any more than I do,” Jill says, laughing. “But this will do.” She puts the hanger back in the closet and pulls the dress on over her head. It looks quite different, on her instead of the hanger, because it fits more closely than Khan had thought. He rather likes it.

“Sarah gave me our wedding present, or rather showed it to me,” Khan says.

“Is it a quilt? Did she make us a quilt for a wedding present?” Jill asks hopefully.

He smiles. “She did, and truthfully, lioness, it’s incredible.” He describes it for her, the dragon and the lioness, and the border in black, gold and red squares.

“Oh, man,” Jill says. “Oh, wow. That’s one hell of a wedding present.”

“I do wonder when she started work on it,” Khan says.

“We told her we were engaged when we got back to Earth, so…a little over four months ago,” Jill says. “I don’t really know a damn thing about making quilts so I don’t know how long they’re supposed to take.”

“Neither do I, although it would not surprise me if she had had it planned before we told her,” Khan says. “Perhaps as a victory quilt.”

“I would believe that,” Jill says. “Which does nothing to negate the incredibleness of the quilt. I’m really going to love having that on our bed.”

“I am, as well,” Khan says. “I have never had something like it before.”

“I told her not to make me a quilt for my apartment in San Francisco because I was almost never there, but regs didn’t allow me to have one on ship,” Jill says. “So I haven’t had one before, either.”

“Somehow that’s appropriate,” Khan says. “That your first quilt be ours.”

“I don’t know if appropriate is the right word but I like it,” Jill says. “Especially one that’s that beautiful.”

“She said she had a specific wedding gift for you,” Khan says. “But didn’t say what it was.”

“Huh,” Jill says. “I have no idea. I’ll find out when she summons me for coffee and babka. But why were you so late getting back?”

“Martin,” Khan says and Jill laughs.

“He doesn’t say much unless you get him going and then he’s just the best conversationalist,” Jill says. “What were you discussing?”

“Judaic law and how it compared to my own,” Khan says. “There was more overlap than I had thought there might be. He gave me a list of books for further reading on the subject.”
“Judaism is in many ways very practical,” Jill says. “So are you. I’m not surprised.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “Out of curiosity, I looked up the basic rules of keeping kosher, and quite honestly in those times it was a fairly decent way of avoiding disease from animals.”

“Again, it’s practical,” Jill says. “Which is the argument some Jews have made for no longer following it, because it’s no longer applicable. But the rabbis haven’t agreed on that yet.”

“Do rabbis ever agree on anything?” Khan asks. “From my conversation with Martin, it did not seem so.”

“They really don’t,” Jill says, laughing. “Eema’s quip is that if you put three Jews in a room you get seven opinions, but if you add a rabbi you get five more and if you get two rabbis you get eighteen more.”

“Why eighteen?” Khan asks.

“I think—I can’t quite remember, but I think the Hebrew for eighteen is similar to chai, the word for life, so giving a gift of eighteen something is a sign of life,” Jill says. “I don’t remember all the details, I’m not Jewish, just that eighteen means something.”

“We can look it up later, I presume,” Khan says. “For now, should we to the sitting room?”

Jill blows out a breath. “Yeah.”

They get there first and find Travis just arriving with two of the building staff and their tea and assorted foods to go with it. “The tea is in an insulated pot, so it won’t get cold, and you can put the infuser right here. If you need another pot just ring for someone, honey.”

Again, Khan notices that there are chairs, one couch, and one backless bench. He appreciates the courtesy, and takes a seat on the bench. There’s not quite enough room for Jill to sit with him, so she takes the chair on his left.

“Do your parents tend to run early or late?” Khan asks her softly.

“Either early or right on time,” Jill says. “A skill I inherited, thankfully, or which was trained into me by gymnastics and Starfleet, but either way.”

“Cat never mastered it,” Khan says. “Either ten minutes early or twenty minutes late, but she never landed on time. It became a running joke within her government.”

“I bet Anandi was always precisely punctual, though,” Jill says and Khan laughs.

“She was, of course,” he says. “And Bishop was usually on time unless he was delayed somewhere along the line. Most of us usually managed to be punctual unless we were making some kind of point, but Cat consistently could never do it.”

The door opens and a small woman walks in, followed by the man Khan presumes is Jill’s birth father. He’s about Katsuro’s height, but broad through the shoulders and chest, and Jill grins when she sees both of them, hopping to her feet. “Mom,” she says, hurrying forward to hug her mother. They really aren’t that dissimilar in size, Khan notes, although Jill’s mother is a bit taller and Jill is a bit bigger all over due to muscle. He rises to his feet, folding his wings back as much as he can although that will ache later. He’ll have to remember to ask Jill to help.

“So you saved the galaxy,” her father says and Jill laughs, pulling away from her mother.
“I had help, Papa.” She reaches up to hug him and laughs again when he picks her up, hugging her tightly. “Put me down so I can introduce you properly,” she says, kissing both his cheeks soundly. Her father sets her down and Jill shakes herself all over. “Mom, Papa, this is Khan, and if you think I saved the galaxy it was mostly his doing.”

“Not true,” Khan says immediately.

“We can argue about credit later,” Jill says. “Khan, these are my parents, Vanya and Laura.”

Vanya extends a hand, smiling broadly. “A pleasure,” he says. Khan shakes hands with him, and Laura, and then they all take their seats.

Tea is a perfectly amiable affair, half in Russian, and Jill and her parents get along perfectly well. But they don’t express much worry or grief about Jill and Khan leaving the solar system likely for good. “She was made to fly,” Vanya says to Khan. “If we protested, we’d be clipping her wings. Just come home now and again, da?”

“We’ll do our best,” Khan says, not wanting to promise something that may be impossible. But Vanya seems satisfied with that.

“That was always what they told me,” Jill says to him. “They didn’t care if I won—okay, they cared, but to them it was whether I’d done the absolute best I could. It just worked out that doing my best equaled winning things.”

“Of course we cared,” Laura says. “I don’t think I actually breathed a full breath your entire floor routine at the Olympics. I was so dizzy when it was over.”

Jill giggles. “I hold my breath if I’m watching the footage,” she says. “Even though I know I nailed it.”

“Yes, but do you ever watch it?” Laura asks. “You wanted to put all of it away.”

“Once in a while,” Jill says. “Although no, not usually. And I did, because I didn’t want to be a gymnast the rest of my life. I mean, I’m still a gymnast, but I didn’t want that to define me.”

“And I understand that, but I still don’t see why you had to lock it all away,” Laura says. “But. We’ve had this discussion before.”

“We have, and it’s the reason you have custody of all my gymnastics stuff,” Jill says. “That and I have no room for it.”

“Do you want to take any of it with us?” Khan asks her.

“I don’t think it’s going to have a lot of meaning wherever we end up, so no,” Jill says. “I’ve survived without my medals until now, I think I can continue to do so.”

“What are you going to do with all your Starfleet uniforms?” Laura asks her. “Or any of that?”

“I’m bringing one formal uniform and one shipboard uniform with us, because we are likely to run into Federation outposts here and there and we might use them to resupply,” Jill says. “So the uniforms might be useful since I’m not apparently allowed to resign.”

“To be fair, you agreed to that,” Khan says, although he’s still conflicted on whether or not she should have.
“I did because without it we didn’t get our ship,” Jill says. “Well, kind of. But also I like Viola, and I like that she’s in charge, and I want to continue to help her since it’s kind of our fault or our actions that caused her to be in charge and also in a wheelchair.”

Khan disagrees that the wheelchair was their fault but her ending up in charge of Starfleet—that one is rather on them, as the saying goes.

“When will the ship be ready to let people look at it before you leave?” Vanya asks.

“If we keep on schedule, six weeks,” Khan says. “If something delays us, longer than that.”

“So is this how it worked out? You build the ship, she builds the wedding?” Vanya asks.

“I’ve had some input on the ship,” Jill says. “But Khan knows more about ship design than I ever will. I am working with Aisha and Jasmine and Jake on supplying her, though. But Khan doesn’t want to know anything about the wedding and I figure if we’re doing this once we’re doing it right and also Viola wants us to have a big party. So it’s going to be a hell of a thing. The formal invitations are almost ready to go out, because the wedding’s in eleven weeks and there are some guests traveling from outside the solar system.”

Khan blinks. That seems sooner than he thought, and also too far away.

“We’ve been in discussion with Travis about attire, and transportation and hotels while we’ll be here,” Laura says. “He’s wonderful. What are you doing about your wedding gown?”

“I’m getting married in my formal uniform, medals and all,” Jill says. “Then I’m changing into a fun fancy dress for the party, and that’s being custom made for me. I would show you pictures but I can’t show them around Khan because he’s not allowed to know anything about it.”

“Send them to me,” Laura says. “I’m your mother, I think I get the right to see it in advance.”

“You do, you do,” Jill says. “I’ll send them to you this afternoon.”

Khan wonders if Jill has sent Sarah pictures. He knows Magpie and Andy have seen it—Magpie helped design some of it—but none of his siblings. It amuses him, her determination to keep the dress a secret, but if it makes her happy he doesn’t care.

Then again, he won’t show her the tattoo he’s getting on Tuesday, either. For this one, he’d done the intelligent thing and simply asked Magpie for a design. She’d given him the lioness, one paw raised as if she pauses in the middle of stalking someone. She looks directly at whoever sees her, and honestly Khan feels like the whole tattoo has a protective quality to it, that his lioness guards his back, quite literally as she’ll be on his lower back, below his wings.

He likes that, and he likes the sand and earth tones Zach is using for her, and against his pale skin he thinks she’ll be quite beautiful. He just has to wait for Tuesday to have it be done, and then for Jill to see it.

They’re not the only two getting tattoos before leaving. Katsuro and Bishop have each gotten the Japanese kanji for ‘forever’ tattooed into their left wrists. Konstantin got his wolf touched up, and Ekaterina is thinking about getting a wolf for him before they leave.

In a surprise to Khan, Jake got his name-sign tattooed on the back of his neck, just below his hairline. Khan knows a few others are considering it now they’ve seen Jake do it, and he does like the way it looks.
Not, he thinks, enough to get it done himself, but he does like it on Jake, and presumes he’ll appreciate it on whoever might do it next.

“How long are you in town for, Mom?” Jill asks, catching Khan out of his thoughts.

“We’re actually taking a shuttle up the coast after we leave here, and going to Vancouver for a day or two,” Laura says. “If you have time, we’ll swing by again on our way home for a day, but if not we’ll head back to New York from Vancouver.”

“We should have time but message me first,” Jill says. “Just in case something comes up.”


“I know,” Jill says. “I appreciate it.”

That seems to be the unseen signal to start saying goodbye. Jill rings for an attendant to come escort her parents out of the building and get them a shuttle to Vancouver, and the three of them chat about nothing while they wait.

It doesn’t surprise Khan when Travis himself shows up, attired in what must be current fashion. “Laura, darling,” he says, leaning down—way down—to kiss her cheeks. “I will of course be happy to ensure you and Vanya get to Vancouver, but while I have you here, I do need your input on just a few things. Would you mind dreadfully coming with me for a bit?”

Laura smiles and a bit of color comes into her cheeks. “Of course not,” she says. “Anything I can do to help.”

“There’s just a few things that we specifically need the mother of the bride for,” Travis says. Over Laura’s head, he winks at Jill. “So come with me, my darling, and I’m sure we’ll find something for Vanya to do while you and I put our heads together.”

One last quick goodbye and Travis ushers them off, and Jill looks at Khan in the resounding silence. “And those were my parents.”

“They mean well,” Khan says diplomatically.

“They always have,” Jill says.

“It’s just not enough,” Khan says because he can’t keep quiet. “It never was. They love you, but I am somewhat reminded of the tale of the ugly duckling. Your parents hatched something rare in you, and to their credit have been good about letting you find and set your own way. But you did so alone, lioness. I have never been a parent but I know that when a child has regular nightmares, one does not simply give them a stuffed toy and leave them to deal with the nightmares alone. I don’t know what causes your nightmares, Jill, or where the origins of it all lie, but your parents did you no favors by giving you Bilbo.”

“Yeah but I love him and I’m not giving him up,” Jill says. “So.”

“But that is my point,” Khan says. “You have more connection to a stuffed bear than your birth parents. I think the fault theirs, more than yours, because there’s simply no…depth to connect with. But the years for that connection to build were before you went to Colorado, and it simply never happened.”

“It didn’t,” Jill says. “And I am okay with that. My parents are a lot of things, and they’ve always done their best and maybe it wasn’t always enough. But it was their best, and I’m not going to be
angry about things that happened thirty years ago. My nightmares are what they are, dragon, and we deal with them as best we can and we’ll see what happens on the ship when day and night matter less. I want it noted that the only time I ever couldn’t do the job because of sleep was after the forty-three hours when I just couldn’t get out of bed for a while.”

“Understandably so,” Khan says. “Come, lioness, let us back to our quarters if we are to have this discussion.”

It takes all of two minutes to get back into their room and they discover it’s been made up while they were at tea. As always, their personal belongings were left scrupulously alone and cleaned around, but Khan does appreciate the housekeeping and laundry service. He’ll miss that on the ship, although he’s a tidy person by nature. Jill, however, is not, and Khan foresees some chaos in keeping her clothes off their floor.

“Before you say anything,” she says, holding up a hand. “I don’t really want to have this discussion, dragon. We can both agree that my parents did their best and that their best wasn’t enough. They loved me enough to help me get to the Olympics, and then into Starfleet, and I will always love and be grateful to them for that. Beyond that—it just doesn’t matter. You can be angry with them about my nightmares, that doesn’t change the fact that I get nightmares. My parents were never the original cause, so it doesn’t help anything to be angry with them.”

“Lioness, that you will acknowledge they were insufficient is enough for me,” Khan says.

Jill nods slowly. “Yeah. They were. Are. But I have Eema and Abba to make up for that.”

“You do,” Khan says, “I should say ‘we’ do, although I don’t quite think Sarah considers me one of her adoptive children.”

“You’re definitely family but I don’t know if she sees herself as your mother,” Jill says. “Might be worth asking.”

“I think I shall pass,” Khan says, holding out a hand. Jill walks over to him, taking it. “What did you want to do with the rest of our afternoon? It’s getting on toward evening.”

“Is tonight a good night to go flying?” Jill asks hesitantly.

Khan smiles. “I believe it is.”

They stay out for hours, catching breezes that carry them out over the bay itself, alone in the quiet and dark sky. It must be similar to being in space, Khan thinks, the dark and quiet and chill. Jill says nothing, and they both dressed for warmth before they took off, so he stays out long after the stars rise in the sky, catching thermals and wind currents, drifting through the sky.

Eventually he starts making his way back toward their building, and its convenient roof deck. Jill says nothing as he lands and sets her down, although Khan gives her an arm for a few steps until her legs steady. She glances at him and touches her heart, but says nothing, and he smiles, taking her hand.

They undress and get ready for bed in companionable silence, and Khan is physically tired enough he closes his eyes once Jill fits herself against him, content in the quiet and willing to sleep, for once.

In his dreams, the ampitheatre is overrun by green, flowers poking up through ruins of seats and vines trailing down the remaining wall. The oncoming storm has pulled back to a cloudy day, and Khan sees glimmers of sunshine when he looks up.
He walks toward the victor’s podium, seeing something lying on top of it. The ‘something’ turns out to be a bat’leth, stained with dark purple and the dark red of dried blood, lying crossed with a longsword, also stained with purple and red.

Khan touches his heart. “We will remember,” he says.

The world spins around him and he closes his eyes until it passes. When he opens them again, it’s early morning in their hotel suite.

Next to him, Jill sits up, pushing her hands through her hair. “Did you have the same dream I did?” she asks. “With the amphitheatre, and the crossed weapons?”

“I did,” Khan says. “What did you say?”

“I said ‘we will remember’,” Jill says. “I don’t know why that, but it seemed to be what the dream was looking for because then I spun into reality. Is it what you said?”

“It is,” Khan says. “I will be curious if anyone said something different.”

“We’ll find out,” Jill says. “For now, I could use a shower. Join me, dragon?”

“Yes,” he says and they get out of bed.

Chapter End Notes

We have maybe three chapters left, folks.
Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

All that's left to do is get married.

Chapter Notes

Two chapters left after this one, guys. This one's a bit short but I'm fairly certain the next chapter will make up for it.

“Tomorrow,” Jill says, sitting cross-legged on their bed. “Somehow, we finished everything and now all that’s left to do is get married.”

“I still remain unconvinced we finished everything,” Khan says.

“We’ve finished everything we possibly could,” Jill says. “The secret program you found on the Jupiter station is now being handled between Starfleet and Vulcan because you were right, it tracked back to them and now they’ve got some very careful explaining to do. However they didn’t execute the attack on the station.”

“No, apparently the two things were unrelated and I only caught the backdoor because it re-established itself as the system came back online,” Khan says, sitting down on the edge of the bed by her knee. “And Starfleet has in custody the man who piloted the shuttle.”

“Who turned out not to be the faux-Ikan, so that’s a loose end but I think not one we need to worry about,” Jill says. “He’s probably got bigger problems than us.”

“The ship is completed,” Khan says. “She passed all the tests, we’ve taken her out on two trial runs, and everything is working as it should.”

“The ship is also furnished, and supplied with everything except perishables and water, we’ll fill up on those before we ship out,” Jill says. “I still can’t believe that finished on time. Aisha is scary.”

“There are reasons I trusted her to run my home,” Khan says, smiling a bit. “She was equally fierce on a battlefield or facing down suppliers or staff. I expect she’ll appoint herself our quartermaster, or equivalent.”

“I think she already has, dragon,” Jill says. “I like how we’ve all kind of settled into various roles without needing to argue over it.”

“For the most part, yes,” Khan says. Andy has taken the navigation slot, and Khan has no issue with that but he thinks Alona might push for it at some point. However, Khan also expects Andy to gravitate toward engineering after a while. They’ll see how it goes.

“There’s one surprise in the ship,” Jill says. “Do you want to know now or do you want to wait to
“I was on the ship yesterday,” Khan says. “When did this happen?”

“Today,” Jill says promptly. “Do you want to know?”

“I rather think I do,” Khan says, because he wants to know what the devil Jill did to his ship.

“Get a tablet, please,” Jill says. “I need to show you pictures.”

Khan gets up and finds her tablet, handing it to her. She swipes and taps at it for a moment then turns it around. “This is painted in the common space, and it’ll be hidden when the screen is down but it was the only space big enough.”

He looks at the tablet and all his anger disappears. “It’s beautiful,” he says, looking at the circle of seventeen names—all of them are there, and about where he would have put them, with Jasmine taking Cat’s spot next to him and Carson next to Anandi. Under the circle is their creed, as it were. “Whose idea was it?”

“Magpie’s,” Jill says. “Jasmine was the one to tell us where in the circle they should be placed, though. She put herself next to you but we saw that on Qo’noS so we decided not to argue.”

“It’s where she belongs,” Khan says. “You on one side, her on the other.”

“Yeah, we agreed on that,” Jill says, flashing him a grin. “Magpie drew the design although she ran it through the computer for exactness, and then we printed out a stencil and did a test run on a spare piece of paneling. We had to modify the stencil a bit, so we did another test run, and then we just waited until today and painted it on the ship.”

“Matthew got his name-sign tattooed like Jake did,” Khan says. “So did Alona, and Amir, and Jasmine.”

“I thought about it but really I think I’m done, between you on my back, Magpie on my left forearm and Andy on my right upper arm,” Jill says. “I thought about getting a dragon for Jake but dragons aren’t his thing the way they’re ours.”

Zach did a remarkable job with both dragons, Khan thinks, looking at them. The silver dragon does a very good job of looking almost iridescent and glittery, and the Chinese dragon winding up her right arm has a remarkable complexity of shades within its purple, blue, and green colors.

Then again, the lioness on his lower back looks like it could have come out of a painting.

“If I figure out one that seems right, and we ever come back to Earth—which we will at some point, to see Eema and Abba if nothing else—I’ll get it, but I’ve lasted this long without it.” Jill reaches for his hand, tangling their fingers together. “Continue with the review of things we needed to get done, dragon.”

“The Federation-Klingon accords are signed, and there will be an official Klingon ambassador arriving at some point after our wedding,” Khan says. “As far as I am aware there will be no Klingons at this gala.”

“As far as I am aware there will be none, but the Jill Zone laughs at things like that so who knows,” Jill says. “Ambassador.”

Khan smiles, shaking his head. “That still seems odd, given how this all started.”
“I don’t know, I think it’s kind of awesome,” Jill says. “Almost as awesome as my shiny captain’s bars.”

“You were ready to walk away from it, and yet,” Khan says.

“I was, but I’m honestly glad I don’t have to,” Jill says. “Even if it’s just information once in a while, I’m glad I can still serve, in some fashion. I know, I know, you don’t care, but I do.”

Khan considers how best to put it. “I am glad you did not have to give up your career,” he says. “But once we leave, our own family would take precedence over that.”

“Now we have reached the obvious portion of the evening,” Jill says. “I’m not going to endanger us by anything I tell Viola, and I’m not going to forget where my loyalties lie out there. If you think otherwise, I’m going to be cranky and I don’t want to be cranky at you the night before our wedding.”

“I do not think otherwise, lioness, pax,” Khan says, raising her knuckles to his lips. “I just felt it needed saying.”

“I’m not convinced but all right,” Jill says. “But…look at this, dragon, from start to finish. We started with wanting to get your family back and ended with peace between the Klingon Empire and the Federation, our own ship and diplomatic rank if we need it.”

“All because you decided I looked sad,” Khan says.

“To be fair I didn’t know I was going to help prevent interplanetary war when I tripped into you,” Jill says, laughing. “I just knew something wasn’t right with you and I wanted to find out what it was so I could make you smile.”

At that, Khan does smile a bit, and he kisses Jill’s knuckles again. “You are a rare creature, my lioness,” he says.

“Not as rare as you,” she says. “But I didn’t know that when I tripped into you, either. Although the wings were kind of a giveaway you were something different, but really it’s a big galaxy, there are all kinds of species out there.”

“There are and we shall see what we find,” Khan says.

“Second star to the right and straight on til morning,” Jill says softly. “Except none of us are Lost Boys.”

“None of us were ever really children of the kind Never-Never-Land welcomed,” Khan says. “Perhaps we need a better guidepost than a Puck derivative.”

“I will take the ship to Mordor, though I do not know the way,” Jill says and Khan laughs.

“We are not dropping any magical rings in any volcanoes, lioness. If you ever discover a ring that turns you invisible, put it back.”

“Well, but that’s no fun,” Jill says, laughing. “So, dragon, tomorrow morning your siblings are picking you up at seven. They will have custody of you until the wedding ceremony, and both Aisha and Jasmine have personally assured me you will be at the ceremony location on time, clean-shaven, dressed in your tux, and with our wedding rings. Oh, and sober, but I didn’t think I had to worry about that in the first place.”
“You didn’t,” Khan says. “You did not have to worry about the rest of it either, but it pleases them
to fuss.”

“They don’t want you overwhelmed with memories of your first wedding on the day of your
second, dragon,” Jill says. “And since we both refused bachelor or bachelorette parties, this is the
closest they’ll get to having one with you. So let them fuss.”

“What time do I need to be at the location?” Khan asks.

“Ten-thirty,” Jill says. “But we’re not doing most of the formal pictures until I’m out of my
uniform, so there’ll just be a few of those. But you don’t get to see me in either my uniform or my
dress until I’m ready. It’s a rule.”

“I see,” he says, but he smiles. “When does your day start?”

“Slightly before then,” Jill says. “I’ve been told to be out of the shower with damp hair as of seven,
so they can start the prep before I have breakfast and then make me gorgeous or something. Regs
stipulate I have to wear my hair neatly pulled back and out of the way, and I have to wear my lid
since we’re outside, so we can’t do much fun with it for the actual ceremony but they’re going to
prep it for something more interesting for the party.”

“Am I allowed to share the shower with you?” Khan asks. “Our last shower as an unwed couple?”

“You are if you acknowledge that there will possibly be more than one person in our suite by the
time we get out,” Jill says.

“Lioness, we’re getting married. I am relatively certain everyone who will be coming to our suite
tomorrow knows we have sex,” Khan says. “We’ll bring clothes into the bathroom.”

“You can, but I was told not to put anything on except a robe,” Jill says.

“I am hesitant to draw too many comparisons between our wedding tomorrow and mine to Rani,
but in this it does seem familiar,” Khan says. “The amount of preparation she had to do for the
whole set of affairs was striking.”

“Women always have more preparation than men,” Jill says. “Especially on the wedding day. Oh,
but you’re not to shave, I was to tell you that, because Aisha intends to do it properly, and trim your
hair. By properly I assume she uses a straight razor?”

“Yes, and she’s quite good with it,” Khan says. “She would do this for me before important days,
in our original time, but rarely otherwise. I don’t know where she learned the skill, but she’s never
even nicked me.”

“I’ll ask her if she’ll teach me,” Jill says. “I’d like to know how to do this.”

“She might,” Khan says. “Are you going to want to practice on me?”

“You’ll heal almost immediately if I cut you, so yes,” Jill says. “But not until I’ve talked to Aisha.
Besides, it’s fair. You shave me, I shave you.”

“I suppose that is fair,” Khan agrees.

“However you are not bringing a straight razor near my pussy,” Jill says. “I have limits and that’s
some damn tender skin.”
“Straight razors aren’t designed for the groin,” Khan says. “Safety razors, though, could be. If they exist in this time. Have we stocked personal toiletries?”

“We have, and I ordered razors like we’ve been using,” Jill says. “And I laid in a really, really big supply of all my bath products, and the ones I ordered for you. But I’m sure we’ll eventually run out and see what else is out there.”

“If all else fails we’ll stop at a starbase and order more,” Khan says.

“I’ll worry about that in about six months,” Jill says. “Which is about when I’ll run out of stuff, or start running out of stuff. Although if I can restock earlier, I will.”

“We can worry about it later,” Khan says. “Of all our concerns, that is fairly low on the list.”

“Of course,” Jill says.

“Do you know if my siblings are taking me running?” Khan asks.

“All I know is that you should at least have underwear on by seven when they get here and they’ll tell you the rest,” Jill says.

“That’s rather not comforting,” Khan says.

“I don’t think it’s meant to be, dragon,” Jill says cheerfully. “But relax, they can’t do anything terrible to you because I need you in one piece for the wedding day and fully functioning for the wedding night.”

“Trust me, lioness,” Khan says, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. “I have plans for our wedding night.”

“Do you,” Jill says, not quite asking.

He smiles, and says nothing.

“Dragon,” Jill says, tugging on his hand.

“Lioness,” Khan says, tugging back.

“What do you have planned for our wedding night?” she asks.

“What does your wedding dress look like?” Khan counters.

“You know I can’t tell you that,” Jill says.

“I’m not revealing this, either,” Khan says. “You’ll find out tomorrow night.”

She sticks her tongue out at him and Khan laughs. “Is that like my wedding present? I’ll find out later?” she asks.

Khan shakes his head. “No, your wedding present you may have now if you wish.”

“I do wish, and then I’ll give you yours,” Jill says. Both of them get up and go to different locations, Khan returning to the bed with a box roughly the size of a large pair of shoes and Jill returning with a rectangular box the size of Khan’s forearm.

“I would like you to open yours first,” Khan says, setting the box in front of her.
Jill laughs. “All right.” She unwraps the box carefully, setting the silver paper aside. “This is heavy, whatever it is,” she says, opening the box. When she looks inside, she gasps, and reaches in carefully to lift out the two objects within. First, the black dragon, iridescent in glass, the underside of his wings almost rainbow and silver; then, the lioness, golden and stretched up, so her forehead meets the dragon’s when Jill sets them together. “Oh, Khan,” she says softly. “Oh. Do we have a shelf in our quarters for them?”

“We do,” Khan says. “It was installed today, or will be installed tomorrow. It will be padded inside, and closed, in case of ship’s turbulence, and the figurines will have a way to stick to the shelf.”

“They’re beautiful,” Jill says, running her fingertips over each figure. “They’re absolutely beautiful. Where did you get them done?”

“Andy knew the artist,” Khan says.

“At some point I’m going to be irritated with the amount of dragon and lioness items we have, but today is not that day,” Jill says. “It’s not likely to happen so long as they keep being incredibly beautiful. Thank you, Khan. They’re breathtaking.”

“I am glad you like them,” he says. “I look forward to seeing them installed in our quarters.”

“My present to you is in two parts, but they’re not quite related to each other, it’s more like you’re getting two presents,” Jill says. “Just open the box.”

Khan raises his eyebrows, but does, lifting out a smaller box and a tangle of straps and buckles. “Which part do I look at first?” he asks.

“So this thing, the straps, is multi-purpose, but basically it works as a carry harness to allow one adult to carry another, smaller adult and still leave their hands free,” Jill says. “I thought we could use it for flying, so you could have your hands free and I’d still be out of your way. It can also be used to tether space suits together.”

He smiles, looking at the straps. “That’s rather brilliant,” he says. “I look forward to us trying it out.”

“Now the other one,” Jill says, nodding at the box.

Khan smiles again but opens the box, lifting out an old-fashioned watch; something that wouldn’t have been out of place in his original time. “This isn’t exactly what it seems,” Jill says.

“I presumed as much,” Khan says. “What is it?”

“It’s a few things,” Jill says. “It’ll give you a link to the ship’s computers if you’re in range, although its ability to process information is limited. You can use it as a dead man’s switch, in emergency. Some other features. But mostly what it is is a specific life-sign detector. It has an absolute link to the black sapphire earrings I wear, and as long as my earrings are in and all my vitals are in good range everything’s fine. If your watch stops getting data from my earrings, or if my vitals drop precipitously, you’ll get an alarm and my last known coordinates.”

“When you say absolute, what is the range?” Khan asks.

“At least from planet surface to orbit,” Jill says. “I don’t know about interplanetary, though.”

“We’re not likely to be apart on that level,” Khan says. “This…” He looks at the watch, which is
quite elegant, something he would have worn in his time. “Thank you, lioness. I don’t know if I
can express how much this means to me.”

“I have an idea,” Jill says, smiling. “Here, let me fasten it for you.”

She buckles the leather strap around his wrist and touches the dial on the side, which causes the
face to light up briefly and the hands to spin before the watch sets itself to the correct time. “It
syncs to planetary clocks, or ship’s clocks,” she says. “I’ll show you how to link it to the ship’s
computers later.”

“That really is secondary,” Khan says. “Lioness, if all this did was tell me you were alive I would
be grateful for it.”

“Well, now you have a way to know if I’m alive and in trouble or not,” Jill says.

“Thank you,” Khan says softly, taking her hand. After all the dreams in which he saw her die, after
everything on Qo’noS—Khan fears very little but the thought of losing Jill makes his throat close
up and his stomach twist. “Did Andy build this?” he asks to redirect his thoughts.

Jill shakes her head. “There’s a planet, Bellaven, that makes paired things like this. I told Jake what
I was looking for, he found me some possibilities, and when you had to stay over on Jupiter for a
couple nights Jake and I went there and bought the set. I had to be there because it’s all keyed to
my biometrics.”

“Does this work in reverse? If my vitals drop, will your earrings alert you in some fashion?” Khan
asks.

“It does not because we didn’t have time for them to add that,” Jill says. “Adding the reverse
capability is apparently super complicated and limits what items you can use, plus it can take
months, so you get a one-way link. Also, in case you were curious, they had to pierce new holes
for the earrings so my previous holes can still be used.”

Khan can think of a few reasons why that might be, but doesn’t ask because it’s not the point. He
looks at the watch again, appreciating its design. “A couple things to know about it,” Jill says. “It’s
waterproof up to a hundred meters, and the strap looks like leather but it’s the same material my
bike stuff is made out of, so it’s stronger and waterproof and resistant to all kinds of other things. It
can survive vacuum although it may stop working if it’s exposed too long. Then again, if your
watch is exposed to vacuum long enough to stop working, you have bigger problems.”

“Rather,” Khan says. “Who designed the watch, lioness? Was it from Bellaven?”

“No, we brought the watch to them,” Jill says. “We bought the earrings from Bellaven because we
had to, but we brought them the watch. And the watch itself was designed and built by Eema’s
sister, Aunt Rachel, who runs the jewelry business that got started by an ancestor a long time ago. I
asked her for something that would suit you, and she gave me that.”

“She has good taste,” Khan says. “Or knew mine.”

“She asked me a few questions about you, first,” Jill admits, but smiles. “Nothing explicit or
anything, although she did suggest we consider thinking about children sooner rather than later. I
nodded and smiled and fled.”

“Sooner may be one thing but sooner does not mean now,” Khan says.

“It doesn’t, but did you get the reversal taken care of?” Jill asks. “Before we head off into space?”
“I did,” Khan says. “I told you I would, lioness.”

“I know but then you never mentioned it and I wasn’t sure,” Jill says.

“I told you I would do it, and I did,” Khan says. “What was to mention?”

“That you had done it, dragon,” Jill says. “Just so I knew.”

“Fair point,” Khan says, touching his heart. Jill smiles and catches his hand.

“Although I guess now we get to see if you have super-sperm and if they can overcome my new implant,” she says. “Which given my biological oddities I would not necessarily lay odds against.”

“Let’s deal with that if it happens, lioness,” Khan says. “Right now I am more interested in the two of us than a potential third.”

“Fair point,” Jill says, touching her heart.

“Are you ready for sleep?” he asks her. “Tomorrow will be long.”

“Tomorrow will be long enough I’m using stims instead of coffee,” Jill says. “I have some for you, if you like.”

Khan shakes his head. “I think not.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you would but I figured I’d ask,” Jill says. “I’m not quite ready for sleep yet but I think I’d like to lie down with you and have you hold me for a bit.”

“Of course,” Khan says. They settle into bed the way they usually do, Jill fitting herself against his side, under his chin.

“I love you,” she murmurs, her hand over his chest.

“And I you,” Khan murmurs back.

He falls asleep at some point and wakes when Jill groans and rolls out of bed. “Stims, then shower,” she says, stumbling toward her bag of medicines. While she doses herself Khan goes to use the toilet and start the water.

They clearly don’t have enough time for sex in the shower, but Khan holds Jill close for a long moment or three, bowing his head to her hair. She covers his arm with her hands, leaning back against him, and he hears her huff a little as she smiles.

“How have I amused you?” he asks.

“You haven’t,” Jill says. “Not like that. Just…I’m looking forward to the next stage of our lives, and that it’ll be our lives.”

“Yes,” Khan says softly. “But first we have to survive the wedding.”

She giggles, turning around to kiss him. “You make it sound like some terrible torment, that all these people want to celebrate us getting married,” she says. “Come on, dragon. Enjoy the public adulation a little. You’re not public enemy number one. You’re not even a public enemy.”

“Which also is a bit odd,” Khan admits but smiles. “All right, lioness. Ready for the madness?”
Jill laughs. “Bring it on.”

Chapter End Notes

And we just skipped about eleven weeks because I want to finish this story before the *fourth* movie comes out. Hope you don't mind.
They emerge from the bathroom into less chaos than Khan feared but still a fair bit. Alona and Jasmine stand in a clear patch while other people set up a chair and whatever else they need. He walks over to them, dressed in jeans but without a shirt. “We’re here to kidnap you for a few hours,” Alona says. “There will be no running, or sparring, or really anything fun of that nature. We have your formal attire for the wedding, Konstantin has the wedding bands, and right now you should finish getting dressed so we can take you to family breakfast. Hurry up, because Cat and Anandi have been cooking for a while already.”

Family breakfast means something to them; at the school, it was a rare treat of theirs, every other week. A breakfast to attend in pajamas, with almost nothing healthy to be found save fruit, and no real supervision by the teachers. Khan has some fond memories of family breakfast, as much as anything can be a fond memory of that school, and to have it this morning touches him.

He nods, rather than say that, and goes to pull on a shirt and shoes and get his wallet and link.

The baker’s dozen of them gather in the private dining room on their floor, and almost as soon as they take their seats Ekaterina and Anandi start bringing out food. “We will save the toasts for after we eat,” Cat says. “Khan, I will get you coffee. Everyone, eat.”

So they eat, and somehow the cooks gauged it perfectly because by the time they’re done there’s one sausage and one piroshky left. “We will not even make you clean up,” Cat says to Khan. “Mostly because Aisha has a straight razor for you and we would prefer she not cut anyone with it.”

“It’s his wedding day,” Maeve says. “He’s excused from all chores on his wedding day.” She finishes her tea and sets her mug down. “Just don’t get used to it, brother.”

“I don’t intend to have another wedding day,” Khan says and everyone laughs, although it’s a bit bittersweet for Khan. He hadn’t intended to have a second wedding day after his marriage to Rani, and yet here they are.

“Which is good because you’re only getting this present once,” Alona says. “We have something for you, from all dozen of us.”
“What is it?” Khan asks.

“We’ve been putting this together for you over the last few months,” Jasmine says, getting up from the table. She goes over to the server set against the wall and opens it, taking out a large box wrapped in blue paper. “Happy wedding day, Khan.” She sets the box in front of him and Khan looks at it curiously before reaching to unwrap it.

It’s an album, he sees, lifting it out of the box, one that looks like a photo album from his time. Thick pages, although when he opens the book he sees the pictures printed on them instead of in holders. But the first page makes him stop and just look at it, because he hadn’t realized this picture existed.

He’s maybe four or five in it, shirtless, just looking right at the camera. Khan doesn’t even remember someone taking this picture, and when he turns the page he sees more pictures of his childhood, such as it was. A lot of the pictures look like random candids that the project’s scientists took, but how did they get copies? He sees himself, with his siblings, or alone. There’s one picture of himself, Konstantin, and Ekaterina right around adolescence, dressed in swimsuits, that makes him smile a bit, looking at the younger versions of themselves.

“How did you even get all these?” he asks finally, turning through more pages.

“Jasmine,” Anandi says. “Before we blew up the facility as teenagers, we did save some of the data, and Jasmine took the pictures at that time. And you know, of course, she photographed you. Andy was able to help us convert all the files into a readable format, and then we put the album together.”

Khan doesn’t ask if they included pictures of Rani, but turns more to the back of the album and sees a picture from their wedding, one he doesn’t remember Jasmine capturing. They’d paused by a window, Khan looking down at Rani, and both of them are smiling, their hands intertwined.

“There are a few of the two of you,” Jasmine says. “I couldn’t leave her out, Khan.”

“No, of course not,” he says, turning pages. A few more from their wedding, some candids from the keep and their lives there, and then the next to last page of the album is a picture from Starfleet HQ, one that someone took after Jake and Jill ran the obstacle course because it’s her jumping on Khan and kissing him.

“The last page will be your wedding photo with Jill, when we have it,” Ekaterina says. “And then perhaps we will start a new album.”

“A family one,” Maeve says quietly. “We need someone to document our actions, for our records and our memories.”

“That would normally be me, but…” Jasmine looks uncertain. “I’m not sure I can do two jobs that well.”

“I can do it,” Amir says. “I was your backup in the keep, and you know I’m good with a camera. I don’t really have a role on the ship so far so let me be our chronicler and our historian.”

“Done,” Khan says and Amir grins.

“Do we have cameras on the ship? Or ones to bring with us?” Cat asks. “It seems short notice to get those things now.”

“It does and we have them,” Aisha says. “Each person on the ship has a personal camera in their
quarters, and it’s quite a good one, but we also have two high-end cameras that do video and still recordings—two in case one breaks, so one is locked away and I have the key and no one else will get it unless the first camera breaks.”

“Each person or each quarters?” Khan asks.

“Each person,” Aisha says. “Since we’re heading into the unknown, I thought it prudent for us all to have ways to record what we find.”

“And this is why Aisha ran your keep,” Alona says. “Because she thinks of everything related to it.”

“And I think of everything related to the ship and its humans,” Aisha says amiably. “Also, consider this your warning that I will be keeping order aboard the ship and I will not hesitate to shoot you in a nonlethal place if I think you deserve it. We have sparring rooms, three of them, and there will be no fighting in the common areas.”

“But that’s no fun at all,” Matthew and Alona say in unison.

“I’m sure you’ll find ways to entertain yourselves that do not involve destroying furniture or things,” Aisha says, unconcerned.

Each person has a personal space on the ship, somewhere other than their quarters that is considered “their” space. Aisha’s, as it was in the keep, is a little nook just between the kitchen and the dining hall, a place with a table, comfortable seating for about five, enough light to see clearly and a direct line to the kettle and tea leaves. Since she doesn’t sleep, she makes tea and settles into her nook, and those who can’t sleep find her.

She hears many confidences late at night, Khan knows, and she doesn’t always share them with him. Usually she doesn’t, and usually he doesn’t ask. But he will be asking her to keep an eye on general morale and attitudes aboard. He did it in the keep, and when Aisha becomes aware of an issue she usually will tell him if it’s something that warrants his involvement.

He wonders who will find her on the ship, and when, and what confidences she’ll hear over tea in the middle of gamma shift.

He also wonders how she decorated her quarters, and whether she included a bed. He thinks she likely did, because she does rest, and beds are convenient if she has a lover—although Aisha has never had a lover in all the time Khan’s known her and he thinks she may be asexual. But that’s completely beside the point and he’s certainly not about to ask.

Jill’s space is the zero-G bubble they have in the ship. It’s there both simply because they could do it and they thought it might be useful for experimentation. So the labs form a circle, and in the middle of the circle sits a fairly large sphere made of transparent aluminum that has no gravity.

None of Khan’s family are all that comfortable in it, but when they got it working, Jill was the last to test it and Khan watched her stretch out and just drift, twisting now and again to drift differently. She didn’t come out until Khan knocked on the sphere and made her come back to reality, and Khan thinks she’s spent some time in the sphere every day since. Everyone else has tacitly agreed to her claim on it and no one goes near it, although Khan figures if they ever do need it for an experiment Jill will be amenable to letting them share.

His own space is in the small observatory they created, the highest point on the ship and thus most exposed, but it can be sealed off from the rest of the ship below. It’s quiet, he’s alone, and he can
watch the stars fly past him, or watch the black outside.

“Enough,” Cat says, interrupting the bickering Khan hadn’t really been paying attention to. “This is a celebration of our oldest brother on the day of his wedding, not a chance for you to squabble.” She gets to her feet, looking at Khan. “My brother,” she says in Russian. “I wish you the happiness with your lioness that I have found with my wolf.”

Khan touches his heart, moved. She hadn’t said that to him when he married Rani.

“I wish you the happiness I have found with my Katya,” Konstantin says, also getting to his feet. “And I wish you the reflexes to dodge when your lioness is displeased with you.”

Everyone laughs at that, even Khan, but there’s truth in it.

“I wish you decades with her,” Bishop says, next to stand. “Longer, if possible.”

“I wish you the quiet moments between,” Katsuro says and Khan knows exactly what he means.

Matthew next, and Khan knows the order they’re using now. “I wish you a life with laughter,” he says. “And joy.”

“I wish you the luxury of being able to relax with your lioness,” Alona says. “After a day’s work, or a long pursuit.”

“I wish you the kind of love that only deepens with time,” Maeve says, getting up.

“I wish you both years of health,” Anandi says. “I wish you the luxury of those years.”

Jasmine next, which doesn’t surprise Khan. “I wish you the luxury of being able to choose children,” she says, and that earns her a few surprised looks but Khan remembers all too clearly the night after Rani’s funeral, when he’d wept on her the way he hadn’t with anyone else. He remembers grieving that, their lost chances.

She’ll never betray his confidences, but that she chose to wish him something she knew he wanted, or had at one point—there are reasons Jasmine is his right hand, and has been since she was twelve. She never forgets a detail about him. She doesn’t forget anything, really, but she never forgets anything about Khan or something he’s asked her to learn.

Aisha comes after Jasmine. “I wish you a harmonious home,” she says. “Love doesn’t always mean you like each other.”

“This is true,” Khan says, but smiles. After so long in each other’s pockets, he thinks he and Jill will do fine.

Amir next. “I wish you an only mildly-interesting life,” he says. “Enough to keep you engaged, not enough that we start wondering why the hell we all did this.”

That earns a laugh, and Khan smiles, remembering the Chinese curse.

Carson last. “I wish you a working partnership as happy as your romantic one,” he says.

Khan gets to his feet, finally. “Thank you. All of you.” He looks around the table, at his family. “It is important to me that this time you are all here. I know that was not possible last time.”

“Things are a bit different now,” Bishop says drily.
“Yes.” But Khan smiles. “But...thank you. I am touched by your wishes for me and my marriage, truly. Whether we will survive the spectacle, I am uncertain.”

Everyone laughs. “It will be quite an affair, but it should be,” Cat says. “You and Jill saved Earth from intergalactic war. With help, of course, but let us give credit where it is due. In lieu of any other suitable recognition, your wedding must stand in as celebration.”

“You’ve been speaking with Viola, haven’t you,” Khan says.

She laughs. “In truth I agree with her on this, Khan. We averted a war, that is something to celebrate. The people certainly want a celebration, and are puzzled as to why there hasn’t been one.”

“The celebration should have come after the accords were signed,” Khan says.

“And it did, but that did not celebrate those who got the Federation and the Klingons to the accords,” Ekaterina says. “And it is not just us, Khan. Six hundred eighty-one Klingons died for these, and we do them a disservice by remaining quiet about their bravery and their honor.”

“So we will celebrate today,” Konstantin says. “And we will all—“ he looks directly at Khan—“have a great time.”

“I want you to remember one thing, when you start bitching about the size of this,” Aisha says. “You told Jill you didn’t give a damn as long as we were all there. You have nobody to blame but yourself if you don’t like how it turned out.”

“Remember, they actually like us this time,” Matthew says. “So smile and be happy and meet a fuckton of people you’ll never meet again.”

Khan raises a hand. “I intend to enjoy my own wedding, thank you,” he says. “However I do think I am justified in saying that neither Jill nor I intended our wedding to be this much of a spectacle.”

“This is true,” Cat says. “But what an incredible spectacle it will be.”

“Not with you looking like that,” Aisha says. “Come with me, Khan, I have a freshly sharpened blade that wants to meet your throat.”

“You make that sound so cheerful, and I would be more troubled but I know Jill needs me alive and intact,” Khan says, following her out of the dining room.

“I have never so much as nicked you,” Aisha says indignantly. “Now I should, just because.”

“On my wedding day?” Khan tries for plaintive and she snorts, but waves him into her quarters. It doesn’t surprise Khan that the bed is neatly made but the pillows are a bit disheveled, but he doesn’t comment. He really doesn’t want Aisha to cut him.

She motions him into the bathroom, where she has a stool set up. Khan sits on it and she drapes a barber’s cape around him. “You just close your eyes and let me move your head as I need to,” Aisha says, laying a hot flannel over his throat.

This is almost familiar between them; it never was common enough to be familiar, but Khan remembers how fussy Aisha can be with the brush and shaving cream, and he does close his eyes, relaxing into the known.

He doesn’t think he’d trust Cat with a straight razor this close to his throat, but Khan is also
reasonably certain she has feline DNA somewhere in there. Although really, he wouldn’t trust Cat with a straight razor because she doesn’t know how to use it.

Aisha, however, somewhere learned from an expert, and every time she demonstrates this Khan appreciates it because there’s something very soothing about being given a shave by someone who knows exactly what they are doing. “Jill wants to learn how to do this,” he says when Aisha has lifted the blade away from him.

“Does she? Huh.” Aisha says nothing else for a moment, working around his chin. “I would teach her,” she says finally. “Since I presume you intended to have her ask me.”

“She intended to ask you, but yes,” Khan says.

“All right,” Aisha says. “I’ll teach her.”

“Thank you,” Khan murmurs and then shuts up because she’s shaving his throat and he doesn’t want to get cut, accidentally or on purpose.

She finishes shaving him and puts something on his face afterward Khan can’t identify but which smells neutral enough he doesn’t object. “I told Jill to order this for you,” Aisha says. “You should use it.”

“We can discuss that later,” Khan says.

“We don’t need to discuss it, just use it,” Aisha says. “Now sit up straight, I want to trim your hair.”

Khan keeps his eyes closed through the entire process because he doesn’t want to see what she’s doing; for whatever reason, he particularly dislikes getting his hair cut and suffers through it as infrequently as possible. Half the reason for the ponytail had been it meant fewer hair cuts.

Perhaps eighty percent.

When she finishes, Aisha wipes a towel roughly over his neck to brush away loose hairs and unsnaps the cape. “Look at yourself,” she says. “I didn’t make you hideous.”

“I wasn’t actually worried about that,” Khan says, opening his eyes. “That’s…shorter than I thought.”

“Hair grows back,” Aisha says. “Also, it looks good on you like this. Does things to your cheekbones.”

Khan looks at her. “Since when do you care about my cheekbones?”

“I don’t give a fuck what they look like,” Aisha says. “But for people who do, they will appreciate this haircut.”

“It does look good,” Khan says, studying it a bit more. “Thank you, Aisha.”

She sniffs, but he can tell she’s pleased. “You’re welcome. Stay here, I need to go get Konstantin with your tux.”

Khan stays put, because what else is he going to do?

Aisha returns a moment later, followed by Konstantin, but without any kind of garment bag. “There is a place for you to change near the location, so you need not travel in formal wear,” Konstantin
says. “I went there this morning and ensured your clothing and shoes were all there.”

“And the rings?” Khan asks.

“Those I have on me, still,” Konstantin says. “Did you think I would do otherwise?”

Khan smiles a bit. “No, of course not.”

“Has Jill seen them?” Aisha asks.

“No,” Khan says. “They weren’t ready until last week and she decided she would wait.”

“Which is only a problem if she hates your taste in rings,” Aisha says.

“I doubt she will,” Khan says, and he’d get to his feet but the bathroom’s rather crowded with his wings and Konstantin. “We’ll find out shortly.”

“I am sure she will love it,” Konstantin says. “How could she not? They’re beautiful, Khan.”

“Well, let me see,” Aisha says and Khan gestures for Konstantin to show her.

Each band is made of blackened adamantium, matte and plain save for the etching. Khan’s ring, a fairly wide band, has the head of a lioness etched in gold; Jill’s, a narrower band, has a dragon wrapping around the band, also etched in gold. They’re plain enough not to get in the way of fighting or any other activity, but unique and beautiful and, Khan thinks, suiting them. He’s grateful to the Femarans, who listened to what he wanted and made the rings for him as their wedding present.

Inside Khan’s band is etched Jill’s name-sign, and Khan’s name-sign is engraved on the underside of Jill’s band.

“All right, she won’t hate it,” Aisha says, looking at the rings. “These are stunning, Khan. And my God does Jill have small hands.”

“She has slightly smaller hands even than Rani, and I thought that was unlikely,” Khan says. “But only slightly.”

“I’m amazed they had enough room for the dragon,” Aisha says.

“The artisans weren’t sure they would, but they made it work,” Khan says.

“Where did you go for these?” Aisha asks, handing the velvet box back to Konstantin.

“The Femarans,” Khan says. “When we visited there, I noticed Melcian had on some jewelry that was very high quality, and Cat later found out her ex-husband had made it. Jake made some calls and he was happy to meet with me to create these.”

“You didn’t trust any jeweler on Earth?” Aisha asks.

“I thought there was something fitting about our wedding bands being made by the same people who created the weapons to allow us to reach this point,” Khan says. “A statement of war, now a statement of commitment. The metal itself is neutral; it is how we use it that defines it.”

“We had to fight the small war to win the large peace,” Konstantin says. “And without both, we would not have today.”
“It’s true,” Aisha says. “And that is fitting, Khan, that the metal we used to win against the Klingons be used for your rings.”

“I thought so,” Khan says. “Hold them safe until the ceremony, Kostenka.”

“Of course.” Konstantin tucks the case away in his jacket—he isn’t dressed either, Khan notes. “Let us go and change. I am to be your valet, should you need one.”

“You always made the perfect valet,” Khan says as Aisha leaves the bathroom and Konstantin moves to follow her, giving Khan enough room to stand and exit.

“Only because I have the patience for all the little details,” Konstantin says. “Come. It’s a brief walk from here.”

As they walk, Khan starts seeing chairs set up for the ceremony. He notes the number, and then the quiet streets, and wonders if he should have accepted Jill’s offer of stims, but has to laugh at himself. When he ruled, he enjoyed a bit of ceremony and public acclaim now and then; who wouldn’t? He might as well enjoy today; he has no responsibilities to worry about.

The main square for the ceremony has chairs on three sides, with an aisle down the middle of each sided; as they get closer to the wedding canopy Khan sees how it orients and from which direction Jill will likely be walking. Somewhat embarrassingly, she’s rehearsed this, but he hasn’t due to conflicting schedules and problems with the phaser cannon. But he’s fairly certain someone will have the exact job of making sure he does what he’s supposed to.

Someone did the first time he got married, at any rate, and that had been—not quite as big as this, but certainly lavish and a spectacle in its own right. Rani hadn’t cared, and neither had Khan; the quiet wedding was for them, with a few of Khan’s siblings and Rani’s father and brothers. The rest of it was for her extended family, and to prove to her immediate family he would treat her with the respect she deserved.

It’s probably not the best idea to be thinking about his first wedding so much on the day of his second but perhaps it’s inevitable. Khan does find it amusing that in both public weddings he’s being married according to a religious tradition that he doesn’t personally practice. Although the wedding today is based on Judaic tradition but isn’t a standard wedding ceremony, so he supposes that’s different.

“We’ve a room in here,” Konstantin says, taking him to a building right on the edge of the square. “Andy and Magpie are with Jill in the bride’s suite across the hall, so you’re not to open the door without getting confirmation you won’t see your lioness. She’s being very strict on that.”

“It makes her happy,” Khan says as they go inside. Konstantin swipes a keycard and lets them into a comfortably appointed studio, albeit one without a bed. Two garment bags hang from hooks in the bathroom door.

“It does, and today is about making her happy,” Konstantin says.

“Today is about her,” Khan says simply.

“I do think you have a bit to do with this, my brother,” Konstantin says, laughing as he goes to wash his hands.

“Well, yes, but you know as well as I do that the bride is always the center of focus at a wedding,” Khan says. “This is the party she mostly wanted, and entirely deserves.”
“You both deserve it,” Konstantin says. “We all do, Khan, for I agree with Katya about the lack of a proper celebration. We do the Klingons we fought a disservice by staying quiet.”

“Perhaps,” Khan admits, going to wash his hands when Konstantin finishes. “I am certain there will be numerous toasts to them today.”

“Of course,” Konstantin says. “Now, let me dress first, da? That way I can help you and we can avoid ripping fabric with your wings.”

Khan is reasonably certain he can get dressed without Konstantin’s help but agrees because he knows it pleases Kostenka to fuss. And truthfully, it will be easier to get the shirt and jacket on with help. He’s not sure why men’s fashion hasn’t advanced in the last few hundred years, but the tuxedo appears to be immortal.

The tailors did fit him for the tux—he had two sessions of it, squeezed in between trips to Jupiter—but Khan hadn’t actually seen what they did with it until he opens his garment bag. It looks fairly standard, save the wing slits, but his tie and cummerbund are gold, and the studs on his shirt black onyx.

Black for him, gold for her.

Konstantin helps him settle the clothes around his wings, and insists on doing up his shirt studs and cufflinks for him. “I didn’t get to do this last time,” Kostenka says. “Let me fuss a bit.”

“Before you finish,” Khan says and wraps his arms around his brother, holding on tight. Konstantin laughs and hugs him back, a true Konstantin hug that lifts Khan off the floor and leaves his ribs feeling bruised. “I had thought,” Khan says when he has breath again. “I had thought I would never see you again.”

“Twelve life-debts,” Konstantin says. “How do we even begin to pay them?”

“By keeping her alive,” Khan says. “And it is thirteen, for without her I would be dead by now.”

“In all likelihood,” Konstantin agrees quietly. “But. It is ill done of us to be gloomy on your wedding day. So we will celebrate the thirteen of us that exist, and celebrate your lioness, and your marriage, and leave talk of life-debts for another time. And now, let me finish getting you dressed, as we need to be outside for pictures soon.”

Khan lets Konstantin finish doing what he could likely do himself, but. This is his oldest brother, the second one born after Khan. Oldest, and closest, and had things been different once upon a time…but that never was meant to be, and neither Khan nor his brother wish otherwise.

Still. It’s something they both think about from time to time, a passing thought of ‘what if’, although Khan hasn’t truly thought about it since meeting Jill, save once, when Cat asked him the eternal question.

The unholy trinity, and now, perhaps, the unholy quartet.

Khan looks in the mirror when Konstantin finishes with him, and makes one minor adjustment to his tie mostly because he has to. “We do look good,” Konstantin says, touching Khan’s shoulder but careful not to rumple the jacket. His own tie and vest are black with a gold shimmer to them, and his cufflinks have wolves engraved on them.

“We do,” Khan agrees, but smiles. “Pictures, you said?”
“They promised me it would be painless,” Konstantin says. “If it is not, I will frown at them.”

Konstantin looking unhappy is usually enough to incentivize whomever he’s looking at. Khan can do it, but there’s something about being loomed over by a scowling 2 meter, solidly built man that he can’t reproduce.

Besides, it’s apparently not his job to worry about anything today. This is a decidedly strange feeling and the last time he had it was during the wedding festivities with Rani, where they’d told him exactly what to do every step of the way. Khan wonders if it’s a common thing among weddings, with the groom having nothing to do but show up and go where he’s told.

Cat and Konstantin had married quickly and secretly in their original time, to have it be official before they could be separated. Katsuro and Bishop held a small ceremony with the core seventeen about six weeks ago. No one else among them is married, or likely to be. So Khan’s ability to ask anyone about similar experiences is limited to nil.

However, if he sees Mikael today he’ll ask.

They go outside into honestly, a lovely day; cool but not too cool, sunny, a little breezy. Khan sees the photographers—multiple, but he supposes given the size of this affair it makes sense—and as he expected, one of them comes hurrying over to him and Konstantin as soon as she sees them. She has bright green hair and sunglasses on, but pushes the latter up on top of her head. “Good morning,” she says, thankfully not too perky about it. “I’m your photographer for the day—we have two for guests and general crowd shots, one for you, and one for your fiancée. So I will likely be following you around but with the intent of staying out of your way.”

Khan nods. “What is your name?” he asks.

“Oh,” the photographer says and blushes. “I’m Daphne. Sorry, forgot that part. Okay, so what I want to do is get some pictures of you alone, and then some of the two of you, and then as more people in the bridal party get here we’ll take more pictures. After the ceremony we’ll need about five minutes to get pictures of the two of you together, and then at some point during the reception we’ll need to steal you and Jill for more pictures, but we’ll try to make it quick so you can get back to the party.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. “Exactly how long is this party going to last?”

Daphne shrugs. “I got told to show up for a full day with the potential of overtime, which for me is anything over eight hours. The ceremony starts at 11, and the party starts after that, and I don’t think anyone specified an end time but things will likely wind down around sunset. Or not, I don’t know, this is apparently the party of the year.”

Konstantin thumps Khan on the back, above his wings. “I am certain you and Jill will be able to escape should you need to.”

“I certainly hope so,” Khan says because he really does have plans for the wedding night.

“But for now, pictures?” Daphne says hopefully. “I promise to make this as painless as possible.”

Khan gestures. “By all means,” he says. “Where do you need me?”

By the time she finishes with the pictures—which isn’t entirely painless but better than it could be—people are starting to arrive, and Khan both expects it and is startled when Travis materializes at his elbow. “Good morning, darling,” he says breezily. “I am here to ensure…how do I put this? I am here to ensure things go as planned.”
“You’re here to tell him what to do,” Konstantin says.

Travis laughs. “Well, yes, but I didn’t want to say so quite like that. But because you didn’t have time to rehearse this, I’ll run you through it quickly, but we need to go to your starting location as it’s almost time.”

“Is this a wedding or a stage performance?” Khan murmurs to Konstantin.

“Da,” Konstantin says and Khan smiles.

It really is a simple thing; they line up, with Cat behind Andrew and Ava, Konstantin behind her, and Khan behind him. Khan presumes Andy and Magpie will come out with Jill and Jake once he starts down the aisle.

Khan expected Cat’s dress to match Konstantin’s vest and was not proven wrong. The cut of the dress reminds Khan strongly of some of Cat’s dresses in their original time. She always favored fuller skirts because she can more easily hide a knife or two under them, and he’s fairly certain she’s armed today but is not about to ask.


“All right,” Andrew says amiably. Khan hasn’t interacted with the man much beyond the two sessions he and Jill had with him and Ava, to design the ceremony, but has gotten the impression Andrew exists somewhat like Katsuro, in a constant state of Zen. The difference between them, Andrew has four adolescent children and currently two dogs. (The dogs are not at the wedding; the children are.)

Although, really, given the four children and two dogs, Khan wonders if it’s Zen or if Andrew has simply given up. He doesn’t think so, but one never knows.

The resemblance between Andrew, Sarah, and Jake is striking; there’s no question the three are related. Khan wonders what Jake’s brothers look like and really does hope he finds out tonight.

The music starts, distracting Khan from his thoughts, and he watches Travis listen, clearly waiting for something. After eight bars, Travis touches Andrew’s shoulder and he starts walking down the aisle; a measure later, Ava goes; a measure later Cat; Konstantin; two measures and Travis gestures to Khan, who starts walking and reflects that he could almost be going to his public execution if times were different.

Instead, he gets murmurs from the filled seats—every single one filled—and is aware of eyes on him, but he ignores them with the ease of practice. At the front, a quiet young woman in a gray dress points him to where he is to stand. Khan lets his wings relax a little, since he has room, and glances back at Konstantin, who smiles. Cat does, as well, and hooks her first two fingers around his for a moment.

(Two fingers, because pinky fingers were weak, according to Ekaterina.)

Khan looks back and sees Magpie walking down the aisle, carrying a small bouquet of tiger lilies. She wears a dress that shimmers between gold and silver, sleeveless with an empire waist. When she reaches them, she winks at Khan and moves as the young gray woman points her. Khan looks back to see Andy, and smiles, because Andy wears slim black pants and a Chinese-style tunic with a mandarin collar. The tunic is black, and has gold Chinese dragons embroidered across it.

The music changes, and quite a lot of people get to their feet. Khan looks at Jill and Jake, standing at the end of the aisle, and she’s breathtaking even in the plain gray Starfleet uniform—although
hers, and Jake’s, are enlivened by rows of colored bars and medals. Jill has three medals, Jake has two.

He looks down and notes that she’s wearing Marveek’s boots, which makes him smile, but really she could be wearing a sack and he’d still think she was beautiful right now—and he’d be right.

Jake and Jill get to the front and Jake leans down, kissing Jill’s cheek. “Love you, half-pint,” he murmurs. “Happy wedding day.”

She kisses his cheek, not leaving a smudge behind. “Love you, too, Aaron.”

Jake laughs and goes to take his seat.

The ceremony itself is fairly brief, by their request. Andrew talks about chosen family, and a wedding being a marriage of two families, and Khan smiles because they’re rather merged already. Andrew talks a bit more about the sacred contract of marriage, although he frames it as generally spiritual rather than religious. After that Ava sings something in Hebrew Khan can’t catch enough of to translate properly, but it’s some kind of blessing on marriage.

It is beautiful, though, and he lets it wash over him.

Because neither of them are Jewish they can’t really use the Judaic ring exchanges, so with Andrew and Ava they came up with an alternative. When it’s time, Khan turns to Konstantin, who hands him the box. Khan touches his heart and turns to Jill, opening it and taking out her ring. Konstantin takes the box back so Khan can slip the ring on Jill’s finger. “With this ring, you are made holy to me, for I love you as my own soul,” he says softly. “You are now my wife.”

Jill takes the ring from Konstantin and slips it on Khan’s hand, her fingers warm and steady against his. “With this ring, you are made holy to me, for I love you as my own soul,” she says. “You are now my husband.”

Ava sings something else Khan doesn’t translate, and then Khan and Jill scrawl their names on the data pad with the wedding certificate.

“By the authority vested in me by the Earth government, I declare you legally wedded,” Andrew says and grins. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Khan looks at Jill, who reaches up for him; he lifts her up, kissing her, and all around them a thunderous cheer goes up.

Chapter End Notes

The wedding vows Khan and Jill use I found as alternate vows for a Jewish ceremony. I didn’t make them up.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

It's the wedding party. Do you really need a summary?

Chapter Notes

Well...we're done. This is a really long chapter so settle in, I guess. More extensive notes after the chapter, but one first:

This story would absolutely not exist, or not be finished, or be a lot less than it is without foxtales' help. She has been my sounding board, my muse, critical reader, all of that and more, and I leaned on her a lot when I was struggling with the story. Any flaws in it are wholly mine--and I know there are many; this sprawling, messy universe probably needs a serious editing pass but we're going to let it stand. But without her this would be a much lesser story.

So this story is dedicated to her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When he sets her down, they get motioned to start the recessional, at which point they exit to find Travis waiting for them. “Lady Jill, you’re to use the same room you were in earlier, and the attendants are already in there to redo your hair and makeup,” he says. “As for you, good sir, you can likely head over to the reception area, where the hors d’oeuvres are already being passed around and the bar is open for you all night long. However, if you wanted formal pictures in your uniform we would need to capture them now.”

“I don’t,” Jill says. “I’m sure the photographers got us during the ceremony, I don’t need more than that. I want the fun fancy dress for the rest of the pictures.”

“Then, darling, go transform into the beautiful queen of the day,” Travis says. Khan looks at Jill. “Don’t take too long, lioness.”

“I will take as long as I need to look perfect,” she says, making a face at him. “Go on, have a drink, I’ll be there soon.”

He shakes his head, but smiles. “All right,” he says. “Where exactly is the reception area?”

“I can take you there,” Travis says. “We’re using the open space behind and next to the reception hall in the HQ main complex. We’re also using the reception hall.”

“How many people are you expecting?” Khan asks.

“We have confirmations from just over a thousand,” Travis says. “I expect the total to end up around eleven hundred by the time we’re done.”
He smiles, though. “But you don’t have to say hello to all or even most of them.”

“Thank Heaven for small mercies,” Khan murmurs under his breath.

The spread for the reception does impress him, though, with tables and chairs scattered throughout and enough different food stations Khan thinks they might be able to feed a thousand people.

But it’s not his problem. He’s certain that whatever he wants to eat today he will be able to, and he’s not responsible for feeding the crowd.

Inside the reception hall—which flows smoothly into the open space—Khan finds his siblings; most of them have drinks, but he declines when the server comes to take his order.

“Brother, have a drink,” Matthew says. “It’s your wedding day.”

“I’m aware, believe me,” Khan says, acutely aware of the warm weight on his left ring finger, achingly familiar again.

“Where did your vows come from?” Maeve asks. “They were lovely.”

“Andrew,” Khan says. “He and his wife, Ava—Jake’s uncle and aunt—said they couldn’t perform a full Jewish wedding ceremony for us because neither of us were Jewish, which we understood. But we used Jewish themes in the ceremony, and the vows were ones Andrew said were sometimes used as alternate vows in Jewish ceremonies. Since it didn’t reference anything specifically religious, we decided we wanted to use it.”

“It really was lovely,” Maeve says. “Now let me see your ring.”

Khan laughs and submits to having his ring examined by all of his family who haven’t seen it yet.

Then people he’s never seen before start coming over to him to congratulate him. This, at least, is familiar, and Khan nods and smiles politely and shakes hands where appropriate. At some point Matthew does get him a drink, something in a tall brown bottle that tastes like a particularly good cider, and Khan appreciates it but wonders how much longer it will take Jill. It seems as though an hour has passed, but when he looks at the chrono it’s been scarcely more than twenty minutes.

“What am I drinking?” he asks Matthew.

“It’s from a planet called Vesh,” Matthew says. “It’s cider, made from a native fruit that’s like an apple but isn’t quite. The bars are…extensively stocked, although in this case I ordered it for you because Alona and I had it and I thought you’d like it.”

“I do,” Khan says. “Jill’s former captain grew up on Vesh.”

“So many threads,” Maeve says.

“We ordered some for the ship,” Matthew says. “Aisha limited how much alcohol we could stock, for some reason, but we did order some of this.”

“For some reason being that we needed to stock things like food, and linens,” Aisha says. “Alcohol is not as important as ensuring we can eat, thank you.”

“Or have clean sheets,” Maeve says. “Khan, did you ever tell me how the laundry on the ship works?”

“It’s sonic,” Khan says. “Standard ship’s issue machines, and since it’s sonic one machine does it
all. They tell me the machine will wash, dry, and fold sheets and towels but we hadn’t yet tested that as far as I know, just that it worked to wash.”

“It works,” Aisha says. “It’s actually quite decent at folding towels, and I don’t like how it folds the sheets but I admit they are neatly folded when it’s done. The machines are also quiet enough they can be run at all hours without disturbing anyone. Everyone will have one set of linens on the bed and two as spares, and I will wash linens once a week. If you go through all three sets of linens before I wash them, you’re on your own to clean up. Towels, same principle.”

“Reasonable enough,” Amir says. “Are they all boring white?”

“No, they’re all boring gray,” Aisha says. “Keeping white sheets white requires bleach and I wasn’t interested.”

“Gray is standard issue on Starfleet ships,” a voice Khan recognizes says and he turns to see Jim Kirk in uniform, cap off because they’re inside. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Khan says.

“But, uh, where’s your wife?” Kirk asks.

“Changing from her uniform to her fun dress,” Khan says. “I’ve no idea how long it’s supposed to take.”

“Well, the party won’t really start until she gets here,” Kirk says.

“It won’t,” Khan agrees. He takes another sip of his cider; it really is quite good. But as he’d expected, when he sets the bottle down Travis has materialized at his elbow. Khan looks at him for a moment, trying to figure out how a man taller than Khan himself manages to sneak up on people. Then he smiles and decides to go with it, it doesn’t matter today.

“I’m not sure what discussion you just had with yourself but I’m going to trust the outcome was favorable,” Travis says.

“It was,” Khan says. “What do you need me to do?”

“Your bride is about ready to make her entrance, so if you’ll come with me,” Travis says.

“Will you tell me one thing?” Khan asks as he sets down his cider and follows Travis toward the main dance floor. “Did she intend to tumble into the wedding?”

“She thought about it and decided she didn’t want to compromise on the dress enough to make it something she could tumble in,” Travis says, smiling. “However, she kept on the boots she wore for the ceremony. Something about them having been good enough for the Klingons, they’re good enough for her wedding.”

“Our wedding,” Khan says absently, but that has the ring of familiarity to it.

“Of course, darling,” Travis says, petting his arm.

He smiles, because really what else is he to do? Travis brings him to the center of the dance floor, with a direct path to the door. Their host, or whomever, starts speaking and people stop talking, listening to him. Slowly they gather to get a good view.

Khan mostly ignores them, but he hears music, and then sees movement from outside. His wings
shift and he folds them back, but he can’t help but step forward when he sees Jill come through the
doors.

Her gown has golden-red embroidery along the edges of the bodice, and the straps are made of
gold—dragon scales, Khan realizes as she gets closer. The patterns on her bodice are sprays of
dragon’s scales, and her straps are made of scales. Her skirt has a translucent white overskirt over a
full gold skirt, and sprays of golden-red scales circle the bottom of the white skirt.

Her hair spills down in curls from a high ponytail, secured with a gold band. They look…neater
than usual, close to ringlets; Khan wonders how long that took to accomplish, and how much
product is in her hair, then smiles at himself. He’ll wash it out for her later.

He holds out his hands for her, but Jill smiles, changing to circle him. He turns with her, looking at
the back of her dress—it’s backless, as he expected, and the sides and bottom are edged with
golden-red scales. The hem hovers just above the floor she won’t step on it.

She stops in front of him, facing him, and Khan holds out his hands again. His lioness takes them,
then gives him an impish grin and jumps on him. He catches her, not entirely surprised, and—
because it’s his wedding day and he can relax a bit—swings her in a circle, Jill’s skirt flying out
behind them and the crowd cheering for them.

She kisses him soundly, then jumps to the floor, shaking herself briskly to set her dress to rights.
“We decided dragons were easier for dresses than lionesses,” she says, taking Khan’s hands.

“It’s perfect,” Khan says, raising her hand to his lips. “You’re perfect.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Jill says, but smiles. “I feel pretty damn close right now, though. Dance
with me, dragon.”

“What did you pick?” Khan asks.

Jill turns to the host and a moment later the music starts. “Given everything, I thought this one
appropriate,” she says, settling into Khan’s arms to the tune of “As Time Goes By”.

“It’s older than I am,” Khan says, touched by it and also by the thought behind the song.

“Yeah, but it’s a classic for a good reason,” Jill says.

“It is,” Khan agrees.

“They installed the piano yesterday,” Jill says as they move around the dance floor. “It’s been
tuned, and Jasmine tested it out and says it’s a decent piano. I didn’t know she played.”

“Most of us learned one instrument or another, and many of us learned piano—or keyboard—
because it was accessible at the school,” Khan says. “Jasmine was—is—quite talented, and I
expect she’ll use the piano a bit once we settle into a routine. She preferred piano, and dance, to
singing.”

“Where is her spot on the ship?” Jill asks.

“Her quarters, since she does not share them,” Khan says. “If Jasmine wishes solitude, she wants
the ability to lock out the world. Physically.”

“Andy does, too,” Jill says. “I’m a little worried about how Andy will do on the ship, without as
much space.”
“Andy has two spaces on the ship, both of which are exclusive to him,” Khan points out. “His quarters, which Andy is not sharing, and her lab, which is solely for her use. If Andy wishes to be alone, he can arrange it easily.”

“True,” Jill says. “I just worry. And I know the ship’s not that small, at all, but. It is an enclosed space.”

“And we will have opportunity to stop and get off, now and again,” Khan says. “It will be fine, lioness. Focus on today.”

She laughs, looking up at him. “I love you,” she says. “Always. So long as part of me exists, I will love you.”

“And I you,” Khan says, leaning down as she stretches up, their lips meeting in the middle.

That earns them a round of applause and cheers, and Jill’s laughing when she pulls back. “Okay, so in all my planning I kind of didn’t think about what happened once we got here,” she says. “I don’t know what’s next.”

“Fortunately, darling, I do,” Travis says and Khan turns to see the man just to his right. “There is nothing you have to do from now until the toasts, which won’t be until everyone has had a chance to have a bite and a drink or two. There is no formal meal tonight due to the size of the crowd but there are stations all through the reception for different foods plus servers circulating with trays. You can either wander and find food yourselves and say hello along the way to whomever you might meet, or you can settle into your table and have your food brought to you.”

“No, I want to see this,” Jill says. “But I really want a drink. Can I ask for someone to get me a drink and bring it to me wherever I am?”

“Of course you can, darling,” Travis says. “You can have almost anything you want today.”

“I would very much love a vodka and cranberry,” Jill says. “The best quality vodka they have.”

“As if you’d get anything but,” Travis says. “For you, good sir?”

“There was a cider I had before Jill entered.” Khan says. “Something from Vesh. I don’t know what happened to that bottle but another would be appreciated.”

“Of course. Go enjoy, and cut in line. You’re allowed to cut in line.” Travis gives Jill an air kiss—careful not to smudge her makeup—and hurries off toward one of the bars.

Khan looks at Jill and takes her hand. “Let’s go mingle, and see what they’re feeding us, lioness.”

It takes them… a while to get food, because they get stopped every three meters. Mostly just by people neither of them know wishing them congratulations; Khan doesn’t know if Jill is looking for people but she doesn’t mention anything to him. She does seem to be looking for something but he’s not sure what.

“There it is,” Jill says and hurries in the direction of a food station with a gold-and-black sign. When they reach it, Khan finds out it’s a deli—specifically, an old-style kosher deli. He’s not sure this one’s actually kosher or just pretending, but either way. “They do mini sandwiches, so they don’t fill you up for days. But I couldn’t taste it, so let’s see how close they get to actual deli.”

“Hey, we’re legit,” the guy behind the counter says. “You want pastrami or corned beef?”
“Both,” Jill says. “And plenty of mustard.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear,” the guy says. “For you, Mister groom?”

“I’ll try the same,” Khan says.

“You’ll like it,” the guy promises him and ducks behind a curtain to the food prep section of his station. When he comes out, he has two plates with small—but thick—sandwiches on them. Each plate also has a pickle. “Half sour, like they don’t make no more,” he says, handing each of them a plate. “You like it, come back for more. You don’t like it, don’t come back.”

“Thank you,” Jill says. She picks up her sandwich and takes a bite; Khan holds off, watching her eat the first bite. “Okay, that really is legit,” she says after she swallows. “Best deli I’ve had not in New York.”

“Where’d you think we’re from?” the guy asks. “Originally, anyway.”

“You sound like Brooklyn,” a voice says and Khan and Jill turn to see a tall and fairly broad man standing there. He has short curly hair, dark eyes, and Khan knows immediately he’s part of Jake’s family, just not which part.

“Samuel!” Jill shoves her plate at Khan and hugs Samuel. “Of course we found you by the deli.”

“Honestly, I just looked for wings and found you,” Samuel says. “We’ve got tables but with many small children we decided to send a scout and have you come to us.”

“Yes, and we will but I need to finish my sandwich,” Jill says. “Also, Khan, this is Jake’s older younger brother, Samuel. He works for Starfleet, planetary security. Samuel, this is Khan.”

“I did get that impression,” Samuel says but grins, holding out a hand. Khan hands both plates to Jill and shakes it, pleased by the man’s grip.

“Is Leah your daughter or David’s?” he asks.

“Leah is David’s,” Samuel says. “I have Deborah, who’s four, and Allen, who’s two. David has Rose, who is almost four, and Leah, who’s six months. Eema got a surplus of girl grandchildren to balance having three boys.”

“But Eema now has four grandchildren so has no need to pester me or Jake about it,” Jill says.

“You say that like four grandchildren stops her from wanting more,” Samuel says. “Bring your sandwich with you, we’re actually near a food station that does some amazing things with some animal from a planet I’ve never heard of, but it tastes like the very best pork belly and then some.”

“None of the boys keep kosher,” Jill says quickly, looking at Khan. “Although David keeps kosher-style, somewhat.”

“Yeah, but I really don’t,” Samuel says. “And pork belly is damn good when cooked properly.”

“It so is,” Jill says. “I wonder if we have a station here that does it.”

“That’s what I said, come by us and you’ll get the station that does it better,” Samuel says cheerfully. “And say hi to the family.”

Khan takes his plate back from Jill and follows Samuel to a section of tables under a canopy, near a station decorated in red and blue. He originally thinks just a couple of the tables belong to the
Jacobs family, and then starts noticing resemblances and similar coloring and looks at Samuel. “How many of you are there?” he asks and everyone laughs.

“So you’ve got the extended Gould-Jacobs family here,” Samuel says, grinning. “I’ll introduce people who will hopefully raise their hands when I do. You know Eema, and Abba. I’m the older dork. That is my beautiful wife Linda, in the blue dress, and the little girl on her lap is our daughter Deborah. Her brother Allen is sleeping on one of his cousins, I’ll get there in a moment. David is the one with the baby on his chest, because David is the baby whisperer and Leah is a fussy little thing. Elizabeth is next to him with Rose on her lap. So that’s Eema and hers. Eema has five siblings. There’s Aunt Ruth, who’s a traveling photojournalist with her partner Luke. They don’t have kids. Aunt Mara is Aunt Ruth’s identical twin, and runs the family jewelry business in New York. She and Uncle Adam have two kids, my cousins Naomi over there, and Matthew there. Matthew and his husband Justin have adopted twins, Ben and Avi, but the twins are regrettably ill with we’re not sure what but it seems unpleasant so Justin quarantined himself at home with them and sent Matthew here with a clean bill of health.”

“Noble of him,” Khan says, honestly meaning it. Quarantine with sick twin children seems a particularly dreadful way of experiencing it.

“It helps that he’s a pediatrician,” Samuel says. “So that’s them. Then we have Uncle Stephen, who runs a restaurant in Las Vegas. His husband is Uncle Joshua, who does nothing but piss people off as he will happily tell you. But really he’s a writer. The only way they would ever have children would be as appetizers.”

“No, soup,” Stephen says. “Poached.” He has the same calm Zen expression as Katsuro, and straight black hair around an unlined face. Khan really has no idea how old he is.

“They scream when they go into the water,” Joshua says helpfully, next to him.

“Like lobsters,” Stephen says.

“What’s a lobster?” Rose asks.


“Kay.” Rose seems satisfied with that.

“On Uncle Stephen’s right we have Aunt Judy, who before Jill was our other Olympian,” Samuel says. “She medaled in diving. One gold, one silver. Now she coaches. Her husband, Uncle Noah, is a marine biologist. They have three scary children but all of them are in the middle of a month-long competition on New Aegean they’ve been training for for over a year. So they—and Uncle Noah—send their congratulations and best wishes but could not be here. Consider yourself lucky. Really, really lucky.”

“Really,” Judy says. A bit of silver touches her short dark hair, but not much. But the lines around her eyes and mouth indicate she smiles easily and often.

“I will take your word for it,” Khan says.

“I’ve met them,” Jill says. “You’re lucky. We both are.”

“My daughters aren’t really that bad,” Judy says. “They’re worse.”

“How many pre-schools did they get kicked out of?” Jill asks.
“The twins got kicked out of four,” Judy says. “Or, rather, we were told the school didn’t feel they were capable of meeting our children’s needs and we should seek alternate placement. We finally gave up and homeschooled, and then kept it when the demon came along.”

“The demon?” Khan asks, rather regretting he won’t get to meet these women.

“My youngest daughter was a perfectly happy baby,” Judy says. “Laughed, smiled, cooed at everything, thought everything was fun. There are some in my husband’s family—which isn’t here, thank your lucky stars—that decided she was really an evil demon meant to suck out people’s souls. She hasn’t learned that trick yet that I’m aware of and we won’t comment on her ability to suck other things.”

Jill snickers. “Except in how you just did.”

“I’m her mother,” Judy says. “I’m allowed.”

“And moving on from that, last we have Uncle Andrew and Aunt Ava, whom you know,” Samuel says. “They have four kids. Rachel, and she’s the one Allen is sleeping on. Misha, over there, Daniel, and Yael next to Uncle Andrew. And that, believe it or not, is all of us.”

“That’s a fair number of you,” Khan says.

“It’s not that often we’re all in the same place,” Sarah says. “We do try to have an extended family reunion with some of the far-flung cousins every other year, but while many of us are in the New York area many are not.”

“It’s good that we’re all here for a happy event,” Andrew says.

“There you are,” Travis says, coming over to Khan. “I do apologize dreadfully for the delay in your drink, darling. I do promise it is the perfect temperature.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, taking the bottle.

“And for you, sugar,” Travis says, handing Jill her glass. “I’ll be just around the corner if you need anything at all.”

“Thanks, honey,” Jill says. “We’ll let you know.”

“Now that you have drinks, we should have a toast,” Samuel says. “And then I’ll take you around the corner for the better than pork belly.”

“Is it still treyf?” Jill asks.

“We don’t know,” Sarah says. “Which is why those of us who keep kosher are staying vegetarian or fish. There is plenty here we can eat.”

“Good,” Jill says. “I wanted to make sure of that.”

Martin, who so far has been quiet, gets to his feet and picks up a glass, and everyone hushes. “I’m not one for speeches so we’ll make this quick,” he says. “To Jill, my heart-daughter—I am so happy for you, sweetheart. You found the real thing, and don’t ever let it go. Wherever you end up, don’t let it go.”

“I won’t,” Jill murmurs, taking Khan’s hand.

“To Khan, who somehow doesn’t fit as a son-in-law,” Martin says and everyone laughs. “You
have a rare thing in your wife. Remember that, and treat her like she deserves.”

“I will,” Khan murmurs, tightening his hold on Jill’s hand.

“So I say mazel tov to you both,” Martin says. “To you, and to life. L’chaim!”

“L’chaim!” everyone choruses and there’s a lot of glass clinking and drinking.

They stay with the Gould-Jacobs clan a bit longer, enough to eat the not-pork belly that has both Khan and Jill considering seconds before they decide against it. A round of hugs follows—Khan mostly avoids it—and then he and Jill take their drinks and start wandering through their party.

They stop at a couple stations to try the food, and say hi to officers Jill knows or other people that congratulate them. There’s rather a lot of Starfleet gray in the crowd, but Khan hasn’t seen Viola yet. He’s certain she’s there somewhere, but with a thousand people his odds of spotting her are low unless they happen to be in the same area.

“Snow White!” a female voice calls and Jill spins around. Khan turns as well and sees four very petite women hurrying over to them, all four of them hugging Jill at once. Jill is just the shortest among them but Khan thinks that’s more due to various shoes than anything else.

Jill’s grinning when the tangle of them separate. “Oh, man, I haven’t seen you guys in…”

“A really long time,” one of them—blonde and dressed in shimmery green that makes Khan think vaguely of Tinkerbelle—says. “You were off saving the galaxy.”

“Or something,” Jill says. “Khan, these are my girls from the Olympics. The blonde here is our Summer child. Jalayah is next to her, in the red, and on my right is Misty in the blue and then Laurel in black. Ladies, this is my dragon Khan.”

“I am glad to meet you all,” Khan says, meaning it.

“We’re glad to meet you,” Laurel says. “We don’t see Snow White that much since she’s rarely in the solar system, but we wanted to meet her husband before you all take off for parts unknown.”

“That still sounds weird,” Jill says and Khan thinks at least he’s not alone in that. “Just. Weird. Anyway. How are you all? What have you been up to?”

Before they get too involved, Khan tells Jill he’ll be up the path by one of the tea stations. She laughs and kisses his cheek and Khan goes to find out what kinds of tea the station has.

He ends up with a cup of something black, and as he steps away from the counter he sees Andy and Matthew walking toward him. “You’ve already lost your wife?” Matthew asks, raising his eyebrows. “That doesn’t bode well.”

“She’s just over there,” Khan says. “Her fellow gymnasts found us.”

“It’s always funny to see Jill with people her own height,” Andy says. “Or not funny, just… different.”

“Among humanoids, is she still short?” Matthew asks.

“Yes,” Andy says. “The general range of human height works for most humanoids, although some are bigger overall.”

“Her mother is scarcely taller,” Khan says. “Although I do think the gymnastics training
suppressed her growth."

“It does that, I’m told,” Andy says. “So how does it feel to be married?”

“Odd,” Khan says after a moment. “Not a state in which I thought I’d find myself again, at least for a long time. But I am glad we did this, before we leave. And if we are to have a party, let it be in celebration of her.”

“And you,” Matthew says.

“But mostly her,” Khan says. “Which is as it should be.”

“You never would have backed away from the spotlight before,” Matthew says, studying Khan. Khan shrugs. “I’m not that person anymore. I have no wish to rule anything, or be the one feted for my accomplishments. It has been…a tiring time, and I am perfectly content to stay out of the direct spotlight.”

“At least for now,” Matthew says. “Something will happen, out there. You know it will.”

“We will see what we find,” Khan says, taking a sip of his tea.

“Are we looking for anything in particular?” Andy asks.

“I think not,” Khan says. “Merely looking to see what is out there, and perhaps eventually to find ourselves a new home, if we grow tired of traveling.”

“Hopefully that won’t happen for a while,” Matthew says with a grin. “A whole galaxy out there, most of which hasn’t been explored. Imagine the possibilities.”

“I have,” Khan says. “I think we all have been.”

“I know some of what Jill’s told us she’s seen out there, but yeah, a lot of unknowns,” Andy says. “Exciting, a little scary, but mostly exciting.”

“We won’t let anything happen to you,” Matthew says.

“I’m not actually worried about me,” Andy says. “I’m worried about everyone else.”

“Don’t worry about us until a situation arises where you need to,” Matthew says, brushing a knuckle down Andy’s cheek. “We do a pretty good job of surviving.”

“You do,” Andy agrees. “I still worry. Magpie and I worried the whole damn time you were on Qo’noS and we didn’t hear from you.”

“Okay that was a situation that deserved a bit of worrying,” Matthew says. “I mean, we were going to win, but none of us were certain we’d get through it without someone dying.” He looks at Khan. “Unless you thought differently.”

“I thought it possible,” Khan says. “I chose not to analyze it further than that.”

“Even we can be defeated, eventually,” Matthew says. He shakes himself all over and grins. “But not then, and today is a day of celebrating my oldest brother’s wedding to a woman every bit his equal, and possibly superior in some areas I don’t ask. So let’s not think about danger and risk out there, let’s think about happy things and whether Khan needs another drink.”
“I do not, thank you,” Khan says.

“Well you’re no fun,” Matthew says. “It’s not as though we can get drunk easily.”

“No but it can happen,” Khan says. “So long as there is no forge water here, however, we may be safe.”

“I haven’t actually seen the Femarans,” Matthew says. “Andy and I have been wandering the crowd. Jake found his team pretty quick and they ended up all joining the mass of Jake’s family—good Christ there’s a lot of them. And Magpie got invited to join in the last time we were over there.”

“Is Marika here?” Khan asks.

“She is, and she’s wearing gloves,” Matthew says. “And her hair is now apparently pure white.” Khan blinks. “I wonder if I should see her.”

“I don’t know if I’d recommend it,” Andy says. “She’s kind of…not quite all there, or so Jake says.”

“Her foresight was wrong,” Khan says, thinking about it. “She said not to get on the Vengeance when it was in the Neutral Zone or there would be thousands of deaths. But we boarded it in the Neutral Zone and no one died save Marcus and his thugs.”

“Maybe she misinterpreted what she saw,” Matthew says. “Or maybe the future is in flux and what she saw is not what came to pass because she saw something and then Rani helped us out.”

“Maybe what she saw was the timeline as it played out before Rani intervened,” Andy says.

“That may very well be it,” Khan says to Andy. “Rani said that, too, in her dreams sometimes I was alone, and those dreams ended in fire and death.”

“When did she say that?” Matthew asks.

“She left me a message,” Khan says, wondering how many of his siblings don’t know. “There is a statue of her, in the Lion’s Market, with a secret compartment. Before she died, she gave Jasmine a box to put in that, and then Jasmine retrieved it for me when she was awakened. She wrote me a letter. She’d been having dreams, before she died, and she left me a message on the slim chance that hundreds of years in the future I would be able to read it.”

“Slim chance that turned out to be right,” Andy says softly.

“Yes,” Khan says. He takes a sip of his tea and turns to see Jill hurrying up the path to them, skirts floating around her. “Done catching up, lioness?” he asks.

“For now, but I’ll try and find them again before the party’s over,” Jill says. “But Travis found me and told me the toasts and things are going to start soon so we need to make our way to our table of honor, where there will be new drinks for us. I told him to get you another cider and I asked for a Rigellian orbit because they’re so good.”

“What is in a Rigellian orbit?” Matthew asks.

“A mix of three Rigellian liquors, orange juice, and something else I forget,” Jill says. “It tastes a little like citrus punch and a lot like something incredibly smooth and delicious to drink. The
problem is you don’t realize how strong they are until you’re into your third, so I’m cutting myself off after one.”

“Wise choice, lioness,” Khan says.

She laughs at him. “I’m not going to get drunk, dragon. I don’t want to get drunk, I feel damn good right now.” Jill takes his hand as they start heading back to the reception hall. “I’ll let you have a sip, though, and then maybe if you order one I’ll have a sip of yours.”

“If I order one,” Khan says, amused.

“You should,” she says and he laughs.

When they get to the reception hall Khan sees a screen set up outside—he presumes for those who couldn’t fit in the hall itself. They go inside and he’s proven correct by the completely full tables and people standing around the edge of the room. One table sits just at the edge of the dance floor, decorated in gold and red; it has one tall chair and one backless seat. He doesn’t know who thought of it this time but appreciates it.

They take their seats, Andy and Matthew go to find the rest of their family, and Travis comes over with a tray holding two drinks. “I waited until you sat down so they wouldn’t warm up, sugar,” he says, setting Jill’s glass down. The contents are almost coral in color, a pinkish orange, and there’s a garnish of a small round orange fruit.

“Thank you,” both Khan and Jill say as Travis sets Khan’s cider down.

“If you need anything else, I’ll be just over here,” Travis says, nodding at a spot along the wall. “I can see you, so just raise a hand and I’ll be right over.”

“If we need you,” Jill says. “Thank you. Are you having a good time?”

“Of course I am, darling,” Travis says, sounding a bit surprised she has to ask. “I always love seeing the results of months of hard work, and I must say, this has gone swimmingly well so far with only a couple minor emergencies about which I’m not telling you.”

“I don’t care,” Jill says. “I did all the work to get to the party, now I get to enjoy it.”

“Exactly,” Travis says with a smile that matches Jill’s. “All right, darlings. I’ll be just over here.” He leans down and brushes cheeks with Jill before heading to his spot.

The host comes over to them then; Jill takes a sip of her drink and sets it down, as does Khan. “What do you need from us?” she asks the host.

“From you two, not a thing except to sit back and listen to the lovely things people are going to say about you,” the host says. “We do have a fair number of toasts because a lot of people wanted to talk.”

“Who is on the list, and what is the order?” Khan asks.

“In order—Jill’s former captain, someone named Aktok, Jake, Andy and Magpie who I think are going together but they hadn’t quite decided,” the host says. “Andy and Magpie, that is. Jake is his own. Admiral Cathcart, and then your family said they had something for you that needed to be last.”

“I wonder,” Jill says, looking at Khan. “Did they write us a song?”
“Likely, or found one to perform,” Khan says, touched by it. “We will find out after Viola.”

“Was there anyone else you thought might want to speak today?” the host asks. “Either of you?”

Jill shakes her head. “My parents don’t really do public speeches, and we got the Gould-Jacobs thing earlier. I mean—well, if my girls want to say something, maybe, but I don’t know if they would.”

“Your girls?” the host asks.

“My fellow gymnasts from the Olympics,” Jill says. “Summer, Misty, Jalayah, and Laurel.”

“I’ll see if we can find them and find out,” the host promises. “And then we’ll get started. Be right back.” He touches his ear as he walks away, speaking quietly.

Khan takes a sip of his cider. “Will you try to keep in touch with them, once we leave?”

“I’m going to try to keep in touch with everyone on Earth I still care about, but some people may be more successful than others,” Jill says.

“I would expect so, naturally,” Khan says.

Jill reaches over and takes his hand, squeezing it for a moment. Khan raises her hand to his lips, brushing a kiss over her knuckles. “You always have to go one better,” she says but she laughs.

“Naturally,” Khan agrees. “Did you expect anything less?”

“Of course not,” she says, grinning at him. “That’s who you are, my love.”

He smiles in return. “Nurture or nature?”

“Does it matter?” Jill counters.

“No,” Khan says. “No, I suppose it doesn’t.” It had, once, their belief in their genetic superiority absolute.

Now...things are different.

The host comes back over to them. “We’ve had one more addition,” he says. “Your girls said they would rather not speak because there are too many people here and they’re over that, direct quote. However Captain Kirk has requested a chance.”

“Wasn’t expecting that one, I’ll admit,” Jill says.

Khan’s surprised as well but on further thought he thinks he shouldn’t have been. Kirk likes to perform (although he’s a terrible comic). As well, Khan thinks it likely that someone clued Kirk into the idea of life-debt; whether or not Kirk agrees with it, the debt is there and can only be discharged by saving Jill’s life, or someone else close to her at her direction. (Usually the last happens solely in dire emergency.)

Someone, of course, meaning Jasmine. She has spent a fair amount of the last few months enjoying his company; unusual for Jasmine but on the other hand, they both knew it was short-term.

But they’re shipping out without Kirk. Knowing Jasmine, Khan doesn’t know whether to warn Jake or stay quiet. He’d ask Jill what to do, but isn’t entirely certain he could trust her answer. However, the odds of Jake listening to advice from Jill about his sex life are roughly the same,
Khan estimates, as his staging a coup and taking over the Earth government. He doesn’t \textit{want} to do that. In similar fashion, Jake has a rather hilarious block with Jill with anything involving sex. He \textit{will} listen, if made to, but his first inclination is to do anything but.

He’ll see how it plays out, but he knows Jake is more appealing to her than Jim on some levels already: Jake speaks Arabic, for one, and for another, he’s a trained \textit{soldier} of the kind Starfleet isn’t supposed to make anymore. Kirk’s had most of his shiny rubbed off by now; Jake never had any, and the difference shows.

“Are we ready to begin?” he asks, returning his attention to the present.

“We are,” the host says brightly. “Would you like champagne for toasting or are you fine with your current drinks?”

“I’m really okay with my current drink,” Jill says. “I’ve never much liked champagne.”

“This is fine,” Khan says.

“Fantastic. Then we’ll get started.” The host smiles and heads out onto the dance floor. He touches a small square on his jacket and Khan hears a quiet hum for a moment, then nothing. “Good afternoon, everyone,” the host says. “We have reached the portion of this party where the toasting, and by extension the drinking, happens. If you have not a beverage of your choosing, do kindly find a server or the nearest bar to remedy this deficit. I do warn you there’s quite a long list of people who wish to congratulate the newlyweds, so pace yourself.”

There’s some movement, but it doesn’t take long before people take their seats again. “Our first toast today is Captain Mikael Knight, Jill’s former captain.”

Mikael walks onto the dance floor, elegantly formal in silver. He takes another square and puts it on his jacket, then touches it. Again, the low hum for a moment. “Jill served on my ship for five years,” he says. “Two as our lead pilot, three as our XO. She was the best pilot we’d ever had, and I refuse to compare her to Delia, who stepped in after Jill left us to save the galaxy, but for three years she was someone I was proud to call my first officer. I knew that if I told Jill I wanted something done, she’d get it done. Which is, I expect, rather what happened here. She said “Okay, so we need to stop a war” and therefore she did. She never quite got the concept of limits.”

“Never have, never will,” Jill says to general laughter.

“When Jill first contacted me to tell me she wanted six months’ leave for academic study in London, I knew she wasn’t actually doing it for academic reasons. I didn’t know what reasons she \textit{did} have, but I knew that if there was trouble somewhere, she’d find it. It’s what she does. So I signed off on the paperwork, and tried not to worry, and then…a lot of things happened in a very short time. Which is my long-winded way of saying that Jill, you are the \textit{most} stubborn individual I have \textit{ever} known in my life, and Khan, I wish you all the best in that. She is stubborn, often more than a little too impulsive, never really stops to think “wait, maybe we can’t do this”. Having said that,” Mikael says and Jill raises an eyebrow. “Jill you were the \textit{finest} officer I’ve ever had on my bridge, and we were lucky to have you for the time we did. You are unfailingly and unquestioningly loyal to your people, and you’ll do anything when one of yours is in trouble. As I think Khan learned very early on.”

Khan smiles a little. “I had an inkling.”

“You made people want to follow you just by being you,” Mikael says to Jill. “We used to have squabbles over who got to go on the away party with you.”
“I knew there was a whole betting pool but I thought it was for who got to stay back,” Jill says, eyes wide.

Mikael shakes his head. “No, they had a weekly game of something and wagered so many points, and at the end the points got to be traded in for trips on away missions. But they were pretty careful in how they structured the game so it didn’t always go to the same couple people.”


“I don’t know where you and Khan and everyone will end up,” Mikael says. “But I am certain that you’ll find a way to make it interesting. Both of you will. And I have every faith in your ability to not only survive, but thrive out there.”

He raises his glass. “On Vesh we say this. May your drink be bottomless and your plate be ever-full. To the wedded couple.”

A rousing chorus echoes the last line back at him; Khan taps his bottle against Jill’s glass and they both drink. She gets up from her seat after that, going to hug Mikael. “I was proud to serve under you,” she says, her words caught by the mike Mikael wears still. “Always.”

Mikael kisses her cheek and touches the mike, turning it off; whatever he says next Khan can’t hear and can’t see enough of his mouth to approximate. Whatever it is, it makes Jill sniff, and blink hard for a moment, before she hugs Mikael again, then goes back to her seat.

Khan says nothing but when she reaches out a hand he takes it immediately, clasping palms with her. “We absolutely made the right decision in not involving him or my crew,” she says after a moment. “But he’s a good captain. A solid, steady one, and like I told him, I was proud to serve under him.”

Jill takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. “Who’s next?”

“Next up we have Captain Jim Kirk,” the host says brightly.

“Well, me and Spock,” Kirk says, coming onto the dance floor. “I’m talking, he has presents.”

“We said no presents,” Jill protests.

“We’ll explain,” Kirk says, affixing the square to his uniform jacket. “Okay. Hi. So. I met Jill on a planet where I wasn’t supposed to be, along with Spock and Uhura, and had we run into pretty much anyone else the three of us likely wouldn’t have made it off that planet. Jill was the one to decide the three of us were trekking along with them, because there was really no other way off the planet, and then had the brilliant idea to make us witnesses for the combat. She saved our lives, but I almost think that was incidental.”

Jill shrugs. “It wasn’t incidental in that I needed you alive, once we decided to keep you.”

“Well, that’s just….charming,” Kirk says but smiles. “Okay, so here was my introduction to Khan, for the record. My group of Amazons and me and Spock had gotten to the final checkpoint, and were resting, when we started hearing approaching people. Jill kept looking up, and for the life of me I couldn’t figure out why. I saw a group of somewhat battered humans arrive, but Jill kept looking up, and then I saw this winged person flying out of the sky to land literally at her feet. She never moved, didn’t even back up a step. And that, I kind of learned, is how Khan and Jill work. They are one very, very cohesive unit.”
“We still argue, for the record,” Jill says. “I punch him.”

Khan shrugs. “Cat used to throw knives at me.”

“No throwing knives on the ship,” Aisha calls. “I’m not cleaning up blood except after dire emergency.”

“Toast with peanut gallery,” Jill says, laughing.

“Yeah, true, but it’s still sort of making my point,” Kirk says. “That whatever arguments you have, or whatever someone’s upset about—it’s not going to be about something fundamental because on those things you two are more unified than almost anyone I’ve met. The things you have done on the way to getting married, that’s a hell of a lot of stress, and yet here we are. So mostly, just—I think you both have a really, really solid thing going and I wish you both well, in whatever form your journey next takes. And now I give this to Spock who explains presents.”

“Technically these are a gift from the existing Vulcan High Council to the ambassador and the captain,” Spock says. “Which is why we chose to disregard your prohibition on presents.”

He sets a box on the table in front of Khan and Jill and touches a button. The top and sides fold away, revealing what looks like a jumble of metal rods.

“There is a Vulcan game called kal-toh,” Spock says. “Each rod affects the others, and so one movement has many effects. When the rods are in balance, it reveals the harmonious shape. This is generally a solo game, but after our discussions on Qo’noS I thought it one that you and, I think, Anandi and Andy would also find some interest in. Therefore the council has sent you five sets of the game, and a complete explanation of how to play and how the rods affect each other, basic steps like that.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Khan says, looking up from the game. “With hours of travel ahead of us this will be more valuable than you realize.”

Spock inclines his head. “I will be interested to hear your thoughts on the game, once you have had a chance to play.”

“You’ll have them,” Khan says, more pleased by that than he perhaps should be, but he finds the Vulcan code of logic interesting and knows Spock has spent time with Anandi learning Go over the last few months. Not a bad thing at all.

Khan still holds that if anyone is going to defeat Anandi at Go it’s going to be Andy, but Andy has so far proven resistant to learning. Khan’s not sure entirely why that is, but Anandi has patience and they’ll have a fair number of hours to fill. Eventually Andy will get curious, or Anandi will wear him down, or both.

Spock folds the box around the game set again. “I do not wish to be an ungracious giver, however I will need to take this back in order to ensure it gets properly transported to your ship along with the other sets,” he says.

“If you talk to Aisha, she will help you get it sorted,” Khan says.

“Thank you, Ambassador.” Spock inclines his head and Khan just laughs because that’s still ludicrous and will never not be.

“I was many things, but no one ever called me an ambassador before,” he says.
Jill looks at him. “What did they call you?” she asks in Russian. “Other than the lion?”

“I never had a rank, exactly, but they called me the lord,” Khan says. “I didn’t wish to be an emperor or a king, but as I was not democratically elected president or prime minister seemed a poor choice. So I opted to deal with it by not giving myself a title and seeing what those around me called me, and they fairly quickly decided I was the lord.”

“Jasmine and Aisha still address you like that,” Jill says. “My lord.”

“They do,” Khan says. “They likely always will.”

“I know,” she says, reaching out for his hand. “I like it. I like that you didn’t give yourself a title.”

He tangles his fingers with hers. “Dragon, I think, is the one I will keep.”

“I certainly hope so because my back would be a bitch to redo,” Jill says and laughs. “And I think our lovely host is waiting on us to start the next toast.”

“Hey, you’re the guests of honor, so this is all on your schedule,” the host says. “But. If you’re ready, we are now looking for Jake. Jake, if you’re out there, come forth and be heard.”

“I’m here, I’m here,” Jake says, jogging onto the dance floor and still somehow elegantly formal in silvers. He holds a brown bottle in one hand, and affixes the square to his uniform jacket. “All right, so. Let me paint you a story, guests of all types. It’s my second semester at Starfleet Academy, and I got through the first semester reasonably intact, honors roll and all, so I figure I’m doing something okay. In other words, I was a clueless moron in a red suit, like the rest of them.”

Laughter runs through the crowd and Jake grins. “So there I was, and I get to my unarmed combat class, and I get paired with Jill. And my first thought—and she got a lot of this—was ‘Am I dealing with a freaking instructor’s kid?’ But after that I was kinda pissed, because I didn’t know what I’d done to get saddled with some tiny girl who probably didn’t know anything. And, as Jill has said, she couldn’t believe she’d gotten saddled with some arrogant asshole. So we were really paired well. Instructor blows the whistle, I go to grab Jill, she twists and moves and grabs me and throws me over her shoulder and I land on the mat, breath gone.”

A few cheers after that one, and general laughter, and Jill raises her drink in the air, laughing.

“So after that I got to my feet and we became best friends,” Jake says, grinning. “I call Jill my sister because in every way but legality she is that. My parents adopted her ages ago and I think my mom likes her better than me.”

“Eema likes me better than you because I call home, Aaron,” Jill calls.

“Not often enough,” Sarah calls back and a wave of laughter runs through the room.

“Can I get on with this, please?” Jake asks to more laughter. “Okay, so. I’d wanted to get Jill into my area of Starfleet for a while, and she kept resisting, and then I got alerted she’d put in for a transfer to London, which is where a lot of my department is based, so I went to London to find her and ask what was going on. I found her, and Khan, and somewhere in there signed on with the lot of them because Jill’s my sister and you help family when they need you. Which is how we got here. And it’s been a hell of a journey this far. I have no idea where we’re going next but that’s part of the fun. So.”

He turns to look at Khan and Jill, serious. “Khan—I know she didn’t make it easy for you. Thank you, for everything you’ve done and been to her. You may have been the most dangerous and the
most insane thing that ever happened to her, but you’re also the best. “

Jake honestly means that, Khan knows, and he touches his heart in response.

“And to you, half-pint,” Jake says and laughs. “Shit, Jill, I don’t even know what to say. You are impossible. You are impossible and infuriating and aggravating and exasperating and you somehow achieve miracles when people think there’s no path forward. Three times you got people out of hazardous situations when you were told not to, and three times you got them home safely. You were presented with one winged human, seventy-two bodies in cryosleep held within a secured facility, the head of Starfleet against you and not a whole lot in your favor and, well. You’re the gambler, more than me, but I’m trusting in your luck to bring us through wherever we’re headed next. I said Khan is the best thing that ever happened to you and I’m right, you know I’m right. Don’t forget that, shorty. And don’t forget that you deserve him. You deserve to be happy, and you deserve Khan. Don’t ever think you don’t.”

Khan looks at Jill, whose eyes are bright. “I won’t forget,” she says, sniffing once.

“So to both of you,” Jake says. “L’chaim!”

Everyone echoes it and Khan takes a sip of his cider and Jill takes a sip of her orbit before she runs out onto the floor to hug Jake. While she does Khan steals a sip of her drink and blinks because that really is remarkably good.

Perhaps he’ll have one.

Jill returns to her seat and the host announces the next speaker, who turns out to be Aktok and who comes carrying a flat padded case. “I also ignored your comment about presents,” he says, setting the case down on their table. “I will explain in a moment.”

“How many other people ignored us?” Khan asks.

“We did,” Andy and Magpie say in unison.

“I did not get you a wedding present,” Viola says. “I gave you a ship.”

“With conditions,” Khan says, but is amused.

“One small one. But we’re ignoring Aktok, and I would very much like to hear what he has to say.” Viola takes a sip of her own drink and sets it in a cupholder attached to her wheelchair.

Aktok laughs. “Well, I am not a bard or a poet, who could tell this much better, but.” He attaches the square to his shirt—Femaran formal wear is almost militaristic in style, which Khan supposes makes sense given their history. “I am a weaponsmith,” he says once it’s on. “Some years back I met Jake, who wished to buy knives from me. I agreed to sell him the knives, and then some other things, and two years after we first met he saved my son’s life when he was caught in an avalanche. So when he came to me, and said he had someone who wanted to build a new weapon, I was intrigued, and thus I met Khan, and later his family, and then I and my children and my nephew made them weapons for battle such as the Federation no longer uses.”

He pauses for a moment. “There is a thing, among weaponsmiths,” he says. “To have your creation used in a pivotal battle—this is not a small matter, to us. That the warrior chose our creations to aid him, and that those creations helped him win a crucial battle—that is how we achieve status, with each other.” Aktok looks at Khan and Jill. “You used our weapons to avert a war, and there can be no higher honor for us.”
“Without your weapons we would have lost,” Jill says and Khan agrees.

Aktok smiles. “Thank you. And in thanks, we have created something for you.” He unlocks the case and lifts off the lid.

Six knives within; four throwing daggers and two slightly longer, designed for melee. All are made similarly to the knives Khan already has, out of a solid piece of adamantium, but these have something engraved on them. He lifts one of the throwing daggers out of the box, looking at the pommel.

“It’s a dragon,” Jill says softly. “Well, a dragon’s head.”

“This is your set,” Aktok says. “We have a set of knives for Khan that have a lioness engraved on the pommel. We took the designs from the rings.”

“Practical enough,” Khan says. “Aktok, this is…we thank you, sincerely.”

“Use them well,” Aktok says, closing the box. “I will speak with Aisha about transporting both sets to your ship.”

“Thank you,” Jill says softly. “Aktok, we honestly could not have done it without you and your family and the weapons you made us. You don’t have to give us anything—although I am not giving these knives back because I have dragon daggers and that’s amazing. But I feel like we should be giving you a present because without you we wouldn’t have been able to do this in the first place.”

“But you did not listen,” Aktok says gently. “You did give us a present. You have given us honor and status incomparable among the weaponsmiths. That is really all we want. That, and the chance to make more weapons for you should you ever need them.”

“If we ever do, we’ll come to you,” Jill promises.

Aktok smiles. “Thank you.” He steps back and takes his drink from the host. “On our planet, when we toast, we say ‘Skalvin’. It means, essentially, to light and warmth and fire. Our planets get cold. So, to my friends—skalvin!”

Everyone repeats it, clinking of glasses, they drink and Khan feels a bit staggered by that one. “Oh, I should add we included holsters and sheaths for the knives,” Aktok says. “We designed for two forearm, and then a few you can wear various ways.”

“Cat is going to be jealous,” Jill murmurs to Khan, who laughs.

“How’s everyone doing out there?” the host asks. “We’ve got two more and a performance, you all surviving? Anyone need a drink refresher?”

A surprising number of people get up. Khan wonders what the alcohol budget was for this party and decides he’s better served not knowing.

Travis comes over to them. “Either of you two darlings need a refresh? Nibble?”

“If you bring me something chocolate I will adore you briefly more than I do Khan,” Jill says. “Briefly, though.”

“That’s all right,” Travis says. “For you, honey?”
Khan shakes his head. “I would actually just like a large glass of water, or bottle of water.”

“I’ll get you one,” Travis promises. “Be right back.” He glides off, somehow managing to move incredibly quickly while looking lazy.

“He has dance training,” Jill says to Khan. “He actually started as a dancer, but decided he’d rather eat regularly and not kill his body by thirty, so he somehow fell into doing personal aide work and got assigned to the diplomatic corps fairly quickly. Everyone loves him or hates him but most people love him.”

“Does he have a partner?” Khan asks curiously.

“He does,” Jill says. “His name is Kyle and do you remember the club I told you about in San Francisco, that we never made it to?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Kyle owns it,” Jill says. “I honestly didn’t know that when I met Travis, or that Travis was Kyle’s partner because Kyle is very reticent about his personal life at the club. But I mentioned something about the club and Travis laughed and told me.”

“You thought he worked there but was not the owner?” Khan asks.

“I thought he was the manager but no, I didn’t think he was the owner,” Jill admits. “I don’t know why. But that’s him, and that’s Travis.”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Khan says.

“No, me either,” Jill says, laughing.

Khan looks at her and reaches out to brush a knuckle down her cheek, just because he can. She smiles, catching his hand and looking at his ring. “It’s lovely,” she says, releasing his hand. “I just like to look at it.”

“You’ll have time,” Khan says. He hasn’t told her this, but he’s asked Bishop, Maeve, Anandi and Carson to see if there is a way for Jill and her siblings to get some of Khan’s abilities. He thinks that with advances in medical technology, they might be able to find a way to do it.

“I will,” Jill says. “And here’s—oh my lord what is that?”

“Chocolate,” Travis says, setting the plate in front of her. It appears to be a hollow half-sphere of chocolate filled with chocolate mousse, settled on top of a brownie.

Jill stares at it, utterly speechless. “Khan, you’ve been demoted to second-best man in my life until I finish eating this,” she says finally, picking up her spoon.

“Here, if you want it,” Travis says, setting a ramekin next to her plate, filled with whipped cream. “The chef suggested it to lighten the chocolate. And for you, sir, one large bottle of water. I have one for Jill, too, because dehydration is never fun.”

“The chef is brilliant,” Jill says, spooning up some of the mousse and then adding some of the whipped cream. “Okay, we can get on with the toasts now.”

“Our turn,” Andy says, walking onto the dance floor with Magpie. Andy carries a small box, and is the one to affix the mike to his shirt. “Your present takes some explanation so that comes later, but
first, let me just say that I am glad we all survived to get here in one piece. See, the bird and I are not fighters, so when everyone went to Qo’noS we went into hiding, and had some long, tense days until we heard from Khan and Jill. It was nothing compared to what they went through, obviously—we were safe—but we were nervous, and it was a long time to wait. So we are very grateful that we finally made it to the wedding.”

“So are we,” Khan says.

Andy grins. “Okay, and now on to the more serious part of this toast. Jill is my sister, has been for over sixteen years. She and the bird originally tried to keep me out of this but that wasn’t going to happen, so I went to London, and in the process found a relative neither of us had known we had. That was, and is, extraordinary, and I continue to be grateful for it—as I am grateful that both you and my sister found happiness with each other. You are both people I love dearly, and frankly I think you’re perfectly suited for each other because no one else would have the energy for either of you.”

“This is true,” Jill says, taking another bite of her chocolate confection. She’s almost down to the brownie.

“To be perfectly honest, augmented or not I’m still more surprised you keep up with her than that she keeps up with you,” Andy says to a general laugh.

“I would say I’m not that bad but, um,” Jill says. “Can we move on?”

“I’m just teasing, dearheart,” Andy says. “Just—you two fit together like you were made to, and I’m glad for it, and interested to see where we’ll go next.” She takes her glass from Magpie and holds it up. “To Khan and Jill.”

Echo, clink, drink. Andy gives the mike back and brings the box over to Khan and Jill’s table, Magpie joining him. “I didn’t think this deserved to be overheard by a larger audience,” Andy says quietly. “So, Magpie and I were scared, and we decided to focus on impossible projects because it was easier than thinking about you, and when you put two scared geniuses together with access to a lot of tech and tech information, miracles can happen.”

“You didn’t,” Khan says, taken aback.

Andy grins. “It’s a prototype and not entirely stable—there’s some work needed, so happy wedding present—but yeah, we did.”

“How?” Khan asks.

“It’s an obscure code hack and a hardware modification,” Andy says. “I’ll keep custody of this until we’re on the ship, since I doubt you want it now.”

“How did you find the code hack?” Khan asks before he takes it away.

“I started looking at failed projects, and I saw what the hardware specifications had in common, and it was all manually coded in because the power input is by default set to clock at a lower voltage,” Andy says. “And since so much of the power requirements are higher than that, it needed to be coded in manually. But you can modify the power input to clock at a higher voltage, at which point it’ll handle adjustments automatically. It’s just that to modify the input you have to solder a new connection on the power source and modify code that goes back to the second generation. So we did that, and the result isn’t perfect—needs work, happy wedding—but we no longer have to code it all.”
Khan shakes his head. “I can’t believe you managed it. This could be priceless.”

“Or it could bring a very, very pretty price,” Andy says. “Or we could keep it among ourselves. I’m in no hurry for this to get out.”

“Nor I,” Khan says. “We’ll see what we think once it’s stable, but really you and Magpie will get the credit for it.”

Andy shakes her head. “It’s your design, uncle. We just solved the problem that kept it from working properly.”

“We can argue about it later,” Khan says. “But it is an incredible wedding gift. Thank you, Andy.”

“You’re welcome,” Andy says, smiling. She picks up the box and leaves the dance floor.

“Our next and also next-to-last toast is from Admiral Cathcart,” the host says to a murmur. Viola rolls forward, turning her chair to face Khan and Jill’s table and parking it. She puts the mike on and says nothing for a moment. “I used to run Intelligence,” she says. “So it’s not really a surprise that my ideal Starfleet officer is someone willing to be a little flexible on a few things once in a while. Jake was one of mine, and I grabbed him right out of the Academy. I rather wish I’d had the chance to snag Jill as well.”

“You did,” Jake says. “I told you about her, I said ‘hey, Admiral Cathcart, really check out this cadet’ and you told me you had no more open spots.”

“Well now don’t I feel stupid,” Viola says and everyone laughs. “Although that was probably true at the time. The point is, though, that sometimes in this constantly changing galaxy you need officers who can think a little outside the box. Or a lot. Or sometimes you forget the box exists and go from ‘Alexander Marcus is corrupting Starfleet from within and is holding Khan’s family hostage’ to my being greeted with news that a band of humans successfully negotiated peace accords with the Klingon Empire.”

“I knew the box existed,” Jill says. “The box was around Khan. I thought around it and outside it to make it go away.”

“You thought light-years outside it,” Viola says. “This is going to be a case study in a lot of things including the need for ethical review of Intelligence projects. Your former advisor is going to be taking the lead on that.”

Keaton hadn’t mentioned it when Khan met with him. He wonders if Keaton has seen recordings from section 31, and when or if that happened. It would bother him more but Keaton’s not difficult to understand; he’s a deeply compassionate man when he chooses to be, and he’d rather gnaw off his good arm than admit that.

“He’ll be good at it but he will also be merciless,” Jill says.

Viola nods. “I’m aware. It’s why he’s doing it. So that’s one thing you two have changed. One among many, since we’re now reorganizing who oversees what. I have some…opinions, but later for that. Simply…be aware of how much has changed, how much you have done. We have had some heavy losses, but thanks to your actions we’ve averted much heavier ones. But for the general audience, when I asked Jill why the hell she’d done it, she said she needed to help Khan, and therefore the rest kind of…followed.”

She shakes her head. “That’s a hell of a thing, to have that much belief in someone. It doesn’t
happen often. We try to get our officers to have it toward Starfleet but it’s not, by any means, the same. Most married couples will say they feel it toward the other but most of them would break down under such intense pressure. But you two crazy kids—and yes, Khan, I’m old enough to be your mother if you ignore cryosleep time—went off and did this and are still as completely insane about each other—and in general—as you were before you left. That’s a hell of a thing, as I said. And I really want to know where you’ll end up next. I’m convinced it’ll be interesting.”

“Don’t curse us, please,” Jill says.

Viola laughs. “I won’t. Only that I am certain you won’t be bored. I wish you both the best, and look forward to hearing from you once in a while.” She raises her glass. “To IDIC.”

“To IDIC,” everyone choruses and they drink.

Khan’s cider is mostly gone at this point and when Travis comes over—Khan having glanced briefly in his direction—he asks Travis for an orbit, as Jill had. “They are divine, aren’t they?” Travis smiles. “Be right back, darling.”

“I told you,” Jill says, laughing. “They are so good. I just have to limit myself or it turns out like me on mudslides. Worst hangover ever.”

“You needed the Femaran cure,” Khan says.

“Not as much as you did that morning,” she says and he laughs.

“Perhaps. I honestly don’t think I had ever been that drunk.”

“We’re going to need a moment to set up for your family,” the host says, coming over to them. “They need a piano, so we need to bring it in from the music hall. Won’t be but a minute.”

Khan sees all twelve of his siblings assembling on the floor, and when the piano rolls in smoothly they gather next to it. Jasmine takes a seat at the keyboard, which doesn’t surprise Khan, and when he sees one of the staff set up a stool next to the piano he looks for Katsuro, who comes over carrying a fairly large drum and takes a seat on the stool. He has one mallet for the drum, dual-headed.

One of the techs comes out with two floating mikes he positions around the group of them. Cat shakes her head, though, and moves one of them farther away from her. “They will hear me without it,” she says.

“We promise you, they will,” Alona tells the tech.

“I believe you but they have to balance,” the tech says. “You’re not going to get picked up more because you’re closer, it’s surround acoustics. The mikes have to be in balance to each other.” He moves it back, studying it for a moment, then nods. “Please don’t touch it.”

“I will not,” Cat says. “However if I blow it out or cause ear-splitting feedback we did warn you.”

“I’ll deal with that if it happens, ma’am,” the tech says and steps away.

“To our brother,” Cat says. “And our sister. This is our gift to you.”

Katsuro starts on the drum, a slow steady beat, like a heart. After about eight measures, as Khan figures it, Jasmine comes in on the piano, and Khan thinks that it sounds like someone walking, in rhythm with Katsuro’s heart beat.
She plays through the melody once, and then a second time but at that time Konstantin starts singing in Russian, in harmony with Jasmine’s playing. The third time through Anandi, in Spanish, starts at Konstantin’s intro note (an octave higher) and Konstantin starts a different melody and lyrics.

It’s a fugue, Khan realizes, a very intricate one, and it tells their story, from their beginnings at the school to now. The pre-cryosleep years get abbreviated, of course, and when it picks up again with his story, when he was awakened on Jupiter, the fugue modulates into a key change and Bishop starts the melody, in French. All of them are using their native languages; he doubts Jill cares. He can’t listen to all of them and identify the languages or words either, not with the layers of the fugue, but he gets bits and pieces and it’s enough. He’ll ask for the lyrics later.

Jill’s entrance is marked by a descending trill from Cat, outside the fugue and so perfectly fitting Khan sees Jill grin at it. The fugue picks up speed at that point, as well, and voices fade into a single melody that then fades into a hum. Khan thinks he knows their intent, and isn’t surprised when Ekaterina starts again, a moment later followed by Konstantin. The rest of them join in order of awakening, in order of wedding blessing.

Once they are all awake, things move quickly to Qo’noS, but when his siblings sing about their time on the planet Khan tries to listen more closely, because it’s not the same between languages any more. Each of them is singing about his or her particular experience on the planet, on the trek and in the arena.

He can’t catch all of it, of course, and he gets a hint of frustration on Jill’s face from the same issue; they’ll ask later.

The fugue starts to build toward what Khan thinks will be the finish, and he hears Klingon words in the mix but can’t quite pick out the voices. His siblings’ voices rise in volume and pitch, singing of the battle, and Ekaterina’s voice soars out over the rest, a descant to the fugue and enough to give him shivers.

The final triumphant chorus leaves his ears ringing in the abrupt silence when it ends. Everyone else seems to have the same reaction; no one says anything for a solid ten seconds.

Then the cheers and applause start. His siblings bow, and again, and then Jill hurries over to them and Khan follows.

“You wrote it,” he says to Cat.

“Jasmine and I,” she says. “I wrote the lyrics and she wrote most of the music. I did write some of the music.”

Khan folds his arms around her. “Thank you,” he says softly. His wings fold around them, and Cat laughs but hugs him harder.

“I love you, my brother,” she says. “Be happy with her. I should not like to have to pick sides. You are my oldest brother, but I owe Jill multiple life-debts.”

“You will not have to pick sides,” Khan promises. “I think, at this point, we are rather committed to each other.”

“Or perhaps you just need to be committed, but not on your wedding day,” Matthew says as Khan folds his wings back and Cat steps away from him. He hugs Khan, hard. “Happy wedding.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, hugging back.
The rest of his siblings embrace him, and Jill, and as they all disperse the band starts playing for people to dance. Khan looks at Jill, to see what she wants to do, and smiles when she takes his hand and pulls him farther onto the floor to dance with her.

They dance, they eat, they have another drink or two although Jill switches to water after drinking half of Khan’s orbit and Khan goes back to the cider from Vesh. At sundown, the party is still in full swing, but Khan judges it time to sneak away from his own wedding reception and have some quiet alone time with his wife.

He catches her returning from the bathroom and leans down to murmur the idea in her ear; Jill nods in agreement and they start making their way out of the party, back to their room. A few people stop them to say goodbye but it doesn’t delay them too terribly long, and within about half an hour they’re in their suite, which has been freshly made up and has a bottle of champagne and chocolate covered strawberries on the table.

“How does this dress come off?” Khan asks, closing and firmly locking the door behind them.

“Oh, it’s easy,” Jill says. “I can get out of it myself, especially since now it just needs to get cleaned and put away. Do you need help with your tux jacket?”

“No, I think I can manage,” Khan says, shrugging out of the jacket. He strips down to his shorts, hanging the tux neatly in the closet and putting away the accessories. When he looks up from the box with his cufflinks, Jill has stepped out of her dress and boots, leaving her in a pair of gold panties, her hair still in its ponytail.

“I want a shower with you,” she says, walking over to him. “A really long one, with sex involved.”

“Then you will have it,” Khan says, taking her hands. “Anything you want, tonight.”

Jill smiles. “I just want you, dragon.”

“You’ll have me,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss her.

“I love you,” she says against his lips. “Husband.”

“And I you,” Khan says, laying his palm against her cheek. “My wife.”

“We did it,” she says. “We actually got married and had the giant spectacle and had a great time and no emergencies happened we needed to know about.” Jill laughs and turns her head to kiss his palm. “This seems like a fitting end to our adventure, before we start the next one.”

“You certainly made me chase you long enough,” Khan agrees. “I do think it fitting, however.”

“From London to Qo’noS to San Francisco to unexplored space,” Jill says. “What do you think we’ll find?”

He shakes his head. “I do not know.”

“Me, either,” Jill says but smiles. “Time to close the door on this one, though. I met you, we achieved our goals and then some, we got married, now we start a new journey.”

“Then let us bid this adventure goodbye,” Khan says, reaching out to undo the band in her hair.

Jill links her hands behind his neck and leans up to kiss him. “I was wrong about one thing,” she says. “We have a mini adventure before the big one. Do you want to know where we’re going?”
“I do,” Khan says, lifting her because their height difference gets awkward. Jill wraps her legs around his waist and he supports her, but for a few moments he’s more interested in kissing her than in their abbreviated honeymoon.

Eventually, though, they separate and Jill pushes her ringlets back. “There’s a private island that for various reasons we have access to,” she says. “It’s in the Caribbean, it’s got a house that is fully stocked with food and linens, or will be as of today, plenty of beach, and there’s a set of cliffs overlooking the ocean that I’ve been told are lovely to dive from. Or, if one wanted, take off from.”

“How private is this island?” Khan asks, kissing her jaw.

“It’s an hour’s boat ride to shore,” Jill says. “I have coordinates for us to beam in, though. But there are no other inhabited islands within sight, and the odds of another ship coming by are really damn small. So pretty damn private. I’ve packed for both of us, but we really won’t need much clothing.”

“Just sunblock,” Khan says. “Or the equivalent.”

“Still sunblock,” Jill says. “They make formulas that last twelve hours, though, even through water and sand. But. That is where we are going tomorrow morning, and tonight, my dragon, needs to start with shower sex.”

“Yes, you said that,” Khan says. He kisses her again, just because, then sets her down. “Then let us head to the shower.”

Jill heads for the bath, but after a moment glances back and stretches out a hand. Khan catches her fingers and lets her pull him along into the bathroom.

It seems, he thinks, she will always be pulling him along somewhere, and it makes him think again of the difference between the women he loves. Rani was his lantern, but she guided his way. Jill is his fire, and she burns where she will. Khan can guide her, but only so much as she allows, and he thinks he will almost always be following her, either pulled along or because he’s chasing her.

He’s content with that.

Chapter End Notes

A couple notes about the chapter:
1. 'treyf' is a Jewish term that means something is nonkosher. Pork is treyf.
2. "As Time Goes By" is a personal indulgence but also a song I thought suited them. Casablanca is my all time favorite movie, and the song was actually my wedding song. But I did think it appropriate here.
4. If you haven't seen Star Trek Beyond, this may not make sense, but I keep comparing Khan to Franklin. Khan, here, has evolved and adapted to a world that no longer wants or needs conquest, and as he says a few times, he's not that person anymore. He's always going to be a leader, naturally and in situations, but he doesn't want to be nothing but a soldier anymore. Khan still wants to keep the soldier's skills,
but not necessarily use them day to day. Franklin couldn't move past that mindset.

5. Kal-toh is a Vulcan game referenced in Voyager that I am certain of; not sure if it's elsewhere as well.

For the story:
I thank and appreciate all of you for following along for the over three years it took me to write this. Thank you for being patient during slow periods or times of family emergency and sticking with it to the end. I promised you I'd get here someday and I did. I wasn't entirely certain how a lot of the time but we got here. I will say I knew the deal with the Klingons relatively early on, because it was the only damned thing I could think of to get them out of a very sticky situation. But getting there took bloody forever.

This epic--which I was calling the Epic That Will Not End for a while--is longer than anything else I've ever written solo, and is the longest consistent plot arc I've ever maintained. Since plot is a weak point for me I'm kind of pleased with that.

Mostly, though...we made it. Thank you.

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