Flying Free

by blueraccoon

Summary

This was also written for a prompt on the STID kinkmeme: short version, Kirk has wings. Much to his surprise, so does John Harrison. Things happen from there. Obviously, spoilers for STID.

Notes

Yeah, so, apparently either I write really twisted people or I write...crackfic? I don't even know what to call this, other than hopelessly self-indulgent and I hope you all forgive me.
Chapter 1

The jacket fits awkwardly and Kirk knows he’s going to have knots all up and down his back from the way he has to hunch under it, but it’s nothing he hasn’t dealt with for most of his life. Besides, at the moment he has more important things to worry about, like not dying from a Klingon attack in a province that’s supposed to be uninhabited. He can’t tell if he’s in a two-way fight or a three-way fight but whoever the madman killing Klingons is, he doesn’t appear to be trying to hurt Kirk or his crew, so Kirk will take what he can get.

Spock and Uhura drag him to precarious shelter in the wreckage of something, and Kirk watches, a little dazed from a blow to the head, as their savior-slash-terrorist effortlessly mows through the Klingons. He sees the man pull down his mask, and his eyes widen as he realizes who that is. “Harrison,” he whispers, almost to himself.

Harrison takes a running jump into the air, his coat flying out behind him and he seems to hang there for moments longer than he should, long enough to throw two knives and end two Klingon lives. He lands, grabs his knives and cuts a swath through the remaining Klingons, finally ending up with his gun pointed at Kirk’s face. “How many torpedoes?” he demands, and Kirk can only stare at him because there’s something in the way Harrison stands, the way that coat fits, that doesn’t make sense.

“Stand down,” Spock says and Harrison shoots the gun out of his hands without looking.

“The torpedoes, the ones you threatened me with, how many are there?” he snaps again.

Kirk remains silent, trying to figure out if what he’s seeing is real or if he’s imagining things.

“Seventy-two,” Spock says.

Harrison glances at him, then back at Kirk, clearly considering. He tosses the gun aside and shrugs off his coat. “I surrender.”

“Holy fuck,” Kirk says under his breath, because those are actual fucking wings on Harrison’s back, and he stretches them to their full extent, big and black and powerful. The only thing Kirk can think of to do in response is shrug off his own jacket and push to his feet, his own wings mantling behind his head. “I accept your surrender.”

Then he punches Harrison in the face, hard enough his hand hurts but Harrison doesn’t look like he’ll even bruise. “Captain,” Uhura says when Kirk lands another blow. “Captain!”


“Why did you help us?” Kirk demands, still trying to figure out the wing thing.

Harrison folds his wings back. “Seventy two reasons,” he says. “And now, perhaps, seventy-three.”

“You are nothing like me,” Kirk snaps.

“No,” Harrison agrees. “I am...better.”

Kirk aches to punch him again but decides against it. “Where did yours come from?” he asks.

“A tale for a tale, Captain,” Harrison says. “Perhaps now is not the best time.”

Kirk won’t really admit it, but he kind of envies Harrison that his wings are black. They blend in more easily with his clothes, and if he turns just so, it’s hard to tell there’s anything on his back at all. Kirk’s match his hair, which he supposes is just how this sort of thing works—he’s never met anyone else with wings before, and he’s burning to find out how Harrison got his and if he was born with them.

But. That has to wait until he’s been secured in the brig, because despite his actions on Qo’nos, Harrison is still a criminal, a man who opened fire in a room full of unarmed Starfleet officers and nearly killed Admiral Pike. Kirk keeps an eye on Harrison the entire time they escort him to the brig and secure him in the cell, but Harrison doesn’t put up any kind of fight, and his wings only mantle once, when someone gets too close. Kirk’s willing to bet it’s an involuntary response; his own do the same thing if he’s not careful.

His wings aren’t quite as big as Harrison’s, and Kirk tells himself it’s stupid to be...anything over that.

“Well, Captain,” Harrison says when it’s just the two of them facing off on either sides of the force field. “I rarely admit to surprise, but I must confess this is a new one to me.”

Kirk reminds himself not to sympathize with the prisoner. “Where did you get your wings?” he asks.

“Is that truly what you wish to know?” Harrison asks. “You could ask me why I did what I did, why I went to Qo’nos, any number of things, and that is what you want?”

“For now,” Kirk says. “We’ll get to the rest later.”

“Genetic engineering,” Harrison says after a pause. “It was an...unexpected side effect.”

“Do you know anyone else with them?” Kirk asks.

“No,” Harrison says. “Until you, I had thought I was...alone.”

“You are nothing like me,” Kirk says because it has to be said, even though his fingers itch to touch those soft black wings, even though Harrison is undeniably beautiful with them.

“No?” Harrison raises his eyebrows. “I think perhaps we have more in common than you would like to admit, Captain.” Again with the emphasis on his title, as though Harrison is mocking him subtly.

“You are a criminal,” Kirk snaps. “You opened fire on a room full of unarmed officers.”

“If you want to know why I did what I did, Mr. Kirk,” Harrison says. “I suggest you take a visit to these coordinates.” He recites a string of numbers, and Kirk memorizes them even though he thinks Harrison’s trying to play him.

He leaves without another word, his own wings shifting and folding as he walks. It’s a tell, one he can’t stop—he’s tried for years, and his wings still shift and mantle when he gets agitated. There are reasons he doesn’t play poker anymore. Kirk hates knowing that Harrison will see the movement, will know he got to him, and his shoulders are rigid with tension by the time he gets someplace he can comm Scotty and ask him to take a look.

The damned torpedoes. He should have trusted Scotty, should have refused to sign for them, but he had to be stubborn, had to go for it just like Marcus knew he would, and now he has a three hundred year old frozen man in a torpedo on his ship and a lot more questions for Harrison.
“Why is there a man in that torpedo?” he demands, his wings spreading without him thinking about it.

Harrison slowly rises from his seat on the low bench, his own wings folded back and still. “There are men and women in all those torpedoes, captain,” he says. “I put them there.”

“Who the hell are you?” Kirk asks, forcing his wings to fold back, even though his shoulders scream with tension and he’s going to be hurting for days.

“A remnant of a time long past,” Harrison says, looking past him, into...Kirk doesn’t know what. “We were genetically engineered to be superior, so as to lead others to peace in a world at war. But we were condemned as war criminals. We slept, for centuries, hoping when we awoke things would be...different.”

“You were all genetically engineered,” Kirk says. “Yet you’re the only one with wings?”

“Yes,” Harrison says. “I was unique among my family.”

“I still don’t--why would a three hundred year old frozen man be awakened to help build weapons?” Kirk asks. “What can you do that we can’t?”

“Genetically engineered to be superior,” Harrison says again. “We are...I am...better. Admiral Marcus wanted a militarized Starfleet, and for that purpose he needed a warrior’s mind. My mind.”

“Why only awaken you and not the rest of your crew?” Kirk asks.

“To control me,” Harrison says, and anger chills his voice and his eyes. “He used my crew, my family, to control me so I would do as he wanted and design his weapons and his warships.”

“John Harrison didn’t exist until a year ago,” Kirk says. “Who are you?”

“John Harrison was a myth, a cipher created when I was awoken,” Harrison says impatiently, and now his wings shift and stretch slightly. “My name is Khan.”

“Why did you blow up Section 31?” Kirk asks. “Why did you open fire on a room full of unarmed people?”

Khan’s mouth twists and his wings fold around him for a moment before he forces them back. “I thought I could smuggle my family to safety in the weapons I had designed,” he says. “But I was discovered. I had no choice but to escape, alone, and when I did I had every reason to believe Marcus would have killed every single member of my family. So I responded in kind.”

Kirk doesn’t want to believe him and yet he does. “What the hell do I do with you now?” he asks, not really meaning Khan to hear it.

“Marcus will be coming,” Khan says. “He wants me dead, and if he has to kill your entire crew to accomplish that goal, he will not hesitate.”

“No,” Kirk says, even though he thinks Khan’s right. “He’s a Starfleet admiral.”

“He’s a madman who wants a war,” Khan says. “And he will have it, one way or the other. You were meant to use my torpedoes on Qo’nos, and he crippled your ship so that when the Klingons came looking for who sent them, you would have no recourse.”

“Can we--” Kirk stops, lets his wings stretch for one glorious minute before he folds them back.
“Can we extract the cryotubes from the torpedoes?”

“Given steady hands and skill, yes,” Khan says. “I could do it with help.”

Kirk nods even though he’s not sure what to do with that knowledge. In the meantime, his comm chirps with a message from Sulu saying there’s a ship headed toward them. He leaves, calling out orders for Khan to be moved to medbay with six security officers posted on him, and runs for the bridge. Given what he saw Khan do with the Klingons he doubts six security officers could stop him if he truly wanted to escape, but for the moment Khan is playing along and Kirk will take what he can get.

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Okay, so, not good. Very not good. Kirk spares a second to thank whatever gods exist that Scotty listened to him—more than that, that he’d listened to Khan, and Scotty had listened to him, and now Scotty’s all that stands between them and total destruction.

And Khan. Kirk wants him to pay and at the same time he understands. If his crew were threatened, what would he do? What wouldn’t he do? And then there’s the wings. He can’t—he cannot—just turn Khan over to Marcus. Not with his wings, not when it’s obvious Khan was coerced into whatever he did.

“I need your help,” he says to Khan in the medbay. Khan is standing, probably because there wouldn’t be room for his wings if he were to sit on one of the biobeds.

“In exchange for what?” Khan asks, his wings shifting briefly.

“I can guarantee your crew’s safety,” Kirk says even though he completely can’t.

“You can’t even guarantee your own crew’s safety and you think you can protect mine?” Khan does not laugh in his face, but it’s a close thing.

“Are you with me or not?” Jim asks.

Khan folds his wings back, tightly enough Jim knows his shoulders have to hurt. “We need to get on that ship.”

“I suppose you have a way?” Kirk asks.

He does. Unfortunately, he also has a pair of big fucking wings on his back and the close-fitting spacesuits are not designed for humans with appendages. Jim has a custom suit, but they end up having to jury-rig something for Khan, and it doesn’t look all that comfortable. But he says he’s fine and Kirk doesn’t question it.

“Are you ready?” he asks Khan.

“Are you?” Khan returns, shifting into a crouch, his wings tucked back.

No. Yes. He tells Spock to launch them, and then they’re hurtling through space and there’s a fucking lot of debris and his visor starts cracking and he can’t fucking find Khan and he’s flying blind and fuck fuck fuck this is not how he—“I see you, Kirk,” Khan’s voice comes into his helmet and Jim almost sobs in relief, but the door’s not open and they need a warm welcome or they’re going to get smashed to bits against the side of this ship and just as Jim’s about ready to try and think of a plan B—not that he has one—the door opens and they shoot through, and Khan grabs him and wraps his wings around him as they tumble over and over on the floor.
His wings are cold from space and so, so soft, and Jim fits perfectly in them, somehow, and he gives himself two seconds to close his eyes and savor the feeling before he pulls away and Khan lets him go, kneeling up on the floor.

“Welcome aboard,” Scotty says, out of breath and one hand still wrapped in whatever he used to keep himself from flying out the airlock. “Who’s this?”

“Scotty, Khan, Khan, Scotty,” Jim says with a groan, pushing to his knees and cracking his helmet. His wings ache where they’re stifled against his back and he wastes no time in getting out of the suit, noticing Khan stretches his own wings as he does the same. Jim knows he’s being stupid and yet he contrives to “accidentally” brush a hand against Khan’s wings as he opens the storage pouch on his suit. So soft, but Khan shifts and folds his wings back, and Jim hands him a phaser and tells him not to get shot.

They fight their way to the bridge, one henchman at a time. Kirk takes notes of how Khan uses his wings—mostly Jim tries to keep his out of the way, but Khan uses his to fight, and it’s a nice trick. He thinks maybe, if they survive this and Khan doesn’t end up in jail for hundreds of years, he’ll ask Khan to teach him. Then he thinks he’d just like to spend time with the one other person in the universe who knows what it’s like to have wings. Then he thinks he’s losing his fucking mind.

He almost tells Scotty to stun Khan when they get to the bridge and doesn’t do it. He wants to see what Khan will do, how far he’ll go. Jim threatens to shoot Marcus, but Khan’s the one to drag him out of the chair, and there’s shouting and yelling and Carol screams and Jim can’t pull Khan off Marcus in time.

Khan turns on Jim like he’s going to attack him and visibly stops himself. “My crew, Kirk,” he says, and Jim fumbles for the controls to let Spock know they’re all right, Marcus is dead, and can they beam over seventy-two torpedoes?

“What are you going to do with them?” Jim asks, seeing on the console as the torpedoes appear in the hangar.

“Revive them,” Khan says. “Live. Continue the work we were doing before we were banished.”

“Which was?” Jim asks.

Khan smiles briefly, a flash of teeth. “You could come with us, Kirk,” he says. “And find out.”

“I have my ship,” Jim says. “I’m not leaving her, nor am I leaving my people.”

“Among people who don’t understand you?” Khan asks. “You don’t belong there any more than I do.”

“I have wings, that doesn’t mean I don’t belong,” Jim says, his own shifting and mantling and wrapping around him briefly.

“Doesn’t it, though?” Khan’s own wings stretch and Jim wants, so badly, to be wrapped in them. To be not alone for once, not a freak.

As if he knows what Jim is thinking, Khan walks over to him, standing toe to toe with him. “You know exactly what it is like to be the outcast, to be the freak,” Khan says quietly, and his wings shift to surround them both, give them the illusion of privacy what with Scotty and Carol still on the bridge. “Why would you want to continue that existence?”

“Because I have a duty to my crew, my family,” Jim says. “You could stay. I’ll...I can plead for
leniency from Starfleet. You were coerced by Marcus. You fought to survive. Stay. Integrate your family with mine.”

“You think that is possible?” Khan asks, wrapping Jim a bit closer in his wings.

“I think you’re the only other person I’ve ever met who knows what it’s like to be me,” Jim says, too tired for anything but honesty. “And I don’t want you to run off and start murdering people.”

“I never said I would,” Khan points out.

“You never said you wouldn’t either,” Jim says. “Look. You did some things I want you to pay for, badly, but you also saved my life at least once--twice, maybe--and I can kind of see extenuating circumstances. I wish you hadn’t killed Marcus, though.”

“I don’t regret it,” Khan says.

“Do you regret anything?” Jim asks.

“No,” Khan says. “Regret is a waste of time.”

“Don’t go,” Jim says. “Come back to Earth with us. I’ll plead your case.”

Very, very lightly, Khan’s wings stroke the back of Jim’s head and his own wings, and he shivers at the feel. Then Khan steps back, his wings folding back. “I will beam you back to your ship,” he says. “You can follow the Vengeance back to Earth.”

“Thank you,” Jim says, stretching out his own wings to brush the side of Khan’s face.
After the return to Earth.

They make it back to Earth, and the Enterprise is going to be in repairs for months but she’ll make it. Kirk testifies at Khan’s trial, pleads for leniency, and Pike pulls some strings and pulls in some favors and Khan gets a suspended sentence, especially when some recordings of what happened to him after he was revived come to light. Jim watches a few hours before he has to be sick to his stomach; he doesn’t tell Khan he saw them.

He meets with Pike after the trial, not entirely certain where Khan has gone and not sure he can find out without causing problems. But he still has questions, and Pike might have answers. “Sir, what’s going to happen to Khan’s crew?” he asks.

Pike sighs. “We’re going to attempt to revive them,” he says. “And reintegrate them into society. If they cause problems, we’ll put them all back in cryosleep.”

“Is that wise, sir?” Jim asks.

“Probably not,” Pike says. “But it’s about the only option we’ve got. Khan isn’t what I’d call a good man, but we do need his skills, much as I hate having to admit it. His crew could prove equally useful, and more than that, is it ethical of us to leave six dozen people in cryosleep just to use as a bargaining chip?”

Jim’s wings shift and fold around him briefly, indicating what he thinks of that idea. “Sir, I’d like to request Khan be assigned to my ship,” he says. “We could use him in whatever capacity he can serve, and I could keep an eye on him.”

“And the fact that he’s like you has no bearing on this request, does it, Jim?” Pike asks shrewdly.

“Sir,” Jim says.

Pike waves a hand. “I’ll consider it. In the meantime, if you want to try and convince him, he’s overseeing the revival of his crew.” He gives Jim the location of where the cryotube-torpedoes are being stored and Jim nods.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me,” Pike says. “I’m not doing you any favors. Khan may decide he doesn’t want to sign on to the Enterprise, and although he’s technically Starfleet I highly doubt I can force him.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says. “Thank you anyway, sir.”

“Dismissed,” Pike says and Jim sees himself out.

He finds Khan where Pike said he’d be, wings tucked back as he studies the readings on a biobed where a man lies, seemingly asleep. “One of your crew?” he asks, and Khan does not look up.
“Yes,” he says. “This is Katsuro. We have attempted to revive him first.” He gestures at the next bed over. “Bishop is next.”

“Why these two?” Jim asks.

“I trust them with my life,” Khan says.

Katsuro stirs, and Khan reaches down, pressing his fingers against the pulse in Katsuro’s wrist. He says something in what Jim thinks is Japanese, but can’t be sure. A moment later, Katsuro’s eyes fly open and he grabs Khan’s hand on reflex, saying something in a whisper.

Jim steps back, feeling out of place at watching this. Katsuro seems a bit disoriented at first, but within seconds he pushes to a sitting position, eyes flicking around him to take everything in. He looks over at the next bed and visibly breathes out, a faint smile appearing on his face.

“So long,” Katsuro says in English, slightly accented. “How...you will have to tell me everything later.” He looks over at Jim and blinks once in what Jim thinks might be surprise. “Another one of us?”

“No,” Khan says.

“Interesting,” Katsuro says. Clearly he has questions, but either he’s content to wait for Khan to explain things or he’s not about to ask in front of someone he doesn’t know. “Bishop?”

“Should be awakening soon,” Khan says. He smiles, and Jim blinks at the sight because there’s actual warmth there, something he hasn’t seen before. “I knew better than to revive one without the other.”

Katsuro laughs. “It has been some time,” he says. He gets off the biobed, moving through some basic stretches far more fluidly than Jim thinks a three hundred year old just-frozen man should be able to move.

“Yes, but some things never change,” Khan says.

“Has the world?” Katsuro asks.

Khan’s mouth twists. “Yes and no.”

Katsuro’s eyes flick to Jim and he says something in a language Jim doesn’t recognize at all. He wishes momentarily Uhura were here, because she’d know what they were saying. Katsuro and Khan talk quietly in whatever language they’re using for a few minutes, and Jim’s wings shift and extend and wrap around him.

Eventually Katsuro nods and moves to the biobed where the other man--Bishop--lies, reaching down to touch his face. Katsuro’s not all that tall, Jim notes--maybe a couple inches shorter than he is. Bishop, however, stretches the entire length of the biobed. He wonders if that was part of the genetic engineering or if some things just can’t be designed.

Bishop blinks once, and again, and Katsuro says something to him Jim can’t quite hear or understand. Slowly, Bishop’s eyes open and he smiles when he sees Katsuro, reaching up to brush his fingers over Katsuro’s face.

Khan walks over to Jim, wings spreading in either a deliberate move to block him from seeing Katsuro and Bishop’s interaction or just because he can, Jim’s not sure. “Those two are a pair?” he asks.
“Have been, when possible,” Khan says.

Jim nods. “So,” he says. “I want to offer you a place on my ship.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because you’re brilliant, and I could use your skills,” Kirk says. “Also, you’ve saved my life twice now.” And you have wings.

Khan’s wings stir and shift and he folds them back. “I will consider it,” he says. “I want to see what will happen with my crew, where we will go.”

“We’d probably have room for some of them, too,” Jim says. “We...lost some people in the fight with Marcus, and even if it wasn’t for that, your crew’s skills could come in handy.”

“Tell me something, Kirk,” Khan says. “Where did your wings come from?”

“No one knows,” Kirk admits, stretching his just because it feels good. “I was born with them, the best guess is some kind of radiation mutation or some consequence of being born in space. They...a couple of doctors suggested I get them removed, but they’re too integrated into my body.”

“They make you unique,” Khan says quietly.

“I never met anyone else with them,” Kirk says, the tip of his right wing brushing Khan’s shoulder. “Yours really were an accident?”

“Either an accident or a planned effect unable to be replicated,” Khan says. “We were...designed, but each of us has slightly different skills.”

“What are theirs?” Jim asks, nodding toward Katsuro and Bishop.

“I would not advise trying to fight Katsuro,” Khan says, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Not unless you want broken bones and a very hasty defeat.”

“Is he better than you?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says.

Kirk’s impressed, remembering Khan’s skills on Qo’nos. “And Bishop?”

“A brilliant tactician,” Khan says.

“Giving away our secrets, are you?” a baritone voice says and Khan turns, smiling when he sees Bishop standing.

“You look well,” Khan says. “I was...concerned the revival protocols had been tampered with.”

“As far as we can tell we’re here and intact,” Bishop says. “Three hundred years? Did we really sleep so long? Did anyone not survive?”

“A few,” Khan says. “Nandi, Carleton, Ingmar...their cryotubes were damaged by time. We are not sure Ada will wake.” He names a couple other people, and Bishop frowns.

“And who is this?” he asks, nodding at Jim.

“Captain James Kirk,” Khan says. “Commands the USS Enterprise, the flagship of the Federation.”
“Is he one of us?” Bishop asks and Kirk wonders how many times Khan’s going to get asked that question.

“No,” Khan says. He says something else in Japanese and Bishop nods, answering easily.

Kirk thinks he should probably go. “You have a doctor to check your crew out, right?” he asks. “I mean--”

“We will be fine, Kirk,” Khan says, and he looks so much more relaxed than Kirk’s ever seen him. Almost...happy. “If you will excuse us, we have more work to do, and three hundred years to fill in.”


Khan nods, and Kirk sees himself out.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

You say he is not one of us.

Fate smiles on him and tells him Bones was assigned to do medical evaluations of Khan’s crew. It takes Jim a few hours to track him down, busy with overseeing ship repairs and dealing with administrative bullshit he doesn’t care about, but eventually he gets a few minutes free and finds Bones in Starfleet Medical. “Hey,” he says, turning the chair around in front of Bones and straddling it so his wings don’t get crushed. “How’s Khan’s crew coming along?”

“Thirty-two of them are awake,” Bones says. “Three died in the revival process. We haven’t started on the others yet. Of the ones that are awake, they’ve recovered much faster than I would have expected. Their cells regenerate like—” he shakes his head. “It’s incredible.”

“Where are they now?” Kirk asks.

“I don’t know,” Bones says. “Something about getting them temporary quarters while they catch up on the last three hundred years. Why do you care so much?”

Jim blows out a breath. “He has wings,” he says, trusting Bones to understand.

“And he killed a lot of people,” Bones says. “He may be like you but he’s not like you.”

“You saw what happened to him, Bones,” Jim says. “He was coerced. He saved my life twice. Maybe more than that, depends on how you count. He could have killed me, left me to die, and he didn’t.”

Bones gives him a steady look. “You sound like you’ve got a crush,” he says.

“What? No,” Jim says, scowling. “It’s just...I’ve never met anyone else like me before.”

“And you still haven’t,” Bones says.

“You know what I mean,” Jim says. “I asked him to join our crew.”

“You did what?” Bones demands. “Have you lost your ever-loving mind?”

“We could use him, Bones,” Jim says. “And his crew.”

“You’re insane,” Bones mutters. “And you’ve got a crush.”

“I do not,” Jim says even though he totally doesn’t. “He’s got what he wants. He won’t turn on us.”

“You don’t know that,” Bones says darkly. “Jim, any one of his crew could snap your neck in an instant without looking twice. We should have left them in cryosleep. There’s no place for them in society.”

“We’re going to find one,” Jim says.
Bones scowls at him and Jim decides the better part of discretion is leaving. The problem is, he’s not sure where to go.

He stops by the quartermaster’s office, because if anyone would know where thirty-three recently thawed people have been quartered and given clothes and things, it’d be him. Sure enough, he gets pointed toward an older section of the Academy dorms, ones not being used by cadets at the moment, and when he walks into the building he hears sounds of fighting coming from the gym. Quietly, he heads down there, peeking his head in.

He can’t quite tell what’s going on; it almost appears to be a free for all, no defined sides and everyone for himself. They move fast, faster than Kirk’s seen people fight before, and he swears he thinks he hears something break at least once, if not more than once. Remembering Khan’s comments, he looks for Katsuro and finds him just in time to watch him deliver a roundhouse kick to some black-haired woman’s jaw, sending her head snapping back and making her stumble back and fall. Kirk hisses in a breath through his teeth--that looked like it hurt--but she’s back on her feet in an instant, turning toward the next opponent and pulling--whoa, okay, so there are knives in this fight now, and she scores a cut across someone’s chest, leaving him bleeding.

Someone shouts--Kirk doesn’t know who--and as if that’s a signal, everyone just freezes. Mid-punch, mid-kick, whatever, they all just stop moving. He counts in his head, and when he reaches five one-thousand, everyone relaxes and the fight appears to be over.

“Not terrible,” Katsuro says, sounding pleased. “We are out of practice, but that was...minimally acceptable.”

The black haired woman with the knives snorts and says something in what Kirk thinks is Russian. Someone else immediately answers her, and Kirk gets confused because there appear to be multiple languages flying around the room, and he wonders how many everyone speaks.

He considers backing away slowly, just fading out of the building, but he takes one step back and the black-haired woman turns and sees him, and a second later she’s got a knife at his throat. “Uh,” Jim says. “I’m not here to hurt anyone?”

She eyes him warily, then turns her head and spits out a stream of Russian that sounds vaguely insulting. “Stand down,” Khan says, coming toward them. “He is not an enemy.”

“I’m really not,” Jim says, trying for charming. The woman rolls her eyes, but steps back and her knife vanishes.

“And now you have met Ektaterina,” Khan says. “Ekatetina, this is Captain Kirk.”

“Hi,” Jim says, resisting the urge to rub his throat. “I really--I didn’t mean to disturb anyone, I just--I came to see how you were settling in.”

“Tolerably well,” Khan says. “We have not been completely successful in reviving everyone.”

“Yeah, Bones said,” Jim says. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

Khan nods. “What do you want, Captain?”

To touch your wings. Jim smacks himself mentally and folds his own back more tightly than he needs to. “Like I said, I just came to see how you were, um, adjusting.”

“I see,” Khan says.
Ekaterina studies Jim for a moment, then moves around him to study his wings. “Interesting,” she says finally in English. “Yet you say he is not one of us.”

“Because he is not,” Khan says.

“A descendant?” Ekaterina suggests, and Khan shakes his head.

“Do you honestly think any of ours would have been allowed to live?” Khan asks. “For that matter, who among us had offspring?”

“Geoffrey,” Ekaterina says. “He had a son.”

“Rowena had a daughter,” someone else comments. “But I do not know what became of her or her descendants.”

“We can find out,” Khan says. “Assuming there are any to find.”

Ekaterina says something in Russian, gesturing between Khan and Jim. Khan snaps “Nyet” and his wings bristle, flaring out for a moment before he forces them to settle. She laughs.

“Khan,” Katsuro says. He says something in--Hindi, maybe? Arabic? Jim has no idea.

Khan’s mouth twists in half a smile. “Don’t break anyone,” he says, and then he’s walking past Jim and Jim follows him out the door. Khan says nothing, and Jim can barely keep up with him as he walks through the campus, to the highest point Jim knows of. Khan doesn’t really acknowledge him, but he doesn’t tell Jim to leave either.

“What are you doing?” Jim asks, a little out of breath.

“What does it look like, Captain?” Khan asks. He takes a few steps backwards, then a few more, before dropping into a crouch, his wings folded back. Jim really has no idea what he’s doing, but Khan runs forward--scarily fast--and throws himself at the sky, wings snapping open and beating strongly to keep him aloft.

“Holy fuck,” Jim says, watching him soar upward, black against the blue sky, wings outstretched. He kind of envies Khan that he can do that--Jim’s never really had a chance to learn how to fly, if he even can. He’s tried a few times, but it’s never lasted long and he’s never been entirely certain he can trust himself to stay in the sky.

He loses track of time, watching Khan in the sky, flying higher and higher until he can barely see him, just a speck of black in the blue. After a while he sits down on the grass, not really sure why he’s still there, not really willing to admit to himself why he hasn’t left.

Khan lands lightly, in a crouch, wings folding around him before he tucks them back. “I should have thought you left,” he says, slightly out of breath as he straightens up. “Why are you following me around, Captain? What do you want?”

“I’ve never met anyone like me before,” Jim says, going for honesty rather than prevarication. “I don’t understand why I have these things, and I don’t know why you have them, but I’ve never met anyone else with them before and I don’t...two out of billions, isn’t that worth something? All kinds of aliens, and yet we’re the only two people with wings I’ve ever known.”

“It is...interesting,” Khan admits. “However, I have done my research, and you are not related to me nor any of my family.”
“Which just makes it more interesting,” Jim says. “Why us? Why this? I don’t...I don’t understand, and I don’t like things I don’t understand.”

“You don’t like me,” Khan says, stating a fact.

“I don’t know if I do or not,” Jim tells him. “I know you’re capable of some pretty awful things, and I know you don’t have a conscience and you’ll kill as easily as I’d put on my boots in the morning. But I also know you have your own code, and you’ll do anything for your family, and I respect that part of you.”

Khan’s mouth twitches in what might almost be a smile. “In another life, you might have been one of us,” he says.

“Well, this is the life I’ve got,” Jim says. “And I still--Bones hates the idea, Spock’s going to go, well, Spock on me, but I still want you on my ship, you and whoever of your crew you bring along. We’re heading out on a five-year mission, no one’s ever done it before, and I think you and your people could come in handy.”

“I have no love for Starfleet,” Khan says. “And yet I seem to have few options. If we do not want to go back to sleep, we must...integrate. In our own way.”

“Are you willing to give me a chance?” Jim asks. “Because despite what I saw you do, despite what you’ve done, I’m willing to give you one.”

Khan shrugs and begins walking back toward the dorms. “I will need to discuss it with my people,” he says. “Not all of us are revived yet, and we will not decide our future until we have awoken everyone we can.”

“Oh, that’s fair,” Jim says. “And the Enterprise is still undergoing repairs, so it’ll be a while before we ship out. Any of your people engineers? Mechanics?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Are you asking for help, captain?”

“A chance to integrate,” Kirk says. “Isn’t that what you want?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says.

Jim sighs. “Can I ask a totally stupid question?”

“You may not get an answer, but you may always ask,” Khan says.

“How many languages do you and your people speak?” Jim asks. “I can’t keep up when you start talking at each other.”

“That is rather the point, captain,” Khan says. “We speak...most languages that existed when we were alive. We use them to remind ourselves of where we came from, the places we ruled and fought and served.” He smiles very, very faintly. “And it is an easy way to have conversations we do not wish to be overheard unless one is a trained linguist.”

“If you could take your choice of your people to serve with you,” Jim says. “On the Enterprise. Who would it be?”

“Katsuro, Ekaterina, Bishop,” Khan says without hesitating. “Our skills vary slightly and complement each other, and the four of us...we are family, Kirk. More so than some others. Every one of my crew is my family; those three are my brothers and sister.”
“So the guy who can best you in a fight, the woman who almost slit my throat, and a guy who
knows tactics?” Jim asks. “What other skills do they have?”

“Many,” Khan says. “And all three of them could best you in a fight, Kirk. We were designed that
way.”

“But who can best you?” Kirk asks.

“Katsuro, sometimes Ekaterina,” Khan says. “Bishop and I are more equally matched.”

“Intelligence-wise, who’s smarter than you?” Jim asks.

“Why does it matter, Kirk?” Khan asks.

“I’m just trying to get a handle on you and your people,” Jim says. “I don’t know anything about
you.”

“Nor do you need to,” Khan says. “We were created for superior intelligence. None among us is less
than a genius.”

“If you’re going to be on my ship, I damn well need to know,” Jim says, frustrated.

“And who has said we will be?” Khan counters. “You have extended an offer. I have not accepted
it. I highly doubt your first officer would approve of this offer, and what of the rest of your crew?
They see me and mine as terrorists, Kirk. War criminals, condemned to death in eternal sleep. Do
you honestly think it likely we will integrate well?”

“I think you sound like you’re making excuses,” Jim says, and he nudges Khan with a wingtip. “My
crew’s seen the records of your trial. You were coerced into doing what you did.”

“And you think they will believe that?” Khan snorts skeptically.

“I think I’m not about to let the only other person I’ve ever met with wings walk away before I find
out what’s going on with him,” Jim says fiercely, blocking Khan’s path with his own wings. “There
has to be a reason we’re like this. Just us.”

“Genetic chance,” Khan says, stretching his own wings either as an attempt to intimidate or just in
response to Jim’s.

“No,” Jim says. “This happened for a reason.” He drops his wings, and Khan slowly folds his back.

“Are you truly that lonely, captain, that you would use me to fill that void?” Khan asks quietly.

“Are you honestly that scared of me that you can’t admit you’re curious too?” Kirk counters. “Don’t
you want to know why this happened? Why we are what we are?”

“I know why I am what I am, Kirk,” Khan says.

“But do you know why I am what I am?” Jim asks.

Khan presses his lips together. “It is not my problem.”

“But you are curious,” Jim says. “Admit it. You can be honest with me. I pleaded for leniency in
your case, I all but begged Admiral Pike for help. I’m on your side, Khan, God help me. No one else
may be, but I am.”
“My family is for me,” Khan says.

“And what do they think of me?” Jim asks.

Khan shrugs. “Uncertain. There is some curiosity as to why you have wings yet you are not one of us.”

“And you’re sure I’m not related to you or any of yours?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Of my family, only I have wings, and you are in no way related to me.”

“Well,” Jim says. “I guess that’s good.”

Khan raises his eyebrows. “Why do you say so?”

“Because...well, I’d just rather not be related to you,” Jim says, wings folding around himself and looking away from Khan.

“You claim to be on my side and yet the thought of being connected repulses you,” Khan says.

“No, it’s not that,” Jim says. “It’s--it’s not that. It’s just--” He takes a deep breath, forces his wings back, and before he can talk sense into himself leans up and kisses Khan lightly. “It’s that. It’s that you have fucking wings and you get me and I don’t know if I can trust you but I don’t want to let you get away.”

Khan stands stock still, but his wings shift and mantle and stretch restlessly. “No,” he says finally.

“No what?” Jim asks.

“No, I am not going to let you use me,” Khan says. “Welcome to being alone, captain.”

“I know what being alone is like, I’ve done it my entire life,” Jim says through gritted teeth. “Khan, whether you believe me or not, I am not trying to play you, use you, manipulate you, or--do anything you’d do toward me. You saved my life. You didn’t turn on me after you killed Marcus and I was pretty sure you would. Whether you want to admit it or not, there’s something between us and I am not going to leave you alone until we figure out what it is.”

“So I must resign myself to your presence,” Khan says, and Jim completely can’t read his voice or his body language, but his wings haven’t settled, and they fold around Khan’s lean frame for a moment before he shakes his head and forces them back.

“There are worse things in the world,” Jim says, reaching out with a wingtip to brush the side of Khan’s face.

“Perhaps,” Khan says.

Jim’s wings don’t quite wrap around Khan all the way, but they come close. “I don’t know you that well, I don’t know if I can trust you, but I want to find out,” he says quietly. “Give me a chance, Khan.”

He steps back, his wings stretching for a moment before he folds them back.

Khan says nothing. His wings are unnaturally still; Jim figures he’s repressing them through sheer force of will and winces inwardly at how much Khan’s muscles will hurt later. “Come along, then,” Khan says, turning and beginning to walk back toward the dorms. “If you are indeed going to attach yourself to my presence, I suppose I can at least feed you. Your crew may think I am attempting to
“Are you susceptible to poison?” Jim asks.

“Depending on type, quantity, and ingestion source,” Khan says. “But Kirk, if I were intending to do you harm, you’d already be dead.”

“I know,” Jim says.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Do I have to worry about your crew killing me?

Back at the dorms, Ekaterina and a thin black woman Kirk hasn’t met yet appear to have taken over the kitchen, and whatever they’re making smells fantastic. “One more?” the black woman asks, looking up from her cutting board.

“Yes,” Khan says. “I appear to have acquired a Starfleet captain. Kirk, this is Anandi. If she doesn’t like you, she’ll poison you.”

Anandi clucks her tongue at Khan and dumps the contents of her board into a big pot. “Not until I’ve had time to research what’s current and what has antidotes,” she says, and Kirk doesn’t know whether to feel better about that or not. “It would be rather stupid of me to poison him with something that has a common antidote these days.”

“Uh, can I weigh in and ask not to get poisoned?” Kirk asks, giving Anandi his most charming smile.

Ekaterina laughs. “You may ask, certainly.”

“No poison at dinner,” Anandi says. “That’s just poor form and bad hospitality, and if we have you to thank for our being here, we’ll at least let you live for a meal.”

“Do I have to worry about your crew killing me?” Jim mutters to Khan.

“Not tonight, I think,” Khan says. “Have we begun reviving the rest yet?”

“Nyet,” Ekaterina says. “The humans require more sleep than we do and do not wish to begin again until tomorrow. They are concerned about the viability of some of the remaining tubes. Ada, Connor, Chaim, Frederich in particular they think may not survive revival.”

Khan’s lips press together. “I was concerned about that,” he says. “After so long...”

“Only seventy-two of us were brought back to Starfleet to begin with,” Anandi says. “The others died on the ship, Khan?”

He hesitates. “That is what I was told. I was never allowed to see the ship.”

Ekaterina growls softly. “So for all you know, twelve of us could have been revived and killed without your knowledge.”

“It is possible,” Khan says.

“The man, Marcus,” Ekaterina says. “He is dead?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Pity.” She slams her knife down into the table, where it stands quivering, point embedded in the
wood. “I would have liked to do that myself.”

“You always would,” Anandi says. “Perhaps that is why you were not revived first.”

Ekaterina smiles thinly and yanks her knife out of the table. “Dinner is almost ready,” she says. “Go tell the others.”

Jim doesn’t know if they’re doing it on purpose or out of habit, but he completely can’t keep up with the conversations in the dining hall. For only thirty-four people, including himself, he loses track of the languages they use, and they seem to think nothing of asking questions and giving answers in different languages— he swears he hears some of them change languages in the same answer, and wonders if it’s a mental game, a trick to keep their skills sharp. He thinks Uhura would go nuts if he were to introduce her, and wonders if that would be a good idea.

Khan remains mostly quiet, and when he does join in the conversation he keeps to English, which occasionally helps Jim and mostly doesn’t help at all. Jim feels more than a bit out of place, but keeps quiet and thanks Anandi and Ekaterina for the meal.

All of them move as one to clean up, which surprises Jim a bit, but he chips in and watches as the thirty-three of them settle into one of the common areas after the meal, some with data pads, some with actual paper books. Everyone seems to be studying something, which Jim figures makes sense—they have three hundred years to catch up on. He notices a little warily that Ekaterina has a knife in her hand as she studies her PADD, loosely flipping it as if by habit, and reminds himself to never get on her bad side.

“You must be getting back to your own duties,” Khan says to him, both of them standing in the wide doorway.

“Probably,” Jim says. “I at least need to get back to my quarters and catch up on messages and find out what I’m doing tomorrow.” He bites his lip and tries to ignore that his wings are shifting. “Walk with me? It’s not far.”

Khan eyes him, but nods and gestures for Jim to precede him out of the dorm. Jim tries to figure out what to say, how to ask what he wants to know, and it’s a good block before he says anything. “Are all your people that eager to kill?” he says finally. “I mean, Ekaterina—”

“Has always been deadly,” Khan says. “We were built for combat, Kirk, to fight our way to the top. We will all kill if necessary and not think twice about it.”

“How did you not kill Marcus before now?” Jim asks.

“He threatened my family,” Khan says with a scowl. “I had no choice. Marcus was the lead admiral at Starfleet. Who was going to believe me? Who was going to listen to me? As far as I was concerned the entire organization was corrupt.”

“Do you still believe that?” Kirk asks.

“I am undecided,” Khan says. “It will depend on how my family is treated, what options we are given.”

Jim supposes that’s fair. “Thank you for having me to dinner,” he says. “Even though I have no idea what you were all talking about.”

“Habit,” Khan says, a not-quite apology. “I will suggest we remain in Standard next time, but I cannot guarantee that anyone will bother. We like our games.”
“I kinda got that impression,” Jim says. “You--did you all grow up together?”

“We did,” Khan says. “Our genetic material came from all over the world, but we were raised together in India, trained and molded until we were old enough to begin leading our own battles. I was sixteen when I led my first army.”

“You ended up ruling India, most of southeast Asia,” Jim says.

“I did,” Khan says. “We brought order to a chaotic time, and we were condemned for it. But that is always the way of the world, is it not? The weapon gets destroyed for what it has done, not the maker.”

“We stopped experimenting on people after the Eugenics wars,” Jim says. “No more genetic engineering.”

“Really,” Khan says, giving Jim’s wings a pointed look.

“I don’t know how this happened, but I was not genetically enhanced,” Jim says, folding his wings back more tightly.

“Humans don’t have wings naturally, Kirk,” Khan says. “Your intelligence is also above average for a standard human.”

“I can’t crush people’s skulls,” Jim says. “And I don’t have enhanced senses or speed or anything like that.”

“No, you do not,” Khan says. “But that does not mean you were not somehow...engineered.”

“No,” Jim says. “No, this was a freak thing.”

“As you like,” Khan says.

Jim sighs. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Overseeing the awakening of the rest of my people, those that survive,” Khan says. “Helping them adjust to today. What did you think I would be doing?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “You’re not a doctor, so...”

“I know the sequencing for cryosleep revival,” Khan says. “We have doctors enough to examine and poke and prod us after we wake. The only other people I would trust to awaken my crew are my crew.”

“You were all so alone,” Jim says quietly, thinking about it. “God. Sixteen and fighting to lead a continent?”

“We had each other,” Khan says. “When we could see each other. It was...all we knew.”


“Katsuro held Japan,” Khan says. “It was what he was made for. Ekaterina, as you may have guessed, took Russia and most of Eastern Europe. She never wanted to rule, but she accepted it. Bishop Western Europe, Anandi parts of South America.”

“But Bishop and Katsuro were together, so...how did that work?” Jim asks.
“They did not see each other very often,” Khan says simply. “They made the most of the times they had. I doubt they will let themselves be separated again.”

“And you don’t want to be separated from them,” Jim says. “Or Ekaterina.”

“I do not,” Khan says.

“So I guess I’d better plan for the four of you on my ship,” Jim says, thinking out loud. “What—what skills do you have other than fighting, than ruling countries?”

“Many,” Khan says. “Katsuro is an engineer, or was when he could study. Bishop studied medicine. Ekaterina...she is perhaps the best linguist we have among us, and she can go anywhere, be anyone.”

“Covert ops,” Jim says.

“Yes.”

“We can always use engineers and doctors,” Jim says. “And tacticians, I suppose, and...whatever you want to do.”

“I have not yet accepted your offer, Kirk,” Khan says. “We may choose to go elsewhere. An option has been presented that we take a ship of our own, head out to find a suitable planet to colonize.”

“Is that really what you want?” Jim asks.

“It is not wholly up to me,” Khan says. “It depends on what we decide after we are all awake.”

Jim sighs. “Yeah, okay, I get it.”

By now they’ve reached his apartment building and Jim lets them in without thinking about it, pushing the lift button and just assuming Khan will come with him up to his place. Somewhat to his surprise, Khan does exactly that.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

I may regret this in the morning.

“Do you want a drink?” Jim asks, letting them into his apartment.

“No,” Khan says.

“Can you get drunk?” Jim asks curiously.

“Given enough alcohol, yes,” Khan says. “But the amount of alcohol required to intoxicate me would give a normal human alcohol poisoning, and the effects do not last long.”

“Bummer,” Jim says. “Do you care if I have a beer?”

“Why would I?” Khan asks, his wings shifting to tuck close to his body. “Why am I here, Kirk?”

“You followed me up, so that’s on you,” Jim says, getting himself a beer from the fridge and flipping the cap off.

“Yes, and I am rethinking the wisdom in that decision,” Khan says, looking around Jim’s apartment.

“Why?” Jim asks.

“What is the point of this?” Khan asks, his wings stretching and settling against his back. “Why am I here?”

“Once again, you followed me up,” Jim says. “So, uh, you have to ask yourself that question.”

Khan scowls impatiently. “I am not like you, Kirk. I do not want to be like you.”

“Whether you want it or not is irrelevant,” Jim says. “You are like me, at least in one big way.” He stretches his own wings as a point.

“Yes, as you keep pointing out,” Khan says. “Why do you want me on your ship?”

“Because you’re brilliant,” Jim says. “Because you have wings. Because I think you need somewhere to belong and maybe the Enterprise could be it.”

“Are the wings that important to you?” Khan asks. “If I did not have them, would we still be here?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says honestly. He sets down the beer, not really wanting it, and walks over to Khan. “Why are you here?”

Khan shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t you?” Jim asks quietly.

“I will not let you use me, Kirk,” Khan says, his voice cool.
“That’s not what I’m trying to do,” Jim says. He takes a gamble and brushes a hand over one of
Khan’s wings, warm and soft and Khan visibly shivers, the first time Jim thinks he’s gotten a real
reaction out of the man. “This doesn’t have to be...okay, cards on the table time? I want you, and
yeah, some of it’s because of the wings and some of it’s because you’ve saved my life twice and
some of it’s because I just cannot figure you out but damn if I don’t want to. I want you to spend the
night with me, for a start, and I want you to be able to trust me.”

Khan’s wings shift and ruffle and fold around him, and he says nothing. Jim stretches out one of his
wings and brushes the edge of Khan’s, and Khan presses his lips together and his wings continue
shifting.

“Trust me,” Jim says quietly. “At least for tonight.”

“I may regret this in the morning,” Khan says, visibly uncertain.

“I hope you don’t,” Jim says.

Slowly, Khan stretches out his wings, folding them around Jim and holding him close. Jim closes his
eyes for a moment, breathing in the scent of Khan’s wings, the feel of them against his own. He
leans up and Khan leans down and their lips meet.

He finds out that Khan’s wingspan is bigger than his bed—his own is almost too big—and the lines
where the wings meet his back are incredibly sensitive, almost too much so. He learns that Khan isn’t
ticklish but there’s a spot on his ribs that makes him squirm, and then he decides that making Khan
squirm is way more fun than it ought to be, after which he discovers that Khan can flip them over
and pin Jim against the bed with little more than a thought.

Okay, so that’s way more fun than it ought to be, too, but Jim’s never been afraid of laughter during
sex and he counts it a job well done when he gets an actual, honest smile out of Khan. He doesn’t
quite get a laugh, but it’s a near thing, and he decides next time he’ll go for that. For now Khan has
Jim’s wrists pinned and okay, so maybe that’s a thing of his and yeah, he’ll fucking beg if he has to,
to hear Khan’s voice go rough with desire and want. Khan seems to like it when he begs, pleads,
curses him when he doesn’t move the way Jim wants him to—and then he does and it’s fucking
perfect and Khan bites when he comes and Jim almost passes out.

They doze after, Jim’s wings tucked against him and one of Khan’s draped over him. Jim brushes his
fingers over the feathers, tracing the line where the feathers stop and soft, warm skin begins. Khan
shivers and twitches under his touch but doesn’t ask him to stop and Jim doesn’t, touching him until
he relaxes, until his breathing evens and deepens into sleep and Jim’s barely awake. He falls asleep
with Khan’s wing around him, and when he wakes alone the bed feels cold and far too big.

“Did he leave a...” He sees the flashing light on his comm link and flips it open to replay the
message.

“...apologize for leaving before you awoke,” Khan’s voice says quietly. “I am needed to oversee the
awakening of the rest of my crew, and we begin early. You know where I will be today if you wish
to find me.”

That’s all there is, and Jim slumps, relieved and disappointed all at once.

He has other messages, and other things to deal with, and he has to talk to Spock about Khan—and
won’t that be fun—and okay, so maybe he puts off that conversation until he can’t anymore, until it’s
him and Spock on board the Enterprise in the captain’s ready room and Spock raises an eyebrow at
him. “There is something on your mind, captain,” he says.
Jim sighs. “How would you feel about working with Khan?”

Spock’s eyebrow twitches. “I do not believe he is trustworthy.”

“I’m not sure he is either but I want to give him a chance,” Jim says. “He didn’t turn on us on the Vengeance, and that’s got to count for something. He and his crew--I’ve met some of them, now, and they’re...interesting. I think, maybe, we could use some of them.”

“And his wings have no bearing on your thoughts?” Spock asks.

“I didn’t say that,” Jim says, a little grumpily. “I think...okay, so he’s from a different time, and things were different for him, but I think...he’s got his own code, and he won’t betray his people. He’d do anything for them. If we can get him to see us as his people, we’ve got him.”

“Do you think that is actually possible?” Spock asks. “I am not comfortable with this idea, Jim.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you would be,” Jim says, sighing. “But...look, come meet his crew with me, okay? Just to get an idea of them. They’re reviving the rest today, the ones they can.”

“I will contrive to arrange some time,” Spock says. “Is that where you are going now?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jim says. “You can handle things on here without me for a bit, right?”

Spock nods and Jim heads for the shuttle bay--the transporters are still offline and will be for a while. He flies back down to Earth and heads for the facility housing the un-awakened members of Khan’s crew.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Be careful or I may think that's an invitation.

Chapter Notes

I feel like I should apologize for how self-indulgent this fic has become. I can only hope it's an indulgence for you as well.

He finds Khan easily enough; the man’s hard to miss. But he looks busy, intent on the woman lying in a biobed, so Jim hangs back for a bit, watching Khan take readings or do whatever he’s doing. The woman doesn’t move, and after a few minutes Khan shakes his head, stepping away. Jim’s guessing it was one of the ones they weren’t sure about, and he grimaces.

Khan turns and sees him, and Jim winces at the tired, almost defeated look on Khan’s face. “Kirk,” Khan says, walking over to him.

“She didn’t make it?” Jim asks, nodding at the woman’s form.

“No,” Khan says, his wings folding around him for a moment. “We did not think she would. Of the sixteen we have attempted to revive so far today, five have not survived. We have twenty-one left, and of those, we are unsure about the viability of nine.”

“I’m sorry,” Jim says, touching Khan’s shoulder.

Khan sighs. “It is, I suppose, to be expected. After so long, equipment inevitably begins malfunctioning. We have successfully revived forty-three people, which is better than I had any right to expect.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt,” Jim says. “Is it possible Marcus tampered with some of the tubes?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But there appears to be no rhyme nor reason for the members of my crew that have not survived, so we think it more likely it is just due to equipment failure. Otherwise, we highly doubt Ekaterina would be here, or Rudolf.”

“Because they’re assassins?” Jim asks.

“Because they would have killed Marcus without a second thought long before I did,” Khan says.

“He might not have known,” Jim says. “And just taken his chances with whoever he could tamper with.”

“He might,” Khan says. “It is hard to tell.”
Jim steps a little closer. “I wish you hadn’t left before I woke up,” he says. “You could at least have woken me before you went.”

“You were sound asleep, and unaugmented humans require more sleep than we do,” Khan says. “I did not wish to disturb you.”

“Next time, disturb me,” Jim says.

“You assume there will be a next time,” Khan says.

“I can live in hope, right?” Jim asks, smiling. He’s pleased when he gets a faint smile in return.

“I must get back to work,” Khan says. “We should be finished here around 1500 hours. If you like, you may come by our temporary quarters then.”

“I will,” Jim says. “I’d like to meet the rest of your people. I don’t know if I want to meet them without you around, though. They might decide I’m target practice.”

“Enough of them know you by now that it would be unlikely,” Khan says. “However, being prudent is not a bad idea.”

“Thank you,” Jim says. He stretches out a wing and brushes the side of Khan’s face. “I’ll find you later.”

Khan nods—and to Jim’s surprise, touches his shoulder briefly before he moves back to the biobeds. Jim smiles, then smacks himself mentally and heads out.

Duties and meetings keep him busy until 1600 hours, and Spock joins him after that to head over to the dorms. “I am still unconvinced this is a logical course of action,” Spock says.

“Yeah, I know,” Jim says. “Humor me, okay?”

“Apparently that is my function,” Spock says and Jim snorts.

The door’s unlocked, and once again Jim hears sounds of fighting coming from the gym. “This way, I think,” he says, leading Spock down the hall to the gym. There are more people in it today, and things seem slightly more organized—there are groups working together, or against each other, he supposes. His attention gets caught by Katsuro and Ekaterina, facing off against each other and moving so quickly he can barely make out individual moves. Ekaterina does a back handspring and throws a knife at Katsuro, which he ducks in time to let the knife go thudding into the wall. He grabs the knife and throws it back at her; she catches it and spins into a kick which he blocks.

“Fascinating,” Spock murmurs next to him, and Jim has to agree.

He looks for Khan and finds him fighting two people he hasn’t met yet, a redheaded man slightly shorter than Khan himself and a petite brunette woman who’s wielding some kind of staff. She uses the staff almost like she’s in a pole vaulting competition, planting it and swinging up to kick Khan in the head, calling out “Disable!” as she does. Khan immediately falls to his knees, and she lands and turns on the redhead, who punches her in the jaw and sends her back a step. A moment later, Khan pushes to his feet and rejoins the fight.

Once again, someone shouts—Jim thinks it’s Katsuro, but he’s not sure—and everyone freezes for a five-count before relaxing. “Better,” Katsuro says, smiling. “Better than yesterday, that is for sure.”

“Feels good to move, finally,” the brunette with the staff says. “Anyone break anything?”
“Ribs,” someone says with a shrug. “They’ll heal.”

“Seconded,” someone else says.

“I think my wrist may have sprained,” Ekaterina says, gingerly flexing it. “It will be fine in a bit.”

“Dislocated shoulder,” a black man says. “Anandi, can you help?”

“SI,” she says, and Jim watches in a kind of morbid fascination as she effortlessly pops his shoulder back into place. The man winces once and rotates his shoulder.

“Gracias.”

“De nada,” Anandi says. She turns and sees Jim and Spock, and her eyebrows raise. “Khan, your captain is here.”

“Not mine,” Khan says and Ekaterina snorts. He snaps something at her in Russian and she laughs.

“We didn’t want to cause problems,” Jim says when Khan comes over to them. “It’s just you said to come by, and I wanted Spock to get a chance to meet your people.”

“Commander,” Khan says, inclining his head. Spock returns the nod.

“How did the rest of the reviving go?” Jim asks.

“We have finished awakening everyone we can,” Khan says. “Of the seventy-two who were still in cryosleep, nineteen did not survive the revival process. The fifty-four of us are all that is left.”

“I’m sorry,” Jim says, automatically brushing Khan’s shoulder with a wingtip.

Khan nods. “I suppose you would like to be introduced.”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Jim says.

Khan shrugs. “This way.”

Jim learns that the woman with the staff’s name is Alona, and the redhead with her is Matthew. The black man with the dislocated shoulder is Hugh. He memorizes names and faces, knowing Spock’s doing the same as Khan introduces him to the ones Jim’s already met.

Ekaterina raises her eyebrows when they come to her, and Jim takes a quick glance at her wrist, but he doesn’t see swelling so either she was wrong or they heal faster than anyone he’s ever met. “You are not human,” she says to Spock.

“I am half-Vulcan.”

“Interesting,” she murmurs, and Jim realizes suddenly that this group of people grew up before the Federation and aside from Khan, may not have met aliens before. “Will you be staying for our meal?”

Spock glances at Jim, who shrugs. “If it is not trouble,” he says. “However, I am a vegetarian.”

“We can work with that,” Anandi says, coming over to them. “Anyway, it’s Bishop’s turn to make dinner.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Jim asks.
“All of us are capable of cooking,” Anandi says. “Some of us prefer it more than others.” She turns and calls out something to Bishop in Spanish—Jim can’t quite get the gist but thinks maybe she’s telling him they have two more for dinner and one doesn’t eat meat.

Bishop pushes to his feet. “I’ll get started,” he says. “Alona, your turn to help me.”

“Aye,” she says and follows him toward the kitchen, impulsively kicking into a cartwheel on the way. “Fuck, I like being able to move.”

“We like you being able to move too,” Matthew says and she laughs, flipping him off before she disappears down the hall.

“Do you remember your time in cryosleep?” Jim asks Khan.

“Scattered dreams,” Khan says. “Bits and pieces, no more.”

Spock’s comm chirps. “Excuse me,” he murmurs, heading into the hall to answer it. Jim wonders what that’s about, if it’s ship’s business or Uhura checking in or whatever. He’ll ask when Spock gets back, he supposes.

Ekaterina and Anandi head off to join a group of people with data pads, leaving Kirk and Khan standing alone. “So,” Jim says quietly. “Do you regret last night?”

Khan’s wings shift and fold around him and fold back. “Regret is a waste of time,” he says.

“Yeah, that doesn’t mean you don’t feel it sometimes,” Jim says. “Do you?”

Khan hesitates. “No.”

“Okay,” Jim says, trying to hide his relief. From the look Khan gives him, he’s not sure how well he’s succeeded, and his fucking wings keep moving, which doesn’t help the situation. “Do you want to try for a repeat tonight?”

“I am not sure that is wise,” Khan says. “In any event, I shouldn’t leave my family tonight. I am the only one with current knowledge and they have many questions.”

“Do you want me to stay?” Jim asks. “I grew up in this time, I can probably answer some of them.”

“Perhaps for a bit,” Khan says. “It would be...helpful.”

“Sure,” Jim says. “I’ve got nowhere to be tonight.”

Spock returns, looking as unruffled as ever. “Everything okay?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Spock says. “Nyota was checking in to find out plans for the evening. I will be meeting her after the meal.”

“She’d probably get a kick out of everyone here,” Jim says. “The languages are...impressive.” He gestures toward the common room, where a few quiet conversations are ongoing, and if he listens closely he can pick out at least six languages—what they all are, he has no idea.

“Perhaps there will be a chance for her to meet some of your people another time,” Spock says to Khan.

“If we are to integrate into society, I should think it likely,” Khan says.
"Integrate into it or with plans of ruling it?" Spock asks blandly.

Khan smiles. "This is not our time, Mr. Spock. Perhaps in some years it may be, but for now it will be enough to live, to find places for ourselves that are not destined by genetics. We have had...few choices before.

Spock raises an eyebrow. "You chose to rule, did you not?"

"We were made for it," Khan says. "We did as we had been trained."

"What will you do with that training now?" Spock asks.

"A question we are still discussing," Khan says. "It depends on what our options are, and what we decide as a group."

"What options do you have at present?" Spock asks.

"Well," Khan says. "Your captain has offered some of us a place on board the Enterprise."

"So I heard," Spock says.

Khan smiles briefly. "The idea displeases you."

"I do not know if it is a wise course of action," Spock says.

"Nor logical?" Khan shrugs one shoulder. "Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn’t. Your Admiral Pike seems to think some of us may find places within Starfleet. We do have skills other than leading countries, and once we catch up with current information, we think we can make ourselves of use."

"What would you do?" Spock asks.

"Improve current technology," Khan says. "However that happens. Weapons, ships, engines, there is no design so perfect it cannot be improved, and I am...good at innovation."

"You designed most of the Vengeance," Spock says.

"I did," Khan says.

"There...may be room to include some of her concepts while we refit the Enterprise," Spock says, carefully choosing her words. "If you choose to assist with that endeavor."

"Careful, Mr. Spock, or I may think that’s an invitation," Khan says, again with the brief smile.

"Khan," someone calls, and he turns. He gets asked a question in--Greek, maybe? Kirk’s not sure, but he answers in a different language. The questioner seems satisfied with the answer and Khan turns back to them.

"What was that about?" Jim asks.

Khan shakes his head. "A question about history."

"Ours or yours?" Jim asks.

"Yes," Khan says.

Jim laughs. "Okay then."
“Mr. Spock, I understand you are a scientist,” Anandi says, coming over to them.

“I am, yes,” Spock says.

“Come talk with us about current advances,” she says, gesturing for him to join her and a couple other people. “We have questions.”

“I will endeavor to answer them,” Spock says, following her over to the small group.

Kirk blows out a breath. “Well, this is fun.”

“This was your idea, Kirk,” Khan points out.

“Call me Jim, okay?” Jim asks. “And yeah, I know, and I knew it wasn’t going to be easy between you and Spock but I figure you’re not actually trying to kill each other so we’re making progress.”

“Why is this so important to you?” Khan asks.

“Honestly? Because I know you won’t betray your people,” Jim says. “And if I can get you to see me and my crew as your people...”

“You are not,” Khan says.

“But we could be,” Jim says.

Khan’s wings mantle and stretch. “Unlikely,” he says. “But...I suppose anything is possible.”

“It really is,” Jim agrees, pointedly brushing one of Khan’s wings with his own. Khan starts at the touch.

“Dinner in ten,” Alona calls, coming back into the room. “Who’s on table setting duty?”

“Not it,” a few people call out.

“We’ll do it,” Hugh says, getting up along with Rudolf (blond, blue-eyed, about Jim’s height) and Maeve (about Katsuro’s height, redhead, and built like a brick house if Jim’s being honest).

“Thank you,” Alona says, disappearing back into the hall.

As with the previous night, Jim can’t keep up with the conversations flying around in two dozen languages. Spock seems to have been claimed by Anandi and her companions--Jim thinks their names are Daffyd and Estevao. He’s not sitting close enough to them to catch what they’re discussing but he can get the timbre of Spock’s voice, and he sounds as relaxed as Spock ever gets, calm but interested in the conversation. Okay, so that’s good.

After dinner Spock excuses himself, and as with the night before everyone settles back in the common area with PADDs or books or videos. Khan stands in the doorway, watching his people, and Jim thinks he’s never seen the man look both so content and so unsettled at the same time. He wonders if he’s responsible for the latter, and the thought troubles him.
“Captain,” Ekaterina says, looking up from her PADD. “Why are you still here?”

“I can go if I’m in the way,” Jim says cautiously. “I thought--some of you might have questions about this time, the Federation and Starfleet and all, and I thought maybe I could answer them.”

“Are we to play twenty questions?” Alona asks. She’s sitting cross-legged on a table, a book in her lap.

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?” Matthew asks.

Alona tilts her head and studies Jim. “Animal,” she says with a slow smile. “Maybe some mineral. And yes, captain, I like the idea. Tell us about Nero and the destruction of Vulcan.”

Jim blows out a breath. “Okay, that’s not a huge thing or anything, no,” he says, his wings shifting and fluffing out for a moment. “Um. It started in, well, an alternate timeline.”

He tells the story as best he can, leaving out some unimportant details like his provoking Spock into almost strangling him, and the mind-meld he’d shared with the older Spock, and focuses more on actual events. It’s slightly unnerving how quiet everyone is, paying close attention; no one really moves.

“Time travel,” someone says when he finishes. “And alternate universes. Sounds fantastical.”

“I wonder where we wound up, in that timeline,” Alona muses. “Maybe we’re still asleep.”

“Or dead,” Hugh says. “It is over a century in the future.”

“Yes, but no one knows how long we’ll live,” Anandi says. “We could be alive somewhere.”

“What do you mean, no one knows how long you’ll live?” Jim asks.

“Genetic engineering,” Anandi says. “Our cells regenerate constantly, slowing down the aging process. We’re all older than you, not taking into account the cryosleep time, and none of us look much beyond our twenties. Theoretically we could live for centuries.”

“I didn’t know,” Jim says. “I mean, I knew you heal fast and all, but...”

“We heal, we don’t require oxygen for survival, we require minimal sleep, our metabolisms can slow down if food isn’t easily available, we’re strong, fast, and our senses are enhanced,” Anandi says. “Anyone in this room could throw you across it without trying, including Alona. And that’s without taking our intelligence into consideration.”

“Why is it always including me?” Alona complains.

“Because you’re one and a half meters tall and weigh forty-five kilos,” Ekaterina says. “Next
obvious question?"

“Oh, I can think of several,” Alona says. “Including what the captain’s intentions are toward us in general and Khan in particular.”

Jim can’t help it; his wings fold around him and block his face. A wave of laughter runs through the room and he sighs, forcing his wings back. “I want...I want to help you integrate,” he says, aware there’s color in his face. “Whatever you did three centuries ago, times are different, people are different. Khan saved my life more than once, and I want to repay that somehow.”

“By taking him to your bed?” Ekaterina asks, and there’s somehow a thin knife in her hand that she’s using to peel an apple. Jim eyes the apple warily and hopes she doesn’t throw the knife at him.

“No,” he says. “That’s...different.”

“How?” That, surprisingly, comes from Bishop, who sits in a corner of one of the couches with a PADD on his lap.

“Uh,” Jim says. “Can that be between us?”

“That depends,” Anandi says. “You appear to be responsible and somewhat of an adult, so odds are in your favor. But none of us will hesitate to kill you or yours if you harm us or ours.”

“Yeah, believe me, I get that,” Jim says. “I’m really, really not trying to do that. I think there are places for you in Starfleet if you want them. i’ve already offered Khan a place on my ship, with whoever he wants to bring along.”

“Khan?” Ekaterina says. “You did not mention this.”

“I was waiting for everyone to be awakened,” Khan says. “It is one of the options we have.”

“Not all of us can serve on one ship,” Anandi says, frowning. “Unless it is our own.”

“We have been separated before,” Katsuro says, but he glances at Bishop and Bishop frowns.

“We have warp drive these days, and long-range comms, and yeah, you might not all serve on one ship but we’re not talking about separating you permanently, or being out of touch,” Jim says. “The Enterprise is in repairs for a while now, so I’m not about to pack up and leave tomorrow. There’s time for you all to acclimatize to this century, this world before anyone has to go anywhere.”

Ekaterina studies him, and Jim wishes his wings would just fucking stay still because he really doesn’t need Ekaterina knowing she makes him a little...cautious. Okay, nervous. She finally says something in Russian, a question by the inflection.

Khan makes a face, which surprises Jim. “Nyet,” he says after a moment. He says something else, looking a bit bothered.

“Are you sure?” Ekaterina asks in English.

“No,” Khan says.

“I see.” She cuts a piece of apple.

“Before we decide where we are to go,” Anandi says, “we will need to meet more people. Invite your senior staff for a meal tomorrow, Kirk.”
“I’ll do what I can,” Kirk says. “We could probably find a restaurant if you wanted to go out.”

“I give you my word we will not poison anyone,” Anandi says.

“You know, I wasn’t worried about that until you just said that,” Jim says and laughter runs through the room. “I get wanting more privacy, though. I’ll invite them. I think my comms officer would like you. She’s a really talented linguist.”

“Earth languages or xenolinguistics?” Ekaterina asks.

“Both, I think,” Jim says. “I don’t honestly know how many she speaks.”

“I would like to meet her,” Ekaterina says. “Her name?”


“I believe we have already met your chief medical officer, captain,” Bishop says. “Dr. McCoy, is it not?”

“Yeah, that’s him,” Jim says.

“For a doctor, he is...acceptable,” Ekaterina says, wrinkling her nose.

“You don’t like doctors?” Jim asks.

“No.” She cuts another piece of apple. “We had enough poking and prodding and testing when we were young.”

“I’m not a fan of having to get checked up, but Bones is a good doctor,” Jim says.

“He seems to be reasonably competent,” Bishop says.

“That’s damning with faint praise,” Jim says.

“It really isn’t,” Maeve says. “Bishop’s highest compliment is satisfactory. Competent from him probably means the man’s some kind of genius.”

“There are too many incompetent people in the world,” Bishop says mildly.

“You barely know anyone in this world,” Jim feels obliged to protest.

“Some things about human nature never change, captain,” Bishop says.


Alona unfolds from her spot on a table and gets to her feet. “I need a run,” she says. “Anyone in?”

“How far?” Maeve asks.

“Until I get tired,” Alona says. “So, maybe forty kilometers?”

Maeve considers and gets up. “Sure, I’ll go.”

A few other people join them and they head out of the room. “It takes a marathon to make you tired?” Jim asks Khan quietly.

Khan shrugs. “It depends on the person. Alona and Maeve have always been distance runners.”
“I noticed Alona was using a staff before, when you were fighting,” Jim says. “Where did she get that?”

“Some of our personal possessions were still on the ship,” Khan says. “Others we have acquired through the quartermaster. Alona uses the staff primarily because she is short, and it gives her better reach.”

“She disabled you earlier,” Jim says. “I was surprised.”

“It happens,” Khan says. “I am out of practice fighting my family, and regular humans are not a full test of my skills.”

“Vulcans might be,” Jim says, thinking about it. “They’re a lot stronger than humans.”

“I somehow doubt your Mr. Spock would agree to fight me,” Khan says.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jim says. “I think he’d love the chance to try and beat you up.”

Khan laughs at that, and Jim grins because it’s the first real laugh he’s gotten from him. “You may have a point.”

“I should probably head back to my place,” Jim says, a bit reluctantly. “Do you want to come with me?”

“He does,” Ekaterina says without looking up from her PADD.

Khan gives Ekaterina a pointed look and says something in Russian. She waves a hand at him and answers, finishing with “Don’t be stupid, brother,” in English--Jim’s guessing that was for his benefit.

“We’ll see you in the morning, Khan,” Anandi says, glancing up from her own PADD.

Khan’s wings bristle--it’s the best way Jim can describe it--and he forces them back before he turns and leaves without saying a word. Jim hesitates, then goes after him.

“Apparently my family has decided you are not an enemy,” Khan says when they’re on the street.

“Is being an actual ally too much to hope for?” Jim asks.

“You are making progress toward that goal,” Khan says. “Some of it will depend on dinner tomorrow night. Does your crew know you are trying to pursue a personal relationship with me?”

“Not...exactly,” Jim says. “Bones has a clue, but I don’t think anyone else knows anything.”

“They will not approve,” Khan says.

Jim sighs. “It’s not their business.”

“Is it not?” Khan asks. “Kirk, I killed many people when I fled, and the only reason I did not let the Klingons kill you and your landing party was because I knew you had my family on board your ship. You seem to have this image of me as someone I am not, and I think your crew sees me more clearly than you do.”

“I know what you did,” Jim says. “I also know what was done to you.”

Khan turns and his hand closes around Jim’s upper arm. “What do you mean?”
His grip’s tight enough to hurt, and Jim wonders if he’ll have bruises later. “I...the recordings,” he says. “Of what they did to you after you were revived. I saw some of them. I didn’t mean to tell you.”

Khan lets go of him, and Jim rubs his arm out of reflex. “How much did you see?”

“A few hours, maybe,” Jim says. “It was edited, scenes from different days and things. You were...Khan, they coerced you. They used you and held your family as a bargaining chip and forced you to do what they wanted.”

“And you think this excuses my actions?” Khan asks. “Your moral view is remarkably dark. I thought you had a conscience, Kirk.”

“I didn’t say it excused them,” Jim says. “Only--if I’d been in your place, I don’t know if I’d have done anything differently. I don’t know if that makes you a better person or me a worse one.”

Khan begins walking again. “I will not apologize for what I did, nor do I regret doing it,” he says.

“I’m not asking you to,” Jim says, keeping up with him. “But I believe in second chances.”


“My crew are good people,” Jim says.

“That didn’t answer the question, Kirk.”

“I’m not saying it’s going to be easy,” Jim says. “Just that I think it’s possible.”

Khan shakes his head. “You make a habit of expecting the impossible to be possible,” he says.

“It usually works out,” Jim says.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

You want things from me I am not sure I have to give you.

They get to the apartment and Jim checks his comm link for messages. Three, none he cares about, and he deletes them and sets the link down on his nightstand. “Do you want anything to drink? I’ve got--okay, I don’t know what I’ve got.”

“No, thank you,” Khan says. “Why did you watch the recordings?”

“I didn’t mean to, at first,” Jim says. “I was just...I saw they’d been introduced as evidence at your trial and I didn’t know what they were, and I had access, and I wanted to know what I’d been missing. Does your family know about them?”

Khan presses his lips together. “No.”

“Why not?” Jim asks.

“They would feel obligated to track down each person who...tested me...and kill them,” Khan says. “And we are attempting to integrate, not send ourselves back to cryosleep in some basement somewhere.”

Jim blows out a breath. “Okay, yeah, that makes sense.”

“Many of them died when Section 31 exploded,” Khan says. “But there are still a few left.”

“Do me a favor,” Jim says. “Never tell me their names.”

“I was not intending to,” Khan says.

Jim walks over to Khan, brushing the edges of his wings against Khan’s gently. Khan shivers—barely noticeable, but Jim catches it, and it makes him smile. “I’m glad you’re here,” he says.

“You are a very strange man,” Khan observes.

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Jim says. “I’m sure you do too.”

“Depending on who I am speaking with,” Khan says. Slowly, he reaches out, taking Jim’s hand, his grip loose enough Jim can pull away if he wants to. “Thank you for helping my people.”


Khan folds his wings around Jim, feathers brushing his neck and shoulders. “You make me question my own motives, do you know that?” he asks. “What I want to do, what my options are, what is best for my family...you make me uncertain. It is not...I do not like it.”

“Am I acting as your conscience, Khan?” Jim asks, hands on Khan’s shoulders.

“Perhaps,” Khan says, considering the idea.
“There are worse things I could be,” Jim says. “Can I admit something really stupid?”

“If you like,” Khan says.

Jim grins a little sheepishly. “I really like having your wings around me. You make me feel...I don’t even know.” Safe. Secure. Wanted. Things he shouldn’t feel where Khan is concerned and yet.

Khan smiles a little, but Jim doesn’t think he’s laughing at him. “I used to do this for Anandi,” he says. “Sometimes Ekaterina.”

“Were you ever...did you ever--” Jim fumbles and stops.

“No, not like that,” Khan says. “But they found it...comforting. Anandi did, at any rate, and Ekaterina...she is very Russian, very passionate. Once in a very long while she would need a shoulder to lean on.”

“And it usually came with wings,” Jim says.

“She didn’t trust anyone else not to use a moment of weakness against her,” Khan says simply. “She knew I would not.”

“Would anyone else have used it against her?” Jim asks.

“Probably not,” Khan says. “But there is always a chance.”

“You all seem pretty tight,” Jim says. “Have you always been?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “All we had were each other. We knew better than to turn on each other.”

“Will you tell me about the ones you lost?” Jim asks. “The ones who didn’t survive the ship and the ones who didn’t survive being awakened?”

“It is a long list,” Khan says. “Thirty-one people.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jim says.

Khan smiles a little again and leans his forehead against Jim’s. “Of them all, Joachim and I were closest,” he says. “He was my right hand, like a son to me. He did not survive the ship, his cryotube malfunctioned or so I was told.”

“I’m sorry,” Jim says quietly.

Slowly, he learns about the other thirty. Annamaria, Felipe, Silver, Ada, Chaim, Connor, Fredrich, Amita, Nisha, Naresh, Ohin, Zareb, Adenrele, Hami, Jahanir, Konstantin, Micah, Rachel, Shashwat, Christopher, Elizabeth, Catherine, Abhishek, Merry, Sebastien, Tomas, Nandi, Carleton, Ingmar and Daniel. Khan’s voice stays quiet and even as he tells Jim about each of them, their place in the world and their skills, and Jim stays folded within his wings and his hands on Khan’s shoulders.

Finally, Khan finishes, looking tired and drawn. “Come to bed,” Jim says softly. “You shouldn’t have to sleep alone.”

Khan closes his eyes, bowing his head to rest his forehead against Jim’s. “Thank you,” he says. “For listening.”

Jim shifts his hands to rub the muscles at the nape of Khan’s neck. “It’s what friends do,” he says.
“And you may not consider us friends, but I’d like to think we’re going in that direction.”

“Friends or lovers?” Khan asks.

“Both,” Jim says.

Khan breathes out slowly. “You want things from me I am not sure I have to give you, Jim.”

“I don’t believe that,” Jim says. “You know there’s something between us.”

“But what that something is, I am...not sure,” Khan says. “You hated me when we met.”

“That was before I knew you,” Jim says. “Before I knew what pushed you to do what you did. Why didn’t you turn on me on the Vengeance? I had every reason to think you would.”

“I expected you to shoot me when we reached the bridge,” Khan says. “Or threaten me to keep me from killing Marcus. You did neither.”

“I couldn’t get you off Marcus,” Jim says. “I tried.”

“I promised myself a year ago I would end his life,” Khan says. “Short of killing me, you could not have stopped me.”

“If I didn’t kill you on Qo’nos, I wasn’t going to kill you then,” Jim says.

“You, unlike me, have a conscience,” Khan says.

“Yeah, but maybe I can be yours,” Jim says. He leans up and kisses Khan lightly. “Come to bed, it’s late.”

They undress for bed and settle in, similarly to the previous night with Khan’s wing around Jim. “Don’t leave before I wake up tomorrow,” Jim says. “At least wake me first.”

“I will,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jim says. He moves a little closer to Khan, resting his head on Khan’s shoulder. “Sleep well.”

Sleep takes a while to arrive, and Jim’s honestly not sure if Khan’s asleep or faking it, but he stays where he is and his wing is warm and soft, and if Jim can’t sleep he can at least be warm and comfortable and safe, listening to Khan’s soft, steady breathing and his heart beat.

At some point he finally conks out, and his dreams are full of unfamiliar faces and cryotubes and explosions. Not all that restful, really, and he wakes groggy and confused, not quite sure where he is for a moment or what’s going on.

“Kirk,” Khan says, squeezing his wrist. “Jim. Wake up.”

“’m awake,” Jim manages and notices his throat feels raw. “Something wrong?”

“You were having a nightmare,” Khan says. “You were shouting in your sleep and you tried to punch me.”

“I...uh,” Jim says. “Sorry? I don’t...things were blowing up and I don’t...it’s all fading now.”

“Are you all right?” Khan asks, not letting go of his wrist.
“I think so.” Jim takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. His heart’s beating faster than normal and he feels on edge even though he’s still half-asleep. “What time is it?”

“Four hundred hours,” Khan says.

“Gah.” Jim rubs his free hand over his face. “I don’t even...I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I require minimal sleep,” Khan says. “I was mostly awake. Here.” He sits up, drawing Jim up with him, and shifts to his knees, pulling Jim in against him and wrapping him in his wings. Jim sighs and leans his forehead against Khan’s shoulder, his own wings surrounding Khan as much as they can.

For a bit, they just kneel there on the bed. Khan has one hand around Jim’s wrist and the other hand on his shoulder, and Jim shamelessly lets Khan’s wings hold him close and shuts his eyes and relaxes.

“Do you get nightmares often?” Khan asks after a while.

“Sometimes,” Jim says. “I don’t know about often, but I get them once in a while.”

“Do they have a theme?” Khan asks.

“It’s usually involving something going wrong on my ship and people dying,” Jim says. “Fairly predictable, I’d say.”

“I would agree,” Khan says.

“You know any tips for dealing with nightmares?” Jim asks, raising his head to look at Khan.

“Lucid dreaming,” Khan says. “Katsuro studied it. I know a bit. If you like, I can teach you what I know.”

“Not right now but maybe at some point, yeah,” Jim says. He sighs. “I don’t think I can sleep again.”

“It is still early,” Khan says. “You should at least lie down a bit longer.”

Jim smiles a little. “What if I made you a better offer?”

“I am listening,” Khan says after a moment.

Jim leans up and kisses him, taking his time with it until Khan kisses him back, tongues tangling and Khan’s hand tightening around Jim’s wrist. “Have sex with me,” Jim says against his mouth.

“All right,” Khan murmurs back, biting Jim’s lower lip lightly.

Neither of them really want to move their wings; at least Jim definitely doesn’t and Khan doesn’t seem inclined to pull his back. But they make it work, with Jim in Khan’s lap, moving against him as much as Khan will let him, fingers tangled in Khan’s hair and mouth against the side of his neck. Khan’s hands grip Jim’s thighs, holding him up, controlling how he moves, and not even Jim cursing and begging and pulling his hair will get him to change that.

The hair pulling does get him a bite on his collarbone, though, and a growl when he does it again, which Jim thinks is possibly the hottest sound he’s ever heard anyone make during sex. “Come on,” he says. “Just--oh, fuck, just--”

“Just what, Jim?” Khan asks, his voice gone rough and raw.
“Stop teasing me and just fuck me,” Jim demands, biting Khan’s earlobe.

Khan laughs, and then his wings shift and he’s pressing Jim onto his back and Jim drags Khan’s mouth to his, groaning into the kiss and his knees tight against Khan’s hips. “Is this better?” Khan murmurs against his mouth, and Jim shudders and his head falls back.

Somehow—he has no fucking idea how—Khan keeps him on the edge of coming but doesn’t let him actually get there, long enough it’s starting to hurt and he’s sobbing for breath and his fingers are clawing at Khan’s shoulders, scratching marks into his skin. “Bastard,” he swears, and Khan laughs again, low enough Jim feels it more than hears it. “God, Khan, please...”

“Yes,” Khan says, and he shifts just a little and Jim totally doesn’t scream when he comes.

He’s still figuring out the mechanics of breathing, not even close to speech yet, when Khan growls and bites him and comes, holding still and somehow not collapsing on him. Jim wraps himself around Khan, arms and legs, inhaling his scent and feeling his heart beat, not as fast as Jim’s but still faster than normal.

After a few moments—not nearly long enough—Khan moves off him and Jim moves to fit against him, one of his wings draped over Khan’s body this time. “Do you always bite when you come?” he asks, voice a little slurred.


“Just so long as you don’t bite me anywhere it’ll show,” Jim says. “That would be...awkward.”

“I will not leave you with visible marks,” Khan says, idly running fingertips up and down Jim’s spine, right between his wings.

“Thanks,” Jim says around a yawn. “How the hell did you do that tonight? I was so close, and you wouldn’t—how did you do that?”

“Very well, I think,” Khan says, and Jim snorts and thwaps his chest.

“You know what I meant.”

“It isn’t something I think I can explain,” Khan says. “I knew what you needed in order to achieve orgasm, and I didn’t let you have it.”

“Bastard,” Jim says without heat. “I’ve never known anyone who could do that before.”

“Jim, I think it is safe to say I am unique among your previous lovers,” Khan says. “For that matter, how many men have you been with?”

“A few,” Jim says. “But you’re nothing like them.”

“I should hope not,” Khan says. “Do you think you can sleep now?”

“Maybe,” Jim says, yawning again. “You?”

“I need to leave in just over an hour,” Khan says without looking at the clock. “Sleep would be unnecessary.”

“Then talk to me,” Jim says.

“About what?” Khan asks.
“What did you do for fun, as a kid?” Jim asks. “Were you allowed to do anything fun?”

“We did have some down time,” Khan says. “Not much, but some. We played various games, everything from trivia to simulations—everything was designed to teach us something, but some of the games were more fun than others. I studied engineering, ship design, when I could. The ship on which we slept was my design, mine and Katsuro’s.”

“What did you read for fun, if anything?” Jim asks.

“I had a collection of classic mystery novels,” Khan says. “We were encouraged to read as much as possible, so we did. I read all the classics of Earth literature, of course, Shakespeare and Milton and Dante and so on. For fun I liked the mysteries.”


“Which is not classic for me,” Khan says, and Jim laughs.

“Sometimes I forget you’re not from this time,” he admits. “You’ve adjusted so well.”

“In some ways yes, in some ways no,” Khan says. “You are...this world is much more civilized than the one I knew. Sometimes I am not sure my family and I will ever adjust completely.”

“You seem to be doing all right,” Jim says.

“I suppose,” Khan says.

Jim hides a yawn against Khan’s shoulder. “What time should we come for dinner?” he asks.

“Any time after 1700 hours should be fine,” Khan says. “You should sleep, Jim.”

“Wake me before you leave,” Jim says, yawning again.

“I will,” Khan says, and Jim closes his eyes and lets himself conk out.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

I'm not making it an order but I expect everyone to be there.

He sort of wakes up when Khan leaves, enough to promise he’ll see him later and kiss him goodbye, and then the next thing he knows is his comm link chirping at him. That turns out to be Spock, who’s reminding him of a meeting they have with Pike in, oh, half an hour. Jim gives thought to calling in dead, takes the fastest shower ever and pulls on a clean uniform, and the day kind of goes downhill from there.

He can’t stop thinking about the people Khan told him about last night, all thirty-one of them. He thinks maybe Khan’s actually being completely honest with him, and that’s both an amazingly good thing and makes him wonder if Khan’s playing a deeper game here, and if he’ll ever figure out what that game is or if it exists.

Spock, of course, notes his distraction, and Jim tries to pass it off as not having slept well. That earns him a raised eyebrow that says “I know you’re bullshitting me”, which makes him wonder if Vulcans ever swear verbally, and then he realizes he’s so tired he’s going down thought tangents in public.

Eventually he gets himself a couple cups of coffee and some food and meets with his senior staff to discuss the status of the Enterprise and...other matters. He leaves out the details of his relationship with Khan (because it’s no one’s business and he’s sticking to that) but does explain that he’s been meeting the man and his awakened crew, those that survived, and they are hoping to integrate into society. This gets met with a lot of skepticism and some outright disbelief (thanks, Bones) and he can tell half his people think he’s lost what’s left of his mind. Oddly, Chekov seems to be on his side, as does Sulu. Spock is...withholding judgment, Uhura’s skeptical, Bones thankfully does not openly say he thinks Jim’s got a crush on Khan (which he doesn’t; it’s more and less complicated) but his entire body radiates disapproval of the idea, and Scotty admits he wants to pick Khan’s brain over the designs on the Vengeance.

“He and his people have invited us to join them for a meal tonight,” Jim says finally. “I’m not making it an order but I expect everyone to be there.” He tells them where and when, considers warning them about Ekaterina and her knives and decides against it because if he’s lucky she won’t greet them the way she did him.

After the meeting’s over, he’s not surprised when Bones catches him. “A word, Jim,” he says and Jim sighs and lets everyone else leave the conference room.

“Yeah?”

“Leaving aside the fact that you’ve lost your mind, you look like crap,” Bones tells him bluntly.

“Thanks, Bones,” Jim says. “Always nice to hear you care about my well-being. I’m fine. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Bones frowns. “Why not?”
Because Khan told me about his dead family members and then I had nightmares of the Enterprise blowing up with him and his current family on it, and I remember you burned in my nightmare, and...Jim shakes his head. “Bad dreams. Don’t suppose you can give me anything for that?”

“No, not really,” Bones says. “The body needs REM sleep and if I gave you anything to suppress it, it’d just make your sleep worse in the long run. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, not really,” Jim says. “It’s...I get nightmares sometimes, you know that.”

“Yeah, I do, and I know they usually have a trigger even if you don’t realize it,” Bones says. He crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the table. “So tell me what’s going on.”

Jim sighs and mirrors Bones’ pose. “I was talking with Khan last night,” he says. “He told me...there were eighty-five of them in total, when they left on their ship. They’re down to fifty-four. He’s lost over a third of his people, Bones. How do you...how do you cope with that?”

“You think he really cares about his people?” Bones asks.

“I know he does,” Jim says. “That part--he might be playing me, okay, but you can’t miss--he’ll do anything for his family. How does he cope with this, with losing thirty-one of them and helping the others adjust to our time, three centuries removed from theirs? Things are so different, and they’re different.”

“I don’t know if there’s a place for them, Jim,” Bones says. “You’re right, they’re different. I met most of them when I was doing medical evaluations, remember?”

“What do you think?” Jim asks.

“I think they’re fighters,” Bones says. “And I’m not sure it’s a good thing, not to the extent they are.”

“What, you think they’re like barbarians or something?” Jim asks.

Bones shrugs. “Could be. They were built for a purpose, but that purpose doesn’t exist anymore, so what are we going to do with them?”

“Help them find a new one,” Jim says.

“If we can,” Bones says. “And what the hell is going on between you and Khan?”

“Um,” Jim says. “We’re, maybe, sort of, kind of involved? I don’t know. It’s...it’s complicated.”

“Did he spend the night last night?” Bones asks.

Jim looks down at his shoes. “Yeah.”

Bones blows out a breath. “And that’s not clouding your judgment or anything, oh no.”

“There’s no regulations against it,” Jim says defensively. “He--he’s been honest with me. I think I make him nervous.”

“You? Why?” Bones asks. “I didn’t think anything could rattle that man.”

“Yeah, well,” Jim says. “You don’t know him like I do. I make him nervous because--” He hesitates, reminds himself Bones is his friend and he can trust Bones, and goes on. “Because I want him but I don’t want anything from him, not like Marcus did, or the people in Section 31. I just...I want to help him, and he’s not used to someone wanting to help without being ready to stab him in the back.”
Bones shakes his head. “I could almost feel sorry for the poor bastard.”

“Sometimes I do,” Jim admits. “Especially what he went through with Marcus holding his family hostage.”

“I wouldn’t tell him that, were I you,” Bones says. He sighs. “I still think this might be a really big mistake, but I’m not going to argue you out of it.”

Jim bumps shoulders with him. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Bones says, but he bumps back. “I have work to do. I’ll see you at dinner, apparently.”

“Yeah, you will,” Jim says. He pushes away from the table. “Thanks, Bones.”

He gets through the rest of the day mostly on auto-pilot and changes into civvies before heading over to the dorms a bit early—he told his crew 1800 hours, but he gets there at about 1630, kind of hoping he’ll get to watch them fighting again.

Just as he gets to the gym door, he hears a woman cry out in pain and everything stops. Ekaterina’s kneeling on the floor, her right forearm bent unnaturally. She looks pale with pain, and she’s biting her lip hard enough Jim wonders if she’s going to draw blood. “Bishop,” Katsuro calls, and he’s over there a moment later, kneeling next to her.

“Scream if you have to,” Bishop tells her. Jim almost offers to call for a doctor but keeps quiet, remembering Khan told him Bishop studied medicine. Ekaterina inhales sharply and Bishop doesn’t hesitate when he sets the bone, and she gulps in air but doesn’t make a sound. “There,” he says, holding her arm gently. “I’d give it an hour, maybe two.”

To heal a broken bone? Christ. Even the bone regenerators they have take a few days to put people back together.

“Spasiba,” she says, looking a little easier but still almost ready to pass out. “Have we a splint?”

“Yes,” Bishop says. “Katsuro, can you—” He says something else in Japanese and Katsuro nods, running out of the room on bare feet and brushing past Jim without a glance.

“Is anyone else in need of healing?” Khan asks. “Status, please. Alona?”

“All clear,” she says, leaning on her staff.

“Anandi?”

“All clear,” she says, holding up her hands. Khan goes down the list, naming everyone and getting a status. Most people say ‘all clear’, although Matthew admits to a couple cracked ribs and someone else says she may have cracked her collarbone. Jim winces at that; those things fucking hurt, but oddly she doesn’t look bothered by it. Then again, for all he knows she’s healed already.

Katsuro returns with a splint, and Bishop fastens it around Ekaterina’s arm tightly enough to give her some support. She breathes out slowly and nods. “Spasiba. I...apologize for my reaction.”

“That was a nasty break,” Bishop says, touching her shoulder. “And you weren’t expecting it. It’s okay, Cat. We’re not at war here.”

“Are we not?” she asks. “Perhaps not a declared one, but...well, we shall see what happens tonight.
Speaking of which, Captain Kirk, either come in or go away but do stop lurking in the doorway as though you are some uninvited intruder."

“I didn’t want to get in the way,” Jim says, taking a step into the room. “It really only takes you a couple hours to heal broken bones?”

“Less depending on severity of break and location,” Bishop says. “Ribs in particular take almost no time to heal.”

“Once the bone is set, healing begins almost immediately,” Katsuro says. “By the time your people arrive, she should be back to normal.”

Jim thinks that’s probably good because he doubts Ekaterina wants to be at a disadvantage while meeting unfamiliar people, but says nothing. “There’ll be seven of us in total,” he says. “Most of you have already met Spock and McCoy, so it’s just a few new people.”

Ekaterina gets to her feet, cradling her broken arm against her torso. “I think we can cope with that,” she says and Jim’s not sure if she’s laughing at him or not, but she looks better than she did even a few minutes ago.

“How did that happen?” he asks, nodding at her arm. “I didn’t see.”

“Katsuro,” she says. “I did not block in time.”

“Or rather you did but I was too strong,” Katsuro says, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I apologize for the mis-judgment.”

“It happens,” she says. “It is not the first broken bone I’ve had from you, and it undoubtedly will not be the last.”

Jim has to admit Katsuro’s not that impressive looking; he’s shorter than Jim and built on the slim side. But if he can break Ekaterina’s arm with a kick he meant to pull...yeah, Jim never wants to fight him.

“Better we break our bones than have them broken,” Katsuro says and Ekaterina smiles a little and nods.

Khan comes over to Ekaterina, pausing to murmur something in her ear. She shakes her head and touches his shoulder with her good hand, murmuring something back too quietly for Jim to catch. He takes her hand and kisses her palm, which surprises the hell out of Jim, and his wings brush her shoulders before he crosses to Jim.

“Everything okay?” Jim asks quietly.

“Yes,” Khan says. “What time did you tell your people to be here?”

“1800 hours,” Jim says. “Is that okay?”

“Yes, it will give us time to prepare the meal,” Khan says. “I am not surprised to see you here earlier, though.”

“Yeah, well, I figured I’d better get here before they did so no one thought they were target practice,” Jim says.

Khan smiles a bit. “Are you truly that worried about our lack of self-control?”
“Uh, Ekaterina almost slit my throat when I met her,” Jim feels obliged to point out. “So...maybe?”

“A warning only,” Khan says. “She would not have actually injured you.”

“You think,” Ekaterina says, passing them as she leaves the gym.

“I hope,” Khan says.

“Da, I know,” she says. “No killing the humans.”

“We appreciate that,” Jim says.

She snorts. “He thinks he is funny.”

“They usually do,” Khan says.

She shakes her head, but she smiles, and says something else to Khan in Russian before leaving. “What did she say?” Jim asks.

“Ah--” Khan glances away. “It is not important.”

He actually looks mildly embarrassed, which Jim means she was probably teasing him about something and he doesn’t want to admit it. “Well, then,” he says. “We’ve got about an hour until my people show up. I guess we should go hang with yours?”

Khan nods. “That is acceptable.”
He should have expected it, when it all went to hell.

Hanging out with Khan’s people means Jim ends up getting quizzed on ship design by Katsuro and Matthew, who ask increasingly technical questions he can’t answer because he’s not actually an engineer. Khan helps out a bit, but a lot of their questions involve things on history of warp drives and advances in technology and Jim’s feeling completely lost by the time he hears people at the door. “Scotty,” he says, a little desperately. “You can quiz him. I promise.”

“Well, Khan,” Ekaterina says. “I suppose you should let in the appetizers.”

He snorts and says something to her in Russian; she laughs and flips her knife into the air, catching it neatly with the right hand that no longer has a splint on it. Jim thinks maybe prudence is best and scrambles up to go to the door with Khan, letting in...the rest of his senior staff, all dressed in civvies and in some cases (Uhura and Sulu, oddly) having made an attempt to look more than presentable.

(Jim will never admit it, but when he later heard Sulu’s message to Khan on Qo’nos, he got a shiver down his spine. He doesn’t think he’d have done nearly as well.)

“Hey,” he says, his wings shifting and stretching before he forces them back--there’s just no room for them, not with Khan’s half-extended (and why that is, Jim doesn’t know). “Come on in, we can introduce you to people.”

In the living room, things seem to be mostly as he’d left them a minute ago--except every single person turns to look as they come in, and these people have some scarily intent looks. Jim’s wings ruffle and stretch, almost trying to block his crew from sight, and he hears a couple people laugh quietly before he forces them back. “Right, so, most of you have met Commander Spock, my first officer and science officer,” he says. “And Dr. McCoy. This is Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, she’s our comms officer and linguist, Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu, our pilot, and Ensign Pavel Chekov, our navigation officer. And Mr. Scott, our chief engineer.”

He’s a little surprised when Anandi stands up. “Hello,” she says, smiling. “Thank you for coming to join us for a meal. I realize some of you may be a bit...cautious...but we give you our word as individuals and as a unit that we mean you no harm, just hospitality. I am Anandi.” She names everyone else quickly, going around the room; people raise their hands or say hello as she gets to them. “Mr. Scott, I believe Katsuro and Matthew had some questions for someone with your expertise.”

“We promise to return you in the same state as which you arrived this evening,” Matthew says, raising a hand. “We were asking Captain Kirk about the history of warp drive but his knowledge is not very thorough.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be, he’s the bloody captain not the engineer,” Scotty says, moving over to them.

“Hey,” Jim feels obliged to protest.
“Mr. Spock,” Anandi says. “Daffyd and Estevao and I would like to continue our conversation from the other day, if that is acceptable?”

Jim notes how Spock doesn’t look at Uhura but she touches his wrist, almost as if giving her okay, before he nods and moves to their little section.

“Lieutenant,” Ekaterina says to Uhura. “Are you a xenolinguist or do you speak Earth languages?”

“Both,” Uhura says.

Ekaterina smiles. “Then we have much to discuss.” She adds something else, in Russian, and Uhura frowns but answers—and then Chekov adds a burst of Russian that makes Ekaterina laugh and clasp his shoulders, kissing both his cheeks. He blushes and says something, and Ekaterina drapes an arm around his shoulders and one around Uhura’s and guides them to seats by her.

“Another Russian,” Khan says. “She loves her people.”

“Lieutenant Sulu,” Alona says, standing up—on a table—across the room. “Do I hear correctly that you threatened Khan with, well, us?”

“Ah–” Sulu ducks his head. “I didn’t know you were in the torpedoes at the time, ma’am.”

She laughs. “It was perhaps the best message you could have given him. Come, talk with us.”

Sulu glances at Jim, who shrugs, before making his way across the room. Even standing on a table, Alona’s barely taller than him, and she drops to sitting as soon as he takes a seat on the couch.

“Dr. McCoy,” Bishop says, raising a hand. “Come join us over here. I was talking with Maeve and Hugh about some of the advances in medical technology since last we were awake, and I remembered you saying you had studied some history on the subject.”

Bones blows out a breath, but shrugs and heads over to their couch.

“I like how your people have separated and surrounded mine,” Jim murmurs to Khan, his wings brushing Khan’s shoulders for a moment. “If I didn’t sort of trust you, I’d be worried.”

“Kirk, even all seven of you together couldn’t take us down,” Khan murmurs back, but his own wing brushes the side of Jim’s cheek. “If we meant you harm...”

“I’d already be dead, I know,” Jim mutters back.

“We take vows of hospitality seriously, Kirk,” Khan says after a moment. “A truce for a meal is sacred to us.”

“Is that all we have? A truce for a meal?” Jim asks. “I thought at least you and I had more than that.”

Khan’s wings shift and fold. “We do,” he says quietly, after a moment. “What that is, however, I am not sure. Does your crew know?”

“Nobody but Bones,” Jim says.

“Well,” Khan says. “We shall see what happens.”

“Do you think yours will tell mine?” Jim asks cautiously.

“I do not know,” Khan says. “I did not ask them to keep it secret. I do not intend to be your...dirty
laundry.”

“You’re not,” Jim says. “It’s not that. It’s...things are complicated.”

Khan raises an eyebrow, giving Jim a very “No, shit” look. He laughs, and Khan smiles, brushing Jim’s shoulder with his wing.

“I’m not ashamed of you,” Jim mutters, keeping his voice low enough he doubts anyone will overhear him. “But my crew doesn’t--they don’t have reasons to trust you yet.”

“And you do?” Khan asks.

“I think I’m getting there,” Jim says. “Are you?”

“You have a conscience, Jim,” Khan says but Jim doesn’t miss the use of his first name. “It makes understanding men like you rather easy.”

“Does it really?” Jim looks up, meeting Khan’s eyes.

“It should,” Khan says. “But you are frustratingly complicated in some ways. Remarkably easy in others.”

“Wouldn’t want to make life too easy for you,” Jim says, smiling.

A blonde woman and a black man come into the room; she says something in maybe German, Jim thinks, and he follows it with something Jim has absolutely no idea about. “Standard, please,” Khan says, pitching his voice to be heard. “We have company.”

“Monolinguists?” The blonde woman shakes her head. “How dull. Dinner is ready, if you will please go be seated.”

“That’s why we have Uhura,” Jim says. “She translates for us. Right?”

“The German I understood, but whatever he said--I’m sorry, it’s a dialect I don’t know,” Uhura says, frowning at herself. “What language was that?”

“Farsi,” he says. “I would not have expected you to know it. It is sadly a dying language these days.”

“Out of--how many languages do all of you speak?” Uhura asks.

“None of us speak less than ten,” Ekaterina says. “Some more. I speak...many, and I intend to learn what I do not know.”

“We will however attempt to keep our conversations in English tonight,” Anandi says, getting up as everyone else does. “We beg forgiveness in advance if we forget.”

“I’m used to it,” Jim says. “You never bother staying in English around me.”

“Have you been sharing many meals here, Captain?” Uhura asks with a polite smile.

“A few,” he says. “Enough to know I can’t follow the conversations.”

She nods. “I see.”

Jim’s not really sure what to make of that, but he follows the others to the dining hall and takes his usual seat by Khan. His crew seems to be talking with their various groups, and he and Khan make
conversation about the Enterprise repairs and random topics of history.

Things are going well. Really well. So he supposed he should have expected what happened, when it happened. Except he didn’t.

All of a sudden, Bishop and Maeve get to their feet, both looking pale and a bit horrified. Bishop starts speaking in rapid French, and Maeve just shakes her head, over and over, whispering ‘no’ under her breath.

Ekaterina shoves her chair back so violently it topples over and dives over the table, grabbing Khan’s shirt in her hands and picking him up, shoving him against the wall. “Is this true?” she demands in English. “Is this true, Khan?”

He covers her hands with her own and says something in Russian, and she snarls and slams him against the wall so hard it rattles. “Is. This. True?” she says again, slowly, in English.

Khan presses his lips together. “Yes.”

Ekaterina barely moves but suddenly there’s a knife sticking out of the wall right above Khan’s left wing. “How many are there?”

Oh, fuck, Jim realizes. Someone spilled the beans about Section 31 and what happened to Khan.

“It is over and done with,” he says.

Another knife slams into the wall above his right wing. “How. Many?”

“Five live,” he says quietly.

She snarls and yanks her knives out of the wall, and Jim still has no idea where she keeps them but they vanish. “You did not tell us.”

He says something in Russian, closing his hands around her wrists, and she snaps a response, more and more agitated. Bishop’s saying something else Jim can’t follow and Katsuro shakes his head, adding Japanese to the mix. Ekaterina yanks her hands free and grabs Khan’s shirt again, shoving him against the wall and looking--either ready to kill something or ready to cry; Jim’s not sure which.

“We cannot,” Khan says in English, finally. “We cannot.”

Ekaterina takes a deep breath. “No. You cannot.”

“If one of us harms them, all of us will be punished,” Khan says quietly.

“Then we go back to the hell of cryosleep and consider it a blessing,” she snaps. “We cannot allow them to live.”

“She’s right, Khan,” Anandi says. “You know we can’t.”

“We must,” Khan says.

“No,” Ekaterina says.

“Cat, please,” he says, and says something else, quiet and Russian and she shakes her head.

“Five people, fifty-four of us,” Bishop says. “We can afford to take our time and be prudent.”

“Um,” Jim says, not wanting to speak up but feeling he has to. “I know what you’re thinking, but you’ve got a room of Starfleet officers here. We can’t--I know what happened, believe me, I know, but you can’t just go killing people because they violated their oaths.”

“You told the human and not us?” Ekaterina demands.

“I did not tell him,” Khan says, looking irritated. “He went digging.”

“You should have told us,” Ekaterina says, low and upset.

“Why? So you could plan five murders and we could get sent back to cryosleep?” Khan asks. “I am trying to find us a place in this new world. We cannot live by the rules we knew three hundred years ago.”

“You assume we’d get caught,” Ekaterina says.

“You’ve just announced intent in a room of officers,” Jim feels obliged to point out, praying she doesn’t throw a knife at him. “If they die, we’ll know where to look and why.”

“Is your moral code so black and white, Captain?” Anandi asks. “These men and women, they hurt our brother. Tortured him, for weeks. And you say we are wrong to want justice for that?”

Jim blows out a breath and his wings keep shifting, enough that he has to stand up. “I didn’t say it was wrong but if you’re going to plan this can I and my crew not be around?” he asks.

“Acceptable,” Anandi says. She says something else in Spanish and people begin taking their seats again. Jim hesitates, but folds his wings back and takes his seat again. Ekaterina and Khan don’t move, however. She has her hands fisted in his shirt, looking up at him. Jim watches, not sure what to say, but Khan’s hands come up to cover hers and his wings fold around her as he bends his forehead to hers.

Jim looks away, feeling like an intruder into something private. He hears murmurs but can’t make out what they’re saying or even what language they’re using, and after a few minutes Khan’s wings fold back and Ekaterina steps away, looking a bit calmer. She returns to her seat and Khan stays where he is for a moment before taking his own place next to Jim.

“Everything okay?” Jim murmurs to Khan.

“As well as can be expected,” Khan murmurs back.

Under the table, Jim touches his hand, and to his surprise Khan grips his, holding on for a moment before he lets go. The meal continues as though nothing has happened, kind of like ignoring a giant elephant in the room, Jim thinks.

After the meal, he manages to gather his people in the hall. “Look, for those of you who don’t know, Khan was...tortured, basically, in Section 31, after he was revived,” he says quietly. “They experimented on him, figuring out his limits, how fast he healed, things like that, and he only got out of that because he’d proven his intelligence enough that Marcus wanted him to design things, but then Marcus held his family over his head for a year.”

Uhura’s lips are a flat line and Chekov looks troubled. Bones blows out a breath, Sulu shakes his head, and Spock...well, he’s Spock. “We cannot allow them to murder five people, captain,” he says quietly.
“I don’t even know who they are,” Jim says. “I’m not asking. I’m asking you not to ask.”

“You are asking me to look the other way while this group of people plans five assassinations,” Spock says. “

“No, I’m asking you to just forget everything you heard tonight,” Jim says.


“You can lie by omission,” Uhura says, surprising the hell out of Jim. “The captain’s right, Spock. I didn’t join Starfleet because I thought it condoned torture. We don’t know who these people are and there’s no guarantee Khan and his people will be able to find them, or if they find them, actually do anything to them. If we see five bodies turn up, we’ll have to investigate or let people investigate, but for now all we heard was a bunch of people being visibly upset that one of their family had been tortured. If that had been you, I’d be planning murder now too.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Sulu says. “If I did, it was all in a language I don’t speak, so I’ve got no idea what’s going on here.”

“I was discussing warp technology when there was a commotion,” Scotty says. “I missed all of it.”

Chekov shakes his head. “With your apologies, Keptin, I do not believe I understood what they were actually discussing. Russians--we promise lots of things, da? We are...passionate people. We threaten murder and weddings in the same voice.”

Jim actually smiles at that and his wing brushes Chekov’s shoulder. “No one’s getting married,” he says.

Bones looks grim. “The first tenet of my profession is do no harm,” he says. “Whoever these butchers were, they violated oaths the medical profession should live by, as well as their oaths to Starfleet.”

“Yeah, and thanks for spilling the beans, Bones,” Jim says, tired and his shoulders aching.

“I didn’t know they didn’t know,” Bones says defensively. “It wasn’t even--I didn’t say anything intentionally, they’d just asked me about Khan’s trial and I mentioned there was a lot of evidence that he was coerced, and...” He gestures. “They put the pieces together.”

Spock looks troubled now, but Jim’s not about to ask him what he’s thinking. “The identities of the doctors in Section 31 were kept confidential,” he says. “It is possible Khan may not even know their real names.”

“Yeah, and how do you know that?” Jim asks. “Did you go looking?”

“Evidence from the trial,” Spock says. “I studied all the relevant data.”

“So we’re agreed we’re going to leave this alone?” Jim asks after a moment. “Just...we didn’t hear anything, we don’t know anything, and unless someone makes it our business it doesn’t have to be?”

Everyone but Spock nods. “Spock?” Jim asks.

“I will...think on this,” Spock says finally, and it’s the best Jim’s going to get and he knows it. He nods, his wings folding around himself for a moment before he tucks them back.

“Let’s go rejoin the others.”
You're welcome to watch them, just don't get in the way.

Somewhat to Jim’s surprise and somewhat to his lack of surprise, when they get back to the common room Ekaterina and Khan are missing. “They went to spar,” Anandi says. “You’re welcome to go watch them, just don’t get in the way.”

“I will and I won’t,” Jim says, leaving the rest of his crew to settle themselves and heading down the hall to the gym.

Khan is taller, bigger around than Ekaterina--she’s just about Jim’s height, and slim-built--and he has wings. But he seems to be on the defensive, ducking punches and blocking kicks and diving out of the way of her knives. Jim counts three she throws at him, all which land solidly in the wall, the last brushing Khan’s wings so closely Jim wonders if she shaved a feather off him. She handsprings back, throws a fourth knife, and spins into a roundhouse kick which he stops by grabbing her ankle and twisting, literally throwing her back. She’s back on her feet in an instant, and things go from there.

The fight ends unexpectedly for Jim, with Ekaterina knocking Khan to the ground and a knife at his throat. “You die,” she says, only breathing a little hard.

“So I do,” he says, tipping his head back. “Will you kill me, Cat, or allow me to live?”

“I think your captain would prefer it if I let you live,” she says, not moving the knife away.

“He is not my captain,” Khan says.

“But you want him to be,” she says, and Jim realizes she must know he’s there, because she’s sticking to English. “Da?”

“Nyet,” Khan says. “It is...complicated.”

“The best things always are, brother,” Ekaterina says. “Did I break anything?”

“Ribs,” he says. “You?”

“Pah.” She snorts. “As if you could.”

“I am not Katsuro,” Khan agrees. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Nyet.” She vanishes the knife--Jim would really, really like to know where she keeps them--and gets off him. “You live, for tonight. Although I was tempted after learning about...them.”

“Killing me would accomplish nothing,” he says.

“Which is why you live, at least until I learn their names and how to find them,” Ekaterina agrees. Khan laughs, reaching out a hand for her and tugging her in against him, her head on his chest and
his wing draped around her.

“‘I missed this,’” she admits, her hand on his free shoulder. “‘I dreamed of you, in cryosleep.’”

“And I you, sister,” he says, kissing her hair. “‘Will you share me?’”

“You aren’t mine,” she says simply. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Konstantin, though...why him, Khan? Why did he have to die?”

“I don’t know,” he says quietly. “I don’t know why any of them died.”

“No,” she says. “None of us do. Not even the doctors.” She makes a rude sound. “What good they are.”

“They have their uses,” Khan says. “BIshop has his.”

“And Maeve,” Ekaterina says. “And perhaps this McCoy. I will see. For now, your captain is waiting for you, and you should reassure him I am not about to murder you nor go on a killing spree.” She leans up and kisses Khan’s cheek, and he folds his wing back and lets her get up to retrieve her knives from the wall.

Khan stays on his back a moment longer, then pushes to his feet, wings stretching and settling behind his back. “She’ll never kill me,” he tells Jim. “Not unless I asked her to.”

“Right,” Jim says. “I mostly believe that. Konstantin, you mentioned him last night. He died in revival?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “He and Ekaterina were...he was a calming influence on her. She loved him, as fiercely as she does anything.”

“I’m sorry she lost him,” Jim says.

“We all are,” Khan says.

Jim watches Ekaterina as she pulls her knives out of the wall but for the life of him he can’t tell where she puts them--maybe a side slit on her pants, but she’s holding at least five and her clothes seem to fit pretty closely, so where the hell do they all go? “Can I ask a question?” he asks her.

“What do you want to know, captain?” she asks.

“How many knives do you carry?” he asks. “And where do you put them all?”

“More than five, less than twelve,” she says. “Are you asking me to undress?”

“No,” Jim says hastily. “No, I’m just...curious.”

She snorts and begins pulling knives out of nowhere until she’s holding six. “This is not all of them,” she says. “And no, captain, I don’t need them to kill you.”

“I really didn’t think you did,” Jim says, his wings fluffing around him and making her laugh.

Ekaterina puts the knives away--the best he can tell is she’s got at least two forearm sheaths, and maybe a thigh release under her pants, but the other three he’s not sure. “You are cute, for a human,” she says, patting his cheek. “And the wings are...interesting.”

“Does that mean you approve of my...of me and Khan?” Jim asks cautiously.
“He could do worse,” she says. “You couldn’t do much better. Well, you could, but Katsuro and Bishop are taken, so of the ones we have left, you cannot do better than Khan.”

“I see where I rank,” Khan comments and she laughs.

“Katsuro can best me in a fight,” she says. “And Bishop...is a gentleman, and those are rare. He’ll still kill you if you betray him, but he’ll be polite about it even as he snaps your neck.”

“Right, because manners count when killing people,” Jim says.

“Would you rather die or die knowing why?” Ekaterina asks.

“I’d rather stay alive,” Jim says.

“Wouldn’t we all, captain,” Ekaterina says. “I am going to find a very large glass of vodka. Khan, we have alcohol in this place, do we not?”

“There is some in the kitchen,” he says.

“Spassiba.” She kisses Khan on the cheek and heads out.

Jim shakes his head. “She...makes me nervous,” he admits. “And you’d want her on board with you?”

“I would,” Khan says. “She does not betray her own people.”

“But would she see the Enterprise crew as hers?” Jim asks.

“That is the question you are asking all of us,” Khan says. “We do not, as of yet, have an answer.”

“What are you thinking about it?” Jim asks.

“Many things,” Khan says. “Some of it is now changed by the introduction of...previous events.”

“They want to kill those people,” Jim says. “You don’t.”

“I killed those I could,” Khan says simply. “It had to be enough.”

“It isn’t,” Jim says, knowing that. “You want them all dead.”

“I want many people dead, Jim,” Khan says. “Those five are among them.”

“Will you help your people find them and kill them?” Jim asks.

Khan shakes his head. “Don’t ask questions to which you don’t want the answers, Kirk.”

“Don’t make me look for things I don’t want to find,” Jim says to that.

Khan touches his cheek. “If—if—we decide to act on those five, you will never know it was us.”

“Except I will because of this conversation we’re having,” Jim says.

“You won’t,” Khan says. “Don’t ask more than that, Jim.” He brushes his thumb over Jim’s cheekbone. “Am I spending the night?”

Even after tonight’s events, even after all this—”Yes,” Jim says, and he leans up as Khan leans down and their lips meet in the middle.
“We should return to the others,” Khan murmurs, his hand still on Jim’s face, mouths a breath apart. “Or they will come looking for us.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Jim leans up for one more kiss, though, before he steps back.

They return to the common area, where mostly what Jim can make out is English, although every now and then he catches something that isn’t. Everyone appears to be engaged in their own conversations and Jim doesn’t want to butt in, so he hangs in the doorway, Khan next to him, both of them watching and both their wings folded back.

“A pair of birds,” Ekaterina comments, glancing up from her conversation with Uhura. “Tell me, lieutenant. Some birds mate for life, others every new season. Which kind is your captain?”


“It doesn’t,” Jim says, stepping forward and afraid he knows where Ekaterina’s going with this. “I’m not a bird, I’m a human.”

“And do you mate for life?” Ekaterina asks. Khan says something to her in—not Russian, Greek maybe, and she raises her eyebrows, responding in the same language.

“Wait,” Uhura says, looking between them. “Are you—are you serious?”

“I am rarely not, Lieutenant,” Ekaterina says. “Did you not know?”

“No, I really didn’t.” Uhura says, getting to her feet. “Captain, a word, please.” She all but grabs his ear and drags him down the hallway into some semblance of privacy. “At what point were you going to let us know that your judgment’s been compromised because you’re involved with Khan?” she demands in a harsh whisper.

“Okay, one, my judgment’s not compromised,” Jim says. “Two, it’s no one’s business but ours, and—”

“Two, that’s bullshit,” she says. “He is a murderer.”

“He was coerced, blackmailed, bullied, and threatened,” Jim snaps back, wings stretching. “I’m not saying he’s necessarily a good man but I think he’s better than we’re giving him credit for. I don’t know what’s between us necessarily but he’s not going to hurt me and he’s not going to hurt my crew. I stayed out of your relationship with Spock and I’m still staying out of it, so extend me the same courtesy about my own life, Lieutenant.”

Her lips thin and she says nothing. “Okay,” she says at last. “Okay. I think you’re making a mistake but it’s yours to make.”

“Thank you,” Jim says, his wings still extended. He forces them to fold back and sighs. “If I can get him to trust me, he and his people will never turn on us, Uhura.”

“But can he trust you? Will he trust you?” Uhura asks quietly.

“I don’t know.” Jim rakes a hand through his hair. “I’m trying. This whole evening, it’s been...I feel like I’m negotiating for a new peace treaty or something.”

“Just make sure you don’t marry the prince,” Uhura says. “Those stories never end well.”

“I’m not the marrying kind,” Jim says, smiling a bit.
“No, but I don’t think Khan takes involvements all that lightly,” Uhura says. “He and his people are...old-fashioned in some ways. They respect hospitality--they’d never think of harming one of us while providing us with food or shelter or company. Outside that, maybe, but in here we’re safe. They believe in trial by combat, survival of the fittest, things like that. It wouldn’t surprise me if he and his people saw this as a negotiation for a truce, and your relationship with Khan was the symbolic marriage to tie our peoples together.”

Jim blows out a breath. “Okay,” he says. “Well, that’s...somewhat disturbing. Do they see Khan as their leader?”

“First among equals, is more accurate, I think,” Uhura says. “Him, Katsuro, and Bishop. Anandi, to a lesser degree--it’s almost like those three are the alpha males, and Anandi and Ekaterina are the alpha females. I mean, they’re all alpha personalities, but those five in particular.”

“When did you become an anthropologist?” Jim asks out of curiosity.

She rolls her eyes. “You study languages, you learn about the cultures that developed them, captain.”

“What do you think of Ekaterina?” Jim asks.

“Deadly,” Uhura says. “Passionate. And yet I think...some of it’s an act. I think she’s capable of being quiet and unobtrusive when she wants to be, and if she were working or trying to kill someone, she’d go unnoticed until she achieved her goal.”

“Yeah, that lines up with me,” Jim says. “I asked Khan who he’d want with him if he took my offer to serve on the Enterprise. He named Katsuro, Bishop, and her.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Uhura says. “They’ve all got little groups within the big group, and that’s one of them.”

“They’re kind of...fascinating,” Jim admits, a little sheepishly. “So different from us, you know?”

“They’re less...cruel than I thought they’d be,” Uhura says. “Most of the time I really do think they just want to integrate and fit in and find places for themselves.”

“The rest of the time?” Jim asks.

“The rest of the time I think they’re playing a deeper game,” Uhura says. “And I don’t know what that game is.”

Jim rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Yeah, I can understand that feeling,” he says. “I get it once in a while too.”

“I’m glad to know your brain is still working part of the time, captain,” Uhura says, smiling, and Jim snickers.

“Let’s go rejoin the others before they send out a search party.”
Tonight did not go so badly.

The evening winds down eventually and everyone says their good nights. Anandi extends a standing invitation for Kirk’s people to come for dinner any night after about 1700 hours, no advance warning required. He doesn’t know if she’s just being polite or if she means it and either way he’s not sure what his crew will do, but they all thank her for the offer.

“I will find you later,” Khan murmurs to Jim before they leave. “I think perhaps your people would like to speak with you without my presence.”

Jim nods. “Just come on by.”

He’s not surprised when none of his people say anything until they’re a good two blocks from the dorms. “Okay, so?” he asks finally, pulling them aside into a small grassy area off the sidewalk.

“They are...interesting,” Spock says. “Not necessarily what I would have expected in some ways, and yet exactly that in other ways. The people with whom I spoke were remarkably up to date on current scientific research, despite such a short time of having to learn it.”

“They dinnae think like we do, Captain, that’s for sure;” Scotty says. “Some of the questions they asked, I’d ne’er even heard them before.”

“Did they make sense?” Jim asks.

“Sure, and some of them might actually be interesting lines of research if we had time,” Scotty says. “It’s like--if technology is a house, we’re used to walking in the front door to find the answers we want. They’re coming in through the bloody chimney.”


“I ended up talking history with a few of them,” Sulu says. “They had a lot of questions I couldn’t answer, which I guess isn’t surprising. A lot of questions about how the Federation was built and grew and how it works.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says. “Let’s never forget these people were literally built to take power and rule countries, and be careful what we tell them about the weaknesses in our governmental structure.”

“A wise decision, captain,” Spock says.

“Hey, part of my brain works on occasion,” Jim says and Uhura snickers. “Chekov? Any comments?”

“No, sir,” Chekov says. “I spent most of ze evening discussing advanced mathematics with Hugh and Rudolf. They knew things I did not, even for being three centuries out of date.”
“Not with Ekaterina?” Jim can’t help tease the kid a bit.

“No, keptin,” Chekov says, his cheeks turning a bit pink. “She went to spar with Khan, and when she returned she was asking Lieutenant Uhura about Klingon language.”

“What’d you tell her?” Jim asks Uhura.

“That I have a basic dictionary I can lend her,” Uhura says. “She wants to learn all of it—Klingon, Romulan—all three dialects—even Vulcan. Anything else she can get her hands on. She speaks...dozens of languages now, some which don’t even exist anymore. She’s one hell of a linguist, I have to admit that.”

“Yeah, but she’d just kill a bunch of Kingons rather than talk to them,” Jim says, and Uhura smiles a bit. Jim’s wings settle a bit and flow around him without hiding him, and he sighs to himself as a couple knots in his shoulders start releasing. “Anyway--whatever you all want to do about dinner at their place is up to you. Go, don’t go, whatever you want. I will probably be there at least some of the time. We’ve all established that they take hospitality seriously, so they’re not going to harm us in any way while feeding us.”

Something catches Jim’s eye and he looks up, trying to figure out what he saw, but all he sees is the night time sky and a few stars. Maybe a shadow, but...oh, whatever. “Anyway, it’s late, go home, I’ll see you all tomorrow when we figure out what we can fix next,” he says, waving his crew off. They all disperse, going their separate ways, and after a bit Jim walks back to his apartment.

He has a small balcony, not really big enough for anything but standing on and looking out at the city, and when he hears someone knock on the door he freezes for a moment before he realizes. “You couldn’t just come in the front door?” he asks, going to let Khan in.

“I flew,” Khan says. “This was an easier landing.”

“You are going to have to teach me how you do that,” Jim says, closing and locking the balcony door behind Khan.

“You have wings and you do not fly?” Khan raises his eyebrows. “Why not?”

“No one ever wanted to let me try, and I never had time,” Jim says. “I’ve given it a couple tries, but I can’t do what you do.”

“Even if I were to teach you how to fly I doubt you could do what I do,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I know, superior strength and stamina and all that,” Jim says. “Still, I want to learn what I can.”

“Then I will teach you,” Khan says as though it’s that simple.

“Thank you,” Jim says. “Do you want anything to drink or anything?” He’s expecting a no, but Khan surprises him again, asking for a glass of water. Jim gets him one, and one for himself while he’s at it (because drinking alone even if you’re just drinking water sucks) and tries not to watch the muscles in Khan’s throat work while he swallows.

They stand there in silence for a bit, until Jim puts his glass down and takes Khan’s empty one and moves it out of the way, and after he’s done that Khan takes his hand and pulls him in close, his wings around Jim. “Tonight did not go so badly, I think,” Khan says, and Jim leans his forehead against Khan’s shoulder and sighs, closing his eyes.
“It could have gone worse,” Jim admits. “Although the...altercation over dinner was not all that helpful.”

“Yes, I had been hoping to avoid that,” Khan admits.

“I thought Ekaterina was going to stab you, not just the wall,” Jim says.

“I was not entirely certain she wouldn’t have,” Khan says. “She is very firm in her belief of ‘who harms one, harms all’.”

“But harming you, that wouldn’t have...” Jim pulls back to look at Khan.

“I would have healed,” Khan says simply. “And if it allowed her to slake her anger, I would have been happy for the injury.”

“Man, you guys are twisted,” Jim decides.

“Perhaps a bit.” Khan smiles and Jim smiles back, stretching up to kiss him lightly. “Do you think we will see your crew members at dinner again?”

“Honestly, I’ve got no idea,” Jim says. “It depends on who’s around, who’s free, and how interested they are in whatever you’ve been talking about.”

“Fair enough,” Khan says. “Will we see you?”

“Probably most nights I’m not expected elsewhere,” Jim says. “Is that okay?”

“It is,” Khan says.

“Careful or I’ll start to think you like me,” Jim says, and Khan smiles.

“If I did not find your company at least somewhat enjoyable, Kirk, I wouldn’t be here.”

“I’ll take what I can get, apparently,” Jim says, laughing. “You know, it’s just us. You are allowed to be honest with me.”

Khan’s mouth twists in what isn’t quite a smile. “I do...I do enjoy your company, Jim,” he says. “You are not my family, but you...interest me.”

“Why?” Jim asks.

“Because you are like me in some ways,” Khan says. “The wings, your intelligence and gift of leadership. And yet you are completely unlike me in others--you have a conscience, a moral code that decides right and wrong.”

“You have your own code,” Jim says.

“Yes, and often it is ruled by expediency,” Khan says.

“No.” Jim shakes his head. “I don’t buy that. Your code puts your people first. You wouldn’t sacrifice any of them for expediency.”

“But I would do anything for them,” Khan says. “You have lines you will not cross. I have none.”

“Sometimes I wonder just how far I’d go for the ones I care about,” Jim says. “I mean, I almost lost my ship because of it until you...until you injured Pike badly enough he couldn’t ship out in search of
you and it was reinstated, and now they’ll let me keep her. I just...sometimes I think we’re all hypocrites and say there are things we won’t do, and when we get pushed, we break those rules.”

“It is human nature to want to think the best of one’s self and others,” Khan says reflectively. “Most people are afraid of the dark, the unknown. Facing their own monsters is too much for most.”

“But not you,” Jim says.

“I am the monster in the dark, Jim,” Khan says.

“No,” Jim says. “No, you’re not. You wanted me to think you were, but I know you now and I know there’s so much more to you than that. You’re honest with yourself about what you will and won’t do, that doesn’t make you a monster.”

“Once again, I think you think better of me than is the truth,” Khan says.

“I think you think less,” Jim says simply.

“Are you to be my moral guide, now, as well as my conscience?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to be to you,” Jim says. “But you’re a better man than you give yourself credit for.”

“I am far from good, Jim,” Khan says.

“I didn’t say you were a good man,” Jim says. “Just that you’re better than you think.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “Perhaps you are deluded by your attraction to me.”

“You could have killed me,” Jim says. “Actively, on the Vengeance, and you could have passively let me die on Qo’nos and when we were trying to get on board the Vengeance. You let me live--you saved my life. Why?”

“I needed to ensure my family’s safety,” Khan says.

“No,” Jim shakes his head. “There’s more to it than that. Ever since we met--okay, so I hated you when I first met you, but there’s still...there’s a connection between us.”

“You want there to be one,” Khan says.

“You do too, or you wouldn’t be here,” Jim says.

Khan smiles a little and his wings shift, stroking the back of Jim’s head. “You are unique, among humans,” he says. “Even among my family you would be unique.”

“Every person in your family is unique, though, in his own way,” Jim says. “I mean, that’s the impression I’ve gotten.”

“It is a fair assessment,” Khan says.

“You’ve told me about the ones who didn’t make it,” Jim says. “Will you tell me about the ones who are still alive? The ones I don’t know that well?”

“If you want to know,” Khan says.

“I do,” Jim says.
“This will take some time,” Khan says. “Perhaps we should sit down.”

“I’m good where I am,” Jim says, oddly reluctant to give up the feeling of Khan’s wings around him.

That earns him a smile from Khan. “You know Ekaterina, Anandi, Katsuro, Bishop,” he says. “Maeve is a nurse—she chose that over becoming a doctor as she felt nurses did more to directly help people. I think she was originally designed as a mate for one of us, but she chose to go her own way.”

“She is rather, um, attractive,” Jim admits sheepishly.

Khan laughs. “She is used to that.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says. “They really designed mates for you?”

“Alona, Maeve, even Anandi, I think,” Khan says. “But we saw each other as siblings, and refused to take partners from our family group with a few exceptions. Ekaterina and Konstantin, Katsuro and Bishop, to a lesser extent Alona and Matthew.”

“I thought there was something between them,” Jim says.

“On and off again. They are...I suppose the best English term would be friends with benefits.”

“Is there a non-English term?” Jim asks.

Khan says something in a language Jim doesn’t recognize. “Did that help?”

“No, not really,” Jim admits.

“Then why ask?” Khan asks.

“I was curious,” Jim says. “I’m not a linguist, though. I’ve tried, but languages are not my strong point.”

“No,” Khan says. “You have other skills.”

“Well, it’s also less important than it used to be,” Jim says. “Most people use Standard these days.”

“Which we know as English,” Khan says.

“Yeah, that,” Jim says. “The world is less divided than it was during your time.”

“I am aware,” Khan says.

Jim leans up and kisses Khan lightly. “Tell me about the rest,” he says.

Khan does, one person at a time, giving Jim context and background and maybe a little bit of understanding he hadn’t had before. He doesn’t know how long they stand there, but Khan’s looking maybe a little tired by the time he finishes talking and Jim’s not far behind. “Come to bed,” he says, sliding his hands up Khan’s arms to massage the back of his neck.

“Yes,” Khan says, leaning his forehead against Jim’s for a moment.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Can they be trusted?

The meetings begin the next day, endless hours of what was Marcus thinking and what plans did he have and how far up does this conspiracy go and what do we need to salvage and worst of all, how do we stop this from being a PR nightmare? Technically they’ve already been ongoing but Jim’s been spared most of them due to rebuilding his ship. But Pike calls him in, and Jim spends six hours in conference rooms and leaves with one hell of a headache and a message to deliver to Khan’s people.

He shows up in time to watch them sparring, which he has to admit is becoming a fun part of his day. Khan has a couple tears in his shirt and Katsuro’s only wearing pants, and Ekaterina has on a sleeveless top and pants, which means he can see the forearm sheaths she uses and one in the small of her back. Wait, maybe that’s two knives. Jim’s not sure.

When the fight ends, Ekaterina has Estevao (about one and a half times her size) on the floor with a knife at his throat, Alona has one end of her staff planted on Matthew’s neck, and Khan has Bishop in a headlock. All three of them release their partners and in Ekaterina and Alona’s cases give them a hand up off the floor. “Captain,” Alona says, seeing him. “Just here to visit?”

“Actually--no,” Kirk says, his wings shifting. “Not tonight. I have...a message and an offer on behalf of Starfleet.”

Dead silence follows that until Khan says something, calm and unruffled, in...Jim thinks maybe it’s Hindi but isn’t sure. “Give us twenty minutes to shower and change, Kirk,” he says, as people begin heading for the door. “Then we will meet you in the common area.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says, tucking his wings back as people pass him.

For twenty minutes--eighteen--he paces and his wings shift and fold around him and fold back and stretch out and he’s finally calmed down when people begin filing into the common area, many with damp hair and a few with water droplets on their skin.

“So,” Anandi says when everyone’s there. “Tell us your message, captain.”

Jim takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. “As you may or may not know, there’s somewhat of... Marcus was the head of Starfleet, and his death and subsequent reveal of exactly what he was up to have left Starfleet in a bit of a mess. There are a lot of people who think you all should have been left in cryosleep, or that Khan should have been put back to join you. We are....we’re working on the PR nightmare angle of it, and people way above my pay grade are discussing how best to handle Marcus’s programs, those that still exist--a lot of them went up in smoke when Section 31 blew up, but a lot of the information’s still around.” He folds his wings back when they threaten to fold around him. “Anyway, the point’s been made that you all have skills we could use, and by this point you’re either caught up on current technology and current advances or you’re close enough we can use you. I have been asked by Admirals Pike and Barnett to request your help. We need you. We need you to figure out what Marcus was up to, to help us repair ships and improve their design, to...basically
anything you think you could be helpful with, we could use your help. If you agree, you’ll be formally sworn in as Starfleet agents and officers.”

“And if we refuse?” Anandi asks.

“We’re really hoping you don’t,” Jim says honestly. “It’s not just us needing your help, which we do, it’s...you could help save us from a PR nightmare.”

“Yes, I am sure we could,” Bishop says. “The former war criminals and despots, sworn to do good on behalf of the Federation.”

Jim winces; he hadn’t wanted to phrase it quite that bluntly. “Something like that.”

“In exchange for our help, captain, what do we get?” Ekaterina asks, toying with one of her knives.

“A place in this world,” Jim says. “A chance to belong, to make lives for yourselves that are more than what genetic engineering destined for you. Our gratitude. A salary, for what it’s worth, places to live maybe that aren’t here. A chance to ship out when some of our ships head out. My offer to Khan remains, and will remain until he and whoever goes with him either accepts it or rejects it.”

“Why are you here and not the admirals?” Matthew asks. “That could be seen as insult.”

“It’s really not meant to be,” Jim says. “I’m here because I know you best, of anyone else in the area. That isn’t to say I know you well, but I know you better than most people do. It was felt you might be more receptive if the offer came from me.”

“This is an offer, not an order?” Ekaterina specifies.

“It is,” Jim says.

She nods, considering. Languages begin flying around the room, and Jim waits patiently for them to talk it out, weighing pros and cons and thinking out loud.

“Khan,” Katsuro says finally. “Can they be trusted?”

English, which means he wants Jim to hear it. Jim bites his lip, wishing he wasn’t so knotted up over Khan’s answer.

“Had you asked me before I ran to Qo’nos, I would have said no,” Khan says slowly. “My experience was not positive, and I believed the entire organization needed to be brought down. However.” His wings shift, just a little, and he weighs his words carefully. “I no longer believe that is the case. If you are asking me as Starfleet as a whole can be trusted, I have insufficient data. If you are asking me if we can trust the offer as it stands...I believe it is sincere.”

Katsuro nods. “Then we will accept.”

Anandi adds something else in Spanish, gesturing idly with a hand, and laughter runs through the room.

“If you come to headquarters tomorrow morning,” Jim says, trying not to show how relieved he is, “we can start figuring out where to put you.”

Ekaterina snorts. “Tests and more tests, captain?”

“Just to get a baseline of what you know and what you’re interested in,” Jim says apologetically.
“I suppose it is only to be expected,” she says, flipping her knife. “However, captain, if any one of us goes through anything similar to what happened to our brother...you will not like the consequences.”

“That won’t happen, I promise,” Jim says more firmly than he feels. “We’re just interested in what you know.”

“Is it possible you are being duped?” Bishop asks. “That this is not what it seems?”

“No,” Jim says. “No, definitely not. I trust Admiral PIke with my life. I’d trust him with yours—I did trust him with yours, he’s the one who fought for the okay to revive you.”

“And this after you nearly killed the man,” Anandi says to Khan. “Remarkable.”

“He doesn’t like the idea of people being used as bargaining chips,” Jim says. “Although I’m not quite sure how he feels about Khan at the moment. At least he survived. Had he died...things would be different. Very different.”

“Let us be grateful for that, then,” Anandi says. “What time tomorrow should we arrive, and will you be there?”

“Why don’t I come over here around 0800 and we can all head over together?” Jim suggests.

“That is acceptable,” Katsuro says. “Are you to be our liaison, captain?”

“Apparently,” Jim says. “I’m not sure anyone else wants to get close enough.”

A murmur of laughter bubbles through the room. “If one must deal with tigers, it is better not to get close enough to get eaten,” someone--dark woman, dusky skin, Jim thinks she’s Leena--says. “Unless that is one’s goal.”

“It’s not mine,” Jim says. “But I’m willing to go to bat for you, so does that earn me a pass?”

“It does,” Katsuro says. “We appreciate your consideration, captain. We realize that most others would not be so...accommodating.”

“I like to think my fellow officers would give you a fair shake,” Jim says although he doesn’t know how true it is.

“Perhaps,” Anandi says. “We shall see, captain.”

Bishop pushes to his feet. “I need to get started on dinner,” he says. “Anandi, Maeve, with me?”

“Si,” Anandi says and Maeve nods, getting to her feet. The three of them leave the room.

“So,” Jim says quietly to Khan, who comes to stand by him. “Integration.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “We shall see how things go.”

“What did Anandi say before?” Jim asks. “After Katsuro said you’d accept the offer.”

Khan smiles briefly, but there’s not much humor in it. “That if we chose to leave, it is unlikely anyone could stop us.”

“I hope you don’t,” Jim says. “I...I argued for this today, with Pike’s backing, but I’m putting a lot on the line for your people. They don’t know we’re...whatever we are, but they know I’ve been spending time with you.”
“What happens if we do not work out, Jim?” Khan asks. “Not you and I, I mean my people, integrating into Starfleet. What happens if it goes...pear-shaped, I think is the expression?”

Jim blows out a breath. “You have to ask the hard questions, don’t you?” he says. “I don’t know. At best my credibility would be compromised. At worst, I’d get in trouble, maybe face a disciplinary hearing or something. I don’t know what they’d charge me with but I’m sure they’d find something. Conspiring with criminals, maybe?”

Khan nods. “And Admiral Pike?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says, shaking his head. His wings fluff out and stretch a little and he lets them. “I don’t know how politics gets played at that level.”

“I am sure we can find out,” Khan says but Jim doesn’t think the ‘we’ refers to the two of them.

“Yeah, probably you can,” he says. “I never want to be admiral, I’ll admit that. I want my ship, that’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“The rewards of doing your job well means they take it away from you,” Khan says.

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” Jim almost laughs. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. I’ll deal with that in a decade, or something. For now I’ve got my ship.” And I’ve got you, sort of. “Will you accept my offer?”

Khan pauses, his wings stretching the same as Jim’s. “In all likelihood, yes.”

“What do your--what do they have to say about it?” Jim asks.

“Ekaterina likes the idea. Katsuro and Bishop are willing to go along if we can stay in touch with our family.”

“You can,” Jim says. “I mean, we may have to do comms and video messages and the like, but no one’s talking about putting you out of touch. What would Ekaterina do while on the ship?”

“Learn languages, teach self-defense,” Khan says. “Study. I am sure she could find uses for herself. She is skilled with computers, she could probably serve as an operations officer if needed.”

“We might be able to use her as that,” Jim says. “Uhura might get...miffed if Ekaterina took her place as comm officer.”

Khan shakes his head. “She would not want that. Although your lieutenant works alpha shift, does she not? You will need officers for beta and gamma shift.”

“You have a point,” Jim says. “We’ll figure it out.”

“For now, we will see where we are needed,” Khan says.

I need you, Jim thinks, and keeps his mouth shut. That’s way too much, too fast, too soon, too everything. He settles for brushing Khan’s cheek with the edge of his wing and Khan touching his hand briefly.

Of course, that’s when Chekov and Sulu come in, and Jim and Khan don’t spring apart so much as both their wings mantle at the same time and knock both of them back a step--and Chekov has to duck out of the way. “Sorry, captain, are we intruding?” Sulu asks, a little cautiously.

Jim forces his wings to fold back. “No, not at all, Sulu. What brings you by?”
“He did,” Sulu says, jerking a thumb at Chekov.

“Ah--well, it is that I found some books for Hugh and Rudolf, keptin,” Chekov says sheepishly. “And Ekaterina had mentioned wanting to know about where in Russia I grew up and compare notes, so I thought I should come by, and the lieutenant decided to come with me.”

“The more the merrier,” Jim says, stepping out of the way. “Everyone’s in there.” Chekov and Sulu nod hellos to Khan, who folds his own wings back, and Jim watches the two of them enter the common area. As expected, Chekov pauses by Hugh and Rudolf to hand over a memory chip and exchange a few comments before Ekaterina calls him over. He blushes, but goes to sit by her, and they begin talking animatedly in Russian.

“Lieutenant Sulu, how nice to see you again,” Alona calls from her spot over by the fake fireplace. “Please, come sit with us.”

Something twinges for Jim when she says that and he wonders if he should warn Sulu about getting involved with three-hundred-year-old augmented women, but figures the guy’s smart enough to know that one for himself. Sulu does smile, though, as he makes his way over to her and Matthew, and Alona stands on the table when he reaches them to clasp hands and kiss his cheek. “Please don’t let her break him,” Jim murmurs to Khan. “He’s a valuable member of my crew.”

“And she of mine,” Khan says.

“Yeah, but I don’t think he could throw her across the room,” Jim says.

Khan smiles. “Perhaps not.”

“Seriously, do I need to be worried?” Jim asks.

“Alona,” Khan calls out, and she looks up. He asks her a question in--Irish? Gaelic? Jim thinks that’s what it is, unless it’s just a bunch of nonsense.

She starts laughing, looks at Jim and giggles more, her cheeks turning pink. Eventually she calms down enough to answer, complete with lots of hand gestures and an occasional snicker.

“What did you ask her and what did she say?” Jim asks warily.

“I asked her if you should fear for the lieutenant’s virtue,” Khan murmurs. “She, after finding the idea hilarious, told me she thinks he’s cute but he’s also very, very young, and she prefers aged beef to veal.”

“He’s not that young,” Jim feels obliged to protest.

“To us he is. It is less an age descriptor and more...he is still green in some ways, inexperienced in others.” Khan shrugs one shoulder. “Even you are somewhat naive to us, Kirk. You forget, we fought wars. We won wars.”

“But you don’t mind,” Kirk says, half-asking.

“I do not.” Khan’s wing shifts and brushes Kirk’s shoulder. “You are also less green than some of your colleagues.”


“Hazard or just side effect?” Khan asks. “It is not necessarily a bad thing.”
“True,” Jim says. He looks over at Ekaterina and Chekov, who have their heads together and are studying something on Chekov’s PADD. Ekaterina smiles at something he shows her and pats Chekov’s cheek, making him smile back and shrug a shoulder. “Do I have to worry about them, too?” he asks, nodding toward them.

“I sincerely doubt it,” Khan says. “She seems to see him more as a younger brother than a potential lover.”

“Okay,” Jim says. “That’s...that’s good.”

“Do you think my people are not good enough for yours, Kirk?” Khan’s voice is quiet but there’s a bit of an edge to it.

“No, it’s not that,” Jim says. “It’s...Chekov’s still a kid in so many ways and i think Ekaterina would eat him alive without salt. She’s...intense.”

“When she wants to be,” Khan says.

“I haven’t seen her not want to be yet,” Jim says and earns himself a not-quite chuckle from Khan. “It’s--I don’t think your people aren’t good enough for mine, that’s not it at all. I just worry about them getting in over their heads.”

“And you are not worried about the same?” Khan asks.

“Oh, I know I’m in over my head,” Jim says cheerfully. “But I’m okay with that.”

“Allow your people the courtesy of making the same decisions,” Khan says.

“I’m their captain,” Jim says. “I look out for them.”

Khan nods, as if tacitly accepting Jim’s argument. “I do not think you need to worry,” he says. “Your crew, however, may be concerned about your involvement with me.”

“Yeah, well, two of them have already given me the “it’s your mistake to make” speech,” Jim admits. “The rest will either do the same or just stay out of it.”

“Do you think you are making a mistake?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jim says. “Maybe I will someday, but right now, no, I don’t.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Khan says. “Do you think you’re making a mistake?” Jim asks.

“I think it is too late to try and correct course, if in fact this is a mistake to begin with,” Khan says. “And I am not certain it is.”

“That’s the best I’m going to get, isn’t it?” Jim asks, smiling a little ruefully, and Khan smiles back.

“I do not regret what has happened between us, Jim,” Khan says quietly. “Nor do I think we should change our behavior.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Jim says. His wing brushes Khan’s and he stifles a yawn. “It’s been a long day.”

“I am sure,” Khan says. “Tomorrow may be longer.”

“You should sleep tonight,” Khan says. “I should stay here.”

“No,” Jim says. “No, I want you to stay with me.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because I like your company and I sleep when you’re there,” Jim says. “Sometimes on my own I get insomnia.”

Khan’s wings shift and brush Jim’s shoulders. “Then I will stay.”

“Thank you,” Jim says softly.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Are you guys trying to be intimidating or does it just come naturally?

Chapter Notes

Comments on this chapter would be particularly welcome, as I had to rewrite about half of it twice and I'm still not entirely certain I like how it turned out.

Khan leaves him early the next morning and Jim tries not to feel disappointed by it. He doesn’t quite get why Khan has to go back to the dorms before Jim himself is supposed to be there. Maybe they spar in the mornings? Maybe he just wants to check in with his people? Jim really has no idea.

He has a message from Pike letting him know where to bring Khan’s people, and wonders when that came in because he and Khan were up late the night before (mostly talking) but decides not to worry about it in favor of taking a sonic shower and pulling on a clean uniform. He has enough time to gulp down a meal bar and a stimulant drink before he heads over to the dorm, and they sit a little uneasily in his stomach on the way.

Normally he’d just let himself in, but this feels weird. So he knocks, and a moment later Anandi answers it, dressed in basic black and her hair pulled back. “Captain Kirk,” she says. “We are ready.”

“Great,” Jim says. “I guess we should get going, then. We’re heading to one of the Academy buildings, it’ll be better suited for our needs.”

She nods and calls out something in Spanish, turning back. Jim steps aside as people begin coming out of the building. He notes a little uneasily that all of them—all fifty-four—are wearing black, fairly close-fitting clothes, although he knows Ekaterina’s got knives stashed under hers. The women (and two men) with long hair have it pulled back, and they move—not quite in step, but definitely in synch. They’re kind of intimidating, Jim thinks, which is probably the point.

It’s only a short walk to the building they’re using, and Khan falls into step with Jim on the way over there, his wings tucked back and his usual black looking more ominous than usual. “Are you guys trying to be intimidating or does it come naturally?” Jim finally asks him, keeping his voice low.

Khan smiles. “Yes.”

“Right,” Jim says, and keeps quiet until they get to the building.

Admirals Pike and Barnett are waiting for them, and both of them look mildly nonplussed at the four and a half dozen people who enter the building. “Thank you for coming,” Pike says. “I know this isn’t going to be much fun, but we’ve arranged for a series of evaluations to determine your strengths and state of current knowledge. The testing room is this way.”
“Would it help if we told you our areas of interest first?” Katsuro asks politely. He turns and says something in Japanese, and everyone shifts into about five or six distinct groups. “We—” he gestures toward himself and the others near him—“are the engineers. Anandi?” She raises a hand. “She and hers are scientists, biological and chemical. Bishop and his are the students of medicine. Hugh and his group study advanced mathematics and physics. Leena and hers are social sciences.”

“That...does help, yes,” Pike says slowly. “But you’ve left out a few people.” He nods at Ekaterina, Alona, and two others that Jim can’t remember the names of. He thinks maybe they’re Amir and Aisha.

Ekaterina smiles. “Covert ops, admiral,” she says. “We do the dirty work.”

Pike looks a little disbelievingly at Alona. “I see.”

“Clearly you don’t,” Alona says. She smiles sweetly. “But you will.”

“All four of us are linguists,” Ekaterina says, leaving out that the rest of them are also linguists. “We are among the best in hand to hand combat—save Katsuro—and we are, I suppose you would call it marksmen. We have studied anthropology and sociology, so as to be able to better integrate wherever we go. We know survival techniques, how to live off the land, things like that.”

“All right,” Pike says. “Well, that might come in handy. Out of curiosity, how many of the rest of you know those skills?”

“We all do,” Katsuro says. “All of us have studied multiple disciplines and fields. The ones we have indicated to you are where our interest and strongest skills lie.”

“I see,” Pike says. “Well. Let’s get on with the boring bits, I suppose.”

In the room they’ve set up, Pike speaks quietly with the person running the computers, who nods and types a few commands into his screen. Each person gets directed to a seat, and things begin. Jim finds an out of the way spot against the wall, his wings stretching a little just because it feels good, and Khan comes to join him. “Starfleet knows my capabilities already,” he says.

“No all of them,” Jim says quietly.

Khan smiles. “Perhaps not.”

The ones taking tests remain silent for over an hour, until there’s apparently a break period. Ekaterina groans and says something in Russian, and everyone laughs. Khan answers her in the same language and she snorts. “Nyet.”

Katsuro comments in Japanese, and Bishop answers him in French, and Rudolf throws German into the mix, until there’s a polyglot of languages being spoken and Jim has no idea what they’re saying. He’s starting to get used to that.

Everyone settles down as the next evaluation begins. Jim finds it kind of fascinating to watch them—he can tell some are very intent on the tests, and some of them—like Ekaterina—seem to regard it as a game. He wouldn’t put it past her to throw the curve somehow, and makes a note to mention that to Pike later. Much later. When there aren’t people with enhanced senses around.

The second evaluation runs longer, and Jim’s more than a bit bored and stiff by the time they finish. “Okay, I think that’s it for today,” Pike says, stepping forward with the help of his cane. “We will need to score these and evaluate them.”
“But there is more you want from us today,” Anandi says, not asking.

“Yes,” Pike says. “We’d like to get a sense of your physical skills. It’s not—I know you know what happened to Khan, and it’s not like that. Just basic stamina and strength testing.”

Ekaterina’s mouth twists, and her right hand flexes—Jim’s guessing she almost pulled a knife and didn’t. “If we must,” she says, sounding not pleased by the idea.

Khan says something in Russian, and she rolls her eyes. “Very well, then, let us do this,” she says, standing up as everyone else does.

They don’t have the facilities to test everyone simultaneously. Alona and Bishop volunteer to go first on the treadmills, and Jim remembers Khan saying Alona was a distance runner and wonders if it’s a subtle way of poking fun at the tests. He watches, mildly disbelieving, as both of them increase the speed to something he’d have trouble maintaining for more than a minute or two and just...keep going, neither one breaking a sweat. “They will be at this for a while,” Anandi tells Pike.

“I see,” he says. “You’re all skilled in unarmed combat, correct?”

“Yes,” Katsuro says. “Do you have opponents we are to spar with?”

“A few of our instructors volunteered,” Pike says. “Would five of you be willing?”

After a bit of murmuring, Katsuro, Ekaterina, Hugh, Maeve, and Daffyd step forward. Jim winces inwardly for whoever ends up sparring Katsuro and Ekaterina and hopes she has more sense than to pull knives. He follows them to the sparring ring, where Pike introduces their partners and the five pairs line up facing each other.

A sharp whistle blows and Jim blinks, because he almost misses it, it’s that fast. Katsuro has his opponent disabled and on the floor in two moves flat, Ekaterina took three but he thinks she was holding back. Hugh, Maeve, and Daffyd are only seconds behind them. “Okay,” Pike says. “Can we try that again, a little more slowly?”

“If you wish, admiral,” Katsuro says. They line up again, and this time it’s obvious all five augments are holding back, but it’s still not even a minute later when all five opponents are either disabled, on the floor, or both.

“And...what happens when you fight each other?” Pike asks cautiously.

“We will show you,” Ekaterina says. “Katsuro, da?”

“Hai,” he says. The two of them move to face each other, the whistle blows, and they launch at each other, moving so quickly individual moves get blurred and Jim has no idea who’s winning. He wonders if they’re deliberately fighting to a draw, or if they’re pulling blows. When the end comes, they’re both on their knees, Katsuro with Ekaterina in a headlock and her with a knife pressed to his inner thigh. “A draw, I think,” she says, not moving. “You would break my neck but not before I severed the femoral artery.”

“Yes,” he says. He releases her and her knife slides back up inside her sleeve before she pushes to her feet.

“Aren’t knives cheating?” one of the instructors asks.

“I fight to win,” Ekaterina says. “Not to score points.”
“Can you teach us how you do that?” another one asks.

“Yes and no,” Katsuro says. “We can teach you moves, techniques, but we will always be faster and stronger.”

Ekaterina smiles and says something to Katsuro in Japanese. He smiles back and nods, backing up a few steps. Without warning, she throws a knife at him, aiming directly between the eyes—and he catches it between his palms about a centimeter from his face. “This is what we cannot teach,” she says, catching the knife easily as Katsuro throws it back to her. It vanishes up her sleeve and she turns to look at the instructors. “Our reflexes were engineered, then honed by decades of training. It is simply impossible for you to do as well.”

“You can’t be more than mid-twenties,” the instructor protests.

“Looks, lieutenant, are deceptive,” Ekaterina says. “Besides, haven’t you ever heard it’s rude to ask a girl her age?”

Pike clears his throat. “We should check on Alona and Bishop.”

Jim follows him back to the other room with the treadmills, where Alona and Bishop are still running, neither having broken a sweat yet. “How far have you gone?” he asks out of curiosity.

“Eh. Twenty-five kilometers, or so,” Alona says without sounding winded. “Admiral, I feel I should point out that we can keep this pace up all day.”

“Can the rest of you?” Pike asks.

“Depends on person,” Bishop says. “Not all of us are distance runners. All of us can run at least fifteen to twenty kilometers at a pace similar to this.”

Jim leaves them to talk and moves over to Khan, standing by the wall. “To be rude, how old are you?” he murmurs.

“Not counting time in cryosleep, fifty-eight,” Khan murmurs back. “All of us are within a year or so of each other.”

Jim looks at him in disbelief. “You look younger than I do.”

“We age slowly, Kirk,” Khan reminds him.

“Yeah, but...” Jim shakes his head. “So I’ll be dust in eighty or ninety years, and you’ll still look like...this.”

“It is possible,” Khan says. “We honestly do not know how long we will live. We were the first successful group of augmented humans from in vitro. There is no track record for us to follow.”

Jim’s wings shift and fold around him for a moment. “Right,” he says. “If you were to have children, would they be like you?”

“At least to an extent,” Khan says. “What that extent is, I do not know. But it is unlikely to happen. Most of us are sterile.”

“Most?” Jim catches that. “How did that happen?”

“We were specifically created,” Khan says. “Fertility was something they decided against allowing us. I believe, had the programs gone on longer, they intended to create a second group and ensure
their fertility, but we were the first, and they wanted to control us.”

“Who isn’t sterile?” Jim asks.

“Rowena was not, although she died before we even left Earth,” Khan says. “Geoffrey, but again, he died in a battle before we left. Of my people as they currently exist, I believe Alona and Maeve are capable of having children, and of the men I am not sure. I am sterile.”

“Well, I can’t get pregnant but that’s good to know,” Jim says, crooking a smile and getting a matching one from Khan.

“Khan,” someone--Bishop, Jim thinks--calls, and he turns away from Jim.

“Oui?”

Bishop asks him a question in rapid French, gesturing to Pike at one point. Pike looks a bit disgruntled by all the linguistics, but doesn’t ask them to stick to Standard.

Khan shakes his head when Bishop’s done talking, his wings fluffing out for a moment. “Non,” he says. He clarifies, still in French, and Bishop nods.

“What was that about?” Jim mutters to Khan.

“He asked me if I had known Pike before, when I was assigned to Section 31,” Khan murmurs back. “I said I had not met him before today.”

“Except when you tried to kill him,” Jim says because that still bugs him.

“I did not speak with the man, Kirk,” Khan points out mildly and Jim sighs, his wings stretching.

“I wish you had,” Jim says. “I wish you’d had someone to go to, before everything went up in flames. If you’d been able to trust someone...maybe this wouldn’t have played out as it did.”

Khan shrugs. “Events happened as they happened,” he says. “There is no guarantee that had I spoken with anyone, I would have been believed. Marcus held all the cards, the ones that mattered.”

“I’d have believed you,” Jim says even though he doesn’t know if it’s true.

Khan smiles, and there’s something off in it. “Perhaps.”

“You don’t think I would have,” Jim says, studying his face. “You don’t think I’d have believed you.”

“You didn’t,” Khan says. “Not until you had no other choice.”

“Then you would have made me believe,” Jim says. “You had proof, didn’t you? Recordings, the damn cryotubes, everything. It might have taken some time, but you’d have convinced me.”

“Of what have I convinced you now?” Khan asks, and Jim licks his lips and his wings shift and stretch a little because that’s a loaded question with a hidden trap if he ever heard one.

“That you’re a better man than you claim to be,” Jim says quietly. “That you love your people, you’ll do anything for them. That you...care about me, somehow, enough that you’re willing to give me the benefit of the doubt and might, one day, trust me.”

“I might,” Khan says, and the edges of his wings brush Jim’s. “Perhaps I already do.”
Jim looks up at him, eyes wider than he means them to be. “I won’t hurt you and I won’t betray you,” he says softly. “Somewhere in there you became one of my people, and I protect what’s mine.”

“I believe you,” Khan says, equally softly.

Jim really, really wants to kiss him right about now, but the room’s full of people including fucking Pike and they’ve probably already said way too much around people with enhanced hearing. He doesn’t know how good the augments’ hearing is and hopes no one decides to tell him.

Ekaterina comes over to them, raising an eyebrow at Khan and getting a one-shoulder shrug in response. “We are taking a break for the midday meal,” she says. “Are you two joining us or will you be elsewhere?”

“We will join you,” Khan says. He adds something else Jim doesn’t get (maybe he needs to ask Uhura or Chekov for lessons in Russian) and she smiles, turning to look at Jim. Kirk shifts a little uneasily under her gaze, and his wings fold around him before he forces them back.

“You may just do after all, Kirk,” Ekaterina says thoughtfully.

“Uh,” Jim says. “Thanks?”

She touches his shoulder, which Jim thinks is the first time she’s actually touched him, and says something in Russian. “Welcome to the family,” she says, repeating herself in English. She touches Khan’s shoulder, then Jim’s cheek, and turns, hurrying off.

Jim looks at Khan. “Did we just get married?”

Khan laughs.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

What was your family like?

Chapter Notes

If I haven't said it before, thank you to everyone who's left comments--getting them really makes my day. Writing this fic is a lot of fun but it's also a little neurotic-making because this is pretty indulgent on my part, and I'm always nervous that people won't like what *I* happen to like. So thank you for the comments and the kudos and I promise to keep this going until it either ends or no one wants to read anymore. (I do, actually, have an end point in mind but it's going to take a while to get there.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Later that day, after the tests are over, Jim’s surprised when the augments scatter. A few go for a run, some make plans to go out for dinner, some make other plans to go out for dinner and then see some of the city, and only a few head back to the dorms. Jim looks at Khan, wondering what he wants to do, and gets no real idea from his body language. “So,” he says. “What do you want?”

“That is a rather broad question,” Khan observes. “How do you mean it?”

“What do you want to do this evening?” Jim clarifies. “Are you hungry? There’s a little pub I know, the food’s pretty good and they have an extensive selection of beer.”

Khan considers for a moment. “All right,” he says.

Jim also likes this pub because no one’s ever looked at him strangely for having wings and the chairs are armless, which means he can sit mostly comfortably without his wings complaining in pain. He doesn’t mention that to Khan, but he sees Khan tense just a little when they enter, and relax just a little less when no one gives them a second look.

They get a table near the back and a human waitress with bright green hair comes over to them a moment later. Jim asks her what’s on special draft, gets a list of options and picks one that sounds relatively decent. Khan, to his surprise, does the same. “I thought you didn’t drink,” Jim says to him after Green Hair moves off.

“I never said that,” Khan says. “I said I cannot get drunk easily or for long.”

“Which must suck sometimes,” Jim says.

Khan shrugs. “I prefer not to lose control involuntarily.”

“Would you ever give it up?” Jim asks, and okay, that wasn’t at all where he meant that to go but on the other hand, now he’s curious.
“It would...depend on the situation,” Khan says.

“Hypothetically,” Jim says, keeping his voice low. “With me.”

Khan raises his eyebrows. “You would want that?” he asks.

“Maybe, and you’re not answering the question,” Jim says.

“Maybe,” Khan says finally.

That’s better than he expected and surprises him. “Okay,” he says, wondering what to do with that knowledge.

Green Hair returns with their beers and asks if they’re ready to order. Jim says sure without thinking about it and then realizes he hasn’t even opened his menu. He flips it open, picks something at random, and Khan does the same. They hand over their menus, she disappears, and Jim picks up his glass, taking a long drink. “Huh,” he says. “Better than I expected.”

Khan takes a sip of his own. “Not bad,” he says.

“I figured you more for a wine guy than a beer guy,” Jim admits. “If you drank at all.”


“I don’t know,” Jim says. “I don’t have the evaluation results. I think it’ll depend on if any of your people were trying to throw the curve.”

“Unlikely,” Khan says. “Possible, but unlikely.”

“Tomorrow we should have an idea of where to put people,” Jim says. “Since I’m apparently your liaison along with everything else.”

“Do you object to the role?” Khan asks.

“No, of course I don’t,” Jim says. “I’m just...there’s a lot going on and I feel like I should be spending more time on my ship while she gets fixed, but I can’t be everywhere at once.”

“No one can,” Khan says. “It is one of the true tests of leadership, the ability to delegate to one’s subordinates and peers.”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “Yeah, I get that. I can’t fix her, you know? I have to trust in Scotty and his people, and whoever of yours get set to working on it, and I have to trust Spock to hold things together, and Pike and Barnett to handle the mess Marcus left behind, and...” He sighs and takes another sip of beer. “And I have to trust that you and your people aren’t playing me, that you’re not after some deeper game here I don’t know about or understand.”

“My people have accepted you as one of us,” Khan says. “Not one of us, but one of us nonetheless.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not playing me,” Jim says.

“What was your family like, that you would so distrust mine?” Khan asks.

“Oh, let’s really not go there,” Jim says. “We’re having a nice evening.”

Khan merely raises his eyebrows and Jim sighs, shaking his head. “Don’t,” he says. “I’ll tell you
sometimes, I will, just...not now.”

“Did they reject you?” Khan asks.

“It’s not that simple,” Jim says, taking a drink of beer to ease the burning in his throat. “It’s...it’s just not that simple.” His wings fold around him and he lets them stay for a moment before he forces them back.

“It is a simple question, Jim,” Khan says.


“Thank you,” Jim says although it feels like a Pyrrhic victory. He can tell Khan’s not thrilled, and he knows he’ll have to tell the story later. Much later. In a decade would be good. He sighs, his wings shifting and stretching a little. “It’s just...”

“The subject is dropped,” Khan says simply.

“Right,” Jim says. “So what do we talk about now?”

“What would you like to discuss?” Khan asks.

“Before, what Ekaterina said,” Jim says. “Seriously, what was that all about?”

“You have been...I suppose adopted is the best word for it,” Khan says. “Is it really that complicated to you?”

“Maybe,” Jim says. “What does it mean for Starfleet?”

“Nothing,” Khan says. “This was directed at you personally, not you as an emissary of Starfleet.”

“So what does it mean for me?” Jim asks.

“What do you want it to mean?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Does it mean you’ll stop talking in a million languages around me?” Khan smiles. “Probably not. It does mean, however, that we will protect you as one of our own.”

“And if anyone tries to hurt me you’ll kill them,” Jim says carefully.

“In all likelihood,” Khan agrees.


“Why does this bother you so much?” Khan asks. “You have wanted to be accepted as an ally of my family. You have been. What is the problem?”

“There’s--there’s a difference between being an ally and being adopted,” Jim says. “It doesn’t bother me exactly, I just don’t know why it happened.”

“You do not like things you don’t understand,” Khan says. “And you do not understand my family.”

“I’m trying to,” Jim says. “But no, I don’t a lot of the time. And you know, you never did answer my question about whether you’re playing a deeper game I don’t know about.”
“Do you trust us that little, Jim?” Khan asks. “Do you trust me that little?”

Jim’s wings shift and fold and stretch and fold back. “I trust you,” he says finally. “I probably shouldn’t, but I do.”

“We are not trying to conquer the world,” Khan says.

“At the moment,” Jim says.

“Would you feel better if I told you you were right? That our plan is to conquer from within?” Khan asks.

“Is it the truth?” Jim asks.

“No,” Khan says.

“Then no, I wouldn’t,” Jim says. “Just be honest with me. Is there something going on I should know about?”

“If there was, I would tell you,” Khan says.

“Okay.” Jim rubs a hand over the back of his neck and shuts up as Green Hair brings their food. He smiles at her and thanks her and she smiles back before making sure there’s nothing else they need and leaving again. “So, new topic?”

“You are remarkably uncomfortable with the idea of belonging to a group you did not help create, or lead,” Khan observes. “How on Earth did you survive the Academy?”

“I survived,” Jim says. “I studied a lot, kept out of trouble—well, except for that damned Kobayashi Maru thing, but that’s totally different.”

“I have heard of this,” Khan says. “The ultimate no-win scenario.”

“I don’t believe in no-win scenarios,” Jim says.

“I was in one,” Khan says.

“But you got out,” Jim says. “There’s always a way out.”

“But the price may be higher than you are willing to pay,” Khan says.

“You were never Marcus’s,” Jim says. “You were never trapped. You always knew a way out.”

“Not without risking my family’s lives,” Khan says. “Yes, of course I could have escaped, I could have killed Marcus at any point and fled, but he held my family’s safety in his hands and I could not—would not—risk their lives. I tried to get them out, and I was found out, and you know the rest.”


“He thought he did,” Khan says. “And sometimes...I wondered.”

Jim’s wings reach out to touch Khan’s shoulders. “It’s in the past,” he says. “And it’ll never happen again.”

“No,” Khan agrees. “That it will not.”
“Why did he awaken you?” Jim asks. “Why you and not, I don’t know, Katsuro?”

“I asked him that once,” Khan says. “He said he had studied the records that still remain from our time, and I was the only one savage enough to suit him. Katsuro is the better engineer, but he prefers not to kill given the chance. He will kill, but he fights primarily to disable. I, on the other hand, think nothing of it.”

“I almost wish he’d revived Ekaterina instead,” Jim says. “I mean, then we wouldn’t be here, but just to see his face when he realized he couldn’t control her.”

“I am glad he did not,” Khan says. “She would have killed him, and then what?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Part of me wishes he was still alive so he could pay for his crimes, and part of me is just glad he’s dead.”

“Who will take his place?” Khan asks.

Jim shakes his head. “I don’t know. They haven’t decided yet. My money’s on Barnett but they could surprise me.”

“Not Pike?” Khan asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Jim says. “He might end up overseeing operations or something, though. It’s all above my pay grade.”

“Be careful, Jim, or one day it will be your pay grade,” Khan says.

“I don’t want it,” Jim says. “I just want my ship.”

“Tell me that in five years,” Khan says.

“All right,” Jim says, smiling. “It’s a date.”

Khan smiles back.

“You know,” Jim says a bit later, after they’ve had a chance to eat and he’s gotten a refill on his beer. “You never did answer me before about whether my getting adopted means...well, for us.”

“You are uncomfortable enough with the idea of becoming one of my family,” Khan says. “The rest is irrelevant.”

“No, it’s not,” Jim says. “What happens if things between us go south?”

“That would be problematic,” Khan says.

“They’d side with you over me,” Jim says. “You know they would.”

“As I said, it would be problematic,” Khan says.

“Because they’d feel obliged to kill me?” Jim asks.

“Depending on the circumstances,” Khan says.

“Well,” Jim says. “Here’s hoping that doesn’t happen.”

“Do you really think it will?” Khan asks.
“I think eventually you’ll get tired of me,” Jim says and then smacks himself upside the head because that wasn’t at all what he meant to say. “God, how do you do this to me?”

“Do what?” Khan asks.

“You ask me questions and I mean to say one thing and then something completely different comes out,” Jim says.

“Why do you think I will tire of you?” Khan asks.

“Because...” Jim breathes out. Because everyone always does, because Khan’s going to look like this for decades and Jim’s going to get older and gray and...because he’s not augmented, he’s just a regular human albeit one with wings, and how long will he amuse Khan before Khan moves on to someone else?

“You fascinate me,” Khan says when Jim keeps quiet. “You are not one of my people, yet you are. You are like me, and yet you are not. You have wings but you can’t fly, you captain a ship yet you have a remarkably insecure view of yourself. Sometimes I think you have more scars than I do. I at least had my family when I was growing up. Who did you have, Jim?”

“Bones,” Jim says automatically. “I had--I have Bones.”

“Yes, and you met him at the Academy,” Khan says. “Who did you have before that?”

Jim’s wings close around him, hiding his face, and it’s all he can do to breathe for a moment. He can sense Khan sitting there, just waiting, and he gets the sense Khan will wait forever if he has to. It still takes Jim a good minute to get his breathing under control and push his wings back. He doesn’t want to look at Khan, doesn’t want to see the pity in his eyes, but he forces himself to look up, and what he sees isn’t pity but compassion. “Let’s get out of here,” he says, his voice raw like he’s been screaming.

Khan merely nods. Jim pays the bill and they leave, and it’s a kilometer back to Jim’s apartment and his wings stay folded around him the entire way there. Once in his apartment, the door safely locked, he looks at Khan, asking him to understand without words, and Khan takes his hand and pulls him in close and folds his wings around him. Jim presses his forehead against Khan’s shoulder and just breathes, harsh and ragged, and one of Khan’s hands gently massages the back of Jim’s neck and his other hand keeps hold of Jim’s.

“Tell me,” Khan says finally, and Jim takes a deep, shuddering breath and does.

Chapter End Notes

I promise you’ll get Jim’s story in the next chapter! Don’t look at me like that.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

I promise, I will not let you fall.

Chapter Notes

Once again thank you for all the comments and kudos, they really do make my day. I've been fighting a migraine all day and all yesterday so if this chapter feels a bit incoherent, that's probably why. Feel free to tell me if it's not up to standard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“My father died in the Narada attack,” he says. “My mother was in labor when they evacuated the ship, and he took over as acting captain, and he...he went down with the ship. Stayed alive long enough to name me and that was that. Mom...never got over it. She married again, guy named Frank, and he...he was an alcoholic. Also an asshole. She left me and my brother with him and went back out into space, and...let’s just say Frank and I didn’t see eye to eye. He wanted my wings gone. Thought I was a freak. Dragged me to five different doctors trying to find one who’d cut them off. No one would once they saw the scans. Frank didn’t like that.”

“Did he abuse you?” Khan asks, very quietly.

“He smacked me around once in a while when he was really drunk,” Jim says, keeping his forehead against Khan’s shoulder. “Mostly I learned to keep out of his way.”

“And your brother?” Khan asks.

“He was a few years older than me,” Jim says. “He...one day he took off and I never saw him again. I looked for him, have looked, and...he’s just gone. Either he’s dead or he found a way to become someone new.”

“You were isolated at school, weren’t you?” Khan asks.

“Between the wings and the intelligence, yeah,” Jim says. “I mean, I tried to downplay the smart thing as much as I could, but I was too stupid to fake aptitude test scores. Didn’t matter. I was, I don’t know, some kind of delinquent. Went out, got drunk, got into fights, got laid if I was lucky. Then Pike walked into a bar one night, after I got my clock cleaned by a couple cadets, and...I don’t know, he offered me a way out, a chance to be something other than the winged freak genius in Iowa. He talked about my father, how Starfleet needed more men like him, told me where the shuttle was leaving the next day, and...I got on it.”

“A chance to start over,” Khan says. “Without the expectations and precedent of the past.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jim says. “And I swore I’d do it, I’d get out in three years, and I kind of did. I was...the Kobayashi Maru scenario, they accused me of cheating, and I was put on academic
probation, so when the news of the attack on Vulcan came and everyone shipped out, I wasn’t meant to go. Bones got me on the Enterprise, then Pike listened to me, then Spock was captain and I was first officer until I provoked Spock into almost strangling me and then I was the fucking captain and I was...so, so not ready, but we pulled it off, and after that they let me keep her.”

“Until the Nibiru mission,” Khan says.

“Yeah, and that was such bullshit,” Jim says. “I wasn’t going to leave Spock to die. I just wasn’t. So they saw us, big deal.”

It is perhaps a bigger deal than Jim wants to admit but now is not the time to discuss the ramifications of breaking the Prime Directive. Khan keeps up the steady, gentle massage of Jim’s neck and shoulders, and Jim sighs and slumps against him, his wings draping around his body. “And now there’s you,” he says. “And your family, and I have a family of my own, on my ship, and how do I handle the two?”

“People can have more than one family group,” Khan says. “It happens all the time.”

“Yeah, but I barely know how to deal with one, let alone two,” Jim confesses. “I keep screwing up, Khan. I’m sure half my crew thinks I’ve lost my mind for taking up with you and yet I think it might be the sanest thing I’ve ever done since joining Starfleet.”

“Why do you say that?” Khan asks.

“Because you get me,” Jim says. “Because you look at me and I swear you know what I’m thinking, but you don’t tell me I’m too crazy or too out there or not captain-y enough or any of that. You just...you go with me.”

“I will tell you if I think you are wrong,” Khan points out.


“My—” Our, technically, but Khan avoids that for the moment. “—family is perhaps biased where I am concerned. They see you as having the good sense to want an involvement with me, rather than having taken leave of your senses.”

“Your family doesn’t look at me like I’m a freak because I have wings,” Jim says wearily.

“Does yours?”

“Not the good ones,” Jim says. “But there’s always new crew members and people who’ve heard but haven’t seen me and...sometimes it gets tiring. It’s not enough I’m one of the youngest captains ever, it’s not enough I saved the world once and saved us from a war this time, it’s not enough to have the flagship of the fleet...but no, I’ve got to have fucking wings on top of it. Sometimes I wish they could just cut them out. I can’t even fucking fly, Khan. What’s the point of having wings if you can’t fly?”

“I will teach you,” Khan says. He shifts, pushing Jim away from him slightly to meet his eyes. “Come with me.”


Khan keeps a grip on his hand as they walk back to campus and the hill he’s used before. “Trust in your body,” he says as they climb the hill. “It will know what to do, and I promise, Jim, I will not let
you fall.”

Jim looks at him nervously, and his wings shift and stretch and fold back. “I could break my neck,” he says.

“I will not let that happen,” Khan says simply. “Do you trust me?”

Jim blows out a breath. “You know I do.”

“Then come.” Khan takes him to the very top of the hill, looking up at the night sky. “Run forward, throw yourself at the air, and let your wings carry you,” he says.

“Right, like it’s that easy,” Jim says, but he backs up, a little more than Khan would need but it should give him the speed he needs to launch. He takes a breath, crouches down, and runs forward, throwing himself off the hill and shouting in surprise and mild alarm when his wings snap open, beating to keep him aloft. Khan follows him off the hill, staying close in case Jim wavers. The look of determination on Jim’s face doesn’t surprise him, and he almost reaches out to catch Jim a few times when he wobbles, learning how to turn and bank and gain altitude. But Jim catches the hang of it after a few minutes, and Khan backs off, watching him soar.

He can tell when Jim gets tired; his wings waver and he frowns, and Khan catches him before he can do more than drop a few feet, gently lowering them both to the ground. Jim’s heart pounds against Khan’s chest and Jim clings to him a bit more tightly than perhaps he needs to, but Khan does not let go of him and Jim seems more focused on breathing than anything else. “Stamina will come with time,” Khan says eventually. “Your wings are not used to being used.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Jim says, a little breathless, and he finally pulls away from Khan. “But that was...I felt so free up there.”

“I know,” Khan says simply. “I used to fly at night, a way of unwinding from the day.”

“Did it help?” Jim asks.

“Sometimes,” Khan says.

“What about the rest of the time?” Jim asks.

Khan shrugs. “Ruling does not lend itself to relaxation.”

“Neither does captaining a ship,” Jim says. “I’m tired. Let’s go back to the apartment.”

They walk back, more slowly than they walked here, a companionable quiet between them. Jim lets them back in and locks up after them and Khan watches him, wondering what he is thinking, what he wants.

“No one ever wanted to let me fly before,” Jim says softly, looking at Khan. “I just...I got to thinking I couldn’t.”

“Did anyone ever appreciate your wings?” Khan asks, keeping his voice mild and quiet.

Jim shrugs. “A few girls I dated. Bones has all kinds of theories on why I have them. Spock didn’t seem to care.”

“Not caring is not the same as appreciating,” Khan says.

“No, it’s not,” Jim agrees. “Did your family appreciate your wings?”
“They did,” Khan says. “For the most part. Many of them did not understand why I had them. I still don’t entirely understand why I have them. But my family has always supported me.”

“I envy you that,” Jim says without meaning to.

“You should have been one of us,” Khan says. “We would have appreciated you for what you are, not ostracized you for what you have.”

“I guess I am one of you now,” Jim says slowly. “And you know, no one’s ever made a comment about my wings to ask if I was engineered or related somehow.”

“And no one will,” Khan says. “My people are not perfect, far from it, but we appreciate diversity. And the occasional odd genetic quirk.”

“Well, you would, wouldn’t you?” Jim asks. “I mean, you guys were so engineered--what about you wasn’t?”

“Very little,” Khan says. “Physical appearance was what they could do the least with--height is hard to engineer, apparently, and most of us have similar coloring to our biological donors.”

“Wait, donors?” Jim asks. “I never thought--who were your parents?”

“We don’t know,” Khan says. “Our genetic material came from people selected for the program, then was adjusted and enhanced before we were embryos. The women who carried us to term, we never knew. We were taken from them before we were a week old.”

“Did they experiment on you as you were growing up? Tweak things?”

“Of course,” Khan says.

Jim blows out a breath. “You had it harder than I did.”

“No, I don’t believe so,” Khan says. “For all the issues in my life, I had my brothers and sisters, my people. You had...who?”

“Okay, so let’s not turn this into a pissing match of who had it worse growing up,” Jim says. He rubs his hands over his face. “Let’s just...I don’t know. I don’t want to think about this shit anymore tonight.”

“What would you rather discuss?” Khan asks.

Jim shakes his head. “I don’t want to talk.” He takes two steps to stand toe-to-toe with Khan. “I want to take you to bed, and I want you to let me fuck you, and I want to forget anything else exists for a few hours.”

Khan takes his hand. “All right.”

“Wait, seriously?” Jim asks. “I thought you’d have issues with number two on that list.”

“You want it,” Khan says. “And it is not the first time I have done this.”

“Someday will you tell me about that?” Jim asks.

“Perhaps,” Khan says.

Jim leans up and kisses him. “I’ll make it good for you.”
“I have no doubt of that,” Khan murmurs, his free hand cupping Jim’s cheek.

Jim tightens his grip on Khan’s hand and draws him back to the bed, pulling him down on top of the covers he never bothered to make earlier that day. “Just for the record,” he murmurs, “I don’t mind if you leave marks I can hide.”

Khan smiles and kisses him. “All right.”

He does leave a few marks, some scratches and fingertip bruises, and the ones Jim leaves fade in moments but there’s something about seeing them even for so short a time, watching Khan’s pale skin redden from his nails and bruise from his mouth. There’s something about watching his control slip, bit by bit, until Khan lies shivering under him and Jim’s pressing kisses to the line of his back, between his wings, buried as deep inside him as he can get. “Jim,” is all Khan says, but his voice is rough and half-broken. His fingers dig into the mattress, sinking into the material.

“Yeah,” Jim mutters back, dragging his tongue up the back of Khan’s neck. “Yeah, I have you.”

Khan’s still quiet but Jim can hear the catch in his breath, feel him shudder and twist when Jim moves just right. His wings stretch and shift, twitching with every move Jim makes. “Jim,” he says again, not begging but it’s the closest Jim’s ever gotten.

Jim spares one hand to scratch the line between Khan’s wings and hear him make a choked sound. “Come on,” he says, out of breath himself and closer than he wants to be. “Let me have it. Come on.”

“Jim”, Khan says again and that’s all he gets out before he comes, breath harsh against the pillow, body going taut. Jim closes his eyes and presses his forehead to Khan’s shoulders and tries to hang on for just a little bit longer, just—he groans when he comes, not ready for this to end.

For a minute, or five, or something, he lies flat on top of Khan, his heart pounding and Khan breathing faster than normal. Eventually he eases back and moves to lie next to Khan and Khan rolls onto his side, fitting himself against Jim. They don’t speak, but their hands lazily wander over warm, sweaty skin and Jim nuzzles at Khan’s chin and throat.

“Let’s try that again in a couple hours,” Jim says finally, biting a shallow mark into the soft skin under Khan’s jaw. “Maybe with you on top.”

Khan makes a rumble that could be approval or contentment or something Jim can’t identify. “As you like.”

“Only if you like it too,” Jim says, suddenly mildly paranoid.

Khan laughs, low and quiet enough Jim feels the vibrations more than hears it. He shivers, trying not to reveal how much of a turn-on it is. “I should have thought that would be obvious, Jim.”

“With you, nothing’s ever obvious,” Jim says, shifting to rest his head on Khan’s shoulder.

Khan gently strokes his hair. “I enjoyed this very much, Jim.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Jim says, closing his eyes. “I wasn’t sure you’d go for it.”

“I am not that bound up in stereotypes and cliches,” Khan says. “Pleasure is pleasure, regardless of where one finds it or how.”

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t bottom for just anyone,” Jim says around a yawn.
“No,” Khan agrees. “I would not.” He brushes his fingers over Jim’s lips. “Rest, Jim.”

That sounds like an excellent idea. So Jim does.

Chapter End Notes

For Jim's background I used a combination of things I've seen elsewhere in fandom and his official bio on the wiki. I may not be strictly canon-compliant as a result, so I beg author's license and hope it works for you.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

I think I can trust him.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay in updating - I have been dealing with a three-day migraine that's made writing all but impossible. Hopefully the next bit won't take quite as long to come out. Thanks again for your patience, and thank you for all the comments - feedback is *always* welcome, even if it's to tell me something's not working! I can't get better if I don't know what I'm doing wrong *g*

Khan wakes him when he leaves. Jim totally doesn’t try to hold on to him, grumbling about early risers and empty beds. Okay, maybe he does, but it gets Khan to smile and kiss him and press him back against the bed, and by the time he actually does leave Jim’s too relaxed to put up much of a protest.

He drags himself out of bed and into the shower, having enough time for breakfast before he pulls on a clean uniform and goes to meet Pike. “How did the evaluations turn out, sir?” he asks, taking a seat at Pike’s nod.

“See for yourself,” Pike says, passing a PADD across the table. Jim picks it up and scans the results. He’s not surprised that everyone tested off the charts, with only a few small gaps in current knowledge. Out of curiosity, he looks up Ekaterina in particular and blinks at her scores--so much for throwing the curve.

“So what do we do with them now, sir?” Jim asks, handing the PADD back.

Pike sighs. “I don’t know. Our best bet may be to divide them into smaller groups and assign each one to a ship. Do you have any thoughts on who you’d like on the Enterprise?”

‘Katsuro, Bishop, Ekaterina,” Jim says without thinking about it. “Khan. Whoever else they want.”

“An engineer, a doctor, a...whatever Ekaterina is, and Khan,” Pike says. “Why those four?”

“They’re the ones Khan picked,” Jim says, not really thinking about it. “He has his reasons for working with them, and I trust him.”

“You what” Pike looks startled. “Jim, I realize you may feel some kind of connection to the man, but trusting him goes a bit far, doesn’t it?”

“I know it sounds crazy, sir,” Jim says. ‘But I think...I think I can trust him. They like me, his people, and they’re not going to sabotage me. I don’t know about anyone else, but they won’t turn on me.”

Pike frowns. “I hope you’re right, Jim.”
“I am, sir,” Jim says, sounding more confident than he feels.

“They’re due here at 0900 hours,” Pike says. “We’ll ask them to divide themselves into groups of four or five and see where we can put them. I’ll give you the people you’re requesting, but you better find a use for them.”

“I will, sir,” Jim says, praying he’s not lying.

As with yesterday, all the augments dress in black when they arrive, and it takes Jim a minute to find Khan, surprisingly near the back of the group. He looks...well, anyone else probably wouldn’t notice a difference, but Jim thinks he looks a bit tired, and...troubled, like something’s on his mind.

He doesn’t get a chance to pull him aside and ask what’s going on. Pike starts talking as soon as everyone’s in the room, explaining what Jim thinks is obvious, that not all of them can work on the same ship, and are there groups they’d prefer to use? Katsuro says something in Japanese and everyone shifts into groups of four or five, one group of six Jim notices. Khan comes over to join Katsuro, Bishop, and Ekaterina; Jim tries to catch his eye, but only succeeds for a moment. He frowns, wondering what’s going on.

Instead he pretends to be the professional captain and joins the group, explaining where he’ll need their help--Katsuro with Scotty, Bishop either with Scotty or Bones depending on which skill set he intends to utilize, Ekaterina maybe with Uhura although that makes him nervous, and Khan...he doesn’t give Khan an assignment at the moment. Instead he takes his group to the shuttle bay so they can head up to the Enterprise.

“What’s going on with you?” he asks Khan quietly on the way up to the ship. He knows the others can hear them, but for the moment they’re pretending not to and he’ll take what he can get. Before Khan can answer, Jim holds up a hand. “Don’t lie to me. Just don’t.”

“I find myself...troubled,” Khan says after a moment.

“By what?” Jim asks.

“Our conversations yesterday,” Khan says. “You should not have gone through what you did.”

“You couldn’t have stopped it,” Jim says, looking ahead rather than at Khan. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

“I know,” Khan says. “It does not mean I like the situation.”

“I don’t like what you went through either, but I couldn’t have changed it,’ Jim points out.

Khan’s wings mantle and stretch a little, brushing Jim’s shoulder. “What happened to your stepfather?”

“He’s still around,” Jim says. “Still drinks, Mom’s still in space somewhere. I haven’t seen him in years.” Now he turns to look at Khan, his own wings shifting. “Don’t go near him.”

“Why not?” Khan asks.

“Because I don’t want him to touch you,” Jim says. ‘Because that part of my life is done with and it’s over and I don’t want it touching anyone else.”

Khan does not look pleased, but he nods. “I will not contact your stepfather.”
“Don’t have anyone else do it, either,” Jim says. “Just...let it be.”

“If I must,” Khan says.

“Careful or I’m going to think you actually care about me,” Jim murmurs, pleased when Khan smiles.

“What makes you think I do not?”

“I’m not sure of anything where you’re concerned,” Jim says, again not meaning to but getting used to the fact that when he talks to Khan he says all kinds of things he doesn’t mean to.

Khan moves a little closer to him, just shy of touching him. “You are one of mine,” he says quietly. “Believe that, even if you do not believe anything else.”

Jim looks at him. “And you’re one of mine,” he says, equally quietly.

This time Khan touches him, brushing the backs of his fingers against Jim’s cheek. “Yes.”

Khan’s standing well within Jim’s personal space, especially with the wings, and Jim doesn’t care, in fact if he could get Khan closer he’d do it. However, he has three other people on the shuttle and has to look professional, so he focuses his attention on docking the shuttle and then showing them where to go. Scotty looks both pleased and a bit wary at having Katsuro and Bishop--who apparently decided engineering was a better use for his skills at the moment--to help him, but Katsuro asks a question that sets Scotty off on a tale and Jim decides to leave them to it. He brings Ekaterina and Khan to the bridge, where Uhura is on shift, and drops Ekaterina with her, explaining she’ll be learning languages and backup comms, making it clear to both women that Ekaterina is not there to replace Uhura. For her part, Uhura looks moderately pleased, and Ekaterina--well, she hasn’t pulled a knife on anyone so Jim counts it as a win and leaves them with Spock not-quite hovering nearby.

Then he takes Khan to his quarters, because it’s private and he wants privacy, and kisses him once the door’s closed. “I should so not be doing this right now,” he mutters, hands on Khan’s shoulders.

“I am certain the ship can spare both of us for a few minutes,” Khan murmurs, brushing a kiss over Jim’s jaw.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Jim says, but Khan folds his wings around him and Jim closes his eyes, luxuriating in the feel. “Can you work with Spock without either of you killing the other?”

“Yes,” Khan says, leaning his forehead against Jim’s. “Why?”

“Because it’s either him or Scotty, and I think you and Spock would work okay together once you get past the dick size contest,” Jim says. “You have ideas. Good ones. He might know how best to put them into practice on the Enterprise.”

“I see,” Khan says.

“Don’t kill each other,” Jim says before kissing Khan again.

“I promise I will not harm your first officer,” Khan says, lips a breath from Jim’s.

“Thank you,” Jim says, reluctantly stepping away. Khan lets him go, and Jim’s wings fold around him and he tries not to think how cold he feels outside the circle of Khan’s wings. “I guess...let’s go.”
They find Spock in one of the science labs and Jim explains what Khan and his people are doing on the Enterprise, and then explains that he thinks Khan and Spock would hopefully work well together. “That is...logical,” Spock says carefully. “We are discussing how to improve the shields at the moment, if you have ideas, Mr. Singh?”

“Khan,” he says briefly. “And yes, I do.”

Jim studies the two of them as they start discussing things he doesn’t quite understand, and eventually decides that if they’re going to kill each other he can’t really do anything about it so leaves. He focuses on the things he has to get done, which are all tedious and involve paperwork and he does it anyway, because it’s either that or he wanders into Engineering to bother Scotty and Katsuro and Bishop, or wander into the science labs to bother Spock and Khan. He considers bothering Ekaterina and Uhura, decides he’d like to live with all his parts intact, and wanders down to sickbay to bother Bones.

Bones glares at him when he comes in but waves him at the empty chair, and Jim swings it around so he can sit in it and drops down. “How are things going in here?” he asks.

“We were less badly hit than some sections,” Bones says. “Mostly these days we’re patching up people who get injured fixing things.”

“Are there a lot of those?” Jim asks.

“More than there should be, less than there could be,” Bones says. He raises an eyebrow at Jim. “Heard you brought on some new crew.”

“Yeah, kind of,” Jim says. “I don’t really know how it’ll work out, but...I’m hopeful.”

“Where’d you put them?” Bones asks.

“Bishop and Katsuro are with Scotty and the engineers,” Jim says. “Ekaterina’s with Uhura, and Khan is, um, with Spock.”

“Oh, that won’t go badly,” Bones mutters. “Why do you trust him? Why do you want this to work so badly?”

Jim licks dry lips. “He gets me, Bones. He knows—he gets me. And his people...he feels about them the way I do about the crew on this ship. I think we have more in common than we think.”

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?” Bones asks, but at least he has the courtesy to keep his voice low.

“What? No,” Jim protests. “I don’t know what’s between us but no, that’s not it. I just...they could be really helpful to us in general, Starfleet as a whole, and I want...I want to prove there’s more to them than war criminals, than despots and murderers.”

“Why?” Bones asks.

“Because everyone deserves a second chance,” Jim says. “Even if it comes three hundred years later.”

Bones shakes his head. “I still think this is one of the stupidest things you’ve ever done,” he says. “Almost as stupid as taking the landing party down to find him when our warp drive was crippled.”

“Thanks for the support, Bones,” Jim says, a little hurt.
“I don’t trust him, Jim,” Bones says simply. “I don’t trust any of them.” He leans back in his chair. “That being said, I’d rather you were proven right than I was.”

“Well, yeah,” Jim says, his wings shifting. “I just...” He doesn’t tell Bones that he thinks of Khan as one of his people, and he definitely doesn’t tell Bones he’s been adopted by Khan’s family. Instead, he shakes his head. “I think it’ll be okay.”

“Your mouth to God’s ear,” Bones says. “Have a drink on me later.”

“How about I’ll have a drink with you later?” Jim asks. “That pub I like, 1900 hours?”

“Will Khan be there?” Bones asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Come anyway?”

Bones eyes him narrowly but nods. “All right.”

“Thanks,” Jim says, pushing up from the chair. He nods at Carol Marcus as he leaves, not quite sure what she’s doing in sickbay but he knows better than to ask. She nods back and Jim heads back up to the bridge, where he finds Ekaterina and Uhura talking quietly in something-not-English. “Yes, captain?” Ekaterina says after a moment, turning to look at him. “Lieutenant Uhura is being kind enough to teach me Klingon language.”

“She’s picking it up really, really quickly,” Uhura says, torn between admiration and a bit of jealousy. “We’re onto basic syntax and sentence structure.”

“Oh, good, I guess,” Jim says. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Ekaterina says something to Uhura as he leaves, but it’s not in English and he decides he doesn’t want a translation, especially when Uhura laughs. At least they’re getting along, he figures. It could be so much worse.

In the science labs, he finds Khan and Spock with their heads together over a hologram on one of the tables, Khan’s long fingers manipulating the image carefully. “So you see, if you adjust the frequency every--” He looks up as Jim comes in. “Captain.”

“Don’t mind me,” Jim says hastily. “I just came to see how you two were getting on.”

“We are fine, captain,” Spock says. “Khan has some...intriguing ideas for amplifying and bolstering our shields. We do not as of yet have the power to test them out, but in theory, it should prove workable.”

“Well, cool,” Jim says. “Will I understand any of it if I ask for an explanation?”

“Possibly,” Spock says.

“It is not a complicated concept,” Khan says. He explains briefly what they’re talking about—something about having the shields oscillate through different power frequencies to better absorb things thrown at them—and Jim follows enough to understand it’s a pretty big leap advance from what they have now but if it works...

“Would it use more power?” he asks.

“That is what we are currently testing,” Khan says. “I believe it might but not by a significant amount.”
“Every bit is significant,” Jim says, frowning.

“Compared to keeping your ship in one piece?” Khan raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, don’t look at me in that tone of voice,” Jim says. “I’ll leave you two to it. Alpha shift shuttles back down to Earth at 1600 hours.”

“I am aware,” Khan says. “Mr. Spock and I were discussing using one of the gyms on board the ship prior to leaving.”

Jim doesn’t quite know how he feels about that. “Don’t break each other,” he says. “I mean, I know you’ll heal, but Spock takes a bit longer and I’d like my first officer in one piece.”

“We will endeavor to keep him that way,” Khan says, and Jim knows he’s laughing at him, even though he doesn’t even smile. There’s just something about his eyes, in the way his wings stretch a little.

“Let me know when you’ll be there, I’d like to watch,” he says, and Spock nods.

He leaves, not sure where to go now, finds himself down in Engineering watching Bishop operate a welding torch and Katsuro--actually, he has no idea where Katsuro is and finds Scotty to ask him. “Oh, he’s up there,” Scotty says, waving at something about two stories above Jim’s head. “There were some repairs and he said he’d climb up and deal with them.”

“You trust him for that?” Jim asks, voice quiet.

“You trusted him to help out,” Scotty points out with a huff. “Anyway, he and Bishop know what they’re doing.” He looks up, squinting, and Katsuro steps out from behind machinery. “All right up there?” he calls.

Katsuro nods. “It was a burned out wire and a memory crystal,” he says. “I replaced them both.”

“Thanks, lad,” Scotty says. “Come on down, then.”

Katsuro simply steps off what he’s standing on and drops a good seven meters to the floor, landing lightly in a crouch, fingers of one hand pressed against the floor for balance although Jim doubts he needs it. “Next time, use the bloody ladder,” Scotty grumbles. “You’ll give me a bleedin’ heart attack like that.”

“I apologize for troubling you,” Katsuro says, straightening up. “Captain, may I be of assistance?”

“No, I just came to check in,” Jim says. “Everything okay?”

“Yes,” Katsuro says. “At the moment we are mostly locating things that require repair or replacement. The damage is...considerable, although I am told it could have been worse.”

“We’re still mostly in one piece, so yeah, it could have been,” Jim says. “Shuttle back down to Earth leaves at 1600 hours. Khan and Spock were talking about using one of the gyms to practice before then. If Scotty can spare you, I’m sure you’d be welcome.”

“Thank you, captain,” Katsuro says.

Jim can tell when he’s been dismissed. Nice trick, he thinks, then remembers Katsuro ruled countries and it’s probably just the way he is. He asks Scotty a question about repairs anyway, because this isn’t three hundred years ago and this is his ship, and leaves after he gets an answer to which he
barely pays attention.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Something is not right.

Chapter Notes

So, um, I have to have surgery in a few weeks, so updates *may* be less frequent while I deal with that and the ever-present headache (the cause of surgery). I beg your patience and hope you'll stick with me.

 Somehow, Jim’s not surprised when what seems like half the crew of the Enterprise shows up in the gym to watch Khan and Spock spar. He doesn’t know who to root for, or whose side he should be on, or even if they’re evenly matched. Instead he finds a spot out of the way where his wings won’t bother anyone when they move--because he knows they won’t stay still--and doesn’t quite jump when Ekaterina just...appears next to him. “Easy, captain,” she says, smiling. “I mean you no harm.”

“You know,” Jim says. “Could you not do the spooky stealth thing all the time, though?”

She laughs. “I will attempt to be less subtle in my comings and goings.”

“Thanks,” Jim says, pretty sure she’s laughing at him but he’s getting used to that. “How did your time with Uhura go today?”

“Quite well,” Ekaterina says, leaning against the wall. “Did you think it would not?”

“I think you two will either get on really well or kill each other,” Jim says. “And I’m not sure who I’d put my money on.”

“The goal, captain,” Ekaterina says, “is to not kill your crew.”

“I know that,” Jim says. “That doesn’t mean I don’t worry about it occasionally.”

“Wise man,” she says. She turns to face the floor as Khan and Spock step out into it, and Jim does the same.

He’s still not sure what he’s expecting but the first bout ends in a draw after a few minutes. Murmurs run through the crowd and Ekaterina frowns next to Jim. “Something is...” she continues in Russian, and Jim sighs.

“English, please.”

“Something is off,” she says, studying Khan. “Either that or he threw the match.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Jim says. “It’s also possible Spock’s just that good.”
“I know my brother, captain,” Ekaterina says sharply. “And something is not right.” She pushes her way through the crowd, saying something to Khan in–okay, either she’s showing off or she really doesn’t want Uhura to understand her, because Jim’s never heard that language before.

He turns, wings folding back, and shakes his head. She keeps talking, and he touches her shoulder, saying something quietly. Ekaterina scowls at him and throws her hands up in the air, clearly a ‘Why do I bother’ gesture. Then she turns to Spock. “After him, you fight me,” she says, not a question.

“Only if you agree not to use knives,” Spock says calmly.

“Pah.” She curls her lip. “I do not need them.”

“Then why use them?” Spock asks.

“They are useful,” Ekaterina says. “And I am not one to turn down an advantage even if I do not need it.” She touches Khan’s shoulder and says something, then slips back through the crowd to stand by Jim again. “Idiot,” she mutters under her breath.

“Which one?” Jim asks.

She snorts. “Which do you think?”

“What’s going on with Khan?” he asks, his voice low--not that anyone’s paying attention to them as Khan and Spock start circling each other again.

“I do not know,” she says, looking frustrated. “He is..distracted.”

Jim’s wings ruffle and fold around him and he thinks he knows why Khan’s distracted, and it’s his fault. He doesn’t watch the fight, his stomach in knots over it already, but from the noise in the crowd he can tell it’s another draw. Ekaterina sighs and mutters something before making her way back through the people. “My turn, da?” she asks Spock.

“If you like,” he says.

“I do.” She turns to Khan and stretches up, murmuring something in his ear. He shakes his head and his wing wraps around her shoulders briefly before he slips backward, taking Ekaterina’s place next to Jim.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” Jim asks him quietly. “You’re off your game because of me.”

“It is not your fault,” Khan says, equally quietly. “I should have better control over my thoughts and emotions.”

“Now you sound like Spock,” Jim says. “Logic rules all.”

“I would not go that far,” Khan says, smiling a little.

“Seriously,” Jim says. “You need to let this go. The past is the past.”

“I am aware, Jim,” Khan says, but his wings shift and stretch a little, brushing Jim’s shoulders.

“Are you?” Jim asks softly.

Khan doesn’t answer, turning to look at Ekaterina and Spock. Jim does the same, somehow not surprised when Spock tries for the nerve pinch. Ekaterina folds at the knees, but Jim thinks she’s doing it on purpose--and then she grabs Spock’s arm, twists and pulls and sends him flying over her
shoulder. He lands on the mat with a thud and she’s got one knee in his back and an arm twisted behind him before he can recover.

“Whoa,” Jim murmurs.

“Shall we try again?” Ekaterina asks, releasing Spock and pushing to her feet. He stands up, looking mildly surprised.

“Yes,” Spock says. “I believe we shall.”

This time he doesn’t try to nerve pinch her and she doesn’t throw him across the room, but she still beats him in under five minutes. “My brother could have done this,” she says, sparing a glare for Khan’s direction. “You are more of a challenge than a human, but still not a worthy opponent. Too bound by rules. If you were ever to let yourself get truly angry, Mr. Spock, then we could have a good fight.”

“Vulcans do not let themselves be ruled by emotion,” Spock says.

“I am Russian,” she says. “We are a passionate people. The trick is to make your passion work for you, not you for it.” She jumps to her feet nimbly and tugs her shirt into place even though it doesn’t look ruffled. “Would anyone else care for a bout?”

No one, unsurprisingly, seems to want to take her up on the idea. “Would you be willing to teach a course on your style of unarmed combat?” Spock asks.

“Katsuro would be better suited than I,” she says. “But da, we can. I have said before, there is only so much we can teach–we are genetically engineered to be better, and regular humans will never match our speed or strength. But we can teach techniques, moves, ways to evade being killed.”

“Knife throwing?” Spock asks.

“If you like,” Ekaterina says. “I would not have pictured you for the knife type.”

“No, but I’d like to learn,” Uhura says, stepping forward.

“Then I will teach you,” Ekaterina says.

“Spasiba,” Uhura says and earns herself a smile from Ekaterina. “We were going out tonight to get dinner, would you like to join us?”

“I would very much like that,” Ekaterina says. She looks at Spock, as if challenging him, and he just nods.

Jim looks at Khan. “I invited Bones out for a drink tonight,” he murmurs. “The pub we went to last night. Do you want to join us?”

“I think perhaps not,” Khan says. “The good doctor does not trust me and I do not want to cause friction.”

“You can’t avoid him forever, Khan,” Jim says.

“No,” Khan agrees. “But I can avoid unnecessarily causing tension. Call me when you are home, and I will come find you.”

“You know where we’ll be if you change your mind,” Jim says. “1900 hours.”
“I will not, but thank you for the offer,” Khan says, and he brushes his fingers against Jim’s, quick and subtle and hidden by Jim’s wings. “For now I believe we need to get on the shuttles heading back to Earth.”

They do, shuttling down in groups, and Jim stays with Khan but doesn’t see Ekaterina or Katsuro or Bishop until after they’ve all disembarked. The three of them stand in a tight circle, talking, and Bishop looks concerned; Katsuro, as ever, is unreadable. Ekaterina frowns and scowls and throws out an arm, gesturing at either Jim or Khan or both; he’s not sure.

“Brother,” Bishop calls over to Khan. “A word, please. Captain, you as well.”

Okay, that’s not ominous or anything, and Jim forces his wings back as they walk over to join the other three. “Why were you so off your game today?” Bishop asks Khan. “You could easily have defeated the Vulcan. Ekaterina says you were distracted. Why?”

Khan remains silent and Jim takes a deep breath. “It’s my fault,” he says. “We...we talked about history last night, and Khan didn’t like what he heard.”

Ekaterina says something very quietly in Russian and Khan answers, clearly finding it easier to speak when Jim can’t follow. His wings bristle and stretch and one wraps around Jim for a moment before he pulls it back.

“They crippled you,” Ekaterina says to Jim, finally, and her eyes are bright and Jim really, really doesn’t want to think she’s not quite crying because of him.

“No.” Jim breathes out slowly. “No, they didn’t. Pike gave me the chance I needed, and I took it, and I made something of myself, something I can trust.”

“But the scars remain,” Bishop says quietly.

“No one’s perfect,” Jim says. “You can’t heal mine any more than I can heal yours.”

“This is true,” Bishop says. “But we...”

“Who harms one of us harms all of us,” Ekaterina says, cupping Jim’s face in her hands. “You are one of ours now, Kirk, and we share your pain--but we cannot do more than that until you acknowledge it.”

“It’s the past,” Jim says, a little roughly. “Let the past stay buried.”

She laughs. “Then what am I doing here? What are any of us doing here?”

Okay, maybe not the best line to use on three hundred year old augmented humans. Jim smiles a little. “It’s over and it’s done with and this is my life now,” he says. “Let it stay that way.”

Ekaterina lets go of his face, but taps a fist lightly over his heart. “You carry so much in here,” she says. “Someday that weight will grow too much to bear.”

“It hasn’t yet,” Jim says determinedly.

“When it does,” Bishop says quietly, “we will be here.”

“You’re a healer,” Jim says. “I don’t need healing. I’m not broken.”

“No,” Bishop says. “I never said you were.”
“Khan,” Katsuro says, and follows it in Japanese. Khan nods, his wing stretching out to touch Jim’s shoulder again.

“Hai.”

Footsteps warn them of approaching people and all five of them consciously step apart, Khan’s wings rippling and folding back and Jim’s flattening down against his back as much as they can (and won’t that be a bitch to deal with later). Ekaterina has one hand half-flexed when they see it’s Bones, Spock, and Uhura. “Ready for dinner?” Uhura asks, deliberately not commenting on the grouping. “Anyone else coming along?”

“Not us, I think,” Bishop says, touching Katsuro’s shoulder. “Thank you for the invitation. Captain, good night.”

“Night,” Jim says, waving them off.

Ekaterina studies him a moment longer before saying something to Khan in a language that makes Uhura frown, which Jim thinks was probably the point. “Where are we going for the meal?” she asks Uhura, touching Khan’s shoulder as she passes him. Jim doesn’t catch Uhura’s answer because he’s too busy worrying about sparks flying between Bones and Khan.

“I believe this is where I shall take my leave of you,” Khan says politely. “Doctor. Captain.” He nods.

“You can cut the captain crap, I know the truth,” Bones says, frowning but not outright glaring. “You don’t trust me enough to stick around for a drink or a meal?”

Khan smiles briefly. “My presence troubles you, doctor,” he says. “I had thought it better to not necessarily antagonize you. Jim values your friendship.”

“Well, all right, that’s not stupid,” Bones says, but shakes his head. “But I ain’t gonna get used to your presence if you take off every time we’re in the same room. Have a meal with us.”

Khan, thankfully, does not ask Bones if he’s sure, nor does he look to Jim for confirmation. “As you like, doctor.”

“I have a name,” Bones grumps. “You can use it.”

“Leonard,” Khan says. “Where are we going for our meal?”

Bones looks at Jim, who blows out a breath and suggests the same place they went last night. Khan seems amenable to the idea, so off they go, and since three people can’t walk abreast on the sidewalk Khan drops back so Jim and Bones can walk next to each other.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Maybe this wasn't the worst idea in the world after all.

Chapter Notes

I had intended to go somewhere else with this chapter, and then I had a very complicated dream about the story that changed a few things, so if you hate it, blame my unconscious. If you like it, I'm thrilled.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one speaks much on the walk, and it’s still early enough that when they get to the pub there’s no wait. The three of them get a table and a different waitress than last night--this one has black hair and Jim isn’t sure if the kitten ears are a headband or real, but they perk up when she comes over to get their drink orders. She makes no comments about either Jim or Khan’s wings, and it’s not until she turns to take their orders to the bar that he notices the tail hanging out the back of her skirt.

“It’s not real,” Bones mutters. “The ears are a headband, the tail’s controlled by a sensor band under her skirt.”

“Thanks for spoiling my fun, Bones,” Jim mutters back, but he’s not all that surprised.

“Cats chase birds, not the other way around,” Bones says and Jim snorts.

“I’m not a fucking bird, and...” And he realizes Khan is sitting right there and okay, awkward. “I’m not chasing any cats.”

Bones’s eyes flick to Khan and back to Jim. “Right.”

Maybe this wasn’t the best idea after all. Jim wishes fervently for his drink, and wonders why Khan hasn’t said anything. No one seems inclined to speak, in fact, and Jim’s wings ruffle and he forces them back before they can stretch and bump into things. “Where did the rest of your crew end up?” Bones asks abruptly, and Jim almost holds his breath.

Khan raises his eyebrows, but answers, listing a few ships. “Some are at headquarters,” he says. “I believe some will be heading out to Starbase Eight.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jim says in surprise. “You’re okay with them going?”

“They will not be gone long and their presence is apparently needed,” Khan says. “We must separate at some point, Jim. Not all of us can wait for the Enterprise to finish repairs before we leave.”

“Yeah, I know, but that still seems soon,” Jim says. “I mean, you barely just all woke up.”

Khan’s wingtip brushes Jim’s shoulder. “We will be fine.”
“Who’s going to Eight?” Jim asks, pausing as Kitten Ears returns with their drinks and takes their meal orders.


“What do those four study?” Bones asks. He’s trying, Jim has to give him credit for that.

“Anandi and Daffyd study chemistry primarily, Estevao and Martina biology, but there is some overlap,” Khan says.

Like Anandi’s study of poisons, Jim thinks but doesn’t comment. “When do they ship out?”

“The day after tomorrow, if I am not mistaken,” Khan says. “They will be shipping out on the Wells, along with four others who will be assigned to that ship.” He names the other four, but they’re not people Jim knows well.

“They’re not wasting any time, are they?” Jim asks. “What about Alona, or Matthew?”

“They are currently assigned to headquarters,” Khan says. “Maeve is at Starfleet Medical, Hugh and Rudolf are working with some of the mathematics instructors at the Academy. I believe your admirals are having a difficult time figuring out where to put Alona, and she and Matthew have requested to stay with each other.”

“Couldn’t she do what Ekaterina is doing?” Jim asks. “Backup comm officer or something?”

“She could,” Khan says. “She is not the linguist Ekaterina is, but she does speak well over a dozen languages. But her specialty is not something Starfleet condones these days.”

“She’s an assassin,” Bones says flatly.

“Has been,” Khan says calmly. “None of our hands are clean, Leonard.”

Jim thinks Marcus could probably have made good use of Alona somehow. Then he winces, wondering what exactly Marcus would have done with her and what she’d have done in return. Khan catches his eye and raises an eyebrow, and Jim shakes his head, reaching for his beer and taking a larger-than-necessary swallow.

Bones scowls and takes a drink of his own beer. “And you really think you’ll find a way to fit in in today’s world,” he says to Khan.

“That is our goal,” Khan says. “Alona does have skills that would be useful. All of us do.”

“Khan and Spock were talking about upgrading our shields today,” Jim interjects. “It sounded plausible in theory.”

“Lots of things sound good in theory,” Bones says pointedly, looking at Khan. Jim’s wings stretch and he bumps Bones’s shoulder with one, not quite accidentally. “Did Spock think it was workable?” Bones asks, not quite apologizing.

“He did,” Khan says. “But we can only try in theory at the moment, there is not enough power for a sustainable test.”

Jim glances up as they keep talking—awkwardly, but they’re talking—and sees three people come into the pub. Two redheads and a short brunette and—“Hey, isn’t that—” he nudges Khan.

“Alona, Maeve, and Matthew,” Khan says. “Yes, it is. I did not tell them we would be here.”
“Given that you weren’t planning on being here, I didn’t think so,” Jim says. “Should we invite them over?”

Bones doesn’t look thrilled, but Khan says something quietly, not in English, and Alona’s head snaps over to them. A moment later, the three of them head over to their table. “Well, this is a surprise,” Alona says, touching Khan’s shoulder lightly. “Someone at HQ recommended this place so we thought we’d give it a try. We can get our own table, though. No sense in being a fifth wheel.”

“There’s only three of us,” Bones points out. “You might as well pull over a table.”

“If you’re sure,” Maeve says. “Really, we didn’t mean to intrude.”

“You’re not,” Bones says. “More the merrier, right? Anyway, you’re working at Starfleet Medical, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Maeve says as she and Alona and Matthew pull over the next table and take seats, Maeve next to Bones and Alona next to Khan, with Matthew facing Jim at the ends of the table. Kitten Ears comes over immediately to get their drink orders--Jim blinks in surprise when both Maeve and Alona order draft Guinness--and give them menus, and the three of them order a plate of nachos to start so they won’t be sitting there while everyone else’s food arrives.

“What were you working on today at Medical?” Bones asks Maeve. “What’s your specialty?”

“Triage and emergency medicine,” Maeve says. “First I had to do a skills assessment, then once I’d proven I could be trusted to touch people, I was in the emergency department. It was a busy day, although I’m told some days are quieter.” She smiles, pushing red waves of hair back behind her shoulder, and leans a little closer to Bones. “It was good to be able to help people.”

“Was that what you did during the wars?” Bones asks, but he turns to look at her, and Jim wonders if she’s flirting or just trying to get him to relax around her or if she’s just being friendly.

“In part,” Maeve says. “I worked for Bishop--I served as his head nurse for a while, and then when he took power in Western Europe I helped run a hospital in Ireland, and later England. So many things have changed in medicine since I was last awake, it’s really rather fascinating. They had me shadowing a nurse for a bit today, until they decided I could handle patients on my own, and some of the technology...it’s changed so much.”

“What do you like most about it?” Bones asks.

Maeve tilts her head, considering. “I’m all for increased efficiency and better ways to heal people, but sometimes I found myself thinking that we don’t touch patients enough, it’s all scans and tricorders and hyposprays and things. I’m used to physically touching my patients, either to examine them or give them an IV or whatever, and I think you get a lot from that connection, and I think maybe we’ve lost some of that.”

Either she’s telepathic, someone told her about Bones’s feelings on the subject, or he’s just very, very lucky, Jim thinks as the nachos arrive along with his, Khan’s, and Bones’s meals. The three new augments order entrees and Kitten Ears takes their menus, her tail twitching as she walks off.

“I’d have to agree with you on that,” Bones says, taking a sip of his beer. “Scans are good, but you need to physically examine a patient to really figure out what’s going on sometimes.”

“Exactly,” Maeve says with a bright smile. She touches Bones’s arm, and he looks at her hand in surprise but doesn’t pull back. “You’ve studied medical history, haven’t you?”
“Some, yeah,” Bones says.

“I always found it fascinating, how far we’ve come and yet how far we have to go,” Maeve says. “I mean, leeches to hyposprays, how wild is that?” She laughs, and Bones actually smiles.

“She’s good,” Jim murmurs to Khan, aware Maeve can probably hear him.

Khan smiles slightly. “She is.”

“Did she really run a hospital?” Jim asks, glancing at Bones, but he and Maeve seem to be discussing medical history and oblivious to anyone else.

“In a sense,” Khan says. “She did work as a nurse, the head nurse in fact. That much is true.”

“What am I missing?” Jim asks.

“She killed those patients Bishop did not want to live and could not kill himself,” Khan says softly. “He would send enemies, men or women who had betrayed him, to her hospital, and she would...deal with them.”

Jim takes a gulp of beer. “Right,” he says.

“I told Leonard,” Khan says. “None of our hands are clean.”

“Yeah, true,” Jim says. He looks back at Maeve and Bones; she’s smiling and he’s almost smiling back, and her hand’s still on his arm. “She won’t--”

“No,” Khan says. “No, she will not harm him. You and your people are safe from us, Jim.”

“I knew I was,” Jim says. “I wasn’t sure about my crew.”

“They are,” Khan says.

“When did that happen?” Jim asks.

“When we accepted your offer,” Khan says.

Alona leans over, touching Jim’s shoulder. “Times were different then,” she says. “We did what we had to. Now we do what we want to.”

“So long as you don’t want to kill anyone,” Jim says a little cautiously.

She laughs and flips her ponytail back behind her shoulder. “What must you think of us, captain? We are not all spree killers, or serial murderers. We will kill, but most of us take no pleasure in it. It is something that occasionally must be done, not a hobby.”

“But you were an assassin,” Jim says.

“Was I?” Alona shrugs. “I have been many things. At the moment headquarters has asked me to help design some of the physical fitness classes cadets must take. It isn’t perhaps the most ideal use of my skills, but it will do for now.”

“What do they have Matthew doing?” Jim asks.

“He is working with some of the engineering designers,” Alona says. “Working on improvements to current warp drives and existing technology. There are a few others in that group, but you don’t
“I only know about a dozen of you more than just a name and a face,” Jim admits. “And a third of those are working on my ship.”

“Well,” Alona says. “You will get to know us, I think. One should know one’s family, aye?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jim says, realizing he’s going to need a refill on his beer in a minute.

She laughs and says something to Khan in—Jim’s guessing it’s Gaelic, or Irish, or whatever they call it these days, Khan smiles and shakes his head, taking a sip of his beer.

“This is so not fair,” Jim mutters, picking up a french fry. “Why do you have to talk about me when I can’t understand?”

“Because we like our games, and you’re cute when you’re confused,” Alona says readily. “You’re cute most of the time, but that adds to it.”

“Uh,” Jim says.

She giggles, and Matthew smiles, shaking his head. “Alona, behave,” he says fondly.

“I am,” she protests. “You didn’t say how I had to behave.”

“Better than this,” Matthew says, and Alona giggles more.

Bones belatedly looks up from his conversation with Maeve. “What did I miss?”

“Nothing, Bones, it’s fine,” Jim says. “What are you two so intent on over there?”

“We’re discussing differences in emergency triage between Maeve’s time and ours,” Bones says. “Some of what they did—we’d almost consider it barbaric.”

“Between my original time and now,” Maeve corrects. “And perhaps it was, but we had no other options.”

“Right, I know,” Bones says. “Still.”

“I’m sure in three hundred years doctors will look back on this time and consider some of your procedures barbaric,” Maeve says. “Or wonder why you could not cure certain illnesses.”

“Probably,” Bones admits, looking a little grumpy about it. “But we’re doing our best.”

“As were we,” Maeve says.

Kitten Ears comes by with the augments’ meals and snags empty glasses to get refills—Jim needs one, so does Bones, and to his surprise Maeve’s finished her Guinness. He’s more surprised when she asks for a whiskey, neat, instead of another pint, but remembers what Khan said about their alcohol tolerance. “I’m Irish, captain,” she says, looking at him. “We like to drink.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Jim protests, wondering again if she’s somehow got psychic talents.

“Not out loud,” Maeve says, smiling. “Leonard, tell me where you’re from? Georgia, am I right? I remember someone mentioning that, and you’ve got the most gorgeous accent.”

Bones looks faintly pink at that. Jim looks at them, at the way Maeve’s leaning closer to Bones and
he’s leaning back, and looks at Khan, raising his eyebrows.

Khan looks back blandly. “Yes, Jim?”

“Is she--” Jim pauses, not sure how to put it. “Don’t let her break him?”

“I assure you, that isn’t part of her plans,” Khan says. “At least, not without putting him back together.”

“I’m not sure I feel comforted by that,” Jim mutters.

“Once again I feel I must ask--do you think my people are not good enough for yours?” Khan asks quietly.

“No, that’s not it and stop asking like it is,” Jim says grumpily. “It’s just--I don’t want Bones to get hurt.”

“He is letting you make your own decisions where I am concerned,” Khan says, and under the table his hand brushes Jim’s. “Afford him the same courtesy with Maeve.”

Jim sighs. “Yeah, okay. You have a point.”

“I usually do,” Khan says, and Jim lightly smacks his hand under the table. Khan laughs at that, and Jim smiles.

“Anyway,” Alona says, “he certainly doesn’t seem to mind.”

“Bones has a weakness for beautiful women,” Jim says under his breath.

“Most men do,” Alona says. “I’m sure you could be swayed by the right woman.”

“Not right now, no,” Jim says without looking at Khan.

“I was meaning in general,” Alona says. “Still, that is good to know.”

Jim thanks Kitten Ears when she returns with their new drinks, and takes a swallow of his. “So, uh, what kind of classes are you designing?” he asks, hoping for anything else to discuss.

Alona laughs and takes a sip of her Guinness. “You are remarkably easily flustered, captain.”

“Call me Jim,” he says. “Or Kirk. Or...something other than my title. I’m off duty.”

“Very well, then, Jim,” she says. “Let us discuss fitness training.”

Jim knows she’s laughing at him, but Khan’s wing brushes his shoulder and Bones is smiling--an honest, real smile--at Maeve and okay, maybe this wasn’t the worst idea in the world after all.

Chapter End Notes

editing to add this in: I've been listening to a lot of Thirty Seconds to Mars lately, and if you're familiar with their newest album, the song "Conquistador" I think could almost be seen as a theme for Khan's people. What that means for the future, I couldn't say....
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

It's okay to form connections.

Chapter Notes

Quick a/n - thanks to those who've commented about my health, the short version is I'm having sinus surgery in three weeks, so I have a killer headache until then but I'll be all right. As for the story, I'm glad you're all still enjoying, at least I hope you are. If you *aren't*, tell me and tell me why? I can't get better if I don't know what's wrong.

By the time they finally leave the pub, Jim’s feeling a little buzzed--enough to feel loose and good, not even close to drunk, but he watches his steps carefully and lets his wings relax a bit, folding around him without hiding him. Alona and Matthew head off down the street, holding hands, and he smiles a little because in the dark and from behind, she almost looks like his daughter with the height difference.

He turns to see Maeve’s hand tucked into the crook of Bones’s arm, and raises an eyebrow at Bones and gets a scowl in response. “Well, uh, goodnight,” he says, deciding to leave well enough alone and maybe get details from Bones tomorrow.

“Night,” Bones says, and Maeve smiles and waves her free hand. They head off in the opposite direction of Jim’s apartment--but in the direction of Bones’s place, Jim notes--and he blows out a breath and turns to Khan.

“Your place or mine?”

“Mine is not conducive to privacy,” Khan points out. “We are still arranging non-temporary quarters, but there is...paperwork.”

“Mine, then,” Jim says, and Khan nods. They start walking, wings occasionally brushing, and the feel of feathers against feathers gives Jim a pleasurable shiver down his spine. “So,” he says after a couple blocks. “Maeve and Bones? Really?”

“They are both consenting adults with similar interests,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I get that,” Jim says. He shrugs. “I just--Bones doesn’t usually hook up with anyone. Like, I can’t remember the last time he did. He was married once, it didn’t end well, and he’s kind of...wary. And he doesn’t--he’s not easy with you or your people. So I don’t quite understand how that happened.”

“Perhaps you should ask him tomorrow,” Khan says.

“Yeah, maybe,” Jim says. “I mean, Maeve’s...how do I politely say she’s--”
“I’m familiar with her appearance,” Khan says, amused.

“And Bones had a few drinks tonight,” Jim says. “But still.”

“Everyone had a few drinks tonight,” Khan points out.

“Yeah, but only two of us at the table could get buzzed,” Jim says. He shakes his head. “Never mind. It’s—they’re adults. Bones knows what he’s doing.” He hopes. “Maeve doesn’t have any kind of weird psychic powers, does she?”

Khan sighs. “Jim, I am beginning to feel insulted on her behalf.”

“It’s just—I’m sorry. It’s just so unlike Bones,” Jim says, shoulders hunching. “He’s just...not the type to hook up with a woman he barely knows from a group of people he doesn’t trust.”

“It is entirely possible he is just going to see her home,” Khan points out. “They were walking in the general direction of our temporary quarters.”

“True,” Jim says. “Or maybe they were just going for a walk. I don’t know. It’s not really my business, is it?”

“No more than you and I are Leonard’s business,” Khan says.

“Yeah, and he’s—well, he doesn’t approve but he’s told me it’s my mistake to make,” Jim says.

“So let this be his,” Khan says. “If it is indeed a mistake.”

“Yeah,” Jim says, sighing. “She really is a knockout.”

“You should hear her complain about running,” Khan says.

“Running? What?” Jim looks at Khan, confused.

“She is a distance runner,” Khan says. “And she used to complain, often and loudly, about the lack of...supportive garments for women who looked like her. Marathoners are not meant to have breasts, she would say.”

“Oh. Oh.” Jim blinks. Then he winces. “That had to hurt.”

“I haven’t asked if she has found better options in this time,” Khan says and Jim laughs.

“I really have no idea,” he says. “Since I’m neither a woman nor a distance runner.”

“I think the former would be more relevant, but no, you are definitely not female,” Khan says, and Jim laughs again.

“You know, all worries about Bones and Maeve aside, I had a good time tonight,” he says, brushing wings with Khan not quite accidentally. “It’s—I was worried about you and Bones trying to kill each other, and that’s not what happened at all, thanks to Alona and Maeve and Matthew.” He looks up at Khan. “You really had no idea they’d be there?”

“I really had no idea,” Khan says. “Jim, I was on your ship all day working with Spock, when would I have had a chance to contact them and suggest they interrupt us at a meal I was not intending to attend?”

“Well, when you put it like that,” Jim says, a bit sheepishly. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think you
“We have been accused of being psychotic before,” Khan says. “Psychic, however, we are not.”

“Yeah, I’m not touching that one,” Jim says. He realizes they’re at his building and lets them in, hitting the button for the lift and letting Khan step on first when it arrives. Inside his apartment he gets them both glasses of water and decides to ignore the blinking light on his comm link. “So,” he says, taking a sip of water. “Did you enjoy yourself tonight?”

“I did,” Khan says, holding his glass in one hand, wings loosely folded around him. “Did you think otherwise?”

“Have I mentioned I’m never sure of anything where you’re concerned?” Jim asks, taking a moment to just look at him. He thinks that maybe Khan’s too beautiful to be real, and then he thinks maybe he’s had too much to drink. “I’m not drunk,” he says, almost to himself.

“I did not suggest you were,” Khan says. “Did I miss something?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Jim says. “Nothing important, anyway. Just...thinking.” He waves a hand and Khan raises an eyebrow. “It’s really nothing.”

“If you say so,” Khan says, taking a sip of his water.

Jim scowls at him. “Now you sound like Spock.”

“I am not a Vulcan,” Khan says. “I prefer to use my emotions rather than lock them away.”

“Yeah, but you’re still really, really controlled,” Jim says, stepping closer to him. “And logical.”

“Do you have a romantic or sexual interest in Spock?” Khan asks.

“No.” Jim’s response to that one comes immediately and firmly. “Absolutely not, plus he’s with Uhura, and I’m with you, and you are not any kind of--I want you, not him.”

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Khan says, reaching out to take Jim’s free hand and draw him in closer. “Otherwise we might have problems.”

Jim leans up and kisses him lightly. “I want you,” he says again. “Not Spock, not anyone else.” He sets his water glass down on the coffee table and takes Khan’s to do the same. “Did you think I didn’t?”

In response, Khan tangles his free hand in Jim’s hair and pulls him up for a kiss. “I think I know where your interests lie,” Khan murmurs against Jim’s lips, biting gently.

Jim has to catch his breath before he can respond. “How do you do this to me?”

“Clearly your previous lovers have been inferior examples,” Khan says, tipping Jim’s head back and biting his jaw, too lightly to leave a mark but hard enough Jim loses his breath all over again.

“Well,” Jim says, licking dry lips. “You did say you were better at everything.”

“Indeed,” Khan murmurs, but he laughs when he says it.

“You don’t laugh enough,” Jim says, smiling. “You should laugh more.”

“Humor has not always been easily come by in my experience,” Khan says. “Would you prefer to
Okay, clearly that’s a sore spot and Jim notes it for later. “I think you should take me to bed,” he says, tilting his head to kiss Khan. “We can talk later.”

Later turns out to be around four in the morning, when Jim can’t sleep even though his whole body is still humming and Khan’s body fits against his own, fingers gently stroking the line between his wings. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” Jim says softly, into the darkness, his head on Khan’s shoulder.

“I could grow used to this,” Khan says, equally quietly, and he doesn’t stop touching Jim, somehow easing taut muscles even though he’s not using any pressure. “I am not sure it is wise.”

“Why not?” Jim asks.

Khan stays quiet for a moment. “Because it could be exploited,” he says. “Because you could be used against me, or me against you.”

“Not everyone’s a threat,” Jim says, not really surprised by Khan’s words but finding himself depressed anyway. “This isn’t...to state the obvious, this isn’t the time you’re from anymore. We’re...I like to think we’re better. We’re not at war.”

“My experience with Marcus showed me that mankind has changed little in the last three centuries,” Khan says, his voice clipped even though he doesn’t move physically.

“Yeah, and...he was an outlier, he wasn’t--we’re not all like him,” Jim says tiredly. “Not everyone just wants to use you. I don’t.”

“No,” Khan agrees. “But sometimes I think you are the outlier, not Marcus.”

“Pike’s not like Marcus,” Jim says, fighting to keep from groaning in relief when Khan touches him just right. “He’s not. You know that.”

“He is not like Marcus,” Khan agrees. “But he is not like you, either. He wants results from me and my people. He wants to prove he was right.”

“Our people,” Jim corrects him.

“Yes,” Khan says after a moment. “Still, the point remains.”

“He put a lot on the line where your crew is concerned,” Jim says. “He could lose a lot of credibility if...if things don’t work out.”

“Do you think that is likely to happen?” Khan asks.

“No, I don’t, and we’re getting away from the point,” Jim says. “Which is that you don’t have to be on the defensive about everything. It’s okay to form connections. I could be used against you, but so could Ekaterina, or Alona, or anyone else, and so help me, Khan, if you tell me it’s different because I’m not engineered like you are, that I’m somehow inferior and more of a vulnerability--”

“Peace,” Khan says, flattening his hand against Jim’s back. “That is in no way what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?” Jim asks, challenging him.

“There is a difference between a sibling and a lover,” Khan says carefully. “The...emotional component is different. I worry about my crew being used against me, or I against them, but those
connections simply are, and no amount of worrying will change that. Ekaterina is my sister, and will be until we are both dead. You...you are different.”

“You don’t want to care about me,” Jim says softly.

“It is too late for that,” Khan says. “What I do not want is to need you.”

“Do you honestly think I could hurt you?” Jim asks. “Do you honestly think I would?”

“It is not you hurting me that worries me,” Khan says. “It is the idea of you being used against me.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Jim says, resisting the urge to arch into Khan’s touch when Khan starts petting him again.

“How?” Khan asks.

“I just won’t,” Jim says. “Trust me on this.”

“I think you are promising things you cannot guarantee,” Khan says.

“Would it really be so bad, to depend on me?” Jim asks instead of answering. “Would it be the worst thing in the world? You trust your family to have your back, and you don’t let yourself stop caring about them because you think it might be used against you someday. Why can’t you do the same with me?”

“You are so sure of yourself,” Khan murmurs. “And there is still so much you don’t know about me, about my family.”

“Our family,” Jim says again because damnit, he’s been adopted and he’s not going to let Khan forget it. “And if I don’t know, then tell me.”

Khan breathes out slowly. “What makes you so sure of yourself, Jim? What makes you so sure of me?”

“Gut instinct,” Jim says, smiling a little in the darkness. “I just...you won’t turn on me, and I won’t turn on you, and I don’t know if we’ll last as a couple, but I do know you’d rather die than hurt one of your people, and I count as one of yours and I think I will even if we break up.”

“You would do the same,” Khan says softly.

“Of course I would,” Jim says immediately. “Wouldn’t be much of a captain if I wouldn’t do anything for my crew.”

“Some captains would disagree with you,” Khan says.

“Yeah, well, they’re stupid,” Jim says.

Khan laughs softly and Jim smiles again, pleased to hear it. “You sound like Ekaterina.”

“She doesn’t suffer fools gladly,” Jim says.

“No, that she does not,” Khan says. “Neither do you.”

“I pretended to be one for a while,” Jim says. “Thought I was.”

Khan says nothing, but he shifts to pull Jim a little closer against him, fingers massaging the nape of
his neck. Jim sighs and bows his head, letting Khan work out some of the ever-present tension in those muscles. "You could make a fortune as a massage therapist," he says after a bit.

"If you move, I can do a better job," Khan says. Jim groans; moving sounds like way too much effort, but he does, shifting onto his stomach, wings half folded. Khan moves to straddle his hips, and at first Jim’s totally distracted by that, but then Khan’s hands dig into the muscles of his shoulders and he groans again in pure relief.

"Where did you learn to do this?" he mumbles finally.

"Maeve taught me," Khan says. “She studied for a bit, and used me as a practice subject because she knew I was usually physically tense from the wings. Some of this, however, is just knowing where I am likely to carry tension, and you likely do the same. Here, for instance.” He presses down on a spot that’s bothered Jim for so long he’s almost forgotten about it. He inhales sharply, the sensation almost too much to bear, but Khan eases the pressure and slowly works the knot out and Jim almost whimpers in relief.

"You’ll have to teach me how to do this so I can do it to you,” he says, aware there are tears in his eyes and blaming them on the release of tension. He blinks them back, glad Khan can’t see his face.

"Pay attention to what I am doing now," Khan says.

"Trying, but you’re kind of melting me here,” Jim says, biting back a moan when another set of muscles begins to relax.

"Well,” Khan says. “I suppose I can show you another time.”

"That’d be good,” Jim says, the words coming out slurred.

He mostly falls asleep while Khan’s working on his back, and the next thing he knows for certain is his alarm going off and his back feeling sore but relaxed when he stretches over to slap it off. He looks over, expecting to see an empty bed, and blinks in surprise when he sees Khan still there, facing away from him and either asleep or pretending to be. “Hi,” he says, running a hand up Khan’s back, between his wings. “Why are you still here?”

"Would you rather I wasn’t?" Khan asks. stretching under JIm’s touch.

"Absolutely not,” Jim says. “You just usually leave before I have to get up.”

"We are going to the same place," Khan says. “It seemed...illogical to leave only to see you again in a short time.”

"I like your logic,” Jim says, moving to fit himself against Khan’s back. “You’re just wearing black, I don’t think anyone will notice if your clothes are the same today as yesterday.”

"I did consider that,” Khan says. “How much time do we have?”

Jim twists back to look at the clock. “An hour and a half, give or take five minutes. So we don’t actually have to get up right this minute.”

"Are you offering a better option?” Khan asks.

“Definitely,” Jim says, biting Khan’s shoulder. “Interested?”

“Yes,” Khan says, and they end up getting to the shuttles thirty seconds away from late.
It takes Jim four hours before he can get down to medbay and find Bones, and when he gets there Bones is working on a patient with what looks like burns down one arm and leg. Jim knows better than to interrupt him at all, so he takes a seat in Bones’s office and waits, and after about twenty minutes Bones comes in, looking grumpy but moderately pleased. “He’ll be okay?” Jim asks.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine,” Bones says. “Why are you here?”


“Do not even start with me,” Bones says, glaring at him.

“I’m not,” Jim protests. “It’s your decision, I’m not trying to argue you out of it--believe me, that would be stupid for so many reasons. I’m just...did she spend the night?”

Bones sighs and leans back in his chair. “Yeah, but not like you think,” he says. “We were up most of the night talking. Just talking. She left around five this morning to get back to her quarters and get ready for today, and I got a couple hours’ sleep. We’re meeting tonight for dinner, after she gets done and I get back on Earth.”

“Where are you going?” Jim asks. “So I don’t show up accidentally.”

Bones snorts, but gives him the name of an Italian place Jim’s been once or twice. “Fancy,” he comments. “You trying to impress her?”

“No,” Bones says. “She just mentioned she liked Italian food, and that’s a good restaurant.”

“So you are trying to impress her,” Jim says, grinning.

“Oh, shut up,” Bones says.

“She seems like a decent enough person,” Jim says. “I don’t know her that well, not as well as I know some of the others.”

“She’s less trigger-happy than some of them,” Bones says. “And before you say anything, yeah, I’m
aware her hands aren’t clean. We talked about that, a bit.”

“And you’re okay dating a nurse who’s killed people?” Jim asks carefully.

Bones sighs. “It was so different then,” he says. “I don’t know if I’m okay with it, but some of what she told me about then...I don’t know. At least she was honest about it.”

“Most of them are, I’ve noticed,” Jim says.

“They may be stone killers, but at least they won’t lie about it?” Bones snorts again. “I don’t know, Jim. Sometimes I think we made a mistake reviving them, sometimes I think we didn’t have a choice, sometimes...” He shrugs. “But Maeve is...I like her.”

“I should hope so,” Jim says. “I mean, if you’re taking her out to dinner and all that.”

“We’ll see where it goes,” Bones says.

“Do you need any more nurses on board?” Jim asks. “If it ever--”

“That’s way too far in the future for me to think about,” Bones says, glaring at him. “It’s just a date. One date.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Jim says. “It’s just--you should ask Uhura sometime about what she thinks about the augments and their attitudes toward dating and relationships.”

“Unless she’s going to expect me to marry her on the second date, I don’t care much,” Bones says. “And if she does expect that, there won’t be a second date.”

“Not on the second date, no,” Jim says with a grin and Bones sighs.

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“Avoiding it,” Jim says. “It’s all paperwork and forms and I have to go to a meeting with Pike and Barnett and people later, probably about Khan’s people, and that’s gonna drag on forever.”

“Is Khan going?” Bones asks.

“I have no idea,” Jim says. “Probably not. If he is he didn’t mention it to me.”

“Nothing like talking about a bunch of people while they’re not there to represent themselves,” Bones mutters.

“Yeah, well,” Jim says. “I guess I could just bring him along.”

“Your funeral,” Bones says.

“Thanks.” Jim sighs and stretches his wings a little, pleased at how un-cramped his back feels. The muscles are sore, definitely, but in the good way. “I better get back to...stuff. Catch you later?”

“Probably,” Bones says.

“Have a good dinner with Maeve, if I don’t see you before then,” Jim says. “Let me know how it goes.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bones says. Jim pushes to his feet and heads out, wondering if he should check in on Spock and Khan or whether that would get him raised eyebrows and a comment later on worrying
unnecessarily.

He decides he can live with the eyebrows and tracks them down in the science lab, again with their heads together over a hologram of the Enterprise. “Captain,” Spock says when he comes in. “May we be of assistance?”

“I just came to check in,” Jim says. “Shields again?”

“We are refining the idea from yesterday, yes,” Spock says. “We ran a model overnight and are incorporating its results.”

“How’d it go?” Jim asks.

Khan grimaces. “It worked, but used more power than I had expected, so we are working on ways to reduce the power requirements.”

“Only by fifteen percent,” Spock says.

“Yes, but that may not be enough of a safety margin,” Khan says. “I think twenty would be better.”

“If the shields utilize a variable amount of power,” Spock says thoughtfully, “perhaps the safety margin itself should be variable. We could reduce the power input by seventeen to twenty percent depending on their needs at the time.”

Jim’s lost and they don’t seem to remember he’s in the room anyway. He leaves quietly, feeling somewhat better about the world, and heads for the bridge, where his current yeoman smiles and gives him a stack of electronic papers to sign. He sighs and settles into his chair, skimming each report and notice before he signs off on it, just to make sure he’s not actually signing anyone’s transfer orders or a request for something completely outrageous.

Everything seems standard enough, and he hands the PADDs back to his yeoman and asks Uhura for a status report throughout the ship. He pays more attention to that, but everything still seems as normal as it gets these days. “Where’s Ekaterina?” he asks, realizing Uhura’s alone at her station.

“She was asked to teach unarmed combat by some of the security guys,” Uhura says. “I think they’re in the same gym they used yesterday. She told me to tell you, if you asked, she does not plan to break anyone.”

“Uh, good,” Jim says. “How’s she settling in?”

“She’s fine, captain,” Uhura says. “She’s picking up the computer skills really quickly, and we’re working on Klingon language. I gave her the dictionary I had, and she’s also downloaded a couple more advanced books. When she finishes with Klingon, she says she wants to learn Romulan, and then Vulcan, and then anything else I know I can teach her.”

“And you speak any Earth languages she doesn’t?” Jim asks curiously.

Uhura shakes her head. “No, and she speaks several I don’t know. She’s said she’ll teach me, if I want to learn.”

“You also said you wanted to learn knife throwing,” Jim says. “Seriously?”

“Seriously, captain,” Uhura says, giving him a mildly irritated look. “She’s really good at it, and it can’t be a bad thing to know how to throw a knife.”
“No, I guess not,” Jim says. “Just don’t throw them at me.”

“Well, that’s no fun,” Uhura says, but she grins. Jim grins back, wings stretching a little—as much as they can in the confines of his chair.

“I’m gonna go check out this unarmed combat lesson,” he decides, getting up. “You want to come with?”

“Thank you, captain, but some of us have work to do,” Uhura says, turning back to her station.

Jim lets her get the last word, like he usually does, and takes the turbolift to the gym, finding Ekaterina easily enough. She’s standing at the center of a semi-circle of red shirts, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. At the moment, she appears to be talking, gesturing as she explains something. Jim can’t quite hear her and walks over, curious what she’s saying.

“You cannot rely on your weapon to save your life,” she says. “Weapons can be dropped, stolen, they can misfire or break or be sabotaged. Anything that can leave your hand is not something you want to rely on to save you, because what happens if you do not have it?”

“Fighting a person with a phaser isn’t a fair fight,” one of the redshirts says. “He can kill you with one shot.”

“So you remove the phaser from the equation,” Ekaterina says. “Steal it, kick it out of his hand, break his wrist so he cannot shoot. When I grew up we were still using guns with lead bullets, and there are always ways to make a gun a bad idea. I am certain you can do the same with phasers.”

“But you use knives,” another one says. “What about those?”

“I use them because I am good with them,” she says. “I do not depend on them. I do not need knives to best my opponent in combat. I prefer knives to guns because they are harder to sabotage and easier to hide—I am carrying at least five right now, can you tell me where they are?”

He studies her carefully, blushing a little. “No, I can’t.”

“My point,” Ekaterina says. “I will tell you two.” She shakes both wrists and knives slide into her hands. “Forearm sheaths. Convenient, comfortable, and easy to hide under clothes. Somewhat predictable, if you are any good with knives, but worth having nonetheless.” She shakes her wrists again and the knives vanish.

“I’m guessing you’ve got at least one in your boot,” the first redshirt says. “Small of your back, maybe?”

Ekaterina bends and pulls a knife out of her boot. “Correct on the first,” she says, putting it away again. “Perhaps if you can best me in combat, I will tell you the rest.”

“Yeah, that’s never going to happen,” he says, and Jim smiles. “You’re inhumanly good.”

“Practice and engineering,” Ekaterina says. “So. Let us try this again. Come at me, one at a time, and I will show you how I counter.”

Jim counts six redshirts—including Cupcake. One at a time, they all attack her, and she drops them each, calling out her moves as she makes them, not sounding out of breath even when she throws Cupcake over her shoulder. She’s careful to pull her blows, though, and while all six of the guys lie on the floor when it’s over, Jim doesn’t think any of them will have more than a bruise, if that.
“And you say Katsuro is better than you are,” one of them--Jim thinks maybe his name’s Brett something--says with a groan, getting to his feet.

“He is, da,” Ekaterina says, giving him a hand up. She helps the other five to their feet. “Captain Kirk, come to observe or join?”

“Observe,” Jim says quickly, earning himself a couple snickers.

“I would not break you,” Ekaterina says, smoothing a hand down her close-fitted black shirt.

“Yeah, that’s still okay,” Jim says. “Are you guys learning things or just getting thrown around?”

“A bit of both, captain,” Brett says. “The problem is we’ll never be as fast or as strong as she is.”

“Again, I have decades of practice,” Ekaterina says. “If you put in the time, you could come close.”

“You can’t be more than mid-thirties,” someone else says. “And that’s pushing it.”

“I am fifty-seven,” she says. “Not counting the three hundred years I spent in cryosleep. We age slowly.”

“Right,” that person says. “Okay then. What are the--I mean, I get why we stopped engineering people, but are there any drawbacks to how you were created?”

“Lack of fertility,” Ekaterina says. “Increased aggressiveness and quick temper, and lack of conscience to accompany it. Some would argue we have no empathy nor ability to feel compassion or love. They would be wrong, of course, but we were raised to think of everyone not us as inferior beings, there to be led like sheep.”

“And killed when necessary,” Jim says.

“Yes,” Ekaterina says without apologizing. “Again, some of this may have been due to how we were raised. Yes, we have physical advantages, but overall I think one of the wisest decisions humanity made after the Eugenics Wars was to stop experimenting on people, stop trying to build a superior human and just accept humanity as it is.”

“We learned our lesson,” Jim says. “Unfortunately, you and yours were condemned for it.”

“But we were allowed to live,” Ekaterina says. “They could not bring themselves to kill us. And now here we are, three hundred years later, and with a chance to make new lives for ourselves.”

“What do you want out of this new life?” Brett asks.

She smiles. “A good question, sergeant. When I have an answer, I will let you know.”

Brett smiles back. “Can we try this one more time?” he asks, glancing at Jim. “Sir, if that’s all right?”

Jim waves a hand. “I’m not here to interrupt.”

“Once more, da, but I think this time we will try the other way around,” Ekaterina says. “I will attack each of you, and you will attempt to drop me. Do not pull your blows, I will be fine.”

“She really will,” Jim says before he can stop himself. Ekaterina smiles, and moves to attack Brett. He blocks her kick, counters with a punch and a kick of his own, and manages to throw her back on the mat, not quite landing her on her back but enough to send her back a couple steps.
“Good,” she says, nodding. “Well done.”

Brett flushes a little. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Ekaterina smiles again and moves on to the next one. By the time she’s done, she’s hit the mat twice, and someone Jim thinks is named Oran got in one hell of a kick, enough that he wonders if she cracked a rib or two. “Good,” she says, straightening her shirt. “We will continue this tomorrow, da?”

“Yes,” Brett says. “If you have time, I mean.”

“Captain?” Ekaterina turns to him.

“It’s fine with me,” Jim says. “Should we ask Katsuro for help, too?”

“I will speak with him,” Ekaterina says. “Mr. Scott may not be able to spare him from engineering.”

“Point,” Jim says. “We’ll see.”

The security guys head out once Jim tells them it’s fine, and Ekaterina remains. “You wish to speak with me,” she says, tilting her head to the side. “Yes?”

“Did Oran--is that his name? I can’t always remember everyone on the ship--did he hurt you?” Jim asks.

“His name is Oran, yes, and I think he possibly cracked a rib or two,” Ekaterina says. “Nothing worth worrying about.”

Jim shakes his head. “I know you guys heal fast, but man, that just seems painful.”

“I am used to pain,” Ekaterina says simply. “Cracked ribs are an annoyance, nothing more.”

Jim frowns. “Why are you used to pain?”

“I fought wars, captain,” she says, a little surprised. “One gets hurt in battle. And of course there were pokings and proddings and endless tests when I was a child. Similar, I think, to what my brother dealt with after being revived.”

“You were tortured as children?” Jim asks, not really sure he should be surprised and yet surprised anyway.

Ekaterina’s mouth twists. “We were a living experiment,” she says. “We were treated as experiments until we were treated as weapons, until we fought for our countries and ruled, and even then, there were “doctors” who tried, but we usually killed them.”

“What did you do to the doctors who...who experimented on you as children?” Jim asks, not sure he wants to know.

“Dead,” Ekaterina says briefly. “All of them. You do not want to know more than that, captain.”

“I have a name,” Jim grumps.

“Yes, but I am currently serving on your ship,” she says. “I did not want to cause problems by calling you Jim in front of your crew.”

“My crew’s not here at the moment,” Jim says.
“If you like,” she says. “Jim.”

Jim thinks she’s laughing at him but whatever, he’s used to that. “Did you know that Maeve is going out on a date with Bones?” he asks curiously.

“Oh--ah. Dr. McCoy,” Ekaterina says. “Yes, I did.”

“What do you think of it?” he asks.

Ekaterina shrugs. “They are both adults, with some similar professional interests and possibly personal ones. Maeve is...of all my family, she is in some ways the gentlest, the one least likely to kill. She will, of course, because we all will, but she prefers to save lives, not end them. She became a nurse because she wanted more contact with patients, more chances to interact and help them directly, and she continued to work as a nurse because she felt saving lives was the only way she could balance the lives she had taken. I think if any of us has a conscience, she would.”

“Okay,” Jim says slowly. “That’s...good to know.”

“Are you worried for your doctor?” Ekaterina asks.

“Maybe,” Jim says. “Should I be?”

“We are not intending harm to you or your people, Jim,” she says. “Maeve is not looking for marriage. Let them have their fun.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to stop them,” Jim says defensively. “Just...Bones has gotten hurt before.”

“They will be fine,” Ekaterina says patiently.

“Will you answer a question honestly?” Jim asks.

“Probably,” she says. “What is it?”

“Where the hell do you keep all your knives?” he asks. “And how the heck did you modify all your clothes for them so fast?”

Ekaterina laughs. “I sew a bit, enough to make false pockets,” she says. “When we moved to the dorms, I requested a sewing machine and modified my few sets of clothes. As for where I keep the knives...if you best me in combat, I will tell you. For now, you know I keep two in forearm sheaths and one in my boot.”

“I’ll never beat you in combat,” Jim says, shaking his head.

“Not if you don’t try,” she says.

“Even if I do, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t win,” Jim says. “Anyway, I should get back to...stuff.”

“As should I,” Ekaterina says. “I am to meet Lieutenant Uhura for more instruction on how to do her job.”

“She’s on the bridge,” Jim says. “I’m heading back that way myself.”

They take the turbolift together, and Ekaterina keeps quiet on the way there. Jim wonders what she’s thinking and decides not to ask. On the bridge, he takes his chair back from Sulu and watches Ekaterina take the empty chair next to Uhura, greeting her in what sounds maybe like Klingon? Jim’s not sure.
His yeoman has more things for him to read, and Jim glances at the time and realizes two things: one, he’s meeting Pike and Barnett and whoever else in an hour, which means he needs to shuttle back down to Earth soon; two, Khan doesn’t know about the meeting, which means Jim needs to tell him before he shuttles back down so Khan doesn’t wonder what happened to him and also so Khan has a heads up that they’re going to be discussing his people. Their people. Jim sighs, hands the PADD back to his yeoman, and gets up to go do those things.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

How are the augments working out?

Chapter Notes

Whew, I made it! Was trying to get one last chapter in before I head out of town (flight’s at 6am PDT) and the words cooperated. I cannot guarantee I'll get anything posted in the next week but I'll do my best to write around family things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He doesn’t get a chance to do more than tell Khan quickly he’s got a meeting with a few Starfleet brass, likely about his people although he doesn’t know for certain, and he has to get back to Earth for it. There are people coming and going and next to no privacy and he needs to get on a shuttle not drag Khan off somewhere private to talk, and Khan doesn’t ask any questions but his wing brushes Jim’s shoulder. Jim promises to call him after the meeting and find him later and Khan nods and that’s that, and Jim spends the shuttle back to Earth wishing he could pace and with his wings feeling far too constrained.

He walks to headquarters, finds the room easily enough. Barnett’s there but Pike isn’t. “Come on in, Kirk,” Barnett says, gesturing. “No need to stand on formality.”

“Afternoon, sir,” Jim says, coming into the room but not sitting just yet as his wings haven’t settled. “Admiral Pike’s message was a little unclear on what we’re discussing today?”

Barnett snorts and rubs a hand over his balding head. “What do you think, Kirk? We’re checking in with those people we’ve assigned augments to, to see how they’re doing and if they can be successfully integrated.”

“I see, sir,” Jim says. “And you didn’t want any of them here?”

“What would the point in that be?” Barnett asks. “Ah, Chris, good to see you.”

Pike comes in, moving a bit stiffly, and takes a seat at Barnett’s right. “Kirk,” he says. “Going to sit down?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says, forcing his wings back and taking a seat. More people come in, at least two from Starfleet Medical, a couple instructors, a couple other captains Jim knows on sight and at least one he doesn’t know at all.

“So,” Barnett says when everyone’s there. “How are the augments working out?”

No one seems inclined to speak up first, and Jim knows he can’t be the person to break the silence. After a moment, a woman from Medical clears her throat. “We have two,” she says. “One working
as a nurse, and one as a pediatrics surgeon. They’re both—well, our nurse saved two lives just before we got here. They came in with unusual symptoms, and she was able to identify the cause as a disease we haven’t seen in a while and suggest proper treatment. She must have been studying, because it’s something that’s only come up in the last century and is still pretty rare. Had she not recognized it, I think we would have lost both patients.”

Barnett looks surprised. “And the surgeon?”

“He’s assisted in four procedures so far and according to the doctors he’s worked with, he’s unerringly professional and has steady hands,” she says. “We’re going to have him start leading procedures tomorrow.”

“Well,” Pike says. “That’s good to hear, on both. Have either of them caused any trouble with the rest of your staff?”

She shakes her head. “No, not at all, sir.”

“Has anyone else had problems with the augments integrating into existing crews or staff?” Barnett asks.

No one speaks. “I have four on my ship,” the captain Jim doesn’t know at all says. She folds her hands on the table. “Quite honestly, admiral, they’re behaving like exemplary crew members. Two are in engineering, and my chief engineer says they’ve saved him a fair amount of time already with a couple suggestions and an experiment on rerouting power. One is with my social scientists, and they seem to be getting along fine, and one is working with my security people, training them in advanced self defense and unarmed combat.”

“Which one is that?” Jim asks before he can stop himself.

“Amir,” she says. “Do you know him?”

Jim shakes his head. “One of the augments on my ship is doing something similar, although she’s splitting her time between comms and self-defense. I also have two in engineering and one in the science labs.” He doesn’t call Khan out by name on purpose.

“I’m not sure exactly what you expected from these people, but I’m glad to have them,” another captain says. “It’s—there are some interesting gaps in their knowledge, but what they don’t know, they’re learning faster than I ever could, and what they do know, they’re using to help my crew and my ship. Honestly, admiral, the biggest problem we have is no one’s quite sure how to treat them, whether they’re officers or NCOs or outside Starfleet hierarchy.”

Pike looks more and more relaxed with each comment, but Barnett’s face darkens and Jim’s not sure why. “Is there a problem, admiral?” he asks carefully.

“I’m not sure I trust them,” Barnett says candidly. “They could be playing a deeper game here, integrating themselves into Starfleet only to turn on us once we’ve come to depend on them.”

“We have no evidence to support that and so far they’re behaving,” Pike says, and it has the sound of an old argument. “Maybe they really do just want to integrate. Jim, you know them best, what do you think?”

Jim winces, wishing Pike hadn’t said that. “I think they really do just want to integrate, find lives for themselves, sir,” he says, aware all eyes are on him. “They--” He pauses, trying to figure out how to put it without sounding like he’s been compromised by the augments. “If you talk to them, they didn’t have a whole lot of choices before, in their time, and they appreciate getting to decide what
they want to do, what they want to study, this time.”

“You’re telling me they didn’t decide to try and rule the world,” Barnett says skeptically.

“Sir, I think you should try talking to them,” Jim says. “You might be surprised.”

Barnett eyes him narrowly. “You sure you haven’t been compromised, Kirk?”

“Sir, compromised by what?” Jim asks. “They haven’t done anything. I’ve gotten to know a few of them, and I believe them when they say they really do want to make new lives for themselves. They’ve only been awake a few days, most of them, and I doubt they’ve had time to make extensive plans for taking over Starfleet or the Federation, given that neither existed when they were originally alive. These are intelligent, rational people. Let’s give them the benefit of the doubt.”

This makes Barnett scowl, but he doesn’t say anything. “I agree with Captain Kirk,” the female captain says. “But like Captain Jacobs, I’d like to know where to slot them into the hierarchy of my ship.”

Jim studies her a little more closely. She doesn’t seem at all intimidated by Barnett or Pike, and he wonders if he did know her at some point because she’s also on the young side. Older than he is, but most captains are, but not by that much. Dark curly hair that at the moment she has pulled back in a ponytail, dark eyes, and she turns to look at him, as if she noticed him studying her. She smiles, though, a quick bright flash, and turns back to Barnett.

“We’re working that out,” Pike says. “We think they’re going to get sworn in as officers, probably mostly mid-level as we can’t start them out at the very bottom due to the experience they already have. Also, they...might find that insulting, and we’re trying not to piss them off.”

“We shouldn’t be catering to them,” Barnett grumes.

“We’re not, Will,” Pike says. “We’re trying to avoid antagonizing a potentially dangerous group of new allies.”

“Which is catering in a funny hat,” Barnett says with a scowl, but Pike ignores him.

“We should have a swearing-in ceremony in the next few days, we’ll let you all know when it is,” Pike says. “Any other comments or questions about this group of people?”

A couple questions get asked, just questions about how smart they really are, how strong. Pike answers, which Jim appreciates--he doesn’t want to explain how he knows so much about them, and he’s definitely not telling anyone--even Pike--that he’s been adopted into their family group. They get dismissed after a bit, and Jim notices as he stands that whoever that female captain is, she’s tiny--shorter than Alona, he thinks. “Hi,” he says, catching up to her on the way out. “You know who I am, but I don’t think I can return the favor.”

She looks up at him and smiles. “Jill Kane,” she says, extending a hand. “Acting captain of the Marshall. Our actual captain is down with Andorian flu, he’ll be out of commission for a few days.”

“Ouch,” Jim says with a wince; Andorian flu is not fun. “You’re the XO?”

“Guilty as charged,” she says, easily keeping up with him despite his longer legs. “So, you know the augments pretty well?”

“Some of them I know a bit, yeah,” Jim says.
“How’d you get to know them?” she asks.

“Uh,” Jim says. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“Well, fortunately for you I’m off duty until tomorrow morning,” Jill says, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. “Care to grab a coffee and chat?”

He’s still got time before the alpha shift shuttles come back from the Enterprise, and Khan doesn’t know how long the meeting will run, and anyway it’s not like he has to report in, and—”Sure,” Jim says, feeling obscurely guilty and not really sure why.

They head to a local cafe and get seats outside, in the shade; Jill orders something with a lot of caffeine and sugar in it, while Jim sticks to regular coffee. “So,” she says, hands wrapped around her mug. “Where does the story start?”

“How much do you know about why the augments were awakened in this time?” Jim asks cautiously.

She drums her fingers against her mug. “I know that Starfleet found their ship and brought them back to Earth, but only one was awakened, and that one--well, he was Marcus’s secret, and the less said about that man the better.” She makes a face. “Anyway, I heard he escaped--did a lot of damage first, good for him--and then you found him, believed him, Marcus showed up to kill you and you took him down, brought everyone back to Earth and the existing brass decided to awaken the rest of the crew.”

“That’s about it in short, yeah,” Jim says. “You approve of what--Khan, that’s his name--what he did?”

“I’m a vindictive bitch,” Jill says. “If I’d been held prisoner for over a year with my family in cryosleep, hostage to my continued behavior, I’d have tried to take out as many people as I could on my way out the door.”

“Right,” Jim says. “Well, anyway, I got to know Khan a bit when everything happened, and I’ve been spending some time with him and his crew since they were awakened. They’re...interesting people. Who do you have on your ship?”

“Amir, Talya--she’s the social scientist--Jasmine, and Eduardo,” she says. “Are they among the ones you know?”

“Only by face and name,” Jim says. “Most of the ones I know are at HQ or on my ship.”

“Makes sense,” Jill says, taking a sip of her drink. “I heard your ship got pretty badly damage in the fight with Marcus.”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “We’re going to be in repairs for a while.”

She grimaces. “Did you lose any crew?”

“Eighteen,” Jim says, looking down at his coffee. “Some injuries, none life threatening.”

“I’m sorry,” Jill says sympathetically.

“Thanks,” Jim says. Silence falls over the table, and Jim takes a sip of his coffee. “When do you ship out?” he asks, changing the subject.
“Once our captain’s recovered,” Jill says. “Which could be anywhere from three days to two weeks to never, depending on how sick he is.”

“That’s got to be rough,” Jim says. “Who is your captain?”

“Mikael Knight,” she says.

Jim shakes his head. “I only know him in passing.”

“He’s a good man,” Jill says. “I hope he recovers quickly.”

“Did you come back because he got sick?”

Jill nods. “We treated him on board as best we could but we needed the facilities at Starfleet Medical to treat him fully. Fortunately we weren’t that far out.”

“I know one of the augments who’s working at Starfleet Medical,” Jim says. “I can ask her if there’s any news, if you want.”

“Thanks, but we’re being kept up to date,” Jill says. “It’s just…it’s a difficult disease, and even with all the advances we have in technology these days there’s no guarantee he’ll recover. It’s hard. I’ve served under him for six years now, and I certainly don’t want to be the actual captain yet. Definitely not under these circumstances.”

Jim nods, remembering back to Nero, Spock’s hands around his throat and...anyway. He takes a drink of coffee to distract himself. “It’s hard,” he says. “I haven’t--my CMO is a miracle worker, but it’s…it’s hard when someone you know is sick.”

“Yeah. Anyway, on to brighter topics.” Jill takes a sip of her drink. “Are you training with the security folks on your ship, with your augment?”


“I am, yeah,” Jill says. “As small as I am, I try to get every advantage I can, even if it’s just knowing how to get away. Amir said there’s one of them who’s really good with knives, and I thought--since we have some downtime, and my duties are a combination of light and difficult, depending on hour and amount of paperwork--I’d try and see if he or she was around and if I could take a few lessons.”

“Her name’s Ekaterina, and she’s on my ship,” Jim says. “She’s the one teaching my security guys. My comms officer wants to learn, too, so I can ask her about teaching an actual class, or even just the two of you.”

“I’d like that,” Jill says. “I’d appreciate it, even.” She grins, and Jim has to grin back; there’s something about her smile that’s infectious. “Like I said, I don’t know when we’re shipping out, so...at the moment I can find time.”

“Let me talk to her--ah, maybe tonight, probably tomorrow, and I’ll comm you,” Jim says. “Do you think you could get to my ship if that’s where she wants to teach?”

“I’d love to check out the Enterprise,” Jill says. “I will make time. Can I make time even if she doesn’t want to teach me?”

“Sure,” Jim says. “Always happy to show my girl off. Although she’s not in her best shape at the moment.”
“Yeah, I know,” Jill says. “Still.”

“Still, you’re welcome,” Jim says. “Thanks for sticking up for the augments in the meeting today. I wasn’t sure...”

She shrugs. “They seem to be good people. Cold-blooded, sometimes, I mean you look up some of what they’ve done and it’s just chilling, but no one’s attempted to kill anyone on my ship, and Talya says she’s done enough of it to last two lifetimes. Amir says he’d rather teach people how to stay alive.”

“They will kill, though, if threatened, or if anyone threatens one of theirs,” Jim says carefully. “I mean, the killing instinct is still...I think in some ways it was built into them.”

“I know,” Jill says. “I know. The trick, as far as I can tell, is getting them to see the Marshall and her crew as theirs.”

“That’s similar to what I was trying, yeah,” Jim says. “You’re pretty smart.”

Jill laughs. “Thank you. So are you. I mean, your reputation precedes you, but it’s always nice to know there’s substance behind the sizzle.”

“Do I want to know what kind of reputation I have?” Jim asks warily.

She waves a hand. “Oh, the usual. Starfleet’s golden boy, saved the world, saved us from a rogue Admiral, brilliant and beautiful and all kinds of precocious. The story of you against the Kobayashi Maru is almost legendary.”

Jim winces and looks at his coffee. “I don’t believe in no-win situations.”

“It’s good to talk shop, Jim thinks, changing the subject to a question about the Marshall’s mission. Good to hang out with someone else who wears the gold, who went through the Academy same as Jim and knows some of the burdens of command. He doesn’t really know many other captains or XOs, and wonders sometimes if that’s a mistake. Jill’s fun, and smart, and knows a lot more about Starfleet politics than Jim’s ever wanted to know--he asks her how she knows so much, and she laughs.

“My comms officer,” she says. “He’s hooked in to all the gossip that comes out of HQ, he has a boyfriend over there, one of the aides. Aides know everything. So he finds out everything, and passes on the important bits. Yours could probably do the same, if you asked. I’ve found comms officers in general usually know most of the gossip. I pay attention, because while I’m not bucking for flag rank I like to think I might get there one day, and I need to know how the game’s played. A lot of people dismiss me because of my size, and I’ve found I usually have to be twice as good as the next guy in line just to prove I can do the job.”

Jim shakes his head. “You’d think in today’s day and age that wouldn’t matter.”

“Clearly you’ve never been my height,” Jill says, smiling. “People thought I was an instructor’s kid all four years at the Academy, even though I wore the red and aced my exams.”

“I know something about it,” Jim says. “Not because of height, because of, well, these.” He stretches his wings a little. “Did you know there are no known races anywhere that are winged humanoids? Billions of people all through the galaxy, and I know exactly two with wings.”
“Two?” Jill raises her eyebrows.

Jim hesitates. “Khan has wings,” he says finally, reluctant for no reason he can identify. “I didn’t know until I met him on Qo’nos.”

“Interesting,” Jill says. “Two people, one genetically engineered three centuries ago and one from this time, no known connections? Are you related to him at all?”

“No, I’m not,” Jim says. “He looked into it, but he didn’t have any descendants, so there’s no blood connection we can identify. I’m not related to any of the arguments.”

“And your parents didn’t try to engineer you,” Jill says, not quite asking.

“One, it’s illegal, and two, no,” Jim says. “They...they wouldn’t have done that.”

“Huh,” Jill says. “One of life’s great mysteries, I suppose. Has it been hard, growing up with wings?”

Jim sighs. “Yeah.”

She nods. “I’m sorry. It’s hard, being different.”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “It shouldn’t be, but it is.”

“Pretty much,” Jill says. She glances at her watch and sighs. “Alpha shift’s just about over, which means I have...no plans but I should stop monopolizing your time.”

“No, I’ve enjoyed this,” Jim says. “I should head over to the shuttle bay, though, find my people and see what’s going on with them. Hey, if you come, you could meet Ekaterina. Do you speak any languages other than English?”


“She’s a really talented linguist,” Jim says. “I think she gets impatient with sticking to English when I’m around.”

“Got it,” Jill says. “Well, I speak Spanish and Russian, does that help?”

“She is Russian,” Jim says. “And why does everyone around me speak Russian?”

“Well, my dad’s from there,” Jill says. “So I grew up in a bilingual household.”

“Kane isn’t a Russian name?” Jim asks.

“No,” Jill says. “it’s my husband’s. I did the old-fashioned thing because I was tired of having a last name no one could spell.”

“I didn’t know you were married,” Jim says.

“Three years now,” she says. “He’s the head security officer on the Marshall.”

“Is that difficult?” Jim asks as they get up. “Working together and being married? Especially since I’d think you have to give him orders?”

“It’s really not,” Jill says. “It’s a lot better than being married to someone on a different ship, or stationed somewhere else. We know where the lines are professionally and personally, and we know
that when I give him an order, that’s me as his XO asking him as head of security. Why? Are you thinking about getting involved with someone on your ship?”

“Kind of,” Jim says, squirming a little under her direct look. “It’s…it’s complicated.”

“One of the augments?” she asks.

“Uh, yeah,” Jim says. “Could you not spread that around?”

Shepretends tozip herlips. “Which one?”

Jim blows out a breath and folds his wings back. “Khan. We’re…it’s complicated.”

Jill nods. “I can see how it might be.” She pats his arm. “Good luck.”

“You don’t--I mean, he did some--” Jim fumbles.

“I’m a vindictive bitch,” Jill says again. “I think he absolutely did the right thing.”

“But there were so many innocent people who died when the place blew up,” Jim says, wings shifting.

“Marcus had a tiger in a cage and you’re surprised when the tiger attacked when it broke out?” Jill asks. She shrugs. “Maybe I’m just cold-blooded. Maybe I think that when you sign on to Starfleet, you sign on to a certain amount of risk. I could die in space, anytime. Not even from a hostile encounter--all it’d take would be something going wrong with the life support systems, or the gravity, or a hole in the damn ship. I take that risk, because this is what I want to do. I don’t know. I know I have a lot more sympathy for a man who was essentially held hostage for a year with his family helpless than for people working on programs Starfleet shouldn’t even have.” She looks up at Jim. “You’re not comfortable with it.”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “He was coerced, and bullied, and...” And he’s not telling her what else happened to Khan. “I mean, yeah, I understand why he did what he did, and I’m not--it’s just, I regret the lives lost. I wish there had been another way.”

“I can understand that,” Jill says. She sighs. “I hope Marcus is burning in hell. That would make me happy.”

“I wish he’d lived to answer for his crimes,” Jim admits.

“Some people on this planet don’t deserve the privilege of being here,” Jill says. “He was one of them. I never liked the man, for the record. He treated me like a pretty little girl without a brain in her head the few times we met.”

Jim winces at that. “Ouch.”

“After the first meeting, I learned to just have my captain and the male members of my crew speak for me, and I kept quiet when he was around. I am not good at holding my tongue, in case you wondered. But it worked.” Jill tucks a loose curl back behind her ear.

“Yeah, I can...yeah,” Jim says. “Do you want to grab a cab over to the shuttle bay?”

“I think so, yeah,” Jill says. “You hail it. They never see me.”

Jim laughs and steps out to the curb. His luck holds--a moment later a cab comes along and pulls over, and they get in, giving the driver the location. His wings take up more room than they should,
but Jill’s small and it works. “Thanks for having coffee with me today,” she says, turning to look at
him.

“Thanks for taking time to talk with me,” he says. “I don’t know that many other captains, and
it’s...it’s been good to talk shop.”

“I’m not a captain,” Jill says, making a face. “I’m an XO.”

“Acting captain,” Jim says.

She sighs. “Yeah, true. Hopefully not for much longer.”

“I’ll cross my fingers,” Jim says. “And we’re here.” He pays the driver and they scramble out of the
cab.

Chapter End Notes

I, um, apologize for inflicting more OCs on you...let me know if you like her?
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Why are you so convinced I automatically think the worst of you?

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Sorry for the long delay - I had spotty internet and a week full of family, so very little time to write, and I've had some new health issues lately that have made writing more difficult (nothing life-threatening, just uncomfortable). Also, I am having surgery on Tuesday so I'll do my best to update before then but I may not get anything out for a few days after that. Thanks for your patience, and your feedback!

They get to the shuttle bay just as the first shuttle lands from the Enterprise. Jim sees Katsuro and Bishop, but not Ekaterina, and not Khan or Uhura or anyone else he really cares about. He nods at Katsuro and Bishop, and Bishop raises a hand and Katsuro nods back, but they clearly have somewhere they're going, because they leave quickly without stopping to say hello. Jim wonders briefly what's up with that and waits for the second shuttle. This one has most of the bridge crew on it, and Khan's with Spock and Ekaterina's with Uhura. Jim waves all four of them over. "Guys, this is Commander Jill Kane of the Marshall," he says. He introduces the other four briefly. "Four of Khan's people are working on the Marshall, and one of them mentioned to Jill that Ekaterina might be willing to teach a class or a few people on things about knives, so I thought I'd introduce you. I know Uhura also wanted to learn, so...how would you feel about having two students?" he asks Ekaterina.

She studies Jill for a moment. "I can work with this," she says. "We will, however, need more knives and a safe place to practice."

"Knives we can probably get from the quartermaster," Jim says. "You can use one of the gyms on the Enterprise, we can set up targets and mats and things."

"I would prefer not to have more than four students at a time," Ekaterina says, looking at Jim. "If there are others you are considering bringing to me, please keep that in mind."

"So noted," Jim says.

Ekaterina extends a hand to Jill. "Commander."

Jill shakes her hand firmly; Jim sees Ekaterina smile faintly at her grip. "Are you on duty tomorrow alpha shift?" she asks. "Say, eleven hundred hours?"

"I can make time," Jill says. "Are your transporters functional?"

"Not at the moment," Jim says. "I can--if you call me, I can arrange for someone to shuttle you over."
“I’ll take one of the Marshall’s shuttles,” Jill says. “Perks to being acting captain.”

“Acting captain, Commander?” Spock asks.

“Our actual captain is sick with Andorian flu,” Jill says.

“Not an easy disease to recover from,” Spock comments.

“No,” Jill says. “No, it isn’t.”

“Commander Kane, are you busy tonight?” Ekaterina asks. “Would you care to have a meal with me and Lieutenant Uhura? We can discuss what you would like to get out of training with me and what realistic goals would be.”

“I am not and I’d like that,” Jill says. “Please, call me Jill. We’re off duty and you’re not an officer yet.”

“Yet?” Ekaterina asks.

“Captain Kirk and I just came from a meeting with a bunch of folks,” Jill says. “The plan, as far as I’m aware, is to swear your people in as Starfleet officers sometime soon, but official ranks and things are being determined. Were you not aware?”

“No, I was not,” Ekaterina says. “Khan?”

He shakes his head. “But it is not surprising.”

“True,” Ekaterina says. “Well, we shall see. Commander Spock, will you be joining us for dinner?”

“If I will not be intruding,” Spock says.

“Of course not,” Uhura says. “I was thinking—there’s a burger place a little ways from here, we’d need a cab or something, but they have milkshakes that are out of this world, and for some reason I really want one today.” She looks at Ekaterina. “Have you ever had a milkshake?”

“I think perhaps once,” Ekaterina says. “Maybe twice. I would like to try one in this time.”

“Sugar,” Jill says firmly. “Sugar is very important. Almost as important as caffeine.”

“They have coffee milkshakes,” Uhura says.

“I’m sold,” Jill says, laughing and getting Uhura to laugh with her. Even Ekaterina smiles.

“Let’s go, then,” Uhura says. “Captain. Khan.” Jim nods, as does Khan, and the four of them head off.

“So,” Khan says when it’s just them. “How did the meeting go?”

“You want to get dinner and talk about it?” Jim asks. “We could maybe order in tonight, I have a few places that’ll deliver, one place that does pretty good fusion cuisine—I forget exactly which cultures, but it’s really good.”

“All right,” Khan says. “Also, what is Andorian flu?”

They fall into step and Jim sighs. “It’s a really nasty disease,” he says. “It’s—apparently it’s no big deal for Andorians, but for humans it can be deadly. It depends on how severely you get sick, and
how strong your immune system is. The problem is that the Andorians never developed a full blown
treatment for it, because for them it’s like a cold or something, and no one’s been able to find a good
treatment for humans that’s not just treating the symptoms and hoping the patient recovers.”

“I see,” Khan says. “How sick is her captain?”

“I don’t know the details,” Jim says. “I can find out, I guess, or maybe Maeve would know. There’s
another one of your people there, a pediatrics surgeon? I didn’t get the name and I don’t know who
that is.”

“Carson,” Khan says. “Odds are he would not know, as he focuses on pediatrics.”

“You can’t--” Jim pauses. “You heal, but could you heal someone else? A blood transfusion or
something?”

“Yes,” Khan says. “But if word got out about that, it could be dangerous.”

“For you, yes,” Jim says. “I won’t say anything. Captain Knight will recover, or he won’t, and it’s
not--I’m not asking for anything, I want to be clear on that.”

“I know you are not,” Khan says. He glances at Jim. “You are very careful not to ask anything of me
or our people we are not willing to give already.”

“Well,” Jim says. “Yeah. I mean, that’s the point, isn’t it?”

“Did you mention to this group of people that you have been accepted among us?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jim says. “No, and I’m not planning on it. Admiral Barnett’s very suspicious, even without
cause--well, without cause in current time--and I don’t want to give him any kind of anything that
would lead him to think I’ve been compromised somehow.”

“Prudent,” Khan says.

“Yeah, well. Pike’s on our side, at least,” Jim says. “I don’t know about anyone else. I don’t know
how many people know the full details of what’s going on.”

Khan shakes his head. “Nor do I.”

“Maybe we should find out,” Jim says, thinking out loud. “Just to...just so we know what we’re
dealing with.”

“More knowledge is never a bad idea,” Khan says. “How do you propose we go about finding out?”

Jim’s quiet for a few minutes, thinking. “I can ask Pike for some of it,” he says. “He...I think he’d
understand why I’m asking. I don’t know if he’ll know everything, but I can ask.”

“You trust him,” Khan observes.

“I do,” Jim says. “Alona’s at HQ, do you think she might know anything?”

“It is possible,” Khan says. “She is good at gathering information. I can comm her tonight and ask,
and if she does not know anything, I can ask her to find out.”

“And Matthew?” Jim asks.

“Alona is better at gathering intel,” Khan says. “But Matthew may be able to find things out.”
“Couldn’t hurt to ask them both,” Jim says. “And whoever else is at HQ.”

Khan nods. “Indeed.”

They get back to the apartment without problems and Jim goes hunting for the delivery menus. He finds the one he wants and hands it to Khan, getting them both glasses of water while Khan looks at it. “So, um, I spent a while talking to Jill this afternoon,” he says, handing Khan a glass. “We had coffee, talked shop.”

“Oh?” Khan looks up from the menu.

“She’s...interesting,” Jim says. “I like her. She’s also married, so it’s not like we were flirting or anything, and I...I may have mentioned to her that we’re involved.”

“What did she say about it?” Khan asks.

Jim really wishes he were better at reading Khan’s body language, because mostly he gets nothing, and that’s about what he has now, although Khan’s wings look relaxed and they’re not shifting, so that’s something. “She wished me luck,” he says. “She said—okay, so I asked her if she didn’t object to what you did, before you ran to Qo’nos, and she...how did she put it?” He tips his head back, thinking. “She said Marcus had a tiger in a cage, and asked me if I was really surprised the tiger attacked when it got free. She also called herself a vindictive bitch, but she thinks you did the right thing.”

“Not an attitude I expected to find from a Starfleet commander,” Khan says after a moment.

“Yeah, well,” Jim says. “I don’t know. I think there’s more sympathy out there for you than you think there is.”

“Maybe,” Khan says. “It is not something I particularly want to research.”

“She also said she never liked Marcus, so that might have something to do with it,” Jim admits. “What do you want for dinner?”

“That does not surprise me,” Khan says. “Marcus had little use for women, and one her size would have been...” He shrugs a shoulder. “He probably treated her like a child without much intelligence.”

“That’s about what she said,” Jim says. “Hard to believe someone with those attitudes could...well, it’s hard to believe he did so much of what he did.”

“I suppose,” Khan says. “As for dinner, what do you recommend?”

Jim points out a few dishes he’s particularly liked and Khan picks one, and Jim goes to place the order. “Be about half an hour,” he says, coming back over to Khan. “How was your day?”

“Productive,” Khan says. “Mr. Spock and I have another simulation running tonight based on adjustments we made today. I am hopeful it will turn out better than last night’s.”

“What was wrong with last night’s? You said it worked,” Jim says.

“It did, but used too much power,” Khan says. “We think we have ways to refine that, however, and decrease the power consumption. Do you really want the technical details?”

“I might understand them,” Jim protests. “I am a genius, after all. But no, I don’t. I’ve had enough of work for the day.”
“I was not insulting your intelligence,” Khan says. “Merely asking if you want to get that in-depth.”

“Not right now,” Jim says. “You can explain it to me another time.”

Khan nods, taking a sip of water. “I will need to return to my quarters tomorrow morning,” he says.

“Yeah, I figured,” Jim says. “Clothes, shower stuff, things like that. You could—if you wanted to bring some over, that would be okay, so you don’t have to rush off every morning.”

“Perhaps I will,” Khan says. “Tell me something, Jim. Why were you so nervous when telling me about Commander Kane, both in general and about us being involved?”

“Well, the being involved part is just...I don’t know, it’s complicated,” Jim says. “I wasn’t sure how she’d react, you know? Whether she’d be upset because of what you did, or because of anything else, or...I mean, I know she’s working with some of our people but still, it’s not like...you’re different.”

“A fair assessment,” Khan says. “But you were nervous simply telling me you spent time with her.”

Jim’s wings shift and fold around him before he makes them fold back. “I didn’t know how you’d react,” he says. “I mean, it’s not like we were flirting, but...”

“Did you think I would think you were?” Khan asks.

“Um,” Jim says. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, we haven’t had the exclusive conversation or not but it’s not like I want anyone else, but I didn’t know...she’s female, and pretty, and--”

“Do we need to have the exclusivity discussion?” Khan asks. “I will tell you now, Jim, I do not like the idea of polyamory. I will also tell you that I do not think you are about to go out and sleep with random people. If you want to pursue a friendship with Commander Kane, by all means, I am in no way going to tell you who you can and can’t talk to. But unless you give me cause to think otherwise, I am not doubting your fidelity.”

“Most people would,” Jim says. “Apparently I have a reputation.”

Khan shrugs. “I know you.”

“You do,” Jim says. “Okay. I like Jill, and I’d like to develop a friendship with her. I don’t know that many other Starfleet commanders, or captains, and I probably should. Jill seems pretty tied in, and I could use some networking. And no, I’m not about to sleep with anyone else, nor do I want to.”

“I didn’t think you did,” Khan says.

Jim blows out a breath. “Plus, anyway she’s married, and I get the impression she could kick my ass if she wanted.”

“You really should study more unarmed combat,” Khan says. “I can teach you. It might be better if I did, rather than Katsuro or Ekaterina, because of the wings.”

Jim thinks about that for a moment. Fighting Khan, wrestling with him, feeling Khan’s hands around his wrists or his body pinning Jim down or—“Um,” he says. “So long as we do that in private. I don’t need my crew seeing me get my ass kicked by you.”

Khan smiles and Jim thinks he knows what Jim was thinking. “All right,” he says. “We can arrange that.”
“I think you’re laughing at me,” Jim says, but he smiles.

“Your motives are not entirely about your crew,” Khan says. “That much is patently obvious.”

“I didn’t say they were,” Jim says. “But I don’t need Ekaterina laughing at me, either. I mean, I’m not terrible, just compared to you.”

“I never implied or said you were,” Khan says. “Why are you so convinced I automatically think the worst of you? That you are incompetent, or unfaithful, or stupid?”

“Because mostly people see my reputation and not me, and the reputation is...a lot of things I’m not,” Jim says when he thinks he can trust his voice. “Because I like sex and I’ve never really been looking for a relationship before so people think I’m just out to screw as many people as possible, because they think I slept my way to the Enterprise and all my successes have been just luck. Because I don’t know if I’m as good a man as you think I am.”

“I think you think less of yourself than you should,” Khan says.

“So, something we have in common,” Jim says, managing a smile.

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “Jim, you are remarkably intelligent and a successful ship’s captain. I studied your record when I was at Section 31, out of curiosity. You may have been aided by luck, but much of what you’ve accomplished has been due to your skills and your crew’s skills.”

“Most people don’t see that,” Jim says.

“I am not most people,” Khan says simply.

“No,” Jim agrees. “No, you’re not.”

“Tell me, Jim,” Khan says. “Did Commander Kane see you or the reputation?”

“She saw me,” Jim says. “I mean, she’s aware of my reputation, but I think...I like to think she saw me.”

“Admiral Pike sees you,” Khan says. “Why does this bother you so much? Why are you so convinced people who meet you will not see you for what you are, instead believing the reputation of things you are not?”

“I hate the damn reputation,” Jim says. “It’s gotten me into trouble, and there are people who believe that’s all I am. A winged freak who’s just extraordinarily lucky and shouldn’t have his ship. Some people think I wouldn’t have it were it not for the wings, it’s some kind of...I don’t even know. Freak quota?” He sighs, his wings stretching and wrapping around him.

“You challenge the rules,” Khan says. “You challenge the status quo, you jump without worrying about a safety net or how far you will fall. You make people wonder how you do it, and how you succeed where they would likely fail. For better or for worse, Jim, you evoke reactions in people, and not all of them may be favorable to you. But I think you do yourself a disservice when you constantly doubt how other people see you. If you give them a chance, they will see you.”

“So, this is something we have in common, I see,” Jim says after a moment. “You think everyone in the world hates you, and I think everyone thinks I’m nothing more than what people say about me.”

“I don’t think everyone hates me,” Khan says. “I think most people see me more clearly than you do, because you want me to be a better man than I am.”
“Because you are a better man than you claim to be,” Jim says. “You’re not--I don’t know as I’d call you a good man, but you’re not a bad one, either. I think you were a great man, once, and maybe you will be again in this time, I don’t know. I think you should let people get to know you, find out what they actually think.”

Khan smiles a little. “Physician, heal thyself?”

“Something like that,” Jim says, smiling back.

The door buzzes and Jim goes to get their food and tip the delivery guy. He brings the box over to the coffee table and sets it down, going back for plates and silverware. Khan joins him on the couch, and they eat in companionable quiet.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Were you ever in a serious relationship?

Chapter Notes

I feel like I’m constantly apologizing for delays in updating; I’ve had some real life stuff going on and some health issues and for some reason, this chapter just took forever to write. I hope you enjoy it and I thank you for being patient with me. As always, comments are incredibly appreciated and I do try to respond to all of them, although it may take me a day or two.

“I wonder how Bones and Maeve are getting along,” Jim says, clearing away the trash from dinner. “They’re probably at dinner now.”

“I would not advise calling Dr. McCoy,” Khan says, watching Jim throw away cartons and load plates and silverware into the washer.


“Are you really that concerned for him?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jim says. “Yes. Maybe. He...he likes women, don’t get me wrong, but he got burned badly when his marriage broke up, and every time he got interested in someone at the Academy, well, it didn’t always go well, and I just don’t want...” He sighs and his wings ruffle. “I don’t know Maeve that well, so I have absolutely no idea how well she and Bones will do with each other.”

“Perhaps the four of us should attempt an outing,” Khan says, sounding amused. “You and Leonard can eye each other’s partners warily.”

“A double date? Yeah, I don’t know as I see that going well,” Jim says, getting two beers from the fridge and popping the caps off the bottles. He brings them over to the couch and hands one to Khan, taking a seat next to him. “On the other hand,” he says after taking a swallow. “Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst idea in the world.”

“If the only reason you are proposing the idea is to see how Maeve and Leonard interact, I would advise against it,” Khan says.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Jim says even though he might. “But...you and Bones need to get more comfortable with each other, right, and I do want to get to know Maeve better, because I want to know everyone better, and...I’ll mention it to Bones tomorrow.”

“How did your meeting go?” Khan asks, changing the subject entirely.

“It went fine,” Jim says. “Jill was pretty firmly on your--our--side, and there were a couple people
from Medical who were pretty impressed.” He tells Khan the story of Maeve recognizing the disease. “Basically, if it weren’t for Admiral Barnett, we’d be golden, but he’s still...he doesn’t trust your crew, and I don’t know what will get him to change his mind. It may just take time.”

“Time we have,” Khan says. “Can one admiral really be that much of a problem?”

“Uh,” Jim says, and Khan smiles. “You tell me.”

“Point well made, Jim,” Khan says. “And if Barnett winds up in charge of Starfleet...”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Jim says. “I’m not sure that’s been sorted yet. I’ll ask Pike when I meet with him. Speaking of, hang on.” He grabs a random PADD on his coffee table and sends Pike a quick message requesting a meeting with him, deliberately making it sound non-urgent and low-key. “Did you want to call Alona and Matthew, or just send them a message?”

“I will speak with them in the morning,” Khan says. “Before I return to the Enterprise.”

“Okay, that works,” Jim says. “So long as you’re sure you’ll see them.”

“We make it a point to say hello in the morning,” Khan says. “All of us. Too many occasions when we could not.”

“But you haven’t been--you weren’t there this morning,” Jim says. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” Khan says, taking a sip of beer. “No, they knew I was not likely to return this morning.”

“Should I go back with you tomorrow?” Jim asks, more than a bit uncertain. “I mean, I’m guessing all your people know we’re...” He gestures with his bottle. “Would it be rude if I didn’t go?”

“You would be welcome, if you wanted to come for breakfast,” Khan says. “Do you wish to?”

“As you like,” Khan says.

“I’m trying to do this right,” Jim admits. “I mean, I don’t even really know what’s going on between us, but I don’t want to screw this up, and not just because your crew could all kill me if I hurt you.”

“Why do you think you will?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Because I’ve never claimed to be any good at relationships that were more than casual hookups? Did you--were you ever in a serious relationship, when you were originally alive?”

“Once,” Khan says. “She was not one of us, and...she died, a few years after I came to power. She became ill, cancer, and she did not tell me until it was too late. I could have saved her, if she had told me earlier, but she...” He breathes out slowly. “She didn’t know I could have saved her, and she did not want me to be distracted with worry for her, and she died.”

“What was her name?” Jim asks softly.


“Do you have any pictures of her?” Jim asks.
Khan nods. “With my things, back at the dorm.”

“I’d like...would you show them to me?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“How did you meet her?” Jim asks.

Khan smiles a little. “I conquered her city, and she came to negotiate for release of prisoners and fair treatment, and I told her I would let her father and her brothers go if she would stay with me. I let them all go, in fact, and she stayed. She became one of my chief negotiators, and I fell in love with her, and later she with me.”

“You courted her, didn’t you?” Jim asks, a little amused and a little saddened by the idea--not at the idea of Khan courting anyone, but at the loss he’d suffered when Rani died.

“Of course I did,” Khan says. “She deserved no less.”

Jim wonders if Khan would court him and then bites his lip before he says that out loud. He’s not sure he’d want that, in the first place, and in the second, he doesn’t know that what he and Khan have, or what they’re developing, is the same thing at all as what Khan had with Rani. He doesn’t want to risk devaluing that by making a joke about the two of them.

“How long were you together?” he asks instead.

“Six years,” Khan says. “She only wanted one thing from me I could not give her.”

“She wanted a child, didn’t she?” Jim asks, putting pieces together.

“Yes,” Khan says. “She did, and we had talked about perhaps adopting one, or creating our own with the aid of some of my people, manipulating DNA to create an embryo much the same way we were created. But she died before we had time.”

“I’m sorry,” Jim says.

Khan nods. “She told me every person has her time, and this was hers. I told her it didn’t have to be, and she told me that wasn’t my decision to make.”

“Whose was it?” Jim asks.

“The gods,” Khan says. “Or the universe, or time, or...some force greater than us.”

“Do you believe in God? Or gods?” Jim asks curiously.

Khan’s wings ruffle and fold back. “Undecided,” he says. “I suppose I should be considered an agnostic.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” Jim says. “I’ve never been able to decide if I believed or not either. It’s hard to say you believe in something that by definition we can’t prove exists.”

“The essence of faith is just that,” Khan says. “A willingness to trust in something that cannot be quantified.”

“It’s hard to do, in today’s age,” Jim says. “Everything’s so centered on science, on what we can prove and learn. Religion’s kind of fallen out of favor.”
“There is a difference between being religious and having faith,” Khan says. “One requires adhering to a moral and behavioral code and joining a group. One simply requires a decision. What one does with one’s faith is a personal matter.”

“Do you have faith?” Jim asks quietly.

“In what way?” Khan asks.

Jim licks his lips, trying to figure out how to put it. “I mean...I don’t know. Do you believe there’s more to life than what we can measure?”

“Yes,” Khan says simply. “I believe in more things between Heaven and Earth, if that is what you mean. To an extent I believe in karma, and that there are things we may never understand, answers we may never find in this lifetime.”

“Do you believe in life after death?” Jim asks. “Or reincarnation?”

“I am not sure,” Khan says. “Do you?”

“I think so,” Jim says. “I don’t know if I believe in Heaven and Hell, but I like to think there’s more out there than just this life. Maybe if we get things wrong this time around we get another chance to get it right, you know? Or maybe if bad things happen in this life, next time we get a better deal. I like the idea of karma, that what goes around comes around, and that whatever happens, it all balances out in the end, even if we never see it happen.”

“Do you believe in fate?” Khan asks.

“I believe I make my own destiny,” Jim says. “Free will.”

Khan smiles a little. “That does not surprise me.”

Jim takes a drink of beer. “If I were to get sick, would you heal me?”

“Yes,” Khan says without hesitating.

“Why?” Jim asks.

“Because you are part of my people,” Khan says. “I take care of what’s mine.”

“Am I yours?” Jim asks, and it’s not what he meant to ask but he’s not sure what he did mean to ask.

“In what way?” Khan asks. “You are one of my crew, Jim, my family. I certainly do not own you, nor would I want to, but I consider you part of my people. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“I’m not sure what I wanted to know,” Jim admits. “Did you--” He stops, afraid to ask what he wants to know. “Was Rani yours?”

“Yes,” Khan says softly. “She was mine. More than one of my people, she was mine. She belonged with me, to me, and I to her.”

It’s not fair to compare what he and Khan have to his relationship with Rani and Jim knows it. He’s not jealous, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he is curious about her, about what it must have been like for her to fall in love with such a powerful, dangerous man. “She must have been an incredible woman,” he says, almost to himself.

“She was,” Khan says. “Beautiful and brilliant and fierce. I wanted her from the moment I saw her.”
“When did you know you loved her?” Jim asks.

“When she laughed,” Khan says. “She was so serious at first, demanding I treat the prisoners fairly, free her family, provide for my new subjects. I gave her everything she asked for so she would stay with me, and I sought her out to talk, for advice, just to be together. But she was so serious, and gradually she began to smile more, to relax more in my company. And one day, we were talking over lunch, and I made some offhand comment, I can’t even remember now, and she laughed, and I knew I loved her.”

“When did she fall in love with you?” Jim asks.

“She never told me,” Khan says. “When I asked, she laughed and told me it didn’t matter, that what mattered was she loved me now.”

“Huh,” Jim says. “Maybe she thought it was embarrassing or something.”

“She liked having a few secrets,” Khan says. “She felt if we knew absolutely everything about each other, we would have nothing to discuss in twenty years.”

“That makes sense,” Jim says. “I’m sorry you didn’t get those years.”

Khan nods. “As am I. Why are you so curious about her?”

“Because she was important to you,” Jim says. “I’m not— it’s not like I’m comparing us, or anything, I just... you loved her, and I want to know what made her so special to you. I mean, I’m guessing you could have had just about anyone you wanted, so why her?”

“She wasn’t afraid of me,” Khan says. “Never, not even after she saw me kill men in front of her. Even when she knew I held her father and her brothers, and I could have killed them without blinking, she was not afraid to bargain for their lives. Even before she trusted me, she didn’t fear me.”

“Why not?” Jim asks.

Khan shakes his head. “I do not know. She never told me.”

“What did she think of your wings?” Jim asks, brushing his fingers over the edge of Khan’s wing and feeling him shiver, just a little.

“She loved to fly with me,” Khan says. “She was light enough I could carry her, and I would take her out with me at night.”

“Would she have gone into cryosleep with you?” Jim asks. “If she’d survived?”

“I do not know,” Khan says. “Probably not, however, since she was not genetically enhanced. I do not know if she would have wanted to go, either.”

“Why wouldn’t she?” Jim asks. “She loved you.”

“But her family was important to her, and they were not going,” Khan says. “It would have been a difficult decision. In some ways I am glad she didn’t have to make it.”

“Did your family consider her a member?” Jim asks.

“Of course,” Khan says. “Ekaterina in particular adored her. She wept at Rani’s funeral, one of only three times I have ever seen her cry.”
Jim wonders what the other two times were and doesn’t ask. “Would I have liked her?” he asks instead.

“I believe so,” Khan says. “But things would be very different had she survived, had she been in one of the tubes. I would have found a way to revive her, regardless of consequences, and I would have killed Marcus without a second thought had he threatened her.”

“Because she couldn’t defend herself?” Jim asks.

“Because she was mine,” Khan says, quiet and fierce. “Because I promised her I would protect her, always.”

Jim considers saying something, realizes he’s not sure what, and takes a sip of beer instead. “Where is she buried?” he asks when Khan looks less...something and the knuckles wrapped around his beer bottle aren’t stark white.

“She wasn’t,” Khan says. “She was cremated, her ashes scattered.”

There’s more to it than that, Jim thinks. “So all you have of her now are pictures?”

“Images, two of her journals, and two pieces of jewelry I had given her,” Khan says. “And...” His wings shift and he looks away from Jim. “I kept some of her ashes. It was...the only way I could keep part of her with me.”

“Do you still have those?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “When we were sent into exile, we were allowed to keep some small amount of possessions, and we hid them through the ship. Marcus never looked, but once we began reviving the others, we were able to retrieve what possessions we had secreted away. Everything I had of Rani’s is still safe.”

“I’m glad,” Jim says. “Have you looked up her family since you were revived? Maybe she had descendants who are still around?”

“What would the point be?” Khan asks. “Her brothers never fully trusted me, and we had little to say to one another even when she was alive. Why would I find her descendants? What would it gain me?”

“You could tell them about her,” Jim says. “Maybe they have stories. Maybe they have other possessions of hers, or...I don’t know. It’d be a connection, a way to remember her.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “I suppose it would not hurt to at least see if she has any living relatives.”

“Exactly,” Jim says.

Khan sets his beer down on a coaster. “Did you ever try to have a serious relationship?”

“No,” Jim says, shaking his head. “I didn’tt--” He shrugs, a little sheepish. “I like sex, and I never tried to pretend I didn’t, but I never met anyone I really wanted to stick around before. I never ended things on bad terms with anyone, but I always said going in that I didn’t want anything serious.” He sets his bottle down next to Khan’s. “You’re different.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because you are,” Jim says. “You’re not like anyone else I’ve ever met. You have to know that. It’s
not just about the wings. I mean, there’s those, too, but it’s not...” His wings shift and he lets them. “I
don’t know what we have between us, but I’m not in any hurry to move on.”

“I did not think you were,” Khan says. “But odds are if all you had wanted was a casual hook up, I
never would have said yes.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured,” Jim says. “Uhura had this theory that--it sounds stupid, but she said it was
kind of like you and I were negotiating an alliance between your crew and Starfleet, and you and I
were, I don’t know, the symbolic...thing...to tie our people together.” He can’t say the word
marriage; it sounds too ridiculous.

“What do you think?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Is she right?”

Khan shrugs one shoulder. “In a sense, perhaps. It certainly was not my intent, but it could be a side
benefit.”

“What was your intent?” Jim asks.

“Not everything I do has an ulterior motive,” Khan says.

Jim has to smile. “You didn’t know, did you? You had no idea why you agreed to be with me.”

“Did you know why you were asking?” Khan asks.

“Honestly, no,” Jim admits. “I just...you fascinate me.”

Khan brushes his fingers over the edge of Jim’s wing. “Do you want to go flying?” he asks. “It is not
that late yet.”

Jim considers it for all of three seconds. “Yes,” he says.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Because everyone has doubts.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, the verdict of this summer is that my body hates me and does not want me to write. I had minor surgery (yes, that makes two for the summer) last Friday and some complications after and writing has not been high on my list of things I felt up to doing for a while. But! I have gotten better and thus you have a new chapter. As always, comments/criticism gladly welcomed--even if it's just to say I suck and here's the ten things I could have done better!

Pike calls Jim over breakfast and tells him to come by now, which Jim was half expecting and glad he grabbed a shower before he and Khan left. He tells Pike he’ll be there in ten, excuses himself from the table, and tells the others he’ll catch up to them on board. Ekaterina raises her eyebrows, but doesn’t ask; Jim leaves Khan to explain and heads out. He feels mildly guilty about that, but on the other hand, isn’t quite sure what he’d tell her if she did ask.

“Come on in,” Pike calls when Jim knocks on the door. Jim comes in, closes the door behind him, and takes the seat Pike waves him to. “So,” Pike says, leaning back in his chair. “Why are we here?”

Jim considers for a moment what he wants to say. “Sir, it’s about Khan’s people,” he says finally. “Do you--is there going to be a problem with Admiral Barnett?”

Pike studies him for a moment. “He doesn’t trust them,” he says. “To be fair, I’m not sure he should. Someone should remain skeptical, and with their history...” He shrugs. “It does seem a bit suspect that they’d go so quickly from what was to now.”

“Do you think they’re playing us?” Jim asks caustically.

“Most of the time, no,” Pike says. “But I think it’d be dangerous to assume that what we see is all there is.”

Jim remembers the conversation about the five doctors, about Khan’s promise they won’t know, and has an uneasy feeling Pike’s right. “So what do we do about it?” he asks instead, shifting in his chair as his wings try to stretch.

“There’s nothing we can do at the moment,” Pike says. “Nothing we should do, either, without reason, and right now all we have is Will thinking they’re up to something and a few random suspicions they might be. What do you think? I know you’ve been spending time with them.”

“I think they like their games,” Jim says slowly. “And I think they’re very insular as a group. They don’t trust most people except each other, and they trust each other implicitly. If you asked any of
them to go to bat for any other of them, they’d do it in a heartbeat without asking why.” He stops, considering what he wants to say. Away from Khan and his crew, he still feels obscurely guilty for admitting to having doubts, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have them. “I think, maybe, they’re not up to anything—yet. They haven’t had time, things are too different from what they knew, they’re smart enough to play the long game and see what happens. But...they may be positioning themselves for advantages later, and I don’t know about that. I think--Khan’s been honest with me, I know that much, and so have his people that i’ve gotten to know, but Vulcans don’t lie either and they’re sneaky sons of bitches, so truth can be...slippery.”

Pike snorts at that. “What have you been talking about?”

Jim shrugs, his wings ruffling. “Life, history, general getting to know each other stuff.”

“Does he trust you?” Pike asks.

For a moment, Jim hesitates, caught between what feels like a rock and a hard place. He doesn’t know why he’s so reluctant to admit to Pike what’s going on, but it feels almost like a betrayal to tell him the truth about himself and Khan. And at the same time, it’s not like he’s ashamed or anything, but...”Yes,” he says after what feels like too long a pause. “At least, I think he does.”

“Do you trust him?” Pike asks. “Should you?”

Jim licks dry lips. “I’m not sure, but I think I do,” he says, answering in reverse order. “He’s...complicated, but at the same time he’s very straightforward if he wants to be, and he’s been honest with me.”

“Are you involved with him, Kirk?” Pike asks matter-of-factly.

“Uh,” Jim says. “Sir, that’s not--”

“So that’d be a yes,” Pike says. “Is that wise?”

“Probably not, sir,” Jim says. “But at this point I think breaking it off would be a bad idea.”

Pike’s eyebrows rise, but he doesn’t ask. “How does the rest of his crew feel about you? About Starfleet?”

“They’re giving me a chance, sir,” Jim says. “Same with Starfleet.”

“You have four on your ship,” Pike says. “They’re working out?”

“As far as I know, sir,” Jim says. “No one’s complained, although I think my security folks are a bit envious.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Pike says. “Which one is working with them?”

“Ekaterina, sir,” Jim says. “And she’s going to be teaching a couple people knife work.” That reminds him he has to stop by the quartermaster’s office before he heads up to the ship.

“Let’s not have anyone get cut open,” Pike says. “Keep me posted.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says, figuring it for a dismissal and getting to his feet. Pike dismisses him, and Jim salutes and sees himself out.

He walks over to the quartermaster’s office, mulling over the meeting with Pike. It hadn’t gone quite the way he’d meant it to, but he’s glad he took the chance to talk. Maybe there is more going on than
meets the eye. Maybe Khan’s playing him. Jim thinks back to flying with him the night before, to Khan catching him when he’d wavered, arms tight around his chest, and later, to Khan’s body against his, hands rough and voice low. That can’t have been anything but honest. Can it?

He’s so sunk. If Khan’s playing him, there’s no way Jim will be able to outthink him, outplay him. If he isn’t...he’s still sunk. Jim’s intelligent enough to realize Pike probably doesn’t approve of them being involved, and Barnett will have a fit when--if--he finds out. And yet he can’t just break it off; more than that, he doesn’t want to.

The quartermaster gives him a big wooden box that Jim tucks under one arm and doesn’t open. It’s remarkably heavy, and gets heavier as he carries it over to the shuttle bay, and he’s relieved to set it down for the trip up to the Enterprise. He carries it to the bridge with him, figuring he’ll find Ekaterina there, and sighs in relief when he finds her sitting next to Uhura. “Present for you, courtesy of the quartermaster,” he says, handing her the box.

“Spasiba, captain,” she says, lifting the lid. A dozen knives gleam against the velvet interior, tucked into slots. Ekaterina lifts one out, frowning as she tests its balance in her hand, loosely bouncing it against her fingers. She flips it into the air and catches it just before Jim dives out of the way, and nods. “Acceptable.”

“Please don’t throw knives on the bridge,” Jim says warily. “We have gyms for that sort of thing.”

“Of course,” she says, putting the knife away and closing the box. Jim relaxes a little when she sets it down, and turns to his yeoman to find out what paperwork’s waiting for him this time. He deals with that quickly enough, gauges the time, and leaves the bridge in search of Bones. He should have enough time to find him before Jill shuttles over.

“What?” Bones demands when Jim walks into sickbay.

“Good morning to you too,” Jim says, rolling his eyes and leaving off the ‘asshole’ at the end of it. “Am I interrupting any emergencies?”

“Not at the moment, captain,” one of the nurses says. Bones glowers at her but jerks his head toward his office, and Jim follows him into it and shuts the door.

“You’re remarkably cranky for a man who had a date last night,” Jim says. “Please tell me you’re cranky from lack of sleep.”

Bones sighs and rubs a hand over his eyes. “Yeah, something like that.”

“She keep you up all night?” Jim asks, smirking.

Bones snorts. “Jealous?”

“Nope,” Jim says. “Did she?”

“Yeah,” Bones says, slumping back in his chair. “It’s one thing to know they need less sleep than we do and another to deal with it.”

“I know,” Jim says, keeping his voice matter-of-fact, and Bones snorts again. “So things went well?”

“Yeah,” Bones says. “Yeah, they did. We have more in common than I thought we would.”

“Like what?” Jim asks. “I mean, other than medicine.”
“Music, food, alcohol,” Bones says. “She says she likes to dance, so we thought we might go out sometime.”

“What kind of dancing?” Jim asks. “Like, clubbing, or—”

“No, not like clubbing,” Bones says. “Proper dancing.”

“I didn’t know you danced,” Jim says in surprise.


“Right,” Jim says, deciding to leave that alone.

“Anyway,” Bones says. “What do you really want to know?”

Jim looks at him, eyebrow raised, and Bones actually laughs. “Depraved.”

“Oh, like you’ve never asked me,” Jim says, grinning.

“I haven’t,” Bones says. “You’re always eager to tell.”

Jim pauses to consider that for a moment. “Not this time,” he says.

“Yeah, that’s really fine,” Bones says.

“So?” Jim nudges.

Bones smiles, lazy and relaxed. “I’m seeing her again tonight, that’s all you get,” he says.

“Oh, come on,” Jim protests. “That’s not fair.”

“Deal with it,” Bones says.

“Come on,” Jim wheedles. “One small, tiny detail?”

“She’s a natural redhead,” Bones says, and Jim laughs.

“I kind of guessed that one,” he says.

“Yeah, well, it’s all you get,” Bones tells him.

“Was it good at least?” Jim asks, not giving up.

“No,” Bones says. “It was better than good.”

“Okay, fine,” Jim says. “Just...life’s too short for bad sex.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” Bones counters.

“Yeah, I really would,” Jim says, remembering a few less-than-spectacular nights.

“Get out of here,” Bones says. “Don’t you have work to do?”

“Yeah, probably,” Jim says, pushing to his feet. “You know, maybe if you wanted sometime, the four of us could...” He shrugs. “Just an idea.”
“What, like a double date?” Bones laughs. “What are you, fourteen?”

“Hey, it’s just an idea,” Jim says, a little sheepish.

“Yeah, maybe,” Bones says. “I’ll ask Maeve.”

“Catch you later,” Jim says, heading out of the office. He has just enough time to get down to shuttle bay without rushing before the lieutenant on duty announces an incoming shuttle from the Marshall. Once it docks, he walks over to greet Jill.

“Permission to come aboard?” she asks, standing in the shuttle doorway.

“Granted,” Jim says, smiling. “Welcome to the Enterprise, Commander Kane.”

Jill jumps down to the floor rather than take the ramp and grins at Jim. “So,” she says. “Do you have time to show me the bridge?”

“Absolutely,” Jim says, feeling entirely too big next to her. “This way.”

He shows her around a bit of the ship, and takes her to the bridge where they pick up Uhura before heading to the gyms. Ekaterina’s already there when they arrive, and she’s set up a few targets and piled mats behind them. “Commander,” she says, turning. “Captain. Will you be joining us today?”

“As a spectator,” Jim says. “Is that all right?”

“One of these days I will convince you to take a lesson with me,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “It is your ship, captain. I cannot tell you what to do.”

“She does it all the time,” Jim says, nodding at Uhura.

“No idea what you’re talking about, captain,” Uhura says innocently.

Ekaterina laughs. “So,” she says. “Lieutenant, Commander, which is your dominant hand?”

“Nyota and I’m right handed,” Uhura says.

“Left handed,” Jill says. “And as far as I’m concerned you’re the instructor, so call me Jill.”

“For a hierarchical institution your officers are not very formal,” Ekaterina observes to Jim. “All right, then.” She leans down and opens the box, taking out two knives. “For the moment, hold this,” she says, handing one to Uhura and one to Jill. “Become comfortable with it, feel its weight and its balance.”

Jim watches as she leads them through some basic training on knifework, alternating her demonstrations between her right hand and her left without seeming to think about it. Eventually she gets them to try throwing the knives, one at a time. Uhura’s lands short of the target, skittering across the floor, but Jill’s hits, wobbling a bit and staying put. “Beautiful,” Ekaterina says, pleased. “Did you at one point play sports?”

“I play Ultimate Frisbee with my husband,” Jill says. “When we’re not shipped out, we have a league we’re in. It’s different throwing a knife than a frisbee, but it’s still throwing something.”

“A what?” Ekaterina frowns. “What is a frisbee?”

Jill laughs. “It’s a plastic disc with curved edges, about so big,” she says. “You throw it, and it flies through the air. I’ll bring one to show you next time, we can try it out.”
“And what is Ultimate Frisbee?” Ekaterina asks.

“Dangerous,” Jill says. “People get competitive trying to catch it. We had one player break an ankle diving for it last year.”

“This sounds interesting,” Ekaterina says. “You will have to show me. Nyota, you are being too tentative. The target cannot hurt you, and no one else in the room is in the way to get hit.” She crosses to the knives and picks them up, returning them back to the women. “Again, please.”

This time, Uhura’s knife hits the target and slams in, not on the bulls-eye but definitely on the board. Jill’s lands high and almost bounces off before staying. “Much better,” Ekaterina says. “Accuracy will come with time and practice.”

“Show us how you do it?” Jill asks.

“As you like,” Ekaterina says. She moves to stand between them, taking two more knives out of the box. Both of them go flying across the room and land a split second apart, right in the bulls-eye and quivering. “I have been throwing knives since I was four,” she says. “Well, three, but that was a dull blade.”

“And you’re how old?” Jill asks.

“Fifty-seven, not counting cryosleep time,” Ekaterina says.

“Okay, so in five decades I can almost be that good, got it,” Jill says, and Ekaterina laughs.

They finish up the lesson, and Jim’s about ready to head back to the bridge when Khan slips into the room, staying quiet and by the door until all the knives are packed up and put away. Jim’s surprised to see him, and motions him over. “What’s up?” he asks.

“Nothing of importance,” Khan says. “Mr. Spock and I are waiting for the results of our next simulation, and I thought I might come see how the lesson went.”

“It went well,” Ekaterina says. “Do you wish to practice?”

He shakes his head. “No, thank you.”

“You could probably use it, brother,” she says, and Khan smiles.

“Will you fight me?” he asks.

“Only if we have spare clothes aboard this vessel,” Ekaterina says. “I would not wish you to be walking around naked.”

“We frown on that,” Jim says hastily even though—no, nope, not going there. “Maybe another time, when we can ensure there are clothes and things?”

“Of course,” Ekaterina says.

Jim looks at Khan, looks at the women, and considers his options. “Lieutenant, can you show Commander Kane around?” he asks. “I have a thing to take care of, and she had wanted to see more of the ship.”

“Of course, captain,” Uhura says without sounding curious or wondering why she’s being asked to play tour guide. Good.
“Call me before you leave,” Jim tells Jill. “Ekaterina, I don’t know what your plans are for the rest of the day, are you working with the security folks?”

“I am,” she says. “They should be here shortly.”

“Great. Don’t break them.” Jim looks at Khan. “Walk with me for a minute? I want to talk to you about the simulation.”

“If you like, captain,” Khan says.

They leave, and Jim finds the nearest turbolift and tells it to take them to the floor where his quarters are located. Khan remains quiet, and Jim shows them into his quarters and locks the door behind them.

“Jim,” Khan says. “What is it?”

Jim blows out a breath. “I need to ask you something and I need you to--just--” He stops. “What game are you and your people playing, Khan? Is there a longer game here I don’t know about? What do you all want?”

Khan’s wings stretch and he forces them to fold back. “I have answered this,” he says, and his voice is cool but Jim knows he’s not pleased. “There is no game, Kirk. Not now.”

“What does not now mean?” Jim asks, and he hates doing this and at the same time he has to know.

“It means that my people--our people, as you have been correcting me--have been alive in this century for a matter of days,” Khan says, words clipped. “Despite what you think of us, clearly, we are not capable of planning the overthrow of an established united government when most of us have no experience with it nor current technology. Will we, one day, want power? Probably. Will we attempt to overthrow Starfleet or the Federation for it? Probably not. We are intelligent people. We know when things are possible and when they are not. If there is war with the Klingons, we will not sell out the Federation, and we will use our skills toward winning the war.”

“Do you really think there will be war?” Jim asks.

Khan’s mouth twists. “I think the Klingon Empire will not be pacified by treaties and neutral zones for long,” he says. “Marcus was a madman but his view was not entirely without merit. Starfleet will need more ships like the Vengeance before things come to a head.”


“If you trust us, why ask?” Khan asks.

“Because everyone has doubts,” Jim says. “Because you ruled a quarter of the globe and now you’re building shields and ships and that’s almost a comedown. Because Pike thinks there’s more going on than what we can see and I trust him, too, and he’s damn smart, and if he thinks that maybe there’s a reason for it. Because I want to prove Barnett wrong. Because you and I are what we are, and I’m not Rani and I never will be and I don’t know if you’ll ever love me or if I’ll ever love you but fuck if I’m not invested in this, in the success of our people.” He stops, breathing hard. “And they are our people,” he says quietly after a moment. “I believe that.”

Khan breathes in and out slowly, and his wings relax after a moment. “All right,” he says.

Jim walks over to him, where he stands by the door, and takes his hands. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I had
“If I were playing you, Jim, I would not be having sex with you,” Khan says after a moment. “Perhaps there are some lines I will not cross.”

“Speaking of, Pike knows,” Jim says, and Khan snorts.

“He is intelligent,” Khan says.

“Is he right?” Jim asks softly.

“We play games, Jim,” Khan says, sounding tired. “It is what we do. Of course we are collecting information, of course we are considering ways we can work situations to our advantage, of course we will find ways in which we can leverage our usefulness. But there is no concerted effort to wrest power away from those who have it. We are not planning a takeover. Not now. Possibly not ever. Ruling is a singularly wearisome occupation and frankly, I think most of us have had our fill.”

Jim runs his hands up Khan’s arms to the back of his neck, rubbing the tight muscles much the way Khan’s done for him before. Khan sighs quietly and leans his forehead against Jim’s. “How much time do we have before people will be looking for us?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “It’s lunchtime, so...maybe half an hour? Maybe a little longer? When is your simulation supposed to finish running?”

“Fourteen hundred hours,” Khan says.

“So you’ve got time,” Jim says. “I, however, probably need to find Jill and stuff.”

“Probably,” Khan agrees.

Neither of them move.

Jim tilts his head just a little bit and kisses Khan. “If I get any free time this afternoon, I’ll find you,” he promises.

Khan cups Jim’s face in his hands and kisses him again. “You know where I will be,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, and God, I wish we had time,” Jim says. “But I’m on duty, and I can’t...”

“I know,” Khan says, letting go of him and stepping back.

“Are we good?” Jim asks, his wings ruffling a little. “You and me.”

Khan nods. “Yes.”

Jim breathes out deeply. “Okay. Let’s go get lunch, I guess.” He unlocks the door and they leave.
Things fall into a rhythm over the next few weeks. Slowly, the augments move out of the dorms and into living quarters around the city. Khan gets an apartment two buildings over from Jim’s; he’s rarely there, but he has it. Somehow, Jim’s not sure how, Ekaterina ends up in his building. He doesn’t know about the others; he can look up their addresses if he has to, but doesn’t bother. The group of them make it a point to get together regularly, though, whether they reserve a private room at a restaurant for dinner or go to a show or just hang out in the park or take over a gym to spar together. Jim usually tags along, and after a couple weeks he sees Bones start to show up at the gatherings too. Neither of them join in the sparring sessions, but they watch.

“What’s it like watching Maeve fight?” Jim asks at one session, watching her spin out of the way of a punch and return with a solid kick to Amir’s solar plexus. “I mean, do you ever get scared she’ll use those skills on you?”

“What makes you think she hasn’t?” Bones asks, smiling a bit.

“Lack of bruises and broken bones,” Jim says. “Although you could heal those, or she could heal those, so...is she beating you up, Bones?”

To his surprise, Bones laughs. “No, not at all. She’s just--I’ve never dated a woman that much stronger than I am, and it’s...interesting. Most of the time she downplays it, doesn’t really matter, but every once in a while she forgets I’m just a normal human. Watching her fight, that’s interesting. I always wonder what it would take to get her to use these skills on someone who isn’t one of her people.”

“A threat to one of her people,” Jim says simply.

“Yeah,” Bones says. “You have a point there.” He falls silent, watching the battles around the gym. “Are you one of her people, Jim?”

“Yeah,” Jim says, not bothering to dissemble or hide it. “Yeah, I am. I got...I don’t know, adopted, a while back. You?”

Bones shakes his head. “Not me, not yet, but I think she’s thinking about it,” he says. “I think I’ll find out if she requests transfer to the Enterprise.”
“You think she will?” Jim asks.

“I think it’s possible,” Bones says. “And I might be losing my damned mind here, but I’d sign the order if she put it in.”

Jim has final say over personnel decisions, but Bones runs the medbay and Jim will never contradict one of Bones’s decisions where staffing is concerned. He doesn’t know a damn thing about what’s necessary to run a medbay and knows it; that’s exactly why he has Bones. “I don’t think you’re losing your mind,” he says instead. “Any more than I’m losing mine.”

“Your sanity started being questioned a while back,” Bones says with a snort and Jim thwaps his shoulder.

“Have you heard anything about Captain Knight?” Jim asks out of curiosity, because he hasn’t seen Jill in a few days and while no one’s mentioned anything about the Marshall leaving, that doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened or isn’t about to happen.

Bones grimaces. “Yeah,” he says. “I got word today from Maeve that he’ll recover partially, but he thinks he’s going to take disability and retire, or find a desk job. It hit him too badly for him to go back to captaining a ship, he’s just not up for it.”


“That I couldn’t tell you,” Bones says. “You could just comm her and ask.”

“I think we’re meeting tomorrow,” Jim says. “At least, we were the last time I checked my calendar. She and her husband were going to meet me and Khan for coffee, since it’s a day off for all of us. I’ll message her tonight and find out if we’re still on. You want to come?”

Bones shrugs. “Sure, I’ve got no plans that I know of,” he says. “Maeve and I were maybe going to catch a movie, but I’ll talk to her. I haven’t met Jill’s husband yet.”

“You’ll like him,” Jim says. “I’ve only met him a couple times, but he’s a good guy. Clearly devoted to Jill, and she to him.”

“How much taller is he?” Bones asks.

“Maybe a third of a meter,” Jim says. “Maybe little more. He’s shorter than I am, though.”

“Because it’s all about you,” Bones says. “What was up with your meeting with Admiral Pike today?”

“We have a science mission in three days,” Jim says. “I was going to let everyone know tonight via message. It’s only a few people, though, since the ship isn’t ready yet. There’s some weird asteroid they want us to check out and get samples from, and apparently Spock is jumping at the chance to check it out in person so he volunteered us.”

“Who’s going?” Bones asks.

“Spock, obviously,” Jim says. “Me, because it sounds interesting. Sulu, to pilot the shuttle we’re taking. Khan, because he thought it sounded interesting and Spock was all logically polite and invited him along, and we need one more. I think I want Ektaerina, even though she’s not science, because she would be able to excavate samples from the asteroid if we have to go EVA to do it—something in this keeps messing up sensors, so they can’t tell what’s actually up with it. Plus she’s mentioned wanting to space walk, so I figured why not bring her along?”

“He said he can work with her, and he doesn’t object,” Jim says. “Which is as close as I’m going to get to actual approval.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Bones says.

Someone shouts and everyone on the floor freezes for a five-count. Jim looks for Khan instinctively and finds him with an arm up, blocking a punch from Bishop. Out of curiosity, he looks for Maeve next and sees her on her knees with her hands around someone’s ankle—it’s a jumble of people and Jim can’t honestly tell who the ankle belongs to, but he’s impressed at that person’s ability to keep his balance.

“We need showers,” Alona says once everyone relaxes. “Then I think we had arranged for a meal from--somewhere.”

“Red Flower,” Matthew says. “They said they’d deliver it in about half an hour.”

“So just enough time, brilliant,” Alona says. The lot of them head out of the room, and Maeve pauses briefly to gives Bones a wink and a kiss on the cheek; Khan nods at Jim, who nods back, but doesn’t stop.

“What is Red Flower?” Bones asks Jim once they’ve all left. “And where are we eating?”

“There’s a mess hall down the hall,” Jim says. “And I think--hell, now I don’t remember. Fusion cuisine but I don’t think it’s strictly Earth. I think the name comes from a spice they use that grows on...Andor, maybe.”

Bones shrugs. “All right.”

Dinner turns out to be a mix of sweet and spicy dishes, one balancing the other, Jim supposes. Clean up takes almost no time, and while they hang out for a bit, eventually people start scattering. He catches Ekaterina’s eye and asks her to walk back to the building with him and Khan, and says goodnight to Bones and Maeve as they head out.

“So, captain,” Ekaterina says as they walk along, hands clasped behind her back much the way Spock does. Jim’s not sure if she learned it from him or something, but it’s a little freaky. “What is on your mind?”

Ekaterina’s now officially a first-grade lieutenant, red for ops, and she delights in teasing Jim by calling him by his rank every chance she gets. She claims she’s just being precise, but Jim knows better. But he’ll take it—that she’s teasing him means she likes him, and family doesn’t mean you have to like each other, just that you have each other’s backs.

“We have a science mission in a few days,” he says. “A few of us are taking a shuttle to check out some weird asteroid...thing that’s not too far from here. I’m going, Spock’s going, Khan. I’d like you to come along.” He lays out his reasons the same way he’d given them to Bones and Spock.

“A request, not an order, captain?” Ekaterina asks, raising her eyebrows.

“This time, yes,” Jim says. Technically he could just order her to come along--maybe should--but he’s never quite sure she’ll follow any order he gives her if she doesn’t like it. He’s never quite sure any of the augments will, even though no one’s given im cause.

“I see,” she says. “Very well, then, I will go.”
“Thank you,” Jim says.

She says something to Khan in Russian--Jim’s been trying to study, but his time is limited and as a result, so is his vocabulary. Khan laughs and shakes his head. “Nyet.”

“I really hate it when you do that,” Jim says with a sigh.

“I know,” Ekaterina says, laughing. “Rest assured, captain, I am only poking a little fun.”

“Right,” Jim says. “You could poke fun at me in English.”

“Da, but then I would not be suitably respectful of you and you would write me up for insubordination,” she says.

“I’d love to see the captain who would dare write you up,” Jim says without thinking about it. “You may be a lieutenant but that means jack shit sometimes.”

Ekaterina laughs again and this time Khan laughs with her. “Are you saying I have more authority than you?” she asks.

“No,” Jim says. “I’m saying you have more attitude than me and in a clash of personalities between you and just about anyone else I’m not sure who’d come out on top. That goes for everyone, really. You’re all very...alpha, and if it came to a choice between something you wanted and Starfleet regs you’d say fuck the regs and go your own way. I know you have assets, more than what Starfleet’s paying you, and I don’t know where you got them but you’re all, collectively and individually, worth enough that you could walk away if you wanted.” He does wonder about that, though. He’s seen them spending money sometimes, or rather seen the results of them buying things, and has always wondered where the money comes from. He’s never asked Khan, and Khan’s never volunteered the information.

“Starfleet has compensated us tolerably well for our troubles,” Ekaterina says. “For my brother’s troubles, I should say.”

Jim blinks, because that was something that had never occurred to him. “You threatened to sue them, and they settled?” he asks cautiously.

“Not quite but close,” Khan says. “We made several collective arguments, and Bishop put forth the one that if word got out what had happened to me, it would be...messy. There were other arguments, too, about what our skills were truly worth, and the cost of starting over in a new society, and so on, and they paid.”

“I’m...sure they did,” Jim says, still a little surprised. “You never told me.”

Khan shrugs. “You never asked.”

“I just figured you’d had valuables on the ship,” Jim says. “Things you could sell or trade or invest.”

“We left as war criminals,” Ekaterina points out. “They were not likely to let us keep gold or jewels. Of course, we had some, but they were in most cases personal items of emotional consequence. I have a set of jewelry I would prefer not to part with, for example. If I had to, I would, but I would prefer to keep it.” She’s quiet for a moment, but Jim thinks there’s more. “Konstantin gave it to me,” she says finally.

“How long were you together?” Jim asks.
“From the time I was fourteen until we went into cryosleep,” Ekaterina says, pressing her lips together. “Forty-three years.”

Khan touches her shoulder, and she sighs and smiles a little. “It is all right, brother.”

“I’m sorry you lost him,” Jim says quietly. “Will you--will you tell me about him sometime, if it’s not too painful?”

“I will,” she says. “But not tonight.”

“No,” Jim agrees. “Not tonight.” He wonders if Khan has pictures, though, and if he does, whose building they’re in. Khan keeps some things at his own apartment, but a lot of his possessions, which are mostly clothes and toiletries, have taken up residence in Jim’s closet and bathroom. Jim’s not sure where Rani’s things went, though, and hasn’t asked.

“You would have liked him,” Ekaterina says, though, surprising him. “Most people did. He wasn’t charming, not like Bishop can be, but he was just a good, decent man. Too good for our people, really. He wanted peace, so badly. He would have loved to see the Federation, a truly unified government.” Her voice terrifyingly catches, and Jim’s stomach twists.

“Cat,” Khan says softly. “Don’t.”

She breathes in and out slowly. “I had him for over four decades,” she says, a little more strongly. “That is more than many women can claim of their partners.” She looks up at Khan. “You only had six years.”

He says something in Russian, and she smiles. “True.”

“How many of you had partners that you lost?” Jim asks quietly. “How many of you are grieving, still?”

“A few,” Ekaterina says. “But they are not my stories to tell, and may not want them told at all. Khan was not the only one who lost a partner before we left Earth, and five of us left people behind when our ship departed. But as a group we lost thirty-one, Jim. When there were less than ninety of us to begin with, that is not insignificant. It would not be insignificant if there were more of us.”

“I never--I never asked what happened to those you lost,” Jim says, feeling like an idiot. “Their bodies, and...”

“Those we could not save were cremated,” Khan says. “Their ashes were mixed and each of us has a small portion. You were elsewhere when we had the memorial. Their possessions were divided among those of us who asked for them, although there was not much.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t ask,” Jim says, wings ruffling.

“It is not important,” Khan says. “You asked about them, which is of greater importance.”

By this point they’ve reached the apartment building. “Do you want a drink?” Jim asks Ekaterina as they go in and wait for the lift. “I think I’ve got vodka.” In fact, he knows he does; Ekaterina gave it to him.

“No, thank you,” she says. “But thank you for the offer.” She turns to Khan and says something in Russian, and he leans down and kisses her forehead, wings folding around her briefly. Ekaterina sighs and leans into him for a moment, until the lift arrives and they separate.
She’s on a higher floor than Jim is, so they get off first, and Jim glances back to make sure she’s all right, but she gives him a smile as the doors close. “Is she going to be okay?” he asks Khan anyway.

“Yes,” Khan says. “We are...resilient, if nothing else.”

“At least she still has you,” Jim says, letting them into the apartment. “I hate to think what would have happened if she’d lost both you and Konstantin.”

“In all likelihood she would have killed herself, or found someone to do it for her,” Khan states. “There are enough of us left that she has not felt the need, but...everyone has a breaking point.”

“Did you ever think of suicide?” Jim asks carefully.

“No,” Khan says. “I had my family to protect. How could I have tried to keep them safe if I were dead?”

“Good point,” Jim says. “Did--did Maeve leave anyone behind?”

Khan shakes his head. “She didn’t want a partner from regular humans, and none of us appealed to her romantically. I think there are a few who would have liked it otherwise, but it never happened.”

“I wonder what changed, why she’s with Bones,” Jim muses.

“Things are different, Jim,” Khan says, stating the obvious. “Very different.”

“Yeah, true,” Jim says. “Do you want a drink or anything?”

“I think I would,” Khan admits. “Whatever you would like.”

Jim shrugs and pulls the vodka out of the freezer. He pours two generous glasses and puts it back in the freezer before handing one glass to Khan and keeping the other. He’s somehow not surprised when Khan thanks him and knocks back half of it without grimacing. “Long day,” Jim says, even though it hasn’t been that bad. He takes a sip of his own drink.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“I didn’t see you for most of it,” Jim says as they take seats on the couch. “What happened?”

Khan shakes his head. “Nothing important. A series of minor annoyances that all contrived to become a bigger problem than I expected.”

For the last week or so, Khan’s been working on a project that Jim knows very little about, other than he’s collaborating with Katusro, Matthew, and a few non-augments and has been spending most his time at HQ with them. “What exactly are you working on?” he asks, taking another sip of his drink.

“What is your clearance level?” Khan asks in exchange, and Jim’s eyebrows go up.

“Seriously? You’re back to section 31 stuff?”

“I am familiar with it,” Khan points out. “And Admiral Barnett seems to hold some beliefs that Marcus also did.”

“Are you going to be able to ship out with us?” Jim asks. “Or are they keeping you here?”

“No, the plan is still to serve on the Enterprise,” Khan says. “But they are working us harder now so
that when we leave, we can hopefully do some work by long distance and message and video link.”

“Can you tell me about it?” Jim asks. “Will you?”

Khan takes a sip of his drink. “If you like. The group of us are working on ship design, but not like the Vengeance. Smaller ships, designed for hit and run attacks. Improved shuttles, I suppose. There is another group, including Alona and Henri, who are working on combat training classes to be designed specifically for fighting Klingons.”

“But they’ve never fought a Klingon,” Jim says slowly.

“No, but some others have, and we do have video of how they move, how they fight. Alona wants a bat’leth now,” Khan says, and Jim laughs.

“That doesn’t surprise me. How many of your crew are working on classified projects at this point?”

“Perhaps half,” Khan says, considering it. “Ekaterina has been asked to work with Alona and Henri, but has not yet agreed. Bishop starts in two days to work on ship to ship combat tactics.”

“What hasn’t Ekaterina agreed?” Jim asks.

“I do not know,” Khan says. “We haven’t spoken about it due to lack of time. I know she was asked because I recommended her, and I know she has not accepted because Alona told me, but I have not spoken to her directly about the situation.”

Jim frowns. “Maybe you should.”

“I probably should,” Khan agrees. “The question is finding time.”

“She’s off shift tomorrow,” Jim says. “At least, she should be. Oh, that reminds me, I have to comm Jill and find out if we’re still on. I found out today that her captain is not returning to the ship, so I don’t know what that means for her. Hang on a sec.” He finds his link and calls Jill. “Hey, it’s Jim Kirk,” he says when she answers. “Are we still on for coffee tomorrow?”

“Yeah, we’re on,” she says. “I have some news, though.”

“About your captain?” Jim asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, I’ll tell you more tomorrow.” She sounds distracted, so Jim says goodbye and shuts his link.

“Do you want to call Ekaterina and see if she wants to meet up tomorrow?” he asks Khan.

“I will stop by her apartment in the morning,” Khan says. “I think she would prefer to be alone tonight.”

“Even from you?” Jim asks.

“Even from me,” Khan says.

Jim sighs and takes a drink. “I wish she hadn’t lost him,” he says. “That’s...how do you cope with losing someone after almost half a century, especially when you have to start over like she did?”

“In some ways it is easier,” Khan says, surprising Jim. “Everything is different, there are no memories to weigh her down. She isn’t in Russia, where she would be reminded of him constantly.”
“You have a point,” Jim says. “Is it...is it easier for you?”

Khan takes a sip of his drink. “I had a while without Rani before we even left Earth,” he points out. “I have grown used to not having her, I suppose. It is not easy, but it does grow easier with time.”

And you have me, Jim thinks but doesn’t say it. He still doesn’t know exactly what’s between himself and Khan, and neither of them have brought it up. Instead, he takes another drink and says nothing.

“You should message the crew,” Khan says after a while. “About the mission.”

“I should,” Jim admits, setting down his glass and reaching for a PADD. “Shouldn’t be a big deal. I’m not even sure why we’re going, except Spock wanted to.”

“Perhaps that is reason enough,” Khan says.

“Maybe it is,” Jim says. “When I’m done with this, do you want to play chess?”

“I would like that,” Khan says.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Does he know that?

Chapter Notes

Okay. So a couple things. One, for those of you who like the porn and would like to see some of it, I wrote a missing scene from this fic. It's called Safe Landing and you don't really need to know much about the current plotline to read it, it's basically a PWP.

However, it did influence some things in this chapter, so you may want to read that (and tell me what you think) before reading this.

Jill looks uncharacteristically sober when they meet up at the cafe for lunch, and she orders regular coffee rather than her usual--although Jim notes she does dump a lot of sugar into it, so that's not so far off from her usual thing. “Captain Knight’s retiring,” she says after all of them take their seats. She takes a drink of coffee and blows out a breath. “I’m being promoted into his place, and I’m assigning Amir as my first officer.”

Jim’s glad he wasn’t drinking. “That’s...whoa,” he says. “Congratulations, captain.”

She smiles, but it’s a pale shadow of her usual grin. “I didn’t want it, not like this,” she says. “I mean, I never quite figured out how I did want it, but...taking over because my captain’s retiring on disability feels wrong.”

Bones coughs, not looking at Jim, who refuses to think of Admiral Pike in a wheelchair and takes a swallow of coffee instead, scalding his mouth and wincing.

Evan, Jill’s husband, covers her hand with his own. “You deserve it,” he says. “No one knows our ship and her people better than you do.”

“I know,” Jill says. “And I didn’t want someone else coming in and taking over, not someone who doesn’t know her like I do, but...I don’t know if I’m ready for this.”

“You never do,” Jim says.

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” Jill asks, smiling a bit. “Cadet to captain, and I thought I was on the fast track.”

“Technically I was first officer for a bit first,” Jim says. “Then I was almost first officer again, but that’s a tangled story not worth telling.”

“The point is, I didn’t jump the way you did, and I’m older than you,” Jill says. “I missed the battle at Vulcan, not having been in the quadrant, and God only knows where I’d be now if we’d been there. If we’d even have survived.” She takes another sip of coffee. “We lost so many.”
“We did,” Jim says quietly, remembering the destruction they’d witnessed. One mistake leading to one slower than usual entry into warp, a moment of clarity from Jim—who’d been right, damnit—and they’d made it. Had Sulu not...had Jim not been there...so many things would have been different.

“God, this is depressing,” Jill says. “On to happier topics. I mean, a promotion is good news, I suppose, and I’ll be glad to have Amir. He doesn’t think the way a lot of my officers do, and I want the contrast in viewpoints. I need someone who thinks outside the box and isn’t afraid to argue with me.”

“Yeah, none of them are,” Jim says without thinking about it. Maeve laughs, and Khan almost smiles. “I mean...well, I did mean it.”

“I don’t argue with my doctor’s orders,” Maeve says, eyes sparkling. “Unless they’re wrong.”

“Does that happen often?” Jill asks.

“No, not very,” Maeve says. “Doctors in this time are fairly well-trained. I did have a discussion with one of them the other day about the way he was treating his nurses, though.”

“You didn’t tell me about this,” Bones says, looking at her.

She shrugs. “It wasn’t a big deal. He was being...let’s say brusque and arrogant, although there are other words I could use, and I reminded him that we’re people too, we have just as much training as he does even if it’s different, and he’d do better to treat us with respect and courtesy. He was also in his first year out of school, so I think that explained some of it.”

“Did he listen to you?” Bones asks.

Maeve smiles. “Of course.”

“Don’t tell me exactly what you said to him,” Bones decides. “I don’t think I want to know.”

“I do,” Jill says, laughing.

“I’ll tell you later,” Maeve promises.

“Excellent.” Jill looks at Jim. “You have a mission in two days, don’t you?”

“Only a few of us, but yeah,” Jim says. “It shouldn’t be a big thing, at least it’s not supposed to be.” That never means anything, though, and there’s a reason he’s taking Ekaterina and Khan. Call him paranoid, but until Marcus attacked his ship he’d never lost a crew member, and he doesn’t intend to start again now.

“That’s what they always say,” Jill says. Evan laughs, taking a sip of his iced coffee. “Let me know how it goes. We’re shipping out in a week, mission to Starbase Ten and some random exploration along the way.”

“We’ll be back before then,” Jim says. “I’ll let you know.”

They linger over coffee for a bit, until Jill and Evan have to leave for an Ultimate Frisbee game and Bones and Maeve say they’re heading to see a movie. They extend an invitation, but Jim’s never found movie seating all that comfortable with the wings and he and Khan decline. “Do you want to go talk to Ekaterina?” he asks once it’s just the two of them.

“I should,” Khan says, but he doesn’t sound thrilled about it.
“Tell me what’s wrong,” Jim says as they walk toward his building.

Khan shakes his head. “Nothing is wrong, Jim. I just dislike the idea of asking my sister why she is keeping secrets from me.”

“You think there’s more going on than you know about?” Jim asks. “What could she possibly be up to?”

“That is what I do not know,” Khan says. “And I could be wrong.”

“I kind of hope you are,” Jim says.

Khan takes out his comm link and calls Ekaterina, who answers after a brief pause. They have a conversation in Russian, of which Jim only catches a few words, and he hangs up. “She is in her apartment,” Khan says. “I will go up and see her when we get to the building. She has invited you for dinner, nineteen hundred.”

“I’ll be there,” Jim says. Ekaterina enjoys cooking, and she’s remarkably good at it. He never knows what she’s going to make--she’s been having fun exploring alien cuisines and mixing them with Earth’s--but he’s never disliked it.

“What are your plans for the afternoon?” Khan asks.

“No idea,” Jim says. “I’ll figure it out. I should probably go grocery shopping. Anything you do or don’t want?”

Khan shakes his head. “Although if you find decent quality chai, I would not mind,” he says.

“I’ll look,” Jim says. He forgets Khan’s from India sometimes; he doesn’t sound like it, and he doesn’t really look like it either. Genetic engineering has its quirks, he supposes. But Jim’s caught him listening to music in Hindi more than once, and the few times he’s expressed a food preference it’s been for some type of Indian or Southeast Asian cuisine. Although he did spend a year in London after being revived, so maybe he adopted the British accent out of necessity and hasn’t lost it yet?

There are questions Jim knows not to ask, and questions he wonders if he can or should or if it’s best to just leave alone. Sometimes the two categories get mixed and he just keeps his mouth shut on general principle because he doesn’t want to risk stirring up bad memories or touching a sore spot, and Khan’s background seems to have more than its share of those. To be fair, Jim thinks, his own does too, and Khan’s very careful not to ask questions that might leave Jim feeling bruised or raw.

They’re two damaged people, Jim thinks, finding a way together out of...necessity? Need? Desire? Convenience? He doubts it’s the last, doesn’t know if it’s any or all of the first three, and the only thing he’s sure of sometimes is that he’s one of Khan’s people and Khan’s one of his. Beyond that, he’s got no fucking clue.

“You have gone remarkably quiet,” Khan observes. “Credit for your thoughts?”

“Stuff,” Jim says, his wings hunching a bit. “Nothing important, really, just...sometimes I wonder where we’re going, you and I, and if we’ll get there together or separately.” He sighs, not having meant to say that and somehow not surprised. Khan gets him to be honest even when he doesn’t mean to say a word. He wonders if it works the other way, and doubts it. Khan’s very good at keeping his mouth shut when he wants to.

“A good question,” Khan says, jolting him out of his thoughts again. “You are different than Rani,
and our involvement is different.”

“You wanted to be with her for life,” Jim says. “Her life, not yours.”

“Yes, I did,” Khan says. “However, life has proven to me that I am not the kind of person to seek casual attachments.”

“So what is this, then, between us?” Jim asks. “Other than not casual?”

“I don’t know,” Khan says. “Do you?”

“Not a fucking clue,” Jim admits cheerfully. “I guess we’ll figure it out as we go.”

Khan smiles a bit. “I suppose we will,” he says. “I am in no hurry for our association to end.”

“Neither am I,” Jim says, and it’s as close to a declaration of commitment as they’ve ever gotten not counting that one night Jim tries not to think about too closely.

He probably should think about that more, he knows, but something in his mind shies away from examining it. When he tries, all he gets is a memory of how it was to feel that completely safe and yet that completely out of control, and it’s a tangled jumble that makes him want in ways he’s not sure he should.

Khan’s wing brushes his own and he starts. “I’m not very good company today, am I?” he asks, summoning a smile from somewhere.

“Tell me what’s on your mind,” Khan says.

They reach the building and Jim opens the door without answering. “You have to talk to Ekaterina,” he says instead of answering. “We can...we can talk later.”

Khan touches his shoulder, clasps it really. “We will, Jim.” It’s a promise and a not-quite threat and Jim just nods, pushing the button for the lift.

He lets himself into his apartment and looks around, not quite sure what he wants, not really sure what he’s in the mood for. Maybe he should have gone to the movies with Bones and Maeve, maybe he should comm Spock and see if he wants to play chess or something, maybe...he sighs and throws himself down on the bed, sprawling on his stomach because it’s more comfortable than sitting on the couch.

He doesn’t know what’s between himself and Khan, doesn’t know if there are even words or if there are words, what language they might be in. What he does know is that he thinks he needs Khan, more than he ever expected to, and it’s not necessarily a good thing but it’s not necessarily a bad thing either.

His thoughts chase each other in circles that lead nowhere and eventually he falls asleep, not meaning to but welcoming unconsciousness as a reprieve from his brain. He wakes feeling groggy and head stuffed full of cotton, mouth dry, and when he looks at the chrono it’s just about time to go for dinner. The thought is less than wholly appealing, but he knows he’ll feel better when he gets up and moving, so he forces himself to his feet and goes to use the lavatory and splash some water on his face.

When he pauses outside Ekaterina’s door, he hears noise from within, which is...odd, he thinks. He presses the chime and a moment later the door slides open and the noise level increases dramatically; Jim hastily steps inside and closes the door and activates the privacy seal, so the noise won’t escape.
What he sees stuns him, and he steps back against the door without thinking, wanting his back protected.

They’re shouting at each other in Russian, Ekaterina clearly angry about something and Khan equally upset, both of them gesturing wildly and Khan’s wings stretched out. Ekaterina whirls, grabs a PADD and throws it at Khan’s head; he blocks it and the PADD falls to the floor. She doesn’t even seem to have realized Jim’s there, although Jim knows Khan’s aware of him from the quick glance he gets. Jim stays quiet and doesn’t move, not wanting to draw attention to himself in case one or both of them turn on him.

She snaps something else and throws a knife, and Jim blinks when Khan catches it out of the air and throws it back without pausing. Ekaterina catches it, but has to turn slightly to do so, and sees Jim. “You!” she all but snarls, and then she moves toward him and Khan moves at the same time and catches her wrist a moment before her hand can connect with Jim’s cheek.

“You!” she all but snarls, and then she moves toward him and Khan moves at the same time and catches her wrist a moment before her hand can connect with Jim’s cheek.

“Touch him, and I break your wrist,” Khan says, deadly serious.

Ekaterina goes still. “So,” she says. “This is how it is?”

Khan says something in Russian and she snorts. “Does he know that?”

Know what? Jim wants to know but doesn’t dare speak. Ekaterina wrenches her hand away from Khan—who allows it, that’s the only thing Jim can think—and blows out a breath, stepping back. “All right,” she says. “All right.”

“Does it really change anything, sister?” Khan asks, wings slowly folding back.


“I know,” Khan says.

“Do you really?” she asks.

To Jim’s surprise, Khan smiles. “Cat, when have I ever been able to change your mind?”

She laughs. “That one time in Moscow.”

“Exactly my point,” Khan says.

Ekaterina sighs again and pushes her hair back. “All right.”

“Pax?” Khan asks.

“Pax,” she says, and just like that, the tension leaves the room and things seem...normal again. “I need to finish dinner preparations,” Ekaterina says. “I trust you two can entertain yourselves for a short while.” Without waiting for a response, she turns and heads for the kitchen.

“Okay,” Jim says slowly. “What the hell was that?”

“A disagreement,” Khan says, and Jim doesn’t miss the way he’s visibly steadying his breathing. “Minor, as these things go.”

“That was minor?” Jim looks at him. “That...”

“Jesus, you people are violent,” Jim says, and Khan snorts.

“You say this like you didn’t know,” he says.

“Yeah, well, sometimes I forget just how deep it runs,” Jim says. “What were you arguing about?”

“She thinks living in this time has changed me,” Khan says. “Made me softer, weaker. That you have had something to do with that.”

“Me?” Jim all but laughs. “Yeah, right. Like I could.”

“That is, essentially, what I told her,” Khan says.

“Does she believe you?” Jim asks.

Khan shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t know.”

“What did you tell her?” Jim asks after a moment. “When you grabbed her wrist.”

Khan looks away from him for a moment. “That you are mine.”

Jim’s kind of glad the door’s still at his back. “Oh,” he says, not really sure what else to say. There’s a distinction between being one of Khan’s people and being Khan’s, and Jim knows it. He’s not entirely certain how he feels about this, even though it’s less of a surprise than maybe it should be.

I have you.

He shakes his head to clear it. “Well, okay then,” he says. “I mean...do you mean it?”

“I wouldn’t have said it otherwise,” Khan says, and there’s something almost uncertain about it.


He doesn’t know if he moves or if Khan does, but their lips meet in the middle and Jim closes his eyes, letting himself lean into Khan for a moment. Gentle fingers brush through his hair and over the back of his neck and he relaxes even though he doesn’t mean to. “We, um,” he says when they separate. “We should talk about this later.”

“Should we?” Khan asks and he’s still touching Jim, still stroking his neck and the line of his shoulders.

“What changed?” Jim asks softly.

“You know exactly what changed,” Khan says, a tone of reproach in his voice. “Don’t tell me you don’t.”

“That was weeks ago,” Jim says in not-quite protest.

“Yes,” Khan says. “It was.” His hands slide down Jim’s arms to take his wrists and Jim’s mouth goes dry, even though Khan’s hold is light and he could easily break it.

“I can’t think when you do this to me,” Jim says, and Khan lets go. Jim’s stomach twists and he regrets saying anything, but at the same time he wants his head clear, or as clear as it’s going to get. “How do you do this to me?” he asks without thinking.

“I do nothing you haven’t asked for,” Khan says. “Nothing you don’t want.”
“Maybe that’s the problem,” Jim says. “Maybe I shouldn’t want this.”

“A bit late for second thoughts, Jim,” Khan says, his voice cooler than before.

“Don’t,” Jim says. “Don’t go cold on me like that. It’s just--this is--different. You’re different than anyone I’ve ever been with, and I don’t...I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you, the things I want from you. That doesn’t mean it’s a mistake, just...I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“Trust me,” Khan says quietly. “That is all you have to do.”

“I do,” Jim murmurs. “But it can’t be that simple.”

“Why not?” Khan asks.

“Because...” Jim can think of half a dozen reasons which seem pointless. “Can it, really?”

Khan nods. “No one else has to know,” he says, and it’s somehow exactly what Jim needed to hear.

He takes Khan’s hands, rubbing his thumbs over warm skin. It always surprises him, how warm Khan is--he seems like he should be cold, physically as well as everything else, but he isn’t. “We should...we should still talk, later,” he says because he feels like he has to.

“Probably,” Khan says.

Jim leans up and kisses him again, letting himself get lost in it, just a little, letting Khan’s hands tighten on his own and Khan’s wings touch his shoulders, until a pointed throat clearing makes Khan swear in not-English and Jim stumble as he pulls back sharply.

“Dinner,” Ekaterina says dryly, “is ready.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Missions are mostly waiting except when they're completely not.

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter I’ve had in my head for about five chapters so far now, and I can only hope it came out more coherent in text than it did in my head (seriously; I was lying there in bed last night going ‘but what if X? crap, I need to work that out.’) As always, feedback is greatly appreciated, especially on this one as I've been trying to get to it for a while now and I finally got here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They don’t talk that night, at least not verbally, but Jim falls asleep exhausted and content, safe and protected in a way he doesn’t think he’s ever been before. Maybe they don’t have to talk about...this, whatever this is. Maybe it can just be.

They don’t talk the next day, either, busy with mission preparations and other duties, but that night they go flying, and if Jim deliberately overextends himself just to feel Khan catch him no one has to know that but him. He thinks Khan might have an idea, but he still catches Jim and his arms still hold Jim safe as they fall back to Earth, and that’s really all Jim wants.

And then it’s mission day, and the five of them--Sulu, Spock, Khan, Ekaterina, and Jim--get in the shuttle and head out toward Saturn and this asteroid that has been giving weird sensor readings. Spock tries explaining some of it to Jim on the way and while Jim’s a genius he’s not a scientist, and mostly what he takes away from it is that this asteroid might be hollow, might be made up of something they haven’t seen before, and they want to find out what it actually is and why the sensors can’t read it.

When they get there, Jim looks at the hunk of supposedly inert rock and feels something trickle into the pit of his stomach. It looks...ominous, somehow, and he’s of course seen his share of asteroids but this one looks...different. He can’t put his finger on why, either; physically it’s not all that different from asteroids he’s seen before.

Spock and Ekaterina have to go EVA to scan it and excavate samples, as the shuttle’s sensors are both too limited to get much data and also scrambled from whatever energy the asteroid’s giving off. Jim watches them get into the close-fitting spacesuits, checks their seals himself, and seals the front of the shuttle off so they can step out into space.

He’s almost forgotten it’s Ekaterina’s first time in open space, and she murmurs something almost awed in Russian when they’re outside the shuttle. “I feel very small,” she says, looking around. “This is...incredible.”

At least she’s not agoraphobic, Jim thinks. Not that he’d really been worried about that, but the black
hits people differently. “Maybe you’ll have time to go space walking more in future,” he says.

“I would like that,” Ekaterina says as they approach the asteroid. It’s a divide-and-conquer mission; she’s going to try and take samples from it while Spock attempts to scan it.

“Fascinating,” Spock says after a bit. “My readings are still being somewhat distorted by the energy field, but I believe I am making progress.”

“Lieutenant, what about you?” Jim asks.

“Da, captain,” she says, slightly out of breath from exertion. If she’s having problems hacking bits out of this thing, Jim’s glad he didn’t take a regular scientist. Only Spock might have the strength to do it, and he’s busy at the moment. “However, this will take a while.”

Missions are mostly waiting except when they’re completely not, Jim’s learned, so he settles into the back of the shuttle and listens to Khan and Spock discuss tricorder readings and possibilities for the results they’re getting. An hour passes, and he’s about to ask when they think they’ll be done when Ekaterina shouts something in Russian and shoves Spock back, away from the asteroid. Jim jumps to his feet just as it...explodes.

“How the fuck--” Sulu starts, stunned and not thinking of protocol. “it’s an asteroid, how the hell did it--”

“Never mind that, where’s Ekaterina?” Jim snaps.

“I can’t find her, sir, the sensors are offline from the explosion,” Sulu says through gritted teeth. “Working on getting them back online.”

“Spock, Ekaterina, answer me, what’s going on?” Jim demands.

“I am unharmed,” Spock says a moment later. “Slightly dazed from the blast, but the lieutenant’s quick action prevented me from taking more than minimal damage. I am looking for her now.”

“Cat,” Khan says. “Cat, answer me.”

There’s silence.

“Cat,” Khan says again, a little more firmly. He follows it with something in Russian, but there’s still no reply. Jim sees Khan’s face go pale, his wings tensing, and he moves to his side, touching his shoulder.

“She’ll be all right, she’s probably just unconscious,” Jim says even though he’s got no idea if it’s true. “It takes a lot to kill you.”

Khan breathes in deeply and presses his lips together. “Spock, have you found her?” he asks, more sharply than he needs to.

“I am slightly disoriented from the explosion,” Spock’s calm voice says. “I cannot see her visually and there is substantial debris. I will find her.”

It feels like forever to wait, and there’s still no reply from Ekaterina, and Jim’s demanding responses from Spock every thirty seconds, which is probably pissing him off but he answers, always saying he can’t see her and there’s too much debris in the way to scan for her. Five minutes go by. Ten.

“I see her,” Spock says and Jim slumps in relief. “Her suit appears mostly intact, but her helmet is
cracked and there is significant damage. Lieutenant Sulu, do you have us on sensors or are they still non-functional?"

"Half functional, sir," Sulu says, fingers flying over the board. "I think...we’re about forty meters from you if this is right." He gives Spock directions, and soon enough Jim can see him through the viewscreen, one space-suited figure carrying another. His stomach clenches when he sees the blast damage and he can’t tell if Ekaterina’s breathing.

They seal the back of the shuttle so Spock and Ekaterina can get on board, and as soon as it pressurizes Jim and Khan step through. Spock’s laid Ekaterina down on the floor and pulled off her helmet, and her skin’s paler than Khan’s and cold to the touch. "She is not breathing," Spock says. "I cannot tell if she has a pulse through the suit."

"Where’s the damn medkit?" Jim asks.

"We can survive without oxygen for up to fifteen minutes," Khan says, kneeling next to Ekaterina. "She was out there only twelve."

"Has that ever been tested?" Jim asks, finding the medkit and giving Sulu orders to get them home, now.

"Yes," Khan says and takes the kit from Jim, who lets him mostly because he knows the need to be doing something. "She has a pulse," Khan says after scanning her. "Slow, but there. Her body has gone into hibernation to try and save itself, it’s something we can do when injured badly enough."

"Khan," Jim says because he has to ask. "Is this enough to kill her?"

Khan takes a deep breath. "Without medical attention it could be," he says, not looking at Jim. "It would have killed an unaugmented human."

"We’ll get her to Bones," Jim says. "Is there anything you can do for her now?"

"I don’t know," Khan says, and he sounds helpless and Jim winces at hearing it. "I was never a good student of medicine. If we bring her out of the hibernation before there is medical help available, it could kill her, but she needs to breathe."

As if on cue, Ekaterina’s lips part and she sighs. "And there we go," Jim says, resisting the urge to collapse in relief.

"She likely saved my life," Spock comments, getting out of the space suit. "I am still unsure how she knew it was going to explode, however. I did not detect anything substantially different on the tricorder before she pushed me back."

"You—you’re injured," Jim says, seeing bruises on Spock’s arms.

"Minor bruising and lacerations only," Spock says. "It will heal quickly enough without medical help."

"Right," Jim says and kneels on Ekaterina’s other side. The trip back seems endless, even though she’s breathing--slow, and shallow, but she’s getting oxygen and her heart’s beating and her skin seems to warm slightly when he touches her cheek. "Should we get her out of the suit?" he asks.

"The pressure of the suit is likely containing any bleeding," Spock says. "Also, we should not move her in case there is more damage to her spinal cord."
“Even though you moved her when you brought her here,” Jim says.

“Yes, well,” Spock says. “I had no choice.”

Jim forces his wings to fold back rather than stretch out and cover Ekaterina. “Almost there, sir,” Sulu says and Jim rubs his hands over his face. “Dr. McCoy and a medteam are waiting for us when we land.”

“Thank you,” Jim says, pushing to his feet. “Tell McCoy to request Maeve and Bishop join us as soon as possible. Sooner. They’ve studied medicine, they might know more about what Ekaterina needs.”

“Yes, sir,” Sulu says and relays the message.

“Tell Jim to teach his granny to suck eggs,” Bones’s voice comes through. “I already thought of that. Bishop’s somewhere, but Maeve’s here.”

Jim snorts and tries not to laugh in relief. Bones is there, Bones can fix anything and Maeve knows how to fix augments and she’s going to be fine.

They land and the medteam comes to take Ekaterina onto a gurney and wheel her away. Jim follows, as do Khan and Spock, and they get shunted into an observation room while she gets prepped for surgery. When he sees her without the suit, Jim’s suddenly less certain she’ll be all right; she’s burned and bleeding and so, so still. He’s never seen her be this quiet and motionless before and it’s frankly terrifying.

“Khan, do you know her blood type?” Bones asks through the speakers. “She’s going to need some.”

“Use mine,” Khan says, already moving. “If you give her a normal human’s blood you will kill her. Any of ours is compatible, we’re all O negative.”

“You might not be able to donate enough,” Bones mutters, studying Ekaterina.

“Take whatever you need, I’ll be fine,” Khan says, and then he’s gone to donate blood and one of the nurses leaves the OR to go get it, Jim supposes. Khan doesn’t come back for a while, but Jim sees one, two bags of blood come into the OR, and then a third, and wonders how Khan can possibly be donating it all.

He can’t watch the surgery after a while; it’s just too much, too scary when he doesn’t know what Bones is doing or what Maeve is telling him, and he finds Khan on a gurney in the room next to the OR, and not surprisingly Carson’s there on the next gurney. Khan appears to have stopped giving blood but Carson’s is filling the bag. “Are you all right?” Jim asks Khan.

“I am,” Khan says and it’s a lie but Jim knows what he means. “Does Dr. McCoy know how long she will be in surgery?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t ask,” Jim says. “How many pints did you give?”

“Two,” Khan says. “They would not let me donate more. This is Carson’s second, and we are finding others who can donate in case they need more blood.” As if summoned by his words, Alona and Matthew come hurrying in after the nurse, who checks Carson and proclaims him done. Khan gets off his gurney, despite the nurse fretting, and Jim touches his wrist but his skin’s warm and his pulse is strong and he looks steady on his feet despite having donated two pints. Alona immediately takes his place, but the nurse says she needs to check with the doctor to see if they need more blood.
“Khan, what happened?” Matthew asks. “All we heard was that she’d been injured.”

Khan sighs and explains. “We do not, currently, know why she knew it was about to explode, nor do we know what caused the explosion,” he says.

“She’s always had good instincts,” Alona says. “It’s possible she may not even know.”

“If she remembers,” Matthew says.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Jim asks.

“Traumatic amnesia,” Alona says. “It happens, it can happen even to us, and given that she had no oxygen for so long...”

“Fifteen minutes,” Khan says, sharply. “It was less than that.”

“I’m just saying we need to be prepared,” Alona says carefully.

“She’ll heal,” Khan says. Alona says something to him in another language and he snaps a response, wings mantling behind his back. Matthew comments, his voice quiet and steady, and Khan doesn’t look pleased and answers curtly. He turns and leaves the room, in fact, and Jim glances at the others and follows him, not surprised when they go back to the observation room. Spock’s not there, though, and Jim wonders where he went.

He considers calling Spock, decides against it in favor of just being with Khan, even though Khan barely seems to be aware Jim’s there. Jim eventually takes a seat in one of the hard plastic chairs, but Khan stays on his feet, hands curled at his sides, wings half-stretched. It takes an eternity and finally Jim hears Bones’s voice in more than murmurs to the team. “You guys still in there?” he asks, pulling down his mask.

“We are, doctor,” Khan says.

“I think she’s going to make it,” Bones says, watching the nurses wheel the gurney out of the room. “She’s going to be unconscious for a while, though, and given the oxygen deprivation I can’t predict...if there might be brain damage. Scans show about what we’d expect at the moment, but that doesn’t mean much.”

“She will be all right,” Khan states. “May I sit with her?”

“It’s going to be hours, Khan,” Bones says, more gentle than Jim expected.

“I am not leaving until she wakes up,” Khan says and Bones sighs.

“Yeah, that’s about what I figured. You can stay, yeah.”

Jim stays quiet but follows--he’s worried about Ekaterina, but he’s not leaving Khan until they know one way or the other if Ekaterina’s going to be all right. “Do you want the details?” Bones asks when they find him out of the OR and he takes them to the ICU room where Ekaterina is sleeping.

“I don’t,” Jim says, and Khan shrugs.

“Later, perhaps,” Khan says and Bones sighs.

“Later’s good. Seriously, Khan, she’s going to be out for eight to twelve hours.”

“Would you leave Jim?” Khan asks shortly and Bones pauses, scowls, and shakes his head.
“We’ll get you a cot or something,” he says, and in fact there’s already one set up next to Ekaterina’s bed. She’s hooked up to various monitors and tubes and things and she’s still too damned pale and her right hand is bandaged. “Maeve must have taken care of that.”

“Maeve did take care of that,” Maeve says, coming into the room. She’s still dressed in the OR outfit, her hair tightly pulled back, and Jim looks away from the blood on her tunic. “We brought her out of the hibernation, which is probably what saved her life,” she says. “The hibernation, that is. She’s healing more slowly than normal because there was just so much damage, but she is healing. Sleep is what she needs most right now. She’s still unconscious from the anesthesia, and that’ll wear off--on her, I’d give it about an hour, maybe two at most, but if we’re lucky she’ll stay unconscious for several more hours until she’s ready to wake up.”

Bones frowns at Maeve. “That dosage should keep her out for four to six hours,” he says.

“We metabolize most drugs differently,” Maeve says. “She will undoubtedly refuse most painkillers, but if she were to take them she’d need higher doses more frequently than most people.”

“We have options that aren’t narcotics these days,” Bones says. “No reason anyone should be in pain.”

Khan takes one of the two chairs next to Ekaterina’s bed and reaches for her unbandaged left hand. He looks focused, Jim thinks, like nothing else in the world matters to him right now. “Khan,” Maeve says gently. “I’ll be with her. You can go, come back when she wakes up. We won’t leave her alone. We--Alona got in touch with everyone who’s in range, and we’re all coming to be here, to make sure she’s not alone.”

“She is my sister,” Khan says, looking up at Maeve. “I am staying until she wakes.”

Maeve sighs and says something Jim doesn’t understand. Khan smiles faintly and answers her, and she makes a face at him. “Be that way, then,” she says, throwing up her hands. “I am going to go change.”

“I am, too,” Bones says. “We’ll be back.”

“We’ll be here,” Jim says, taking the other chair and straddling it the way Khan’s done.

“You don’t have to stay, Jim,” Khan says once Bones and Maeve are gone.

“Yes, I do,” Jim says. “She’s one of my people, and you’re...I’m not leaving you until we know she’ll be fine.”

Khan looks at him then, and there’s something in his eyes Jim doesn’t understand. “Thank you, Jim,” he says softly.

Jim rests a hand on the nape of Khan’s neck, rubbing the muscles, and Khan sighs and bows his head. They stay that while until the sound of shoes makes Jim drop his hand and both of them sit up.

Over the next eight hours, people come in and out. Forty-seven augments, Jim counts, all taking shifts to be there. They come in in ones and twos, stay for a time, and leave so the next people can come in. Everyone says something to Ekaterina, most leaning down to murmur in her ear. A few say things to Khan but it’s never in English; from his reactions, Jim’s guessing they’re mostly reassurances and reminders he’s not alone. For a couple hours, Jim stretches out on the cot, but he doesn’t sleep well and gives up after a bit. Khan stays put in the chair. Maeve brings them water, and a sandwich at one point, and it’s obvious she’s not leaving until Ekaterina’s awake, either, even if she’s not constantly in the room. She is the nurse that keeps coming in to check her vitals and do
whatever arcane things need doing, though.

As it happens, though, it’s just Jim and Khan in the room when Ekaterina makes a soft, almost inaudible sound and her eyelids twitch. “Cat,” Khan says, standing up. “Cat.”

She inhales more deeply than Jim’s seen her do since the accident and blinks a few times and her eyes open. “Konstantin?” she asks, clearly not quite aware of where she is or what’s going on.

A shadow passes over Khan’s face. “Cat, it’s Khan,” he says, bringing her hand to his lips. “Do you remember?”

Ekaterina blinks again and frowns and looks up at him. “Where am I, Khan?”

“In hospital,” Khan says. “There was an explosion, you were seriously injured. Do you remember, milaya moya?”

That’s a term Jim hasn’t heard before and wonders what it means.

“I...” She frowns again and closes her eyes for a moment. “I remember space,” she says. “I felt so small.”

“What else do you remember?” Khan asks gently.

“I don’t...” Ekaterina looks worried. “Khan, why don’t I remember? What did I forget?”

“Shh, Cat, it’s all right,” Khan says, touching her cheek. “There was an explosion on the asteroid you and Mr. Spock were working on. You saved him, but were injured yourself. Your body went into hibernation, and you were without oxygen for twelve minutes.”

“Traumatic amnesia,” Ekaterina says, closing her eyes again. “Khan, I’m tired.” Her voice fades out, and she sighs.

“I know, milaya moya,” Khan says. “You can sleep, it’s safe here. We’re all here watching you. Are you in pain?”

“Nyet,” she mumbles. “Nothing I cannot tolerate.”

By this point Maeve’s come in and is doing all her checks and things, and Ekaterina says a few words to her but it’s obvious she’s fading fast. Maeve injects something into her IV port and a few moments later Ekaterina’s face relaxes into sleep, her breathing slow and even. “Are you satisfied?” Maeve asks Khan.

He nods. “She’ll be all right,” he says, sounding relieved.

“I told you she would be,” Maeve says. ‘Go home. Bishop and Katsuro will be in here next, we drew up a schedule.’

“Do you not trust Starfleet Medical?” Jim asks.

“I think having an augmented human so injured is a dangerous opportunity for those wishing to study her,” Maeve says. “There are reasons no one’s left her alone, and no one will until she leaves.”

“We can post security,” Jim says. “Make sure they know exactly who’s allowed in her room.”

“And what is my family if not adequate security?” Maeve asks archly. “I know who is allowed in her room, and I will tell the others. Now, go home, get some rest. I will call you if there are any changes,
or if she asks for you.”

Khan sighs, but nods. He touches Ekaterina’s face again gently and looks at Jim. “Let us go.”

Chapter End Notes

1. Milaya moya is a Russian endearment that means ‘my sweet’ or ‘my dear’.

2. The oxygen deprival thing is actually from a mistake I made early on in writing this based on a misunderstanding I had when watching the movie. At one point in STID, Khan says that his crew doesn’t require oxygen and thus he’ll target the Enterprise life support systems. The initial thought I had from that was that his crew could survive oxygen deprival for a period of time. I realized later, thanks to another writer who got it better than I did, that his crew didn’t need oxygen because they were in cryosleep tubes. Oops. But by that point I'd already written it into FF, so I was stuck with it, so when writing this chapter I made the arbitrary decision that they can survive without oxygen for fifteen minutes. I figure if everything else got enhanced, that must have too, right? Right.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

This is going to get him into trouble later and he knows it, but what else can he do?

Chapter Notes

As always, a huge thank you to everyone who leaves me comments - I drove to work this morning smiling when I saw the email notifications. As I said to a couple people, I'm attempting to keep all the plot balls in the air and not drop any; I can already tell you at least one that I've fumbled but am hoping to get back to within a couple chapters assuming it makes sense (it may not make sense to anyone but me).

Also, if folks want more missing scenes, let me know and I'll do what I can. (aka the porn that doesn't quite fit in this story.)

They get a cab back to Jim’s building rather than walk, even though it’s not far. Jim’s exhausted, and even though Khan’s capable of going for longer on less sleep than Jim is he looks tired, shadows under his eyes and his skin paler than usual. Jim takes his hand in the cab and frowns at how cool his skin feels. “It is fine, Jim,” Khan says, but his eyes are closed. “What time is it, even?”


Khan smiles faintly. “Perhaps.”

Jim pays the driver and follows Khan out of the cab and into the building. Once inside his apartment, he turns to Khan and without saying a word, takes his hands and pulls him close, folding his wings around Khan as far as they’ll go. Khan leans his forehead against Jim’s and they stand there, until Jim realizes he’s dozing off on his feet and both of them are swaying a bit. “Bed,” he says, pulling back, and Khan nods.

They undress for bed--neither of them really bothers with pajamas anymore--and take turns in the bathroom before crawling into bed. Khan all but collapses against the mattress, and Jim moves to fit himself against Khan’s back, stroking his shoulders and the skin between his wings, kissing the nape of his neck. “It’s all right,” he says softly.

“I know,” Khan murmurs, bowing his head further under Jim’s touch. “Thank you.”

“You’re mine,” Jim says quietly. “Just as I’m yours, you’re mine. I get to take care of you.”

“It has been a long time since anyone thought I needed taking care of,” Khan observes, his voice sleepy.

“Everyone does once in a while,” Jim says, kissing the line of Khan’s shoulder. “Even me.”

“Jim, you need more looking after than half a dozen children,” Khan says and Jim laughs.
“I do not.”

“Yes, you do,” Khan says, still sleepy but amused. “You forget your limits, you challenge the unknown, you demand the impossible, and someone needs to follow you around to make sure you stay in one piece. That you don’t break.” He’s quiet for a moment. “Rather, that when you do break someone can put you back together.”

“And that someone is you?” Jim asks more lightly than he means it.

“Mine, Jim,” Khan says simply. “Mine to take care of, mine to break down and rebuild, mine to protect even if I have to protect you from yourself.”

“But I’m not the point right now,” Jim says, ignoring the flutter in his stomach at Khan’s words. “You are.”

“Am I?” Khan asks.

Jim strokes his fingers through Khan’s hair and over the back of his neck, down between his wings. “You need to sleep,” he says. “It’s safe here. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Khan sighs and slowly his body goes lax, his breath evening out to a slow, steady rhythm. Jim closes his eyes and lies there and listens to it, worn out physically and emotionally but not quite ready to sleep yet. What he did today—there are things he maybe should have done instead of spending those hours at the hospital. Reported to Pike, written a report, checked in with Spock, any of those, any of a dozen other things that required his time and his attention. But he couldn’t leave.

It wasn’t Ekaterina. He cares about her; she’s one of his people twice over, and she’s Khan’s sister, and had it just been her, he’d have stayed maybe through surgery, until Bones said she was going to live, and then gone to do things. Jim hates waiting; he’s not good at it, and he’s not good at sitting there watching someone unconscious. He’d have gone crazy if it had just been himself and Ekaterina, despite all the other augments coming and going.

But Khan was there, and that made it different, and that meant there was nowhere Jim could go, nothing Jim could do but stay with him. Khan’s more to him than a crew member, more than a friend. Lover, Jim thinks, even though he’s never quite called Khan his lover before. He’s never quite called him anything, except one of his people, and...and now, his.

Exhaustion overtakes him eventually and he sleeps, too tired to analyze any more of the day. When he wakes, it’s because someone’s comm-link is chirping, and Khan’s not in the bed. Jim follows the chirping, isn’t sure whose link he’s grabbing, and answers. “Kirk here,” he says.

“Captain,” Maeve says. “I was looking for Khan. Did I dial the wrong link?”

“No, I just grabbed it,” Jim says, figuring it’s safe enough with her. “I think he’s in the shower. Is everything okay with Ekaterina?”

“Oh, yes,” she assures him. “But you should come here when you can. She is more awake, and asked to see him.”

“Captain,” Maeve says. “I was looking for Khan. Did I dial the wrong link?”

“No, I just grabbed it,” Jim says, figuring it’s safe enough with her. “I think he’s in the shower. Is everything okay with Ekaterina?”

“Oh, yes,” she assures him. “But you should come here when you can. She is more awake, and asked to see him.”

“We’ll be there in twenty,” Jim promises and hangs up. He finds Khan in the bathroom, wiping the last of the depilatory gel off his skin, and takes a moment to just watch him, admiring the lines of his body. “Maeve called,” he says after a minute. “Ekaterina’s asking for you. I told her we’d be there in twenty.”

“Thank you,” Khan says, turning to look at him. “Do you want a shower?”
“Yeah, I’ll be quick and use the sonics,” Jim says. “Ready to go in five.”

It’s more like seven, but they’re still at the hospital in nineteen minutes. Ekaterina’s still in ICU, but when they get to her room, she’s awake and half sitting up in the bed, and there’s actual color in her face. “Cat,” Khan says, immediately going to her side and leaning down to kiss her cheek.

“Takes more than this to kill me, brother,” she says, touching his cheek. “The good doctor thinks I should be ready to leave in two days, I say twelve hours, but that gets me scowled at.” Her voice is stronger, too, although it’s still a bit quiet.

“Take your time,” Khan says, straddling the chair next to her bed. “Do you remember anything?”

“No,” she says, looking troubled. “No. I remember space, and feeling small, and then nothing until I woke here.”

“It’s all right,” he says, taking her hand. “It happens, and given the circumstances...”

“Was the mission at least successful?” Ekaterina asks.

Jim chokes. “Kind of took second place to getting you home and into medical hands,” he says, stepping forward from his spot by the door. “Spock—I haven’t spoken to Spock, he stopped in yesterday when you were...asleep...but we didn’t get to talk about his readings. I don’t know what happened to the samples you excavated from the asteroid.”

Ekaterina shakes her head. “I am sorry, Jim, I don’t remember.”

She really must not be feeling well, Jim thinks. “I’ll comm Spock later, ask him what he thinks,” he says without commenting on her use of his name. “You should rest.”

She snorts. “What else am I allowed to do here?”

“Nothing, if they’re smart,” Khan says and she makes a face at him.

“Might I at least have a PADD or a book?” she asks.

“Do you think you can concentrate?” Khan asks.

Ekaterina sighs. “Maybe. My vision feels unfocused, and my head aches if I try to focus on any one thing for long. Side effects of the oxygen deprivation, it will pass.”

“Has this happened to you before?” Jim asks.

“Have I been caught in an exploding asteroid before, no,” Ekaterina says. “But the scientists who...worked with us as children were very thorough about establishing our limits. Two of us died in the oxygen test. The rest of us had headaches for days, but we survived.”

Jim doesn’t know what to say to that. “How many of you survived to adulthood?” he asks finally.

“Ninety-one out of a hundred and thirty,” Khan says quietly.

“Jesus,” Jim says.

“Survival of the fittest,” Ekaterina says. She sighs and closes her eyes, leaning her head back against the pillow.

“Are you in pain, Cat?” Khan asks softly.
“Tolerable,” she says without opening her eyes.

“There’s no reason you should be in pain at all,” Maeve says, coming into the room. “We have better drugs these days. They won’t make you as loopy.”

“Not as loopy means they will still make me somewhat loopy, and I would prefer to be clear-headed,” Ekaterina says.

“Yes, well, it’s not entirely up to you,” Maeve says. “I have orders from the doctor to make sure you take your pain medication at least for the next twelve hours. You know as well as I do that you won’t heal as quickly if your body is stressed from pain.”

“We’ll keep you safe,” Khan tells Ekaterina, and she sighs.

“If I must,” she says, sounding unhappy. She asks Khan a question in Russian, her voice fading out, and he nods, standing up and leaning over to kiss her forehead before he moves to the drawers holding her things. Jim wonders what he’s getting, then blinks when he sees Khan take out one of her knives and give it to her. She holds it for a moment, her grip loose, then tucks it under her pillow.

“The doctors might not appreciate that,” Jim says cautiously.

“Then do not tell them,” Khan says. “It is more of a...security blanket than anything else, at this point.”

Ekaterina snorts. “My version of a teddy bear, brother?”

“Something like that,” he says, taking his seat again as Maeve moves to inject something into Ekaterina’s IV.

“Alona and Matthew will be here shortly,” Maeve says quietly, watching as the medication takes effect. It’s not long, a few moments at most, before Ekaterina sighs and her head turns on the pillow and it’s obvious she’s mostly out of it. “You don’t have to stay.”

Khan looks at Jim. “Do you have somewhere you need to be?”

“I have people I need to talk to,” Jim says, somehow not surprised by the assumption that they’re sticking together. This is going to get him into trouble later and he knows it, but what else can he do? “Is there another room I can use for a bit? With a terminal or a PADD?”

Maeve nods. “I can show you to one,” she says.

“I won’t be far,” Jim tells Khan. “Or probably gone long.”

Khan nods. “Do what you need, Jim.”

Jim settles his wings and follows Maeve to a small empty office that he’s guessing the nurses or doctors use to write reports between patients. It’s got a terminal, and he takes out his link and gets to work. First up, contacting Spock to find out what he put in his mission report and make sure it will actually match up with Jim’s. There shouldn’t be a problem with that this time, and in fact there isn’t once he talks to Spock. The problem, as he finds out, is the lack of data. “The explosion damaged my tricorder,” Spock says. “I did transfer the data to the shuttle, but the explosion knocked its sensors offline, therefore we are missing the data immediately preceding and following the explosion. Does Ekaterina remember what happened?”

“No, she doesn’t,” Jim says glumly. “It’s not really surprising, given everything. She remembers
“I do not,” Spock says. “Her sample bag was destroyed in the explosion and I did not take the time to look for what might have remained.”

“So basically, we have no idea what happened and we might never know,” Jim says, rubbing his forehead.

“Unfortunately, you may be correct,” Spock says. “I intend to analyze the recordings I do have more closely today, and will be working with Lieutenant McNeil toward that purpose, assuming Khan is unavailable.”

“I don’t know if he’s unavailable or not,” Jim admits. “He doesn’t really want to leave Ekaterina, but you might be able to convince him.”

“How is she?” Spock asks.

“She’s on the mend,” Jim says. “Honestly, if I hadn’t seen how badly she was injured yesterday I wouldn’t have believed it this morning. I mean, she’s still injured, but...she’s awake and talking and being grumpy about being forced to rest and take her pain meds. She says she has some side effects from the oxygen deprivation, but it’ll pass.”

“Yes, she does not strike me as the type to take enforced rest well,” Spock says and Jim laughs.

“She’s really, really not,” he says. “But she doesn’t have a choice at the moment.”

“I understand the other members of Khan’s crew have formed an unofficial security detail,” Spock says.

“They have,” Jim says. “I can’t really blame them.”

“No,” Spock agrees which surprises Jim. “Will you be staying at the hospital today?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “I probably shouldn’t, there are things that need doing, but...I don’t know. I’ll see what I can get done here.”

“If there is anything I can do to assist,” Spock says.

“I’ll let you know. Thanks, Spock,” Jim says.

They hang up and Jim sighs before he starts dictating his mission report. It doesn’t take him that long, since there’s not much there to report and he sends it off to Pike. Then, out of morbid curiosity, he looks up Bones’s report on Ekaterina’s injuries. What he sees stuns him. The burns over forty percent of her body, the broken bones, internal damage, not to mention the head trauma and oxygen deprivation...he’s frankly amazed she’s still alive, and it makes him wonder just what it would take to kill Khan or one of his people. Anyone else would be dead right now and he knows it.

“Speak of the devil,” he says when he looks up to see Khan in the doorway. “How long have you been there?”

“No more than a minute,” Khan says. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Jim says, rubbing a hand over his face. “We may never know what happened, since Ekaterina doesn’t remember and Spock says we’re missing some data due to the explosion. He’s analyzing the data he does have today, with Lieutenant McNeil, unless you want to help him.”
“I can assist, yes,” Khan says. “I would like to remain close to the medical facilities in case Ekaterina requests my presence, however.”

“I’m sure you two can figure that out,” Jim says. “I’m surprised you’re willing to leave her alone.”

“She is healing, and if I hover too much she will get...annoyed,” Khan says, mouth twitching in a not-quite smile. “I would rather not have her cursing at me for the next two weeks.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you,” Jim says. “She can be...creative.” He’s heard Ekaterina go off on things before--often inanimate objects, when the computer doesn’t do what she wants it to.

“Indeed,” Khan says. He looks like he’s going to say something, hesitates, and Jim frowns.

“What is it?”

“Thank you,” Khan says finally. “For yesterday.” His wings ruffle and he folds them back, and Jim gets up and walks over to him, pulling him into the room and closing the door behind them.

“I didn’t do anything I shouldn’t have,” Jim says quietly, taking Khan’s hand, pleased at how warm his skin is. “I told you, you’re mine as much as I’m yours.”

“Am I?” Khan asks and Jim brings his other hand up to touch Khan’s face.

“Yes,” he says simply.

Khan leans into his touch, just for a moment, before straightening up. Jim drops his hand, but doesn’t let go of Khan’s. His own wings stretch out a little, touching Khan’s shoulders; there’s not room to fold them around him. “You would have done the same for me, if it had been Spock that was injured, or Bones, or even Sulu,” he says.

“I would,” Khan admits.

Maybe this isn’t the time for that talk they’ve been avoiding and maybe it is. “I don’t know what this means,” Jim says slowly. “I don’t know all of what being yours means, or what you being mine means for that matter.”

“Trust me,” Khan says, like he’s said before. “The rest will fall into place.”

“Will it?” Jim asks him uncertainly.

In answer, Khan kisses him, tightening his hold on Jim’s hand. Jim closes his eyes and lets himself kiss Khan back, not caring about the outside world right now, not caring about anything but this. He wants to sink to his knees and have Khan take care of him, wants to take him home and take care of him like he did last night, wonders if he can make Khan feel as safe as Khan makes him feel.

His knees do wobble, in fact, and that’s when he breaks the kiss, swallowing hard and taking a steadying breath. “The things you do to me,” he says, almost to himself.

“You say that like you have no idea the effect you have on me,” Khan says, and Jim smiles.

“I really don’t,” he admits. “You’re so controlled. I’m like an open book to you, and you’re written in Hindi and password-protected.”

“I think you know more than you think you do,” Khan says.

“Maybe I want to hear it from you,” Jim says softly.
Something flashes in Khan’s eyes, dark and predatory. “Do you really want to know what you make me want, Jim?” he asks, his voice low. “Do you want to know how much you make me want to consume you, possess you, strip you bare and take you apart, piece by piece? Break you down and build you back up again with my fingerprints over every inch of you? You are mine, Jim. Mine to take apart, mine to put back together, mine for you to surrender control to me, over and over again. Do you understand, Jim? Do you realize what it is I want?”

Jim realizes two things. One, he’s achingly hard, and two, maybe he did have a clue but there’s something about hearing Khan say it. “Yes,” he says finally, his mouth too dry for more than a whisper. “I...I get it.” He swallows, working moisture into his dry mouth. “But you’re mine, too, and I don’t know if it means the same things but I know I get to protect you, I get to take care of you. I get to see you come apart for me the way I do for you. Do you get that?”


Jim kisses him again, because he has to, because they’re too far apart, and Khan fists his hand in Jim’s hair and pulls him closer, until they’re pressed against each other and Khan’s pressed against the door and they have to stop, they’re going to get caught and Jim doesn’t fucking care.

Eventually they pull apart, both of them breathing hard and Jim’s pleased to see Khan looks just as wrecked as he feels. He takes a deep breath, then another, looking away from Khan and straightening his clothes and forcing his cock to quiet down. When he thinks he can trust his body and his voice again, he looks at Khan. “Later,” he says. “For now...”

“I need to contact Mr. Spock about analyzing the data,” Khan says, sounding as collected as he ever is.

“Yes,” Jim says. “I need to...I’ll figure it out.” As if on cue, his comm link chirps, and he moves to answer it, grateful for the distraction. It turns out to be Pike, who says he’s coming to Medical to see Jim, Spock, and Khan. They arrange a meet point and Jim hangs up. “Let’s get moving,” he says.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Don't you believe in second chances?

Chapter Notes

Oh, my goodness, my neck and shoulders are killing me from all the typing I've been doing lately, but my creative brain is on one hell of a roll (at least, *I'm* liking the results) so I've been powering through. Send painkillers, would you?

Comments make my day, as always. I do want to note that I'm trying to get out as much as I can before later this week when RL obligations may prevent me from updating for a week or so, but I'll try not to leave you hanging.

Any takers on the missing scenes, or would I be wasting my energy?

The meeting with Pike doesn’t take long, and Jim thanks whatever deities might exist that Pike doesn’t question why he was at the hospital for so long, why he didn’t get the report done yesterday. Pike does express concern over the lack of data and Ekaterina’s missing memory, and Spock makes a couple suggestions for going back and trying to acquire whatever pieces of the asteroid still exist. Jim argues they don’t know if that could explode as well, Pike agrees with Jim--"Until we know more." Jim can’t really argue that point but damn, he wants to. However, he promises himself that if anyone goes back out to collect the asteroid pieces it’s going to be him, and *maybe* Spock or Khan.

Then he thinks about Khan getting caught in the same explosion Ekaterina did, and his stomach twists and he totally loses track of the conversation for a moment as blood rushes in his ears. He wonders how Jill survives this, how she goes on missions and sends Evan on missions and doesn’t freak out every single time something might go wrong. He’ll have to talk to her, he thinks.

When he tunes back in, Spock and Khan are discussing where best to set up and analyze what data they do have. They agree to use one of the labs at Medical, since they’re right there, and Pike dismisses them and they head off, starting to talk about the data on the way. “Sir?” Jim asks Pike, not sure why they’re still there.

“I’d like to see Ekaterina,” Pike says, surprising him.

“Ah--sure, sir,” Jim says. “I think she’s still in ICU, this way.”

When they get to the room, they find Bishop and Katsuro sitting by the bed. Both of them get to their feet as Pike and Jim come in. “Admiral,” Bishop says. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Pike waves them to sit down, but they don’t. “I wanted to see for myself how the lieutenant is doing,” he says.
“ Alive,” Ekaterina says, opening her eyes and looking at Pike. “And starting to get annoyed that they will not let me do more than lie here and stare at the ceiling.”

Katsuro says something to her in Japanese and she scowls. “Now you sound like Dr. McCoy.”

“How’s the headache?” Jim asks.

She scowls again. “Tolerable.”

“Cat, that is your answer to everything at the moment,” Bishop says, amused.

“Da, well, what else would you have me say?” she asks, clearly cranky. “I hurt, I itch, I cannot see properly and my head aches. It is all temporary, and it will pass, and it is not unbearable and I do not want any more pain medication. What I want is to be home in my own bed, but apparently that is too much to ask for.”

Jim hides a grin; she’s going to be just fine. From the look on Bishop’s face, he’s thinking much the same thing. Pike frowns, though. “Why the vision impairment?” he asks.

“A side effect of oxygen deprivation,” Bishop says. “It will pass as her cells regenerate.”

“That damage, it’d be permanent in someone else, wouldn’t it,” Pike says.

“A normal human could not have survived the damage she did, let alone the oxygen deprivation,” Bishop says. “But, if things had been different, then yes, the damage would be permanent.”

“What does it take to kill one of you?” Pike asks quietly.

Bishop stays quiet, a shadow passing over his face, and Katsuro touches his shoulder and says something softly in Japanese. Bishop sighs. “A severed spinal cord, admiral,” he says finally. “Cut the throat, sever the spinal cord, and even that we cannot recover from. Anything else...depends.”

“I trust that information will stay with the five of us,” Ekaterina murmurs.

“Yes, of course,” Pike says.

She rubs at the bandage on her right hand, making a face. Katsuro takes her left hand, and she sighs. “Itchy,” she complains. “I can tolerate anything else, but the itching is maddening.”

“Can they give you anything for it?” Jim asks.

“Not without removing the bandages and they do not wish to do that yet,” Bishop says. “The new skin is still too fragile to expose to air. It is also,” he says, turning toward Ekaterina, “too fragile to be touched.”

She makes a face at him and says something in Russian that doesn’t sound complimentary, and Bishop’s lips twitch. “She is, in case that wasn’t obvious, not a good patient,” he says to Pike and Jim. “Also I think she is due for more pain medication.”


“Cat, if you think I am going to sit here for the next two hours and listen to you get crankier at me, you are very mistaken,” Bishop says. “And if you think anyone else has more patience, you are clearly more injured than you think you are.”

Ekaterina sighs. “Fine, then, be a bully about it,” she says, waving at him with her unbandaged hand.
“I’ll do what I must to keep you safe and make sure you heal,” Bishop says, leaning down to kiss her forehead before he leaves the room.

Jim shrugs, figuring at least she didn’t pull the knife or protest she doesn’t need a security detail. “I should get going,” Pike says. “Lieutenant, I hope you’re feeling better soon.”

“Spasiba, admiral,” she says, closing her eyes, and Jim realizes how tired she is if she’s not watching him leave.

“See you later, Kirk,” Pike says and Jim nods and watches him leave. A moment later Bishop and a nurse who isn’t Maeve come back in. “Where did Maeve go?” he asks, watching the nurse give Ekaterina medication.

“She was forced off-duty after too many hours working,” Bishop says. “Protesting the entire way, mind, but she is sleeping at the moment, she will be back at fifteen hundred hours.”

“She was on for a long time,” Jim says. “I mean, how long can you guys go without sleep?”

“Days,” Bishop says. “We only need a few hours’ sleep a night, though.”

“That much I know,” Jim says, and Bishop smiles. Jim feels mildly sheepish but it’s true; Khan will usually go to bed with him, but Jim almost never wakes up to him in the bed, even if he’s awake at four in the morning. Of course, he can usually convince Khan to come back to bed, but that doesn’t involve sleeping and isn’t Bishop’s business.

Ekaterina says something softly in Russian, and both Bishop and Katsuro turn to look at her. Bishop asks her a question, and she answers, voice fading out toward the end. The only thing Jim thinks he caught from that was Khan’s name, and he’s not even sure he heard that correctly.

But Bishop gives him a speculative look, enough to make him wonder what Ekaterina said. “Did I miss something?” Jim asks politely. He doesn’t think the language is on purpose; Ekaterina’s primary language is Russian, and she lapses when tired or upset.

“No,” Bishop says. “No, I don’t think you did, captain.”

Jim frowns, because that’s not cryptic or anything, oh no. But before he can answer, his comm-link chirps and he excuses himself to answer it. “We think we have some data,” Spock says. He gives Jim their location and Jim heads over, almost running.

“What’ve you got?” he asks when he gets there, only slightly out of breath and still wondering what was up with Bishop.

“We are not wholly certain, but we think the asteroid had gas pockets in it,” Spock explains. “It is not uncommon for this to happen, however the physical composition of this particular asteroid is different than most.” He goes on a tangent about elements and odd combinations and Jim finally holds up a hand.

“Give me the bottom line,” he says.

“We think Ekaterina hit a gas pocket,” Spock says, looking mildly miffed at being interrupted. “The exposure of the gas to the vacuum of space caused an unstable reaction, and thus the explosion. We just do not know precisely what the composition of the gas was, nor do we know how big the pocket was. It is possible that there are more gas pockets left in the remains of the asteroid, depending on size. For this reason I would not recommend excavating samples, but rather taking a shuttle back and collecting pieces small enough.”
“My concern is that exposing the asteroid itself to a pressurized space might lend itself to more explosions,” Khan says when Spock’s done talking. “Since there is so much data we do not have, we are essentially working blind.”

“But if the gas pocket is sealed within the rock and metal of the asteroid, how could exposing it to atmospheric pressure cause it to escape?” Spock argues.

“And if we study the pieces of the asteroid and in doing so expose a gas pocket to atmospheric pressure, how big an explosion could that cause?” Khan counters immediately. “We have already proven that in order to get any in-depth readings of this particular object, we need to get close enough to it to excavate pieces.”

“But it is possible that in the explosion, the energy field was disrupted,” Spock says. “The remaining pieces may be inert.”

“Can longer-range sensors detect anything?” Jim asks.

“I have not yet had time to check,” Spock admits.

“Do that,” Jim says. “I’m not ready to go back out there and risk another explosion without all the information we can possibly have. I see both your points, but the fact is we almost lost a crew member yesterday and had it been anyone else we’d be planning a funeral right now. That doesn’t mean there’s no acceptable level of risk to try and get this thing into a lab, but right now we just don’t know enough.”

Neither Khan nor Spock look pleased, which Jim figures means he’s doing his job right, but they both nod. Spock moves to the computer along the wall, Khan returns to studying the one in the middle of the room, and Jim blows out a breath and sees himself out.

He finds himself at loose ends, unable to settle or really focus on anything, and ends up calling Jill to see if she’s got a free hour. To his surprise, she does, and she agrees to meet him at their usual cafe in ten minutes. The walk over doesn’t really clear his head, but he gets himself a coffee and waves her to a seat when she comes over with her drink. “So, what’s up?” she asks.

Jim looks at his coffee. “The mission, yesterday,” he says. “It...didn’t go well.” He tells her the story, keeping it brief, and her expression changes to sympathy halfway through and she covers his hand with her own.

“But she’ll be all right,” Jill says. “That’s what matters.”

“Yeah, I know, and that’s not really...” Jim takes a drink of coffee. “I found myself wondering what I’d have done had it been Khan out there. It so easily could have been--he said he’d do it, but Spock wanted him on the shuttle so they could talk more easily about what he was finding. But it could have been, and...how do I do this, Jill? How do I send him on missions that could be dangerous--hell, ones that shouldn’t be but suddenly are, for that matter? How do I willingly let him walk into danger?”

“You ask yourself if he’d let you do the same,” Jill says quietly, still touching him. “You ask yourself if you’re his partner or his caretaker, and if it’s your job to protect him from the rest of the world, or only from those things you can. You tell yourself he’s an adult, that he walked into this with his eyes open and he is fully trained and qualified for these missions that need his specific skills.” She blows out a breath and sits back. “And then you either let him go, or go with him, and you ignore the fear and you lock it down, because it’s something you can’t afford until the mission’s over and you’re home and safe and you can fall apart behind closed doors. And if something happens, you lock
down the fear and the agony and the anger and you focus on what needs to be done right that moment, and the next moment, and the next moment, until he’s safe and healing and you find a friend to get drunk with.”

“You’ve had this all happen,” Jim says without asking.

“Oh, of course,” Jill says, taking a sip of her drink. “I almost lost him twice, he almost lost me once. Well, twice, but we don’t talk about that one and it was on our honeymoon anyway.”

“Dangerous honeymoon,” Jim comments.

She laughs. “Something like that. But yeah, it’s happened, and it’ll happen again, and you just...there’s no easy trick to it, Jim. There’s no easy way to shut off the fear and the concern and just be professional. It just has to get done, and you do what has to get done until there’s nothing else to do.”

“You fall apart on Evan?” Jim asks after a moment.

“I yell at him for being a stupid idiot, I throw things at him, I have punched him in non-damaged places, I tell him he’s not leaving me to be a single mother if we have kids and he’d better get smarter, and then I usually end up sobbing all over him,” Jill says cheerfully.

“What does he do when you get injured?” Jim asks.

“He hovers,” Jill says with a sigh. “Endlessly. He doesn’t let me out of his sight and he fusses and he drives me up a fucking wall.”

“Yeah, I don’t see you being a good patient,” Jim says. “Kind of like Ekaterina.”

“Speaking of, I’d like to see her,” Jill says. “She’s become a friend.”

“Sure,” Jim says. “Just as fair warning, she’s kind of cranky at the moment, at least when she’s not asleep.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jill says. She takes a drink and gets up. “Let’s go, while we have time.”

Jim gets up—as always, he feels too big and too clumsy next to Jill, but he’s gotten used to that. They head back to Medical, and he checks in to make sure Ekaterina’s still where she was. She is—he gets told she’ll be moved to a regular room tomorrow, which Jim is sure will piss her off, but whatever, he still remembers what she looked like in the damaged suit, cold and pale and not breathing. She can survive a couple days in the hospital.

When they get to Ekaterina’s room, Katsuro and Bishop are gone but Alona and Matthew are there, Alona’s staff leaning against one wall. Both of them stand up when Jim and Jill walk in, and Jim makes quick introductions since he’s not sure Jill’s met them before. “Ekaterina has been teaching me knife work,” Jill says, and Jim realizes that she is shorter than Alona. “I wanted to come see how she was doing.”

“Oh, don’t ask,” Alona says, laughing. “She’s awake enough to be cranky and not healed enough yet to leave. It’s a bad combination.”

Ekaterina mutters something in Russian that makes Jill snort and answer. Whatever she says gets a smile from Ekaterina, and she reaches for the remote to raise the head of the bed a bit. “Easy, Cat,” Matthew says. “You’re supposed to be resting.”
“Sitting up is hardly exerting myself,” Ekaterina says, but she does close her eyes for a moment once she has the bed where she wants it. “Jill, I hear congratulations are in order?”

“So they tell me,” Jill says, moving to stand next to the bed. “How are you doing?”

Ekaterina looks grumpy. “I would much rather be home in my own bed, but they will not let me out of here,” she says.

“That’s because you’re still healing, and because if you go home you’re not going to rest and we all know it,” Alona says with a sigh. “And then you’ll end up back in here and no one will be pleased, including Maeve’s doctor.”

“He is rarely pleased,” Ekaterina says. “I certainly hope his bed manner is better than his bedside manner, or I would wonder what Maeve was thinking.”


“That’d be like you sleeping with Khan,” Jim protests.

She smiles a bit. “He is a handsome man,” she says. “And the wings...but no, Jim, I never did, never seriously thought about it. I had my Konstantin, who else could I want?” Her voice goes a little wistful and melancholy, and Matthew steps forward to touch her shoulder. “I wish he were here,” Ekaterina murmurs.

“I know, Cat,” Matthew says gently. “We all do.”

Alona looks at Jim and Jill and jerks her head to the door; they follow her outside. “They’re trying a new pain medication, because she was metabolizing the others too quickly,” Alona says quietly. “The side effect is it’s made her both talkative and a bit...unguarded. I would ask that you respect her confidences, and once you leave here, forget anything you might have heard that you think she wouldn’t have told you normally.”

“Oh, of course,” Jill says and Jim nods.

They go back into the room. “Secret conferences?” Ekaterina asks. “Am I that interesting, to be gossiped about?”

“Always,” Alona says, taking her seat again. “Besides, it’s not like you couldn’t hear.”

“I was not trying,” Ekaterina says. She looks at Jill. “Hold on to your husband, captain,” she says. “Losing one’s partner is a hurt that never heals.”

“How long were you together?” Jill asks gently, taking Ekaterina’s hand.

“Forty-three years,” Ekaterina says, closing her eyes. “I miss him every day since waking up in this world. I would rather still be asleep and dream of him, I think, than awake without him.”

“That’s not true,” Alona says. “You know it isn’t. You know he wouldn’t have wanted that.”

Ekaterina says something in Russian and Jill squeezes her hand, answering her. Matthew adds something, and both Ekaterina and Jill smile. “Point well made, Matthew,” Ekaterina says. “And you are right. I had him for over forty years.”

“Did you ever want anyone else?” Jill asks.
“No. Never.” Ekaterina smiles again, something wistful in it. “How could I? He was my mate. A pair of wolves, we were. They mate for life, and so did we.”

“You could find someone new in this life,” Jill says gently. “He wouldn’t have wanted you to be alone.”

“No one else could be to me what he was,” Ekaterina says.

“That’s the point,” Jim says, surprising himself. “No one can be what he was, but you might find someone who could be something else, something almost or equally as important. Don’t you believe in second chances?”

Ekaterina looks at him, her eyes disturbingly clear. “About whom are we speaking here, Jim?” she asks, and Jim doesn’t answer.

Jill looks at Jim, who shakes his head. “Later,” he mutters.

A doctor Jim doesn’t recognize comes into the room—or tries, at any rate; Alona and Matthew move damned fast and block him. “Who are you?” Matthew demands, and Jim tries not to notice that Alona’s holding her staff just out of sight range of the door.

“Dr. Davidson,” he says, looking indignant that he’s being questioned by two people out of uniform. “I’m a burns specialist, I was told there’s a patient who needs my expertise.”

“You were misinformed,” Alona says coolly.

“I was not,” Davidson says, turning red all the way up through his bald spot.

“On whose orders are you here, doctor?” Matthew asks.

“The--the hospital’s,” Davidson says defensively. “The dean told me there was a patient--”

“She has a name,” Alona snaps. “And she is not your patient.”

“Get out of my way before I call Security,” Davidson says angrily.

“By all means,” Alona says, laughing. “Call Security.”

Davidson scowls at her and stomps away to do just that. Jim, meanwhile, calls McCoy and lets him know of the altercation. Two security guards and Bones get there at the same time, all three looking annoyed. “I told you already, she’s not your patient and she’s not going to be,” Bones tells Davidson. “Now get out before I have Security throw you out.”

“if she’s suffered burns as serious as you say--”

“She’s my patient, and she doesn’t need you,” Bones says, looming over the shorter, pudgier doctor. “Now get. Out.”

“You haven’t heard the last of this,” Davidson threatens, but he turns and leaves.

“We cool?” one of the security guys asks Bones.

“Yeah, it’s fine. It’s like I told you—if these people block anyone from getting in the room, and they call security, call me. There’s a very short list of people allowed in here.” Bones looks in the crowded room. “Captain Kane,” he says.
“Doctor McCoy,” she says. “I came to say hello to Ekaterina.”

“I see that,” Bones says. “Maeve will be back on duty in a few hours, and she can help play guard dog after that. Until then, I’ll be nearby.”

“We appreciate it, doctor,” Matthew says. “Will Davidson be back?”

“Probably not,” Bones says. “I have seniority to him and he knows it. If I say he’s not wanted, he’s not wanted.” He looks pleased by this, and Jim smiles. “And not speaking of him, how’s my patient?”


“Not for another couple days,” Bones says, moving to the bed to check various monitors and scan Ekaterina with a couple devices.

“Not at all,” Ekaterina says, again with that wistful, melancholy tone. “My home was three hundred years ago, with my Konstantin. This time is...I do not yet know what it is, but it isn’t yet home.”

“Give it time,” Bones says gently. “You still have most of your family, that’s got to count for something.”

“I do,” she agrees. “And of course it does, doctor. We have a second chance now, a chance to start over, become who we want. I only wish...” She sighs. “If wishes were horses, the streets would be full of shit.”

Jim snickers at that, as does Bones. Jill smiles, too, and just then Jim’s comm-link chirps. He excuses himself to answer the call, ducking into the office he used earlier. “Kirk here,” he says.

“Captain, we have more data,” Spock says. “I think you will be pleased with the results of our analysis.”

“On my way,” Jim says and hangs up, hurrying for the lab.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

A sane man would walk away.

Chapter Notes

Couple of things here - one, so so many thanks to all the commenters, I once again drove to work smiling today. For a Monday where I barely slept last night, that's pretty impressive!

Two, the rating on this story has CHANGED to Explicit, because of this current chapter. I thought about editing it down or fading to black, and it just didn't feel right, so I decided to keep it in and change the rating to match. If you're not so much into the porn, I do apologize, and you can probably skip most of this chapter. If, however, you've been hoping for some smut, by all means, have some.

By dinner they have a plan. It may not be the world’s best plan, but it’s theirs, and it’s as solid as it’s going to get. The three of them--Spock, Jim, and Khan--will take the shuttle back to the remains of the asteroid and try to scan it from the shuttle. If that’s unsuccessful, Jim and either Khan or Spock will go EVA--Jim to try and collect asteroid debris small enough to be studied and with a low probability of exploding on them, the other to do more close readings of whatever’s left. The problem is, Khan and Spock can’t agree on which of them is more suited to going EVA--Khan argues he is because of genetic superiority and a better chance of survival if something goes wrong. Spock’s argument is that he scanned the asteroid last time, he understands the data better than Khan does--a point Khan argues--and with Khan’s wings, he’s a bigger target if something does go wrong.

Jim rubs his hands over his face and through his hair. “Enough,” he says finally, and both of them stop the way-too-calm and collected back and forth. “Spock, you went EVA last time, you’re still healing bruises and lacerations, and I know you saw someone at Medical today to check on a couple of them. I think, given that, it makes more sense for Khan to go EVA so you don’t take more damage if something does go wrong. However, having said that, it will also depend on whether we can get Khan a proper spacesuit in time.”

“I have one, captain,” Khan says, and Jim blinks in surprise.

“When did you get that?”

“Two weeks ago,” Khan says. “We were discussing taking one of the smaller ships out for testing, and would have gone EVA to do some of the work.”

“Right,” Jim says, remembering this isn’t Khan’s main project at the moment. “Do they need you on that?” he asks cautiously.

“Not at the moment,” Khan says, and it’s not a full explanation but Jim figures he’ll get that later.
“Okay,” he says. “So let’s go get food. Spock, do you want to join us? I think we’re going to swing by Medical first so Khan can see Ekaterina and then find something somewhere.”

“Thank you, but I have plans with Nyota,” Spock says. “We are meeting Captain Kane and her husband for a meal.” He pauses. “Would you like to join us?”

Okay, Spock being social is weird, and Spock inviting them along is weirder. “No, thanks,” Jim says, barely glancing at Khan to get his agreement. “It’s been a long day, I think we’re just...yeah, anyway.”

Spock nods. “I would like to see the lieutenant,” he says. “Is that acceptable?”

“Sure, why not,” Jim says, feeling like he’s been shuttling people to Ekaterina’s room all day long. Pike, Jill, now Spock. When did this become his job?

He hasn’t figured out the answer to that by the time they get there and find Anandi—who Jim had thought was shipped out—and Rudolf in the room. Ekaterina appears to be asleep, and Jim’s glad to see it. She needs the rest, and also he’s not sure how Spock would react if she started talking about home and partners like she had been earlier. He’s not sure how Khan would react, for that matter.

Anandi and Rudolf greet them and slip out of the room to give them a bit more space, and Khan moves over to the bed, reaching down to stroke Ekaterina’s dark hair back from her face, brushing his fingers over her cheek. She sighs and turns her head into the caress but doesn’t wake, and Jim leaves her and Spock to ask Anandi or whoever what’s up.

Outside the room, he finds Anandi leaning against the wall and Rudolf not quite hovering by the door. “Sleep finally caught up with her?” he asks quietly.

Anandi nods. “Healing takes energy, and she used more of hers than she should have in trying to stay awake today. We finally convinced her to sleep, and she has been out for about two hours now.”

“I’m glad,” Jim says. “Are they moving her to a regular room soon?”

“Yes, I think so,” Anandi says. “Hopefully not for a few hours so she has more time to sleep.”

“Right,” Jim says. “When did you get back, anyway? I thought you were shipped out.”

“Last night,” Anandi says. “We had to return for repairs due to an engine malfunction, it was just chance I happened to be able to help stay with Cat.”

“I’m glad you were here,” Jim says.

“As am I, captain,” she says, smiling. She glances in the room and Jim does as well, seeing Spock standing at the foot of the bed and Khan standing next to it, holding Ekaterina’s hand. Jim can’t hear it if she wakes up enough to say anything, but Khan bends down, as if listening to something, before he brings Ekaterina’s hand to his lips and squeezes it. “Don’t wake her, Khan,” Anandi mutters under her breath. “Please, don’t wake her. It took us an hour to convince her to sleep.”

Khan glances back, like he heard that, and he smiles faintly. Jim wonders again just how good their senses are, but doesn’t ask. A moment later, Khan leaves the room, and Spock follows. “I did not wake her,” Khan says to Anandi. “She was mumbling in her sleep, and sounded distressed. I think she will sleep more soundly now.”

“Bad dreams?” Jim asks.
“Even we dream,” Anandi says. She smiles a little, studying Khan. “Is it true?” she asks.

“That depends on what you heard,” Khan says calmly.

“Oh, I think you know what I heard,” Anandi says, smiling again.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Yes, you know what I heard or yes, it’s true?” Anandi clarifies.

“Both,” Khan says.

“Well,” Anandi says. “I am glad to hear it.”

“Are you?” Khan asks, and Jim knows Spock’s dying to know what’s going on, because who couldn’t be, but keeps quiet. He’s kind of afraid he does know what they’re talking about, and it’s related to Bishop’s comment earlier and whatever Ekaterina said.

Anandi steps forward and tugs Khan’s head down, murmuring something in his ear Jim can’t catch. She releases him, and he looks—for a moment, he looks almost sheepish, not something Jim’s seen on him before. It’s gone in a flash, though, and he folds his wings back and looks at Jim. “Dinner?” he asks, and Jim decides that sounds like a great idea. They say their goodnights and leave.

“Pizza?” Jim offers on the way back to his apartment. “It’s easy, cheap, and someone will bring it to us.”

“Yes, that is fine,” Khan says.

That’s the extent of their conversation until they’re in the apartment. “What was that all about, with Anandi?” Jim asks. “And why was Bishop giving me weird looks earlier?”

“I don’t know why Bishop was looking at you strangely, Jim,” Khan says. “I was not there.”

“You probably have an idea, though,” Jim says. “Ekaterina said something in Russian, and then they both looked at me, and I asked if I’d missed anything and Bishop said no, he was fairly certain I hadn’t, and that was...weird, and what did Anandi hear and what did she say to you?”

Khan sighs, his wings shifting and folding around him, which makes Jim wary because Khan’s wings are usually more controlled than his own, and for them to be this unsettled means something’s really bothering him. “Bishop likely heard what Anandi heard, which is what I told Cat,” he says carefully. “Which is that you are mine.”

“This really means something to you guys, doesn’t it?” Jim asks slowly. “The...” He licks his lips, looking for the word. “Claiming someone. Calling them yours. It really means something, more than you’re telling me. Ekaterina, I remember her saying at one point Konstantin was hers, and she’s referred to him that way, as her Konstantin, and...you claimed Rani, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Khan says, his wings still not quite settled.

“What about Katsuro and Bishop?” Jim asks.

“Mutual claiming, I should think, although Bishop is more possessive,” Khan says, sounding easier. Jim files that away for later. “Tell me what it means,” he says. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Have you not figured it out yet?” Khan asks softly.
Jim moves to stand toe to toe with him. “Tell me,” he says quietly but firmly.

“To want someone as yours is not--none of us are easy lovers by nature, and all of us are possessive to some degree,” Khan says. “But there is a difference between owning someone for a night and wanting them to belong to you, wanting them to allow you to take care of them, protect them. The former is just sex, the latter...” He breathes. “It is a lifetime bond, Jim. We do not do this casually.”

It’s not really a surprise, Jim thinks, even though maybe it should be. But somewhere inside him, he knew, he knew what this meant. But--“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asks quietly. “Why did you let me think--”

“What did I let you think?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says honestly. “I don’t know what I was supposed to think.”

Khan presses his lips together for a moment. “You could walk away,” he says. “We are not--I gave Rani the choice, and I will make you the same offer. I am not an easy person, Jim, I am not an easy lover. I want things from you that should terrify you, and I want more than any sane person would. You could walk away, if you chose.”

“And what, end this between us?” Jim asks in the same careful tone Khan’s using. “That’s it, we go back to nothing more than serving on the same ship?”

“I would likely seek a transfer, but yes,” Khan says.

Jim thinks about what he wants to say for a moment, folding his wings back when they try to stretch.

“How long is this offer good for?”

Something dark flashes over Khan’s face. “Make your choice, Jim, and I will abide by your decision,” he says. “But don’t dare play me.”

“Do you really need to hear me say it?” Jim asks. “What do you think I’m going to do?”

“A sane man would walk away,” Khan says quietly.

“A sane man might never have asked you into bed in the first place,” Jim counters and Khan smiles faintly. “I started this, Khan. I invited you home with me, I invited you into my bed, into my life. I’m not walking away just because you think I should be afraid of you. I’m not scared and I’m not leaving, is that what you need to hear? I told you, you’re mine as much as I’m yours, and maybe I didn’t know but maybe I think I did.” He breathes out slowly. “I’m yours, Khan,” he says, voice steady. “And you’re mine.”

Khan’s mouth comes down hard on Jim’s, hard enough that Jim thinks he might taste blood from someone’s teeth, and Khan’s hands tangle in Jim’s hair, gripping tight enough it almost hurts. Jim groans into the kiss and his own hands fist in Khan’s hair, even as his knees go weak and Khan pulls his head back, bending to bite his throat. Jim yelps--that’ll need healing later--and shudders and thinks he’s literally swaying on his feet when Khan licks the mark he’s made, blowing gently over it.

“Tell me what you want,” Jim whispers, hands sliding down Khan’s neck to grasp his shoulders, just so he has something to hang on to.

“I want you to let go,” Khan says softly, kissing Jim’s jaw. “I want you to just surrender and let me take care of you, let me have you.”

Surrender. The thought makes Jim’s heart beat faster and his knees wobble, and without letting
himself think about what he’s doing he slides down Khan’s body, hands skimming over Khan’s shirt, his legs, until Jim’s kneeling on the floor, looking up at Khan, hands resting on his thighs.

His mouth goes dry at the heat he sees in Khan’s eyes, the predatory look on his face. This isn’t the calm, controlled scientist he saw working with Spock earlier; this is the warrior, the man accustomed to taking what he wants, with no one to stop him. Jim’s certainly not about to, not after all but throwing down the gauntlet, but something cold trickles into the pit of his stomach, mingling with the need and desire already there, adding a sharp edge. It feels good, though, and he breathes in deeply, allowing himself to acknowledge that yes, Khan could kill him--and knowing he won’t.

“The things I could do to you,” Khan murmurs, brushing his fingers over Jim’s cheek.

“And anything,” Jim whispers back, the sharp edge spiking when he realizes just how much he means it. He’s never felt like this with anyone before, never wanted this much.

Khan’s fingers slide down and his hand curls around Jim’s throat, pressing just enough that Jim feels the grip, just enough to put light pressure on his windpipe, not enough to cut off his air. He swallows, feeling the muscles move against Khan’s hand, and says nothing even when Khan pushes his head back. Khan’s thumb presses into the soft skin under Jim’s jaw and he feels his pulse beat.

And then Khan pulls back, steps back from Jim entirely, and his stomach clenches tight for a moment before he realizes Khan’s undressing, stripping out of his clothes efficiently. This is backwards, he thinks; Khan’s naked and Jim’s fully dressed and yet there’s absolutely no question who’s in control here.

Still, though, he wants, and maybe--"Let me suck you," he says before he thinks better of it. “Please.”

Khan smiles, not entirely kindly, and tangles his hand in Jim’s hair again, pulling his head back until his eyes almost water from it and his throat feels tight. “What if that isn’t what I want from you?” he asks. “You said anything I wanted, Jim.”

Jim can barely breathe, he’s so turned on and a little scared--maybe more than a little--at the same time. He closes his eyes, unable to look at Khan, and swallows again. “I meant it,” he says, voice slightly strained from the position. “I just--I wanted--”

“Yes,” Khan says softly. “You did.” He doesn’t let go of Jim’s hair, but the pull lessens, until Jim can almost raise his head normally and breathing is easier. “Do it,” Khan says, and Jim leans forward against the grip on his hair and opens his eyes, licking dry lips before he takes Khan into his mouth.

He’s learned by now that genetic engineering equals superior stamina--and superior recovery time. Jim’s pretty sure that’s not fair, that it should be one or the other but not both, but right now he doesn’t have the capacity to think about it, to wonder what kind of night this will be. He breathes in Khan’s scent, musk and sharp from the wings, tastes him salt-bitter on his tongue, and vaguely wonders when he closed his eyes again.

It doesn’t matter. Khan’s hand in his hair pulls just enough to be perfect, and his wings touch Jim’s shoulders and Jim feels utterly surrounded in him, completely lost in this. Pleasure curls in his stomach when Khan hisses a breath, and he whimpers without meaning to when Khan tightens his grip, holds Jim’s head steady to fuck his mouth, pushing in deep until tears stand in Jim’s eyes and he can scarcely breathe. It’s so fucking good, so right, there’s nothing Jim can do but take it, and the need in him burns. He moans as best as he can, pleading without words for something he can’t even define.
Khan whispers something Jim can’t understand but which sounds ragged, almost—almost desperate, and then he’s coming all over Jim’s tongue. Jim swallows, coughs when Khan lets go of him and he can raise his head, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He can’t tell who’s breathing harder, himself or Khan, and the thought makes him smile.

“Stand up,” Khan says, his voice as smooth as it ever is. Jim staggers to his feet and Khan pulls him in for a hard kiss, fingers working at the fastenings of Jim’s shirt. They break the kiss just enough for Jim to pull it off, and he hastily gets out of the rest of his clothes at Khan’s nod before Khan pulls him in again, hand around his wrist. Jim pulls against the hold, just to feel it tighten, hoping it’ll leave bruises. “You really do want me to leave you a mess, don’t you,” Khan murmurs, kissing Jim’s throat again on the other side from the mark he’s already left.

“I just—” Jim loses his train of thought when Khan bites. It hurts and throbs and his cock’s never been harder. “Yeah,” he manages instead of trying for anything else. “Yeah, I do.”

Khan hums a little, as if in agreement, closing his other hand around Jim’s other wrist, grip tight as a vise and unyielding as steel. Jim gasps, shudders, drops his forehead to rest against Khan’s shoulder, struggling to breathe. “Please,” he says softly.

“Please what, Jim?” Khan asks, not letting go of him. “Tell me what you want, and maybe I’ll let you have it.”

“Touch me,” Jim asks, begs really. “Please. Anywhere. I just--I want your hands on me. In me. Whatever.”

He’s really not expecting to get picked up and all but thrown on the bed, and the breath whooshes out of him when he lands, scrambling back on the covers. He props himself on his elbows, watching as Khan rests a knee on the bed, between Jim’s legs, looking at him with so much focus, so much intent. “Hands over your head,” Khan says, and Jim groans and falls back, shifting enough to tuck in his wings before he reaches over his head, tangling his fingers in the sheets they didn’t make this morning. “You really are made for this,” Khan murmurs approvingly, sending a warm flush of pleasure through Jim even though it should maybe be embarrassing.

Slowly, deliberately, Khan crawls onto the bed, over Jim, leans down to kiss him. He runs his hands over Jim’s body, positioning Jim the way he wants him and hitting so many sensitive points Jim can’t help but squirm under him, panting for breath. “Where--ah,” Khan says, almost to himself, and Jim frowns but realizes what he’s doing when Khan reaches over him and snags the tube that somehow ended up under Khan’s pillow.

He closes his eyes, somehow better able to breathe when he feels one hand rest on his belly, steadying him. Of course Khan doesn’t give him any warning before he pushes one finger in, smooth and deep, and Jim makes a choked sound that’s not quite a protest. He doesn’t dare protest; if he does, Khan might just stop, might leave him like this, and that thought does terrify him.

“Please,” he whispers instead, tilting his hips back against Khan’s hand.

“I have you,” Khan answers, twisting and crooking that finger inside him, enough to make Jim see stars. “I’ll give you what you need, Jim.”

Jim doesn’t even know what that is anymore. He wants more, wants another finger, but Khan doesn’t give it to him, not until Jim’s pleading with every breath, shaking on the bed. Two fingers thrust in and hold deep and Jim cries out, muscles clenching. “Please,” he manages. “God, please, just fuck me.”
He can hear Khan’s smile in his voice, and it’s tinged with just a hint of cruelty. “I will,” he says. “When I want to.”

Khan is perfectly capable of stringing this out all fucking night long and Jim knows it, and he swallows a whine that turns into a moan as the two fingers in him twist sharply and scissor. He sucks in air, turning his face into his arm as if he can hide.

He needs more than this, good as it is, amazing as it is, and can’t help but beg for it, even though he knows it’ll get him nowhere, knows Khan will ignore him as long as he wants. The two fingers in him stroke deep and steady, over and over again, and Jim’s trembling with it—and then Khan pulls his hand back and two fingers becomes one, and he sobs without meaning to. “No--please--”

“Easy, Jim,” Khan says, that other hand still on his belly, warm and grounding. “Trust me.”

“I do,” Jim whispers.

Khan brings him to the edge over and over again; two fingers, sometimes three, always backing off right before it gets too much, always bringing him down just enough. Jim’s throat feels raw from the pleas and moans and bitten off cries he can’t stop, his cheeks are damp with sweat and maybe tears, and he’s so lost he doesn’t even know what’s real anymore. He hears Khan murmur to him but can’t comprehend what he’s saying.

Three fingers, now, deep inside him, and Khan says something that sounds like--”‘Come for me, Jim,” he says again and Jim shudders, but he’s been on the edge for so long he doesn’t even know if he can anymore. And then--hot and wet on his cock, Khan’s mouth, and Jim thinks he might actually scream when he comes, blood roaring in his ears and seeing stars.

For a time, he just lies there on the bed, zoned out and boneless and unaware of anything else. He does feel Khan’s fingers ease out of him and grumbles a little at the empty feeling, but he feels so blissed out, so content, it’s hard to summon up the energy to do more than that. Khan laughs softly and pulls Jim into his arms, and Jim collapses against him like a rag doll.

Eventually he comes back to himself, exhausted and aching all over, and sighs. “I think one of these days you might actually kill me,” he mumbles.

Khan laughs again. “You exaggerate.”

“I really don’t,” Jim says, blinking his eyes open. “I also really want a shower.” What he really wants is a bath, but the wings make that kind of awkward and his tub’s not that big. So a shower will have to do. “Share it with me?” They’ve managed before, barely, but Jim’s not ready to be alone yet.

“Of course,” Khan says, stroking Jim’s hair. Neither of them move.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Does it have to be complicated?

Chapter Notes

The boys, they wanted more porn, so while this chapter doesn't really advance the plot it does advance the sex. I hope you'll be okay with the tradeoff. I do promise to get back to plot in the next chapter, though. Things are...happening.

Eventually they do shower and change into loose pants, and Jim orders pizza. While they’re waiting for it, Khan uses the dermal regenerator to heal the bite marks and bruises; Jim can only wish it’d do something about the ache in his ass, but at the same time he doesn’t want to lose the feeling, the only reminder now of what just happened. He wishes they didn’t have to heal the rest of it and knows there’s just no other option.

He sits on the bed while Khan heals him, and after Khan puts the regenerator down Jim leans his head against Khan’s hip, closing his eyes and letting Khan stroke his hair and the back of his neck. Khan’s always gentle with him after something like this, and it makes Jim feel--wanted. Safe. A few other words he doesn’t feel comfortable using, but which make his throat tight for a moment. Khan says something in what Jim has learned to recognize is Hindi, even if he still doesn’t know what it means. It sounds reassuring, though, comforting, and Jim sighs, content to stay where he is and not think for a bit. He can feel the weight waiting for him--Ekaterina, the upcoming mission, ship’s repairs and section 31 work and captain’s duties and--no. Not right now. He’s earned this respite, these brief moments of not having to think.

Still, though, the thoughts intrude on his boneless contentment, and he sits up, pulls away from Khan and rubs his hands over his face. “The pizza should be here soon,” he says as if explaining. Khan gives him a measured look, but doesn’t question him, and Jim sighs and touches the spot on his neck that doesn’t have a bite mark.

The pizza arrives, and they get plates and bottles of beer and eat at Jim’s small dining table. Khan stays quiet, but questions swirl in Jim’s mind as they eat. He finally sighs, picking at the label on his bottle. “What’s going on with the classified stuff?” he asks, for lack of anywhere else to start.

“As Matthew, Katsuro and I are unavailable at the moment, we are on hold,” Khan says quietly. “We will begin work again once Ekaterina is out of hospital and I am no longer needed for Spock’s current project.”

“Is that causing any problems?” Jim asks cautiously.

“I was given permission to assist Spock,” Khan says, and Jim snorts at the idea of anyone giving Khan permission to do anything. “As for the others, I have not heard of problems.”
“Who’s overseeing the project?” Jim asks.

Khan’s mouth quirks. “Admiral Barnett.”

Jim winces. “Of course. Well...hopefully he’ll understand.”

“Do you know, I think he might,” Khan says thoughtfully. “Loyalty to one’s family is something he does recognize, and as one of his concerns was that we would feel no loyalty to anyone or anything, I think this might perhaps work in our favor.”

“I don’t see how anyone could spend more than an hour with any of you and not realize how loyal you are to each other,” Jim protests. “Half an hour.”

“And how much time has he spent with us?” Khan points out.

“Not enough,” Jim mutters.

Khan shrugs. “We shall see. If we have to walk away we will.”

“I don’t want you to leave Starfleet,” Jim says, the thought making him feel cold.

“Easy, Jim,” Khan says, touching his wrist. “I have no intention of it at this time.”

Jim sighs. “Okay.” The others he’s less concerned about, but when the Enterprise is ready to ship out again—current ETA is in three months—they’re heading out for five years, and the thought of Khan not being on the ship with him is...well, it’s just not an option. Another thought pops into his head, though, a distraction, and he leaps on it. “What did Anandi say to you, earlier?”

Khan looks down, and Jim stares at him, because that’s color in his cheeks, which never happens. “It was just--”

“What did she say?” Jim interrupts before Khan can dissemble. Khan won’t lie to him, but he’s very good at evading the question when he wants to.

Khan says a sentence in Spanish, and Jim clears his throat pointedly. Khan sighs. “She said ‘you deserve to be happy’.”

Jim blinks. “Okay,” he says. A tangle of emotions squirms in his stomach, and he takes a drink of a beer he doesn’t want rather than analyze them. He’s...honestly not sure what to say to that one.

“We should clean up,” Khan says abruptly, getting up from the table and picking up the plates. Jim watches him, and hides a smile. Clearly Anandi got under Khan’s skin, though, and that’s not a bad thing.

He lets Khan put the pizza box in the recycler and stack the plates in the washer before going to him, pressing himself against Khan’s back to feel smooth warm skin and smooth, hard feathers. He presses a kiss to the nape of Khan’s neck, wrapping his arms around the man, and Khan sighs and covers Jim’s hands with his own.

“I want you,” Jim says finally, softly. “So much.”

“Tell me what you want,” Khan says, a familiar refrain between them by now.

Jim kisses the nape of his neck again. “I want you to let me top you.”

“Yes,” Khan says, and even now it’s always a little bit of a surprise when he agrees, even though
he’s never not agreed, never said no, that’s not what he wants.

“Will you tell me something?” Jim asks, and he hates doing this because it might spoil the mood but he wants to know. “Did you ever let anyone, before me?”

“No,” Khan says simply.

“Not even--” Jim stops, but Khan knows where he’s going.

“No, not even her,” he says quietly. “She was not...it was not something she wanted. I would have, if she had wanted to, but for some reason she didn’t.”

“Why do you let me?” Jim asks.

“Because it’s what you want,” Khan says. “Because I want it. Does it have to be complicated?”

“No,” Jim says. “It really doesn’t.” He smiles against Khan’s shoulder, pressing a kiss to the warm skin. “You’re always so warm,” he comments.

“Rani used to say I soaked up all the sunlight,” Khan says, surprising Jim a little. “That I took it all and left none for her. Usually she said this during monsoon season.”

Jim laughs. “I can believe that.”

Khan turns around in his arms; Jim has to let go of him and hold him again once his wings settle. He studies Jim’s face for a moment, eyes unreadable, and Jim wonders what he’s seeing, but then Khan kisses him, gentle and easy. Jim sighs into it, a little of the contentment from earlier seeping into him.

For a while, they just stay there, Jim’s arms around Khan’s waist and Khan’s hands on Jim’s shoulders, kissing lazily. After earlier, Jim’s in no rush, and Khan doesn’t seem to be either, although he rarely is. Slowly, though, hunger starts creeping in, the kisses getting hotter and Jim scratching lines down Khan’s back, Khan’s hands tightening on Jim’s shoulders. “Bed,” Jim says finally, tearing his mouth away from Khan’s. He pulls away and takes Khan’s hand, walking back over to the bed, and pushes him down on it gently. Khan moves to roll onto his stomach, but Jim stops him with a hand on his hip. “On your back,” he says. “I want you to be able to see me.”

“As you like,” Khan says, tucking his wings in close and shifting to lie on his back, watching Jim.

“I do like,” Jim says, tugging at the waistband of Khan’s pants. Khan lifts his hips and Jim tugs the pants off, tossing them aside and running a hand up Khan’s thigh. Pale skin, sleek muscles, and so warm under his touch, and Jim moves to kneel between his legs, leaning down for a kiss. Khan presses the lube into Jim’s hand, making him smile against Khan’s mouth and bite his lower lip.

“You really want this, don’t you?”

“As always, Jim, you do well to state the obvious,” Khan says, and Jim laughs.

“Certified genius here. Also, don’t be a brat.”

Khan snorts. “Which of us are you talking to?”

For that, Jim smacks his hip. The skin reddens under his touch and he looks at it, wondering for a moment what it would be like to leave Khan covered in marks, bites and bruises and scratches, what he’d look like if Jim left him as wrecked as he usually leaves Jim.

Any marks he leaves on Khan will heal before they’re done, but that doesn’t mean he can’t mess him
up a bit. Jim grins and leans down, teeth sinking into the skin of Khan’s throat. It earns him a sharp intake of breath and Khan freezes under him, but Jim can feel his pulse beat, fast and strong. “Jim,” Khan says, a little unsteady.

“I want...” Jim licks the mark he’s made. “I want to take you apart,” he says, realizing it as he says it.

“Do you, now,” Khan says, but he tips his head back when Jim nudges his chin and his eyes are closed.

“I do,” Jim says, biting again, overlapping the first mark and slightly surprised neither of them are fading yet. Khan shudders under him this time, and his hands come up to grasp Jim’s shoulders until Jim pushes his hands over his head. “Leave those there.”

He thinks, not for the first time, that they really need cuffs, or rope, or something. As much for Khan to use on him as the other way around, but it’d come in really handy right about now. Jim marks that thought as one to deal with later and runs his hands over Khan’s body, scratching where he feels like it, nuzzling the spot on Khan’s ribs that always makes him squirm. He works his way down, nudging Khan’s legs apart to settle between them, skimming light fingertips over his thighs to see if it makes Khan shiver. It actually does, which surprises him a little, and he grins--right before he bends his head and bites the pale skin. He actually hears a sound from Khan at that, which is unusual, and not something Jim’s going to forget. Biting--or rather, being bitten--appears to be a kink Khan has they haven’t played with before.

Jim considers teasing him more, leaving bite marks all over his body, but dismisses it because while Khan may have the patience for it, Jim’s not sure he does. Still, though, it’s too tempting not to lean down and bite his other thigh, which gets him a choked moan and muscles going taut under his touch. Something fierce curls in Jim’s stomach and he inhales deeply, resting a hand on Khan’s stomach the way Khan did for him. “Trust me,” he says, noting the role reversal.

“I do,” Khan says quietly.

Jim keeps some part of him touching Khan as he opens the lube and slicks his fingers, and he hastily wipes one hand on the sheet before resting it on Khan’s stomach again. As if anticipating him, Khan draws up one knee and Jim kisses it, right where the skin creases. He doesn’t have a good enough angle to bite there, not really, but he does think about it.

Instead, though, he looks at Khan, stretched out on the bed, and smiles. “You are so fucking gorgeous,” he says, circling two fingertips at Khan’s hole, not quite pushing in. “I don’t know how anyone could look at you and not want you.”

“More easily than you think,” Khan murmurs, and he sounds in control but the muscles in his thighs are tensing and releasing, over and over again, as if he can’t stop it. Jim rubs his cheek against that smooth pale skin and kisses the crease where hip meets groin, just as he pushes those two fingers in deep. Khan chokes out a sound that could almost be a curse, and when Jim glances up he’s turned his face into his arm the way Jim did earlier.

There’s something about knowing this is theirs alone, that Khan trusts him in a way he hasn’t trusted anyone else. It makes Jim want to find out everything else he hasn’t done, build new memories. Of course, it also makes him want to find out everything Khan has done and replace those memories with new ones, but that’s not the point right now. The point right now is his fingers inside Khan’s body, twisting and scissoring and every press of his fingers drawing another sound from Khan, another shudder.

He’s coming undone, and it’s the most beautiful thing Jim’s ever seen. He finds patience he didn’t
know he had, content for now to just watch Khan, see the color rise in his cheeks and down his chest, watch his fingers clench in the pillow over his head. When Jim adds another finger Khan makes a broken sound and his hips jerk. He’s biting his lip, trying to suppress the noises he’s making, and Jim leans forward and touches his mouth. “Don’t,” he says softly. “Let me hear you.”

“Jim,” Khan says, husky and ragged. “Please.”

Khan’s never begged him for anything before. Jim considers—just for a moment—ignoring him the way Khan does to him, but realizes that he can’t. He doesn’t have that much patience and Khan looks so fucking perfect against the bed and Jim wants, needs to be inside him. “Yeah,” he says, keeping one hand on Khan’s stomach as he eases his other hand back. “Yeah, I’ve got you.”

His own hands tremble as he strips out of his pants and slicks his cock, and he has to take a couple steadying breaths before he thinks he can actually do this. He shifts, kneeling where he needs to be and lifting Khan’s long legs over his shoulders. Khan opens his eyes, looking at Jim with so much heat Jim feels like he’s burning up. “Jim,” Khan says again, softly, and Jim breathes out slowly and lines up and pushes and both of them cry out.

He knows what it feels like to be on the bottom in this position, how every thrust goes so deep, feels so much, and after the first couple thrusts Khan turns his head away, closing his eyes, lips parted as he struggles to breathe. “Look at me,” Jim insists and Khan doesn’t quite whimper, but there’s something desperate about the sound he makes before his eyes meet Jim’s again. Mine, Jim thinks, fire running through him at the thought.

Jim braces his weight on one hand, using his other to wrap around Khan’s cock and stroke him, not quite in rhythm with the way they’re moving but enough to make Khan gasp and writhe under him, the long line of his neck exposed just enough for Jim to bite down, right where the previous marks have started to fade. Khan cries out at that, bucks up under Jim, pillow twisted between his fingers. “Ask me for it,” Jim whispers, all he can manage. “Ask me.”

“Jim,” Khan says, helplessly. “Please. Please.”

“God, do you have any idea what you do to me when you do that?” The angle’s difficult especially with him still jerking Khan off but Jim manages to lean up for a kiss without dropping his hand. “Do it,” he says against Khan’s mouth. “Let me feel you come, give it up, let me have it.” He keeps murmuring, words he doesn’t even know if Khan’s registering anymore, counterpoint to the moans and gasps Khan can’t stop making.

When he comes, Khan arches up and his head falls back and Jim bites, feeling him tremble. He’s so focused on Khan’s orgasm he barely realizes his own is so close until it hits and he bites again, tasting blood this time and surprisingly not caring.

They collapse against the bed, and Jim can still feel Khan shivering, tremors running through him that he can’t stop. He eases out and crawls up to pull Khan into his arms, rubbing his back and the back of his neck, holding him close, and Khan buries his face in Jim’s shoulder and huddles into him.

Slowly, Khan stops shaking, his breath steadies, and after a few minutes he pulls away. Jim doesn’t really want to let him go, though, and tugs him back, running fingers up and down his spine, between his wings. “Just be with me,” he says softly. “Just like this.”

Khan sighs and settles against him, the two of them creating a tangle of arms, legs, and wings that’s surprisingly comfortable. Jim brushes his fingers over the marks on Khan’s throat, noticing that
they’re fading but not as quickly as he would have expected. His fingertips come away with red, though, and he winces, feeling guilty about that.

“You cannot hurt me past what I can heal from, Jim,” Khan murmurs, as if reading Jim’s mind. “The normal limits do not necessarily apply.”

“I still don’t know if I meant to draw blood,” Jim says.

Khan shrugs a shoulder and takes Jim’s hand, licking his fingertips clean. “It doesn’t bother me.”

“Good to know,” Jim says, more turned on than he wants to be by his fingers in Khan’s mouth. There’s no way he can go for another round any time soon, though, so it’s more a passing thought than anything else.

He cranes his head and notices that the marks on Khan’s neck have already faded, and he can only see two distinct imprints now, and as he watches, they also start to fade. It’s just fast enough to watch, and in a minute or two there’s nothing left but a red patch on smooth, unmarked skin. The red patch lingers, though, and Jim touches it gently. “Why is it still--”

“Bruises take a while to heal,” Khan says. “It will, eventually, but it takes more time.”

Jim wonders why that is, but doesn’t ask. He touches the spot again, a little more firmly, and Khan makes a soft sound. “Sometimes I wish we could keep the marks we make,” Jim admits. “That you didn’t have to heal the ones you leave on me, and that the ones I leave on you wouldn’t heal so fast.”

“I would like that,” Khan admits quietly. “But it is unavoidable.”

“I know,” Jim says, carding his fingers through Khan’s surprisingly soft hair, scratching down the back of his neck. “Maybe one of these days we’ll figure out an option.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. He doesn’t sound convinced.

Jim sighs and closes his eyes, resting his head against Khan’s. “I don’t want to think anymore tonight,” he admits. “Can I not?”

“You may,” Khan says, his hand coming up to cup the back of Jim’s skull. “Just relax, Jim. I have you.”

“And I have you,” Jim murmurs, relaxing into that state of boneless contentment he’d found earlier. They’re both sticky and messy and some of this is going to itch later if they don’t get it cleaned up, and right now Jim just can’t be bothered. He closes his eyes, moving just that bit closer to Khan, and lets Khan pet him, fingers in his hair and down his back.

He hears Khan say something softly in Hindi and doesn’t ask. He’s gotten used to that; Khan often slips into Hindi at times like these, and the sound of the words is soothing even if Jim doesn’t know what they are. Jim’s not sure he wants to know, either; the tone is enough.

He falls asleep without knowing it, and his dreams involve sunlight and storms and a small, dark-haired, dusky-skinned woman in gold. She looks at him from the dias of a grand room, marble floors and ornate carved walls and a throne on the dias, and she folds her arms over her chest, studying him. Jim tries for a charming smile. “Have we met?” he asks.

“No,” she says, considering. “And we won’t.”

“Then what is this?” Jim asks, confused.
She sighs and unfolds her arms. She’s remarkably beautiful, even if she is looking at him like he’s the stupidest man on Earth, or wherever they are. “Take care of him,” she says. “Promise me you’ll take care of him.”

“I promise,” Jim says without quite understanding what he’s promising.

“And tell him--” She hesitates, then shakes her head. “Never mind. Don’t.”

“Don’t tell him what?” Jim asks.

“Never mind,” she says. “You need to go.”

“I do?”

“Yes.” She flicks her hand at him, and Jim’s spiraling out of the room, into sunlight and rain and higher and higher until he hits atmosphere, and he’s going to burn up in vacuum and--

He comes awake with a gasp, breathing hard, Khan looking at him with concern. “What is it, Jim?”

“I think...” Jim tries to remember, but it’s all a blur of gold and marble and dark hair. “Weird dream,” he says, shaking his head. “There was a woman, though, and...she was odd. I promised her something, and she told me to tell--” He stops, not remembering. “I don’t remember the rest. I need a shower. Join me?”

“Yes,” Khan says, and Jim gets up, rubbing his hands over his face like it’ll clear his head.
They stop by Medical to check on Ekaterina before heading out; as Jim was told, she’s been moved to a private room. Katsuro and Bishop are the ones with her, and she’s reading a physical book, even if she does wince and rub at her eyes every so often. “Good morning,” she says when they come in, marking her place and closing the book.

“Good morning, sister,” Khan says, moving to kiss her cheek. “How are you doing?”

“They have stopped forcing pain medication on me, so I am much better,” Ekaterina says, looking pleased. “However, I am still not allowed to go home, and I have been told that someone will have to stay with me or nearby for the first day or two that I am allowed out of this infernal facility.”

“Jim and I can do that,” Khan says.

“I had thought that might be your answer,” she says. “It is wholly unnecessary, of course.”

“Of course,” Khan says solemnly, and Ekaterina makes a face at him. Her right hand’s unbandaged now, but the skin looks a little pinker than normal. “We are on our way back to what remains of that asteroid.”

“Are you, now,” she says. “Be careful, brother, I would not want you to end up in here. You would molt.”

“I do not molt, Cat,” Khan says.

“Being in here would make you,” she says with a sigh. “And here is Maeve with whatever bloody medication I am being forced to take now.”

“No, that’s actually not it,” Maeve says. “But I do need your right hand.” She looks at Ekaterina and something passes between them that Jim doesn’t understand. “Checking the healing of that injury,” she explains to Jim.

Ekaterina holds out her hand, and Maeve—who’s wearing gloves—swabs her palm with something, then the back of her hand. Then she presses a clear circle to the center of Ekaterina’s palm. “There,” she says. “All better.”
“That does ease the itching, thank you,” Ekaterina says.

“Oh, and you have a visitor,” Maeve says. “Leonard said he was all right so long as he didn’t disturb you. He’s a technician who really wants to be an historian.”

Again, that something, and Ekaterina nods. “By all means.”

Jim frowns, jerking his head at Khan, who follows him outside. “I thought the point of people being there was that she wasn’t supposed to get visitors,” he murmurs.

“Perhaps she is exceedingly bored,” Khan murmurs back. As they stand there, a tall blond man walks by, and pauses when he sees Jim and Khan. Jim figures it’s the wings; it happens a lot. The man goes into Ekaterina’s room, and Jim sees her greet him and shake hands. They begin talking, and Jim doesn’t want to interrupt but they need to get going.

“I should--do you want to say goodbye?” he asks. “We need to meet up with Spock and get on the shuttle.”

“Yes,” Khan says. He goes to the doorway and says something in Russian, and Ekaterina smiles and responds.

Something feels off and Jim doesn’t know what it is. He turns it over in his mind while they walk to the shuttle bay, but can’t figure out what’s going on. He’s about to ask Khan if he has a clue when he sees Spock waiting for them. Later, he promises himself.

They get on the shuttle and head out to the remains of the asteroid, and conversation on the way there is stilted and revolves mostly around what they might find once they get there. Long-range sensors didn’t pick up much but they don’t know if that’s because there’s nothing to pick up or because the sensors are being distorted by whatever energy field the remains of the asteroid might be giving off. Jim pilots the shuttle because of the three of them, he’s the best pilot--well, maybe, he hasn’t compared his skills to Khan’s, but he’s better than Spock and Khan doesn’t offer to fly the shuttle. He does, however, take the co-pilot’s seat, which amuses Jim if only because of the look on Spock’s face when he does it.

He probably shouldn’t have so much fun trying to get under Spock’s skin, but damn if it’s not worth it once in a while. Then again, he does the same thing to Khan, the results are just different and usually more rewarding with Khan. Then he wonders if things were different, how different would they be? If Spock wasn’t with Uhura, if Jim wasn’t with Khan, and...

Okay, whoa, train of thought he so doesn’t need right now. Or, like, ever.

Spock and Khan are discussing possibilities for the asteroid and Jim’s listening, but part of him is still trying to remember what he can’t seem to recall from his dreams the previous night. Something about a woman, and she’d talked to him, and...

He sighs. It seemed important at the time, but dreams always do. It was probably nothing, just some odd thing.

Khan glances at him and Jim knows he’s picked up on Jim’s distraction, but he says nothing and Jim’s grateful for the reprieve. Soon enough his attention’s taken up with the asteroid rubble, where pieces bump into other pieces and they can’t get too close without risking getting hit. Since Jim sees the occasional burst of fire when two pieces collide, he’s not keen on risking anyone on the shuttle.

As Spock and Khan expected, the shuttle sensors are mostly nonfunctional. “If anything, it appears the explosion has caused more interference,” Khan comments. “We did think that was an option, but
were hoping it would not be the case.”

“Right,” Jim says. “I’m not taking the shuttle in any further than this, so time to suit up.”

“Captain, I still believe I should be the one—”

“Objection noted and overruled,” Jim says, moving to where the space suits hang. “We’ve been over this, and you’ll be useful on the shuttle. If something goes wrong, you’ll have to be the one to get us to help.”

Spock looks annoyed, but drops the argument. Jim pulls on his own suit, but needs Khan’s help to tuck the wings into their sections; it’s not the most comfortable feeling in the world, and he can’t stretch them more than halfway while in the suit, but it’ll do. He helps Khan do the same with his own wings, and if he runs a hand over the soft under-feathers, no one comments.

Spock checks their seals, and Jim checks Khan’s one more time before Khan checks his, and then Spock steps into the front of the shuttle and seals the back. “Are you ready?” Jim asks Khan, reminded of the last time they did this. So much has changed since then.

The smirk Khan gives him, though, that’s totally the same. “Are you?” he counters and Jim smacks his arm through the suit.

Spock gives them a warning, then opens the hatch and they zoom out into space, both of them carrying sample containers.

It’s an open channel between them and the shuttle, so Jim makes no comments about the previous night, nor does he try flirting. He’s not sure it’d work anyway; Khan seems pretty intent on what they’re doing, even though all they’re doing at the moment is stowing away rocks and trading comments with Spock.

“Captain, I believe I am detecting an imminent explosion,” Spock’s voice says calmly. “You must move at least a hundred meters back toward the shuttle to escape the blast.”

“Moving,” Jim says, already putting on speed, Khan right behind him. He feels the explosion more than anything else, a wave of light and energy that slams into him and sends him tumbling over and over. When he finally re-orientates himself there’s debris all around and he doesn’t see the shuttle...or Khan. “Spock, where am I?” he asks. “Khan, where are you?”

“Sensors are offline from the explosion,” Spock says. “I do not see you visually, however based on your last position you would need to come at least forty meters closer to Saturn’s moons.”

“Yeah, that’s not really helpful, since all I see is asteroid bits,” Jim says, but he looks around. “Khan, can you hear me? Where are you?”

“Surrounded by debris,” Khan says, sounding off somehow. “However, I think I can see the shuttle.”

“Are you injured?” Jim demands.

“Minor,” Khan says, but Jim’s not sure he buys it.

Khan makes it back to the shuttle before Jim, but by the time Jim finds it, and once he gets inside and they unseal the back, he sees Khan stripped to the waist, his right shoulder covered in mottled reds and purples and blues. It also looks—“Dislocated,” Khan says briefly, catching Jim’s look. “I will need help in putting it back into place.”
Jim feels queasy at the thought, but Spock steps up. “Tell me what you need,” he says.

“Hold my arm there,” Khan says, gritting his teeth. “And—pull, hard.” Spock does and Khan shifts and Jim hears the scrape of bone on bone until something fits into place and Khan takes a deep breath. “Thank you, Mr. Spock.”

“Of course,” Spock says. “Shall we return to HQ?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jim says. “We still have the samples, and whatever recordings you guys were doing, I think we can pack it in. Besides, I want Bones to look at Khan’s shoulder, and whatever other injuries he’s got I don’t know about.”

“The shoulder was the worst of it,” Khan says, but he doesn’t move to pull his shirt on.

“Which means there’s more,” Jim says, glaring at him.

“Bruising, maybe a few cracked ribs,” Khan says. “No worse than I have taken in sparring with Katsuro or Ekaterina.”

“You’re still getting checked out,” Jim says, sliding into the pilot’s seat and making for home. “We have rules about this sort of thing.”

“As you wish,” Khan says, absently touching his injured shoulder. Jim keeps glancing at him during the flight back, but the bruises don’t disappear and Khan barely moves, as though his right side is paining him.

When they land, Jim gives Spock the asteroid pieces and the data and sends him off to deal with whatever needs dealing with, and all but drags Khan to Medical once he finds out where Bones is. Khan still hasn’t put his shirt back on, which means they get more than a few looks as they hurry through the corridors, but Jim couldn’t care less.

They find Bones in an exam room and Jim pushes Khan down on the biobed. “What the hell did you do to yourself?” Bones asks, already picking up equipment to scan him.


Bones mutters something under his breath that doesn’t sound complimentary. “Extensive bruising, three cracked ribs, and there’s more under your pants,” he says. “Strip ‘em off.”

Khan raises an eyebrow but pulls off his boots and pants. Normally Jim would appreciate the view, but at the moment all he can see is the mottled rainbow of bruises down Khan’s right side and over his hip, pale yellow to almost black. “It will all heal,” he says, catching Jim’s glance. “The ribs are knitting and my shoulder will be fine.”

“What happened to your shoulder?” Bones demands.

“Dislocated,” Khan says briefly. “Mr. Spock helped me put it back in place.”

“Aren’t you supposed to have superior speed?” Bones asks grumpily, glancing up from his scan.

“That is not as much a help in outer space as you might think,” Khan says. “I can only move as fast as the suit allows.”

“You fractured your hip,” Bones says. “I’m amazed you’re walking.”

Khan shrugs his uninjured shoulder. “I did not notice.”
Jim blows out a breath. “How do you not notice something like that?”

“It is probably all but healed by now,” Khan says.

Bones picks up a different piece of equipment, studying Khan’s hip. “Just about, yeah,” he says. “Will you take painkillers if I give them to you?”

“No,” Khan says. “The bruising is only temporary discomfort, it will pass.”

Bones sighs. “Get dressed. What happened to your shirt?”

“I think it is still on the shuttle,” Khan says.

“Well, come on to my office, we’ll get you something to wear for now,” Bones says as Khan pulls his pants and boots back on.

The three of them head down the hall to the office Bones has appropriated, and he rummages in a supply cabinet before pulling out a scrubs top. Khan takes it, but he frowns, looking at something on the desk. “What on Earth is that?” he asks.

The tribble chirps and rocks from side to side.

“Oh, that’s Jesus,” Bones says. “Don’t feed it unless you want to be buried in them. It was dead, you see, and then I tried an experiment and injected your platelets into it, and now it's happily alive.”

“So you called it Jesus,” Jim says, trying not to laugh.

“Well, it came back from the dead, what else was I supposed to call it? Khan Junior?” Bones grins.

Khan, meanwhile, is staring at the tribble in either horror or fascination; Jim’s honestly not sure which. The thing makes a plaintive sound and Jim picks it up, stroking its fur. Jesus purrs at the attention; its fur is warm and soft. “Here,” he says, handing it to Khan. “They have a very...soothing effect on people if you pet them.”

“I really do not think—” Khan takes the tribble when Jim forces it on him, looking like he’s handling a bomb. Jesus chirps and purrs, and slowly, Khan strokes its fur. “What is the point of these things?” he asks, looking at the tribble.

“You might as well ask what’s the point of humans,” Bones says. “I think he likes you.”

“Do they even have gender?” Jim asks.

“I’m not a tribble specialist, I don’t know,” Bones says. “The main rule of tribbles is that you can only feed them every so often, or they start reproducing like there’s no tomorrow and you end up buried. Literally. They complain a lot about being hungry, but you just have to ignore it. They’re remarkably easy to take care of, though. You want it?”

“No,” Khan says firmly, setting Jesus back down on the desk. It whines piteously and Jim starts laughing, unable to stop.

“I really do think it likes you,” he says between snickers. “Maybe it recognizes that you gave it life.”

“I do not think it has enough brain capacity to realize anything other than basic needs,” Khan says, eyeing the tribble dubiously.

“Hey, don’t insult Jesus,” Bones says with mock indignation. “Also, put on the damn shirt so I don’t
have to look at Jim staring at you.”

“Have you a pair of scissors?” Khan asks.

“Why--ah. Right.” Bones rummages in a drawer and pulls out a scalpel. “Will this work?”

“Yes, thank you,” Khan says. He lays the shirt flat and studies it for a moment, then makes two long cuts in the fabric. When he pulls on the top, Jim automatically goes to help him slip his wings through the slits. He notices the bruising has started to fade, but it still looks pretty ugly, and Khan winces ever so slightly when Jim brushes his fingers over one of the darker spots.

“I can give you a wrap for the bruises, help them heal faster,” Bones says.

“Thank you, but it isn’t necessary,” Khan says. “I will be fine.”

“Are all of you this damned stubborn about receiving medical help?” Bones grumbles.

“Had you been through what we have, you would feel similarly,” Khan says. He rolls his right shoulder, grimacing slightly.

Bones sighs. “Take it easy the rest of today,” he says. “That’s an order, assuming you’ll listen to me.”

“i’ll make sure he does,” Jim says. Khan gives him a mildly annoyed look, but doesn’t challenge him in front of Bones, so Jim figures he’ll take what he can get.

Jesus chirps and rocks back and forth, as if agreeing with Jim. The look Khan gives it is enough to make Jim crack up, laughing until he has tears in his eyes. Even Bones grins. “I think I should find Mr. Spock,” Khan says, pointedly ignoring both of them. “We have work to do.”

“Yeah, and you have healing to do,” Jim says, sobering up.

“I have worked with worse,” Khan says.

“There’s no need,” Jim says. “Spock’s capable of handling things for a few hours until you’re back to normal. You can’t even move your right arm without pain right now. Take a few hours to heal.”

Someone’s comm-link chirps just then, and Jim reaches for his own before realizing it’s not his. “McCoy,” Bones answers.

“Doctor, we have a code red,” the person says. She gives him a location Jim’s not familiar with.

“On my way,” Bones says, already running for the door.

Jim looks at Khan once he’s gone. “I know you’ll be fine, but humor me,” he says. “I don’t like seeing you in pain.”

“It is temporary and bearable,” Khan says, absently touching one of the bruises on his arm.

“Do I have to tie you to the bed?” Jim asks, only half-joking.

Khan smiles, a quick flash that makes Jim’s mouth go dry. “I would like to see you try,” he says softly.

Jim ignores the flutter in his stomach. “There’s no way I can convince you to take a few hours’ downtime, is there?”
“And what will you be doing while I am...recuperating?” Khan asks.

“I’ll sit on you if I have to,” Jim says.

That gets him the same flash of smile. “Would that not be counterproductive to resting?”

Jim laughs. “Maybe. Come on, let’s go home.”

They take a cab back to the apartment, and once inside Jim makes Khan undress so he can see the bruises for himself. They are lighter than before, but some are still disturbingly dark splotches of purple and blue. “You scared me,” Jim says finally, looking at the bruises. “I knew you were right behind me but...”

Khan takes Jim’s hand. “I am fine, Jim.”

“I know. I know.” Jim steps closer to him, though, and leans up for a gentle kiss. “I guess this is one of those things I have to get used to.”

“If it helps, I do not like you being in danger either,” Khan says reflectively. “But this is what we do, Jim. You cannot coddle me any more than I can protect you from all dangers. You would resent me as much as I would you.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t be scared for you,” Jim says. “It doesn’t mean I can’t want to take care of you when it’s all over.”

“No, it does not,” Khan says.

Jim kisses him again, and Khan’s uninjured arm wraps around his waist and holds him close. “We probably have an hour or two before we need to get back to work,” Jim murmurs, kissing Khan’s jaw.

“I thought I was supposed to be resting,” Khan says, but Jim sees the teasing in his eyes and the hint of humor in his voice.

“I did say I’d sit on you,” Jim counters.

Khan laughs, kissing Jim again. “So you did.”

Chapter End Notes

So I'm not sure if any of you noticed, but last chapter I retconned myself. If you can figure out where I went wrong, I will write you a drabble of your choice. Leave me a comment and let me know what you think. I suppose in almost 90k words it was bound to happen eventually. Author trying to keep story canon completely in her head is not as smart as she thinks she is.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

You don't want to ask questions to which you don't want to know the answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ekaterina gets released from Medical later that day, with orders to rest and take it easy for a couple days--orders Jim’s fairly certain she’ll disregard as soon as she gets out of Bones’s sight. Unfortunately--and Jim’s not sure who’s getting the short end of the stick here--Bones also has orders for Khan and Jim to keep an eye on her for at least twenty-four hours. No one looks thrilled about it, but neither do they argue. At least, until Ekaterina insists on walking home from the hospital. “I need to move,” she says fiercely. “I have been cooped up in bed for days now, my muscles are complaining. It is not far to the apartment building, the weather is fine, I am walking.”

“If you fall over, I am not picking you up,” Khan says but Jim knows it for a lie and from the snort Ekaterina makes, she does as well.

The three of them head out into the sunlight, and if they move a little more slowly than normal no one comments on it. Ekaterina moves a bit stiffly at first, favoring her right side, but as they walk she loosens up, moving more fluidly. She doesn’t falter or fall, but by the time they reach the building her skin has almost no color in it and she’s breathing a bit harder than normal. “This is ridiculous,” she mutters, pushing the button for the lift. “I should be healed by now.”

“You almost died,” Khan says, taking her arm. “Even for us, it takes time for everything to return to normal. Another day or two and you should be fine. Were you a normal human, you would either be dead or in hospital for weeks.”

“Da, but I am not,” Ekaterina says, getting on the lift. “Your place or mine, brother?”

“Yours, I think,” Khan says and she pushes the button for her floor.

Jim tries to think of something neutral to say. “Who was the visitor you had this morning?” he asks, watching the floor numbers flash.

She shrugs. “A technician,” she says. “His name...ah, I cannot remember. Viktor something. He studies history in his spare time, and wanted to discuss my rule. I was bored enough to agree.”

“What did you tell him?” Jim asks.

“Very little,” Ekaterina says. “A few details about what life was like for my subjects.”

“How did he find you?” Jim asks.

Ekaterina shrugs again. “I think perhaps through Maeve. I did not ask. It is not as though we have made a secret of who we were, captain.” She steps off the elevator and heads down the hall to her door, unlocking it and pushing it open. “Well, come in and be welcome.”
Khan closes the door behind them, and Jim watches as Ekaterina makes a circle of the main living area, as if reminding herself where her things are and reassuring herself none of it has been disturbed. She ducks into the kitchen and returns with a glass of water, gesturing for them to help themselves if they like. “Sit down, Cat,” Khan says. “You look tired.”

“I am tired,” she says grumpily. “I had forgotten how much bloody energy healing requires.” She drops down on the couch, taking a sip of water.

Jim’s comm-link chirps and he digs it out of his pocket. “Kirk here,” he says.

“Jim, are you with Ekaterina?” Bones asks.

“Yeah, like you told me,” Jim says. ‘Checking in?’

He can hear Bones frown through the link. “No, I need to talk to her. I’ll be there in fifteen.” He hangs up before Jim can ask anything else, and Jim frowns, looking at his link.

“Okay, that’s odd,” he says. “Did you do anything funny at the hospital? Steal medical equipment? Kill someone?”

Ekaterina sets down her water glass. “Jim, perhaps it escaped your notice but I was trapped in a bed and attached to various machines and tubes and things for the last few days,” she says. “How on earth would I have had time or opportunity to do anything?”

“I think if anyone would have found a way, you would have,” Jim says and it’s not really a compliment but Ekaterina laughs.

“Perhaps,” she says. “But no, I did not do anything ‘funny’.”

“I wonder what’s going on, then,” Jim says.

“We will find out when Leonard arrives,” Khan says. “Do you want a drink?”

“Water, thanks,” Jim says and Khan nods, going to get it. He gets himself a glass, too, and they take seats and no one says anything for a bit.

Eventually the door buzzes and Jim gets up to get it, letting in Bones. “What’s going on?” he asks, noting the frown on Bones’s face.

“I need to know everything about your visit with Viktor Defoe,” Bones says to Ekaterina.

She raises her eyebrows. “Why?”

“Because he just died, and I want to know why,” Bones says. “He was a perfectly healthy adult male who just collapsed in the middle of Starfleet Medical. The preliminary autopsy report shows he died of a heart attack, but he didn’t have heart disease, he didn’t have a history of heart problems, and healthy men don’t just die randomly of heart attacks. So I want to know exactly what happened when he came to see you and if you noticed anything out of the ordinary.”

“Are you accusing me of something, doctor?” Ekaterina asks coolly.

Bones glares at her. “Should I be?”

“I never met the man until today,” Ekaterina says, scowling back. “He came into the room, we shook hands, he asked me a few questions about what things were like in Russia when I ruled it. I answered some of his questions, and then he asked me some questions about how I was adjusting to
life in this time. I think I spent perhaps twenty minutes with him all told. He seemed perfectly healthy to me when he left.”

“Did you make plans to see him again?” Bones asks.

“I did not,” Ekaterina says. “I did not find him interesting enough to spend more time with. His questions were obvious, and it was apparent he was not interested in me as a person, but as a genetically engineered human.”

“Well, shit,” Bones mutters. “This makes no sense.”

“I am sorry I cannot be of more help, doctor,” Ekaterina says.

Bones sighs. “It was a long shot. I just figured you might have noticed something. Also, you look like hell. Go to bed.”

“As always, your bedside manner is impeccable,” Ekaterina says, rolling her eyes. “I have had enough sleep to last me the next three weeks.”

“Don’t make me make him carry you to bed,” Bones threatens, nodding at Khan.

“Leave me out of this,” Khan says, amused.

“I could sic Jesus on you,” Bones says.

“Who?” Ekaterina asks, baffled.


“You watch your mouth about my tribble,” Bones says, grinning. “You should feel some responsibility for it, you did bring it back to life after all.”

“Not by choice and not by my doing,” Khan says. “And this is not the point.”

“No, it’s not,” Bones agrees. “I have to go conduct an autopsy on a man who shouldn’t be dead. You need to be resting—actually, both of you should be resting. Let me see your shoulder.”

“I am fully healed, doctor,” Khan says, pushing up his sleeve so Bones can see the unmarked skin.

“What happened to you?” Ekaterina asks.

“Minor injuries from another explosion,” Khan says. “I dislocated my shoulder.”

“You were lucky,” she says.

“He also cracked three ribs and his hip, but apparently that doesn’t count as worth noticing,” Bones mutters. He sighs and gets to his feet. “You take it easy, you make sure she takes it easy, and you stay out of trouble,” he says.

“If you find out anything about Viktor’s death, let me know, please,” Ekaterina says.

“I will,” Bones says. Jim sees him to the door and activates the privacy seal once he’s gone. Then he considers what he wants to say before turning to look at Ekaterina.

“Okay,” he says. “How did you do it and why did you do it?”
“I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about, captain,” Ekaterina says. “And you don’t want to ask questions to which you don’t want the answers.”

“Which means you do know what I’m talking about,” Jim says.

Ekaterina examines her nails idly. “Tell me, captain, if I give you the answers you think I have, what will you do with them? Will you report me for murder?”

Jim blows out a breath. He should and he knows it but—“No,” he says. “But I want to know why and how.”

“The why is simple,” Ekaterina says. “He was one of five. Now there are four, and by the weekend there will be three.”

“Section 31,” Jim says slowly.

“Precisely,” she says.

Jim looks at Khan. “But he looked at you, and you didn’t—”

“Oh, I recognized him,” Khan says. “And he me. But it was not exactly the time or place to make introductions. What was I to have said? Jim, this is the man who attempted to break every bone in my hands to see how quickly they would heal?”

Jim feels sick at hearing it. “How did you do it?” he asks Ekaterina.

“Maeve and Anandi,” Ekaterina says. “Anandi developed an undetectable poison that causes heart attack. Maeve provided the delivery system, the clear circle she placed on my palm. When I shook hands with Viktor, it transferred the poison. It takes effect between six and twelve hours later.”

“Shit,” Jim says, rubbing his hands over his face and through his hair. “You can’t—no one can ever tell Bones. He’d...”

“I think the good doctor suspects already,” Ekaterina says. “But I will not confirm or deny his suspicions, and neither will anyone else.”

Something falls into place for Jim and he looks at Khan. “You knew she was planning this,” he says. “This is what you were arguing about. You didn’t want her to do it.”

“I have learned by now I can rarely, if ever, change Cat’s mind,” Khan says. “I will say, however, that the explosion was not factored into her plans.”

“Much as I want these five people dead, I did not want to almost die in the process,” Ekaterina says. “Still, it did provide us with opportunity to flush out two of them.”

“Two?” Jim asks.

“There was another doctor,” Ekaterina says. “Bishop requested that one.”

“Poison again?” Jim asks.

“To be perfectly honest, I do not know the details,” Ekaterina says. “Bishop assured me it would be taken care of by the weekend, and I trust him.”

Jim rubs his hands over his face again. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”
“What are you going to do about it?” Khan asks quietly.

“Nothing,” Jim says without thinking about it. “It’s--what can I do? I’m not going to turn on my people. I’m not going to turn on you. I get the, the need for revenge, and I know what happened to you, and maybe part of me agrees with what you’re doing, but even if I didn’t, there’s nothing I can do without betraying your trust. It’s a hell of a thing, but I’m not going to talk.”

Ekaterina says something to Khan in Russian, and he smiles briefly. “What did I miss?” Jim asks, glancing between them.

“I think perhaps I was wrong about you, Jim,” Ekaterina says. “And that is not a bad thing.”

“My moral code is perhaps more flexible than Starfleet would like it to be,” Jim mutters.

“Well,” Ekaterina says around a yawn. “Starfleet is far from perfect.” She stretches and moves to lie down on the couch, her head in Khan’s lap. “Wake me in an hour,” she says, closing her eyes.

Jim watches Khan stroke her hair gently, watches Ekaterina lean into his touch, and feels a sudden surge of envy he squashes. It’s not that he thinks there’s anything between them--he knows there isn’t, knows there never has been and never will be. But they’re so comfortable with each other, so easily intimate, he envies it. He’s never had a friend quite like that, except Bones, and Jim’s pretty sure if he ever fell asleep on Bones like that Bones would push him off the couch.

Come to think of it, he has fallen asleep on Bones--well, passed out really--and Bones did push him off the couch. Although there was that one time he just threw a blanket over Jim and left him alone.

“What are you thinking?” Khan asks quietly, looking at Jim.

“Stuff,” Jim says, wings shifting a little. “Just...you and Ekaterina are so close. All of you are. I guess I kind of envy that.”

“A result of how we grew up,” Khan says, fingers still running through Ekaterina’s dark hair. “It takes time to develop. But you are one of us, Jim. Give it time.”

“I know,” Jim says. “I do. I just...I had a brother once, but we were never that close, and I don’t know where he is or if he’s even alive these days. I’ve looked, but...” He shrugs. “I know none of you had it easy, but you had each other.”

“Some days that was all we could count on,” Khan says. “The scientists expected us to turn on each other, battle for power, and we refused.”

“You tried to do everything they didn’t want, didn’t you?” Jim asks.

Khan smiles. “Yes.”

Jim suddenly wants to kiss him for no reason other than he can, but Ekaterina’s asleep and he doesn’t want to disturb her. At least, he thinks she’s asleep. She could be faking it for all he knows. “Should we put her to bed?” he asks quietly, nodding at Ekaterina.

“If we move her, she might wake,” Khan says. “I would rather let her sleep.”

“Some days that was all we could count on,” Khan says. “The scientists expected us to turn on each other, battle for power, and we refused.”

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“If we move her, she might wake,” Khan says. “I would rather let her sleep.”

“She really scared you, didn’t she,” Jim comments.

Khan looks down at Ekaterina, brushing his fingers over her cheek. “It has been a long time since any of us were injured so badly,” he says after a moment. “Not since the wars.”
“I wish I could promise it’ll never happen again,” Jim says.

“I would not believe you if you did.” Khan says, smiling a little.

Ekaterina murmurs something in her sleep, frowning, and Khan touches her cheek again. She wipes, frowning more, and shakes her head. “Cat,” Khan says softly, moving his hand to take her wrist, pressing gently against her pulse. He says something else in Russian that seems to settle her, and she sighs and relaxes.

“Does she get bad dreams often?” Jim asks.

“As often as any of us,” Khan says.

Jim frowns at him. “You get nightmares? You never told me.”

“They come less often these days,” Khan says, looking mildly embarrassed. “I think not sleeping alone helps.”

“Right,” Jim says. “I can understand that.” His own sleep is less disturbed these days than it used to be, even if Khan doesn’t spend the whole night in the bed. He still wakes up now and again, but he’s always had occasional insomnia.

Thinking of sleep makes him try, again, to remember the dream he had last night. He has no idea why it feels so important, but he has the nagging sense he’s forgetting something he shouldn’t be. He sighs, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

“What are you thinking?” Khan asks.

“I can’t shake this stupid dream I had,” Jim says, sheepish. “I can’t remember it, and I feel like I should.”

“What do you remember?” Khan asks.

“There was a woman,” Jim says. “And it was raining, maybe, but the sun was shining, and she...she made me promise something, and I can’t remember what.”

“What did she look like?” Khan asks.

“I don’t remember,” Jim says with a sigh. “I remember thinking she was beautiful, but I don’t...dark hair. That’s all I remember.” His wings shift and fold around him and he smiles a little. “I don’t know why I’m so hung up on it.”

“Maybe if you sleep again you’ll remember more,” Khan says.

“Maybe,” Jim says. “Are you telling me to take a nap?”

“You do look tired,” Khan observes.

“I’m fine,” Jim says. “Just...well, maybe.”

“It is not exactly like we have any pressing duties,” Khan points out. “I am not going anywhere until Cat wakes up, and she would not begrudge you the use of her bed.”

“Come join me if she does wake up,” Jim says, pushing to his feet. He is tired, more so than he thinks he should be, but it’s been a hell of a day so far and he’s technically off duty even if he is on Ekaterina-watch. And maybe Khan has a point about sleeping again and dreaming of this woman.
He sprawls out on top of the neatly made covers, not wanting to disturb the bed, and closes his eyes.

Sunlight again, but the rain pours down, and he remembers the room now, the marble floors and carved walls, and the woman in gold. She’s glaring at him, though, and Jim takes a step back. “Well, you certainly fucked that up, didn’t you?” she asks, annoyed.

“What did I fuck up?” Jim asks.

“I told you to take care of him,” she says, folding her arms over her chest. “And what did you do? You let him get injured.”

“I couldn’t prevent it,” Jim protests.

“Hmph.” She tosses her dark hair back. “You didn’t even remember you promised me, did you?”

“Who are you?” Jim asks.

“If I have to tell you that, you’re clearly not as bright as everyone says you are,” she says. She sighs. “Take care of him. I can’t anymore. And tell him--” She hesitates. “No. He wouldn’t understand. Don’t tell him about me.”

“If I even remember you,” Jim says.

“You’d better hope you do,” she says. “If I have to remind you a third time I’m going to be quite cross.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jim says warily.

“You should go,” she says. She flicks her hand at him again, and he’s falling through rain and stars and spinning wildly until he wakes up, gasping for breath.

“Jim?” Khan asks. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Jim says, pushing himself to sitting. He remembers now, remembers what he promised, and he has a pretty good idea who she was--and she’s right. He can’t tell Khan. “Weird dream.”

“The woman again?” Khan asks.

“Maybe,” Jim says, hating that he has to dissemble, knowing he can’t be completely honest. “It’s kind of blurring.” He notices Ekaterina has changed position; she’s now curled up in Khan’s lap, her head on his shoulder. “Did she wake up?”

“Briefly,” Khan says. “Enough to grumble about being tired and go back to sleep.”

Jim laughs. “Sounds about right. It’s getting on dinner time, isn’t it? Past it, really. What do you want to do?”

“Cat probably has groceries,” Khan says. “I can put something together.”

“You might disturb her if you move,” Jim says. “I can manage to create a meal.”

“You usually avoid cooking like it was the plague,” Khan says, smiling a bit.

“I didn’t say I liked it, but I can manage on occasion,” Jim says. He gets to his feet, stretching a bit and aware of Khan’s eyes on him. “Later,” he murmurs.
“Indeed,” Khan says, equally softly.

Jim smiles and leans down to kiss him on the way to the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not entirely sure I'm pleased with this chapter, but I've rewritten it so many times I can't be objective about it anymore. Comments would be especially welcome to let me know what you think.
Chapter Summary

Are we really going to have this discussion?

Chapter Notes

A couple things about this bit: One, it was written for saveloy, who figured out where I'd gone wrong and requested a drabble with Spock and Khan interacting. This turned into a bit more than a drabble, but I'm pretty pleased with it, and I hope saveloy is too. Two, I have absolutely no idea where this fits in reference to the main story, but let's say it takes place at some point before the mission. It can also be considered AU and stand outside the main storyline, if you think it works better that way.

It amuses Khan to work with Spock. It probably shouldn’t, but it does, and these days he takes humor where he can find it. The Vulcan is intelligent enough, but despite his code of logic and his lack of emotion, Khan is well aware Spock does not particularly like him, does not really trust him, and Khan’s involvement with Jim is something they simply don’t talk about. It hangs in the air, heavy between them, but Khan is not about to reveal details of his personal life to someone who would undoubtedly use it against him, given the chance.

They do manage to work together amicably enough, logic and intellect providing a buffer, and Khan mostly keeps himself from trying to provoke Spock without cause. He has cause more often than not; they have very different ways of approaching problems, and tend to butt heads before finding a mutual path. Ekaterina would call it locking horns, a fight for dominance, and once told Khan to just fuck him and get it over with.

She wasn’t actually serious, at least Khan doesn’t think she was. With Ekaterina, he sometimes can’t tell. In any event, it’s not something he would do; he prefers monogamy, and Jim is all he wants. Sometimes literally. It surprises him, this want, this need he didn’t expect and can’t quite control. He hasn’t felt anything like it since his original time, since Rani.

He still misses her; she was part of him, woven into his soul in a way he never thought possible. Six years wasn’t nearly long enough and while time has eased some of the pain, he knows he will always grieve for her, always wish for what could have been, what might have been if she hadn’t...if she’d just come to him. Sometimes, on particularly dark days, he wonders if she knew he could have saved her and stayed quiet on purpose.

But Rani was three hundred years ago, and Jim is now, and Khan surprises himself again by not wishing things were different. He doesn’t know if he loves Jim, doesn’t know if that will ever be the right word for what burns between them, bright and hot and out of control. He does know Jim is his, has been for longer than Jim might even realize, and he knows he will not give him up willingly.

He finds himself thinking about this while analyzing data, part of his brain studying chemical compositions and rare minerals and part of him wondering what Jim would look like bound in rope,
knots placed just so on his skin. He doesn’t mean to be distracted, but the data is frankly not all that interesting to him and Jim, as always, is more so.

The computer beeps at him and he shakes himself out of his reverie, looking at its latest report. Across the lab, Spock looks at him; Khan can feel his gaze and raises his head to meet Spock’s eyes. “You are distracted,” Spock says, not questioning.

“Am I?” Khan asks.

“The computer has been alerting for the last three minutes,” Spock says.

Perhaps he was more distracted than he intended. “Passing thought, of no consequence,” he says.

“Clearly it was more than a passing thought,” Spock says.

Khan raises an eyebrow. “Do you really care about what might be going on in my mind, Mr. Spock?”

“Only if it sufficiently distracts you from the work at hand,” Spock says.

“It won’t happen again,” Khan says dismissively.

“I can make an educated guess as to the subject of your thoughts, if not their content,” Spock says.

“Are we really going to have this discussion?” Khan asks, more amused than he should be. “You have been quite content to leave the subject well alone.”

“And if I thought you were sufficiently focused on the task at hand I would not be bringing it up,” Spock counters.

“What is it you want to know, Mr. Spock?” Khan asks, leaning against the computer. His wings threaten to stretch and he folds them back with more emphasis than he wanted; that will hurt later.

“Are you asking me my intentions toward Jim?”

“Do I need to?” Spock asks.

Khan smiles, amused despite himself. “Why don’t you ask him?”

“He is not here,” Spock says. “You are.”

“Perceptive as ever, I see,” Khan says. “I have no intention of hurting him, Mr. Spock.” True on one level, at least; he sees absolutely no reason to tell Spock about the things he wants to do to Jim, the ways in which he wants to mark him, bruise him, claim him.

“Oddly, that was not among my concerns,” Spock says.

“Then what was?” Khan asks.

“I find it troubling that he should develop an...involvement with you,” Spock says candidly. “You have done things he should never forgive, and likely would again given the same choices. I do not think you are trustworthy, and I am concerned that you will distract him and cause him to make poor decisions.”

“You have a remarkably pessimistic view of your captain,” Khan comments. He doesn’t bother countering Spock’s arguments about himself; to be honest, Spock’s right and he knows it. “He is an adult, capable of making rational decisions without your guidance. Do you not worry about the effect
you have on Lieutenant Uhura? That she will be distracted were you to be in danger?”

That hits a nerve and he sees it in the way Spock’s face tightens. “The captain is often far from logical,” he says rather than respond to Khan’s goad about Uhura. “And I think he has lost perspective where you are concerned.”

“Perhaps he has,” Khan says. “But it’s his mistake to make, and I have absolutely no intention of trying to change his mind. I would not advise you doing the same.”

Just at that moment, Jim comes into the lab, smiling about something. He takes one look at Khan and one look at Spock and his smile fades. “Clearly I walked in at the wrong moment,” he says. “Do I even want to know?”

“No,” Khan and Spock say in unison.

“Which means it’s about me,” Jim says. “Which means it’s about you.” He looks at Khan. “I so don’t want to have this argument.”

“Neither did I,” Khan feels obliged to point out.

“Spock, can we just not?” Jim asks. “Please? I know you don’t approve, I know you think I’m making the biggest mistake of my life here—which knowing you is something, given that you thought saving your life was a mistake and I got fucking demoted for it, but whatever, we’re past that now. I know you don’t trust Khan. I do, and I have reasons for it.”

Spock’s face tightens again and he says nothing for a moment. “You will not listen to logic,” he says finally. “There is nothing I can say that will persuade you otherwise.”

“There really isn’t, so let’s drop this and move on,” Jim says.

“As you wish,” Spock says.

Jim sighs. “I was in such a good mood, too,” he says. “Anyway, what’ve you two got for me?”

Spock answers him, and things feel stilted but Khan has a feeling they will for a while. He regrets being the cause of friction between Jim and Spock, but there’s nothing he can or will do about it. Eventually, either Spock will find enough reasons to trust him or he won’t. Khan doesn’t much care either way, except in that it makes things difficult for Jim and he does not wish that.

Perhaps he should attempt to make peace, but Khan never claimed to be the better man. He never claimed to be a good man, for that matter. Even Rani never called him that. She called him a lot of things, in a variety of languages, but a good man was never one of them. That she knew better and loved him anyway is still a mystery to him.

He feels claustrophobic suddenly, confined by the white walls of the lab, and realizes he can do one of two things; he can either find his sister, and spar with her until they are both exhausted, or he can drag Jim off to his quarters. Option two would be preferable, but he decides option one is probably more rational. They’re at a stopping point anyway, and he cannot take any more of Spock’s logic and dislike without throttling the man.

That would also be an option, but he knows better. So he excuses himself and calls Cat on his way out of the lab, arranging to meet her in the gym. He’s somehow not surprised when Jim follows him.

“He really got under your skin, didn’t he?” Jim asks on the way to the gym.
“it is of no matter,” Khan says, walking quickly as if it can burn off the restlessness inside him.

“It is,” Jim says. “He’s...he’s my friend, Khan. I don’t want there to be trouble between you.”

Khan does not point out that Spock is the one with the problem, not him. “What would you have me do, Jim?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says with a sigh. “I just...can you try to get along with him? Please? For my sake?”

For anyone else, except maybe Cat, he would say no. “I will try,” he says instead. “I make no promises.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Jim says.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

This isn't possible. It can't be.

Chapter Notes

Note on the chapter numbers - technically this is chap 35, but it's going to drive me batshit if the AO3 counter and my own chapter count don't match up so we're pretending the last interlude is actually a misplaced chapter. I don't really know as it matters to anyone but me, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They leave Ekaterina after dinner, after Khan makes her promise she'll take it easy and go to sleep and not go running or training until the next day. Jim’s frankly amazed she agrees, but she does look easier being in her own space. He can understand that. He hates hospitals too.

He’s not really thinking about anything in particular in the lift on the way back down to his floor, just kind of zoning out. And then Khan closes his hand around Jim’s wrist, almost casually, and Jim gets so hard so fast he gets dizzy from it. “You did say later,” Khan says softly.

“I--yeah. I did.” Jim breathes out slowly. “You know, we could really use...” He pauses, feeling embarrassed even though there’s no reason to be. He doesn’t finish the sentence before the lift doors open and they’re walking down the hall to his door, and Khan hasn’t let go of him and Jim’s wrist burns from the contact.

He fumbles the lock open one-handed and Khan lets go of him just long enough for him to close the door and activate the privacy seal before he pushes Jim against the door, crowding him in, hands around his wrists. “I know what you want,” Khan says against his mouth, biting at his lips until Jim shudders and his head thunks against the door.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want it, too,” Jim manages, pulling at the hold on his wrists just to feel that edge of pain when Khan’s hands tighten.

He feels Khan’s smile against his throat. “Would I lie to you? If you only knew how often I thought about binding you, Jim, you might think me obsessed.”

“I think you are,” Jim says and Khan laughs right before he bites. Jim’s whole body jerks from the pain/pleasure of it.

“You are worth obsessing over,” Khan murmurs, biting lightly at Jim’s jaw, his earlobe, making his breath catch in his chest. Khan presses a thigh between Jim’s legs and he rocks his hips down against the contact, groaning at how good the friction feels.

“I want...” Jim stops, because he doesn’t know. “I...
“Shh,” Khan whispers, brushing his lips over Jim’s. “I have you.”

Every time he says that something cracks in Jim’s chest and he feels himself breaking open, feels raw and exposed and safe all at once. “Please,” he whispers back, realizing he’s grinding down against Khan’s thigh, pulling against his hold.

Khan abruptly changes his grip, pushing Jim’s wrists over his head and pinning them with one hand, his other working Jim’s pants open and shoving them and his shorts out of the way, warm fingers closing around his cock just tight enough to make Jim’s fingers scrabble against the door and his hips buck up. The friction is almost too much but it’s so sweet his eyes close involuntarily and he bites his lip, swallowing a whine.

“If you knew,” Khan says, his voice soft and so, so intent Jim’s breath hitches. “If you knew, the things I want to do with you, the things I would do with you, if you let me. I would bind you, I would tie you down, take my time with you, until you begged for mercy, until you were pushed past the point of what you thought possible to bear. There is a line, and I think you know it, between pain and pleasure, where one becomes the other and you cannot tell the difference, and Jim, I would take you there, I would...”

His hand doesn’t stop moving and Jim can’t breathe and that thing in his chest feels ripped open. There’s only one answer he can give, only one answer he wants to. “Anything,” he gets out, and he thinks he should be ashamed of how desperate he sounds but he doesn’t have the capacity for it.

“I’d--fuck, Khan, please--”

“You would what, Jim?” Khan asks, breath warm against Jim’s lips, and when did he get that close?

“I’d let you,” Jim breathes, forcing his eyes open to meet Khan’s. “Anything. I’d let you. You have to know that.”

“Implied consent is not the same as explicit permission,” Khan says and are they really going to have a conversation about this right now, right when everything in Jim’s body is tightening and he’s so, so close?

He gulps in air, his head hitting the door again and his eyes closing, unable to stand the heat he sees in Khan’s face. “I’d--oh, fuck, Khan, please--”

“Tell me,” Khan says, his hand tightening just enough, stopping just enough that Jim cries out.

He can’t think, he can’t do anything but feel, and Khan wants an answer and he doesn’t fucking play fair and Jim doesn’t care. “I’d let you,” he manages. “Anything you want. Please. Just don’t fucking stop, God, just--I need--” He sobs for breath, knowing he’s falling apart and unable to stop it.

Khan twists his hand on the upstroke and Jim cries out again. “I have you,” Khan says. “I have you. Come for me, Jim.”

Jim doesn’t have the air to make a sound when he comes, the breath freezing in his lungs and blood roaring in his ears. Khan keeps stroking him, doesn’t take his hand away until Jim whimpers and squirms, too sensitized to stand the contact, and even then Khan takes his time about easing his hand back. When Khan lets go of his wrists, it takes him a moment or three to realize he can actually drop his arms, and his shoulders ache with the strain.

“You don’t play fair,” Jim says finally, still breathing hard, feeling about ready to just slide down the door and sit on the floor. In fact, that sounds like a great idea, and he does just that, wings folding awkwardly behind him.
“I never claimed to,” Khan says, kneeling in front of Jim. He leans forward and kisses him, easy and slow, like they have all the time in the world. “Do you wish to change your answer?” Khan asks quietly.

Jim thunks his head back against the door and sighs. “You know I don’t.”

“Do I?” Khan asks and Jim can hear the smile in it.

“Khan, if you don’t know by now that I’d let you do pretty much anything you wanted to me, I am going to seriously start doubting your vaunted superior intellect,” Jim says tiredly.

“Perhaps I need to hear it from you,” Khan says. “I cannot--Jim, there is almost nothing I would not do, were you to let me. You have limits I need to understand. You need to tell me what they are.”

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Jim says, dragging a hand over his face. “Do we have to talk about this right now?”

“No,” Khan says. “We do not.”

“Great, because I’m exhausted and you still didn’t get off,” Jim says. “And that’s about as much as I can think right now.” He’s also a mess and his shoulders ache and he feels pretty blissed out, but he doesn’t mention that.

Khan laughs, and Jim’s eyes fly open when Khan just picks him up as though he weighs nothing. “I hate it when you do this,” he mutters even though he doesn’t.

“You really don’t,” Khan says, laying him down on the bed.

“Oh, shut up,” Jim says, managing to get the coordination to scramble out of his clothes. A thought occurs to him and he snickers; it’s so not the time or place and yet.

“Share the joke?” Khan asks, crawling onto the bed next to Jim.

“When did you get undressed? Also, I just...stupid thought. I wondered if Maeve ever does that to Bones.” Jim rolls onto his stomach, reaching out a hand to brush fingers over Khan’s hip.

“I would think not,” Khan says. “Although it would be amusing to see.”

“You just want to see Bones get tossed around,” Jim says, laughing. “Admit it, you’re scared of Jesus.”

“I am not,” Khan says indignantly. “That...thing...should be dead. It was dead.”

“And you--” Jim sobers suddenly, sits up and faces Khan. “Shit, I didn’t even think.”

“I know,” Khan says, taking Jim’s hand. “In all likelihood it would not have worked, and she would not have wanted it to. Humans are more complicated than a barely sentient furball.”

“Point,” Jim says. “Still.”

“It is the past,” Khan says softly. “Let it stay the past.”

“It isn’t...” Jim shuts up. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to tell me what you aren’t,” Khan says.
“I can’t,” Jim says without meaning to.

Hurt flashes in Khan’s eyes for a moment. “What aren’t you telling me, Jim?”

“It--I can’t--” Jim swallows. “You don’t want to know.”

“But I do,” Khan says. “I don’t understand, Jim. What could possibly be so awful? What won’t you tell me?”

Jim looks down at the bed. “The dream I had,” he says. “I remember it. There was a room, a throne room, and there was a woman in gold, and…”

Khan’s hand tightens almost painfully on Jim’s. “Describe her,” he says, a bare whisper.

“She wasn’t that tall,” Jim says. “Although she was standing on a dais, so I don’t know. She had long hair, dark, almost black, and dusky skin—kind of like Leena, maybe a little darker. Dark eyes. She was beautiful, even when she was glaring at me, which she did a lot. She…she made me promise to take care of you, the first time, and that was what I couldn’t remember, what was so important. And when I fell asleep in Ekaterina’s bed, I dreamed of her again, and she lectured me for fucking up, because you’d gotten injured, and she made me promise again that I’d take care of you, because...because she couldn’t anymore.”

He can’t look at Khan. He doesn’t want to see whatever’s on his face. But Khan’s utterly silent, barely even breathing, and the only indication Jim has that he’s even still registering what Jim’s said is the tight grip on his hand.

“How is this possible?” Khan whispers finally, and he sounds like he can’t decide how he feels. “That...I never showed you the pictures, I know I did not. How is it that you dreamed of her, that you saw her when you don’t even know her?”

“I don’t know,” Jim whispers back. Khan’s cutting off circulation to his hand and he considers mentioning it but he doesn’t want Khan to pull away from him. “I didn’t...do you see why I didn’t want to tell you?”

Suddenly Khan lets go of his hand, and Jim winces, flexing cramped fingers. “I do,” Khan says and stops. “But I think…” He pauses again, breathing hard for a moment. “I would still rather know. That maybe a part of her still exists somewhere...I don’t know what to believe.”

“It could just be my unconscious,” Jim says even though he doesn’t know if he believes it. “I could have just...”

“Describe the room,” Khan says, interrupting him.

Jim closes his eyes, trying to remember. He tells Khan about it, the carved walls and marble floors, the gold and marble throne, the windows between the carvings. “This isn’t possible,” Khan whispers. “It can’t be.”

“It’s a real place, isn’t it?” Jim asks without needing confirmation.

“It was mine,” Khan says. “I don’t know if it still exists.” He laughs, suddenly, and Jim looks at him, confused. “Rani hated it. She thought it was too pretentious, too everything I wasn’t.”

“This really makes no sense,” Jim admits.

“I’m well aware,” Khan says, voice dry and almost bitter. He hesitates, looking uncertain. “Would
you...would you do something for me?"

“Anything,” Jim says, taking his hands again.

“If you dream of her again,” Khan says. “Tell her...tell her I understand.”

“I will,” Jim promises, although he’s not sure Khan does. He’s not sure either of them do.

Khan looks at their hands. “I don’t know whether to hope you dream of her or that you don’t.”

“I don’t either,” Jim says. “I’m not...” He doesn’t know how to say what he wants to say. “I’m not her. I’m here. She’s...she’s not.”

“I know,” Khan says, tightening his grip on Jim’s hands, just a little. “And I would not wish it otherwise.”

“You wouldn’t?” Jim asks. “You wouldn’t rather have her back?” He doesn’t mean to ask that and looks away immediately.

“Jim,” Khan says, gently. “How is it that you can be so confident and so...broken at the same time?”

“I’m not,” Jim says, his throat tight. “I’m not. I’m just--it’s just--this isn’t about me.”

“Isn’t it?” Khan asks.

“Don’t,” Jim says. “Don’t make this about me. It’s not. You’re the one--”

“You’re the one who had the dreams,” Khan says.

“And they were about you,” Jim says. “Look, can we just--can we not?”

“Don’t you understand, Jim?” Khan asks, very quietly. “For better or for worse, I lost Rani centuries ago. I can never have her again. I have...I accepted this. I am not--was not--looking for someone to replace her. I was not looking for anyone, and then you came along and forced your way into my life and made a place for yourself when I was trying not to need you.”

“Uh,” Jim says. “You claimed me first.”

“Yes, well,” Khan says. “What else was I to do with you?” There’s a touch of humor in his voice, but Jim doesn’t feel like laughing.

*Leave.* He shuts his teeth on the word, can’t find another one.

“Jim,” Khan says again, still so quiet. “I have you.”


“What don’t I understand?” Khan asks.

“It’s like there’s this...this pressure,” Jim says, hating--just a little--the way Khan gets answers out of him without even seeming to try. “Here.” He touches his chest. “And you say that, and it just...something just *breaks* and I can’t, I just--”

“I will put you back together,” Khan says and Jim drops his head. “I will, Jim.”
“I don’t know if that’s even possible,” Jim says wearily.

“It may take time,” Khan says, which is not the answer Jim was expecting, although he’s not sure what that was. “But I will. You are safe with me, Jim, I promise you that.”

Jim doesn’t look at him. “I’m tired,” he says, using it as an excuse as much as the truth.

“I know,” Khan says. “Perhaps we should sleep.”

“That’d be good,” Jim says. He crawls under the covers and Khan does as well, fitting himself against Jim’s back.

“Do you remember what Ekaterina said, once?” Khan asks, fingers stroking Jim’s shoulders, his arms. “You carry such a weight inside you.”

“I remember,” Jim says, closing his eyes, not wanting to think about this. *Someday that weight will grow too much to bear.*

“Let me take some of it,” Khan says.

Jim laughs, and he doesn’t mean to but he can’t help it. “I don’t even know how.”

“You will,” Khan says, still touching him, easy and gentle, meant to soothe, and Jim doesn’t want it to work, doesn’t know if he wants to be soothed, but he can’t help it, his muscles just go loose under Khan’s touch and he feels like he’s melting into the bed.

He falls asleep without realizing it and doesn’t remember his dreams, if he has any at all. When he wakes, he’s almost not sure he’s slept at all; he feels warm, muscles looser than they’ve been in a while, and there are hands touching him, sliding down the line of skin between his wings and back up to his shoulders, firm enough to rub out tension and gentle enough he doesn’t think he ever wants it to stop. He feels caught between waking and sleep, unable to move, not really wanting to move, and Khan keeps touching him, keeps dragging his palms and his fingers over Jim’s skin, touching him everywhere he can reach, working out tension Jim didn’t even know he had.

“Don’t stop,” he mumbles, afraid it will when Khan knows he’s awake, but the hands don’t stop moving and in fact the pressure on his shoulders increases just a little, digging in a little more. “Oh...” Jim drops his head forward, even though he doesn’t want to move at all. “Feels good.”

“It’s supposed to,” Khan murmurs back, seemingly content to touch Jim like this as long as he wants, and Jim has absolutely no idea how long he’s been doing it, if he never stopped even when Jim fell asleep. His hands drag down Jim’s back, brushing the edges of his wings, and further down, over his hips and his legs, coaxing him to shift them apart just a little more, draw up one knee.

“Gonna put me back to sleep,” Jim says, aware he’s half-hard but not really caring much about it at the moment; he feels too good, too lax against the bed.

“You didn’t have to wake up,” Khan says, and Jim realizes he really has been touching him this whole time, however long it’s been. He can’t see the clock from his current position and doesn’t want to know, to be honest.

“Don’t know why I did,” Jim says. “I didn’t dream.”

Lips ghost over the back of his neck. “Do you want to go back to sleep, Jim?” Khan asks, pressing another kiss to his jaw.
“No,” Jim murmurs, realizing he doesn’t. “I want...I don’t know what I want. I don’t want to move.”

“You do not have to,” Khan says, hands sliding down his arms, mouth against his spine. “Just relax.”

Jim grunts agreement, letting himself just lie there and be touched, be kissed, and it feels almost like Khan doesn’t care whether he’s turning Jim on or not, that he’s doing this because he wants to. That in and of itself turns him on, makes him shift just a little against the bed, rolling a bit more onto his stomach to get more friction against his hardening cock.

Khan’s nails scratch lightly over his skin, firm enough not to tickle and shy of leaving marks. Down his back, over his ass, enough to spread him open and--“Oh, God,” Jim whispers when Khan licks a line up the center of him, hot and wet and enough to get him fully hard in one breath. Khan hums softly, under his breath, and licks Jim again.

It feels too good, too intimate, even for them, even with all they’ve done. Jim shifts, tries to shift, not sure if he wants more or less, but Khan’s hands tighten on him, holding him where he is, and his mouth doesn’t stop driving Jim insane, teasing and licking and doing things that should be illegal planet-wide. “Please,” Jim manages, his whole body thrumming. “Oh, God, that’s--more, Khan, please--”

He can’t see what Khan’s doing but has an idea when Khan lets go of him briefly, and then his mouth’s gone and two fingers slide into him, burn and stretch and oh, so fucking good. Jim still feels boneless, melted and unable to push back the way he wants to, caught between utter relaxation and complete arousal. He cries out into the pillow when Khan crooks his fingers, managing to draw up that one knee a little more.

But like before, Khan seems content to take his time, to palm his free hand down Jim’s back and over his hip, countering the movements of his fingers inside Jim with slow, warm touches over his skin, with gentle kisses against his spine and his shoulders. Jim can’t tell if he’s melting or burning up, and he can’t move and doesn’t even know if he wants to. “Khan,” he whispers.

“Tell me,” Khan says, brushing his fingers over Jim’s wing.

Jim’s mind is completely blank and he struggles for words. “Fuck me,” he says, finally. “Please. Come on, I know you have to be...”

“I am doing exactly what I want to be,” Khan says, sliding a hand up Jim’s arm and down his back even as his other hand twists and presses enough to make Jim gasp and clench around him.

“But not what I want you to be doing,” Jim says, finding words easier the second time around. “Please, Khan.”

“Yes,” Khan says, and the fingers slide out of him and he hooks his hand under Jim’s thigh and draws his leg up, bending him easily. Jim hears the slick slide of lube on skin, shivers and loses his breath entirely when Khan presses into him, so deep he doesn’t know if he can stand it.

He sucks in a breath when Khan moves, utterly surrounded by him, by his body and his wings and the way his forehead presses against Jim’s temple and Jim can hear his breathing, not nearly as controlled as he thinks Khan wants it to be. “I have you,” Khan whispers.

“Please,” Jim says shakily.

“Do you even know what you’re pleading for?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jim says, finding the ghost of humor in it. “But you do.”
“I do,” Khan says, still moving steadily within him. “But I want you to wait for me.”

“Oh, fuck,” Jim breathes, because he’s already tingling, already feeling his body tighten, and there’s no way he can match Khan’s stamina, he never could. “I think I hate you.”

Khan laughs softly and it sends shivers through Jim’s body. “You do not.”

Jim’s pretty sure he does, just a little, and a little more when Khan grips the base of his cock with one hand, staving off his orgasm. “Oh, come on,” he complains. “Could you play fair for once?”

“No,” Khan says simply.

“I really do hate you,” Jim mutters, but he feels so damn good despite the ache in his cock it’s hard to put any effort into it. Khan kisses his temple, his ear, keeps moving in the same deep rhythm that has Jim shaking and unable to move with him the way he wants from the way Khan holds him, touches him. He can’t do anything but lie there and take it, be taken in a way that’s undoing him one breath at a time.

He loses track of time, of everything but heat and pressure and need clawing higher and higher inside him, until he’s shaking and panting for breath, until he’s absolutely certain he just can’t take any more of this. “Khan,” he gasps out. “Please, I can’t, I just can’t--”

“Come for me,” Khan whispers and it still takes a couple more thrusts before Jim’s body gets the message, before the hand on his cock twists just right over the head and Jim’s head slams back into Khan’s shoulder as he comes so hard he thinks he actually whites out for a minute. He knows he does, in fact, because the next thing he’s aware of is Khan breathing hard, slumped against his back, gone lax in the aftermath of his own orgasm.

Jim doesn’t even have the energy to reach for a tissue or one of the wipes they’ve started keeping by the bed. He lets Khan arrange his body, straighten out bent limbs and settle him, too exhausted and content to care that he’s being manipulated like a puppet. Khan fits himself against Jim’s back again, one arm over his waist. He says something in Hindi, sounding about as wrecked as Jim feels.

“Sleep,” Jim mumbles.

“Yes,” Khan answers.

That’s the last thing Jim knows until his alarm goes off.

Chapter End Notes

So, turns out Jim’s really bad at keeping secrets from Khan. Also turns out I’ve been mainlining a lot of smut lately and this chapter was in large part the result. I’m not sure it’s as good as what I’ve been reading elsewhere, but I did my best and would as always love to know what you think.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

The offer is there, if you want it.

Chapter Notes

Holy crap, I've broken 100k words on this, which makes this officially the longest piece I've ever posted. By a lot, actually. Thank you so so much for all the comments and kudos and bookmarks, I cannot tell you how excited I get when I see email from AO3 hit my inbox. I can't believe how many of you are liking this and reading it.

I do have an ending in mind but it's not anything I'm going to get to in the next couple chapters, so hopefully you'll be patient with me for a bit longer. Yes? No?

Things get back to normal, or whatever passes for normal, over the next two weeks or so. Ekaterina starts working at HQ with Alona and Henri, Khan goes back to his project with Katsuro and Matthew, and in total surprise to Jim asks Spock to join them. Spock considers it for a few days, then agrees and surprises Jim some more.

Then again, they have been sort of getting along lately. Kind of. Jim doubts they’ll ever be friends, but he’ll take what he can get. It still stuns him speechless when he stops by the lab to find Khan after shift and sees him playing chess with Spock. “Dare I ask who’s winning?” he says when he finds his voice, walking over to the table.

“At the moment, we are matched,” Spock says. “Khan won the last game, though.”

“Spock won the first one,” Khan says, studying the board. He lifts his hand as if to move a piece, frowns, and considers a little more before moving one of his knights. “It has been a rather slow and annoying day.”

“If you’ve had time for two and a half games of chess that doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says, absently resting a hand on Khan’s shoulder. “Do I want to know what went wrong?”

“No,” both of them say in unison and Jim laughs.

“Can I convince you to pause the game and come find dinner with me?” he asks. “I’m starving. I think I forgot lunch. Well, I didn’t forget, I just ran out of time.”

“Your move, Spock,” Khan says.

“I believe we can leave the game as it stands for the evening,” Spock says. “I am supposed to be meeting Nyota shortly anyway.”

“Yeah, hi,” Uhura says, walking into the lab. “I thought I’d find you here. Who’s winning?”
“No one, at the moment,” Jim says. “They’ve each won a game, though. Apparently working on classified projects for Starfleet means you have time to play chess.”

“Only on alternate Mondays,” Khan says absently, getting up from the table.

“Today’s Thursday,” Jim points out.

“Is it?” Khan smiles. “What are we doing for dinner?”

“That depends,” Jim says. “Spock, Uhura, you two in? I’ll even treat.”

“Far be it from me to turn down a free meal, captain,” Uhura says. “So long as we don’t go to that crappy place you picked two times ago where I got food poisoning.”

“No, I promise, never again,” Jim says. “If we swing by Medical we can grab Bones and maybe Maeve, though.”

“I would recommend calling first,” Khan says. “In case they have other plans.”

“Yeah, point.” Jim finds his link in his pocket and calls Bones.

“Dinner, what do you want?” Bones answers grumpily.

“Dinner,” Jim says. “You and Maeve in?”

Bones sighs. “Yeah, come by and grab us. Just so long as it’s not that place that gave everyone food poisoning except the superhumans.”

“I promised Uhura already, never again,” Jim says, laughing. “We’ll be by in a few.”

It ends up being seven of them, as they find Ekaterina on their way over to Medical. She’s clearly amused about something, although she doesn’t say what it is and Jim’s kind of afraid to ask in front of Spock and Uhura in case it’s something he’s not supposed to know. But she says something to Khan in a language Jim doesn’t recognize, and Khan’s eyes widen for a moment before he actually laughs.

Jim decides he’ll bug Khan about it later.

“That’s really not fair, you know,” Uhura says, though. “If you’re going to be this excited about something, the least you can do is tell us.”

“My apologies,” Ekaterina says, still smiling. “It is—honestly, I am not sure you would quite understand, and I am not sure I have words in English for it. This is a remarkably inconvenient language.”

Khan says something in the language she used earlier and she dissolves into laughter. “Not fair,” she protests, wiping tears out of her eyes.

“I never play fair,” Khan says, smiling, and she smacks him on the arm hard enough it’ll probably bruise and says something in Russian, which he answers.

“Okay, whoa, too much information there,” Uhura says, raising her hands. “If you’re going to be talking about that, do it in a language I don’t know.”

Ekaterina immediately switches to whatever she was using earlier, asking Khan a question, and he laughs again and shakes his head. She grins and goes to smack him again, but he catches her hand
and twists, enough that she gasps and her knees bend before she yanks back. The two of them end up bickering in whatever language Uhura doesn’t understand, and Jim frankly thinks it’s kind of hysterical to watch; from the looks Uhura keeps giving them, she does too.

They haven’t finished their argument by the time Bones and Maeve join them, but Maeve starts giggling after a moment and smacks both of them on the arm. “You two should be ashamed of yourselves,” she says, trying to glare but laughing too hard.

“Should we?” Ekaterina asks, grinning. “It isn’t my fault that--”

“Stop right there, sister,” Khan says, warning her. She snorts, but subsides.

“For a supposedly superior people, I often think you would benefit from more logic and control to your emotions,” Spock comments.

“Ah, no,” Ekaterina says. “What is life without a bit of fun? Without laughter, and arguments, and tears and love? You might as well take away any reason I had for living.” She considers this for a moment. “Although sometimes I wonder what that is at the moment.”

“Don’t we all,” Maeve says, a little more soberly than Jim thinks she meant to.

Khan says nothing but his wing shifts, just enough to touch Ekaterina’s shoulder. She smiles and brushes a hand over the under-feathers. “Pax, brother?”

“Always,” he says.

“So,” Maeve says. “Where are we going for dinner?”

“We hadn’t figured that out yet,” Jim says. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Something spicy,” Maeve says. “Maybe curry? I haven’t had one of those in a while.”

“I know you’d like that,” Jim says to Khan, who smiles a little. “Sure, there’s that place I can’t remember the name of, it’s two blocks down from the place we’re never going again.” No one else raises objections, and it’s only about a ten-minute walk from where they currently are.

The seven of them get a big round table in the back corner and order drinks; Jim’s not surprised when Khan and Ekaterina each ask for chai. Maeve asks for a basket of naan to share, and their waitress promises it’ll be right out and leaves them with their menus.

“So we had a truly interesting day,” Maeve says, setting her menu down. “What about the rest of you?”

“Lacking in interest but high in annoyance,” Khan admits, and Spock doesn’t quite smile.

“High in interest but not on my part,” Ekaterina says with a mischievous smile.

“What does that mean?” Maeve asks.

“One of the lieutenants I am working with asked me out on a date,” she says, laughing. “He is all of twenty-six. I think I impressed him when I almost dislocated his shoulder and broke his wrist.”

“Ah, so he’s a masochist, got it,” Maeve says. “Did you say yes?”

“Of course I didn’t,” Ekaterina says.
Maeve frowns at her. “You should have.”

“Why was your day so interesting?” Ekaterina asks, ignoring the answer.

Maeve frowns some more, but sighs. “One of the neurologists collapsed,” she says. “We don’t know why, he just fell over in the middle of the ER while working with a patient.”

“Did you know him?” Uhura asks.

“I did not,” Maeve says. “He was a specialist we had called in for help with a troublesome case. I’d never met the man before.”

“Did he survive?” Spock asks.

“He didn’t,” Bones says with a scowl. “It looks like he had an aneurysm, but we’re not sure.”

Jim glances at Ekaterina, asking without saying a word, but she doesn’t give him any indication either way that she knows what happened. He thinks maybe she gives him a quick nod when she takes her chai from the waitress, but he’s honestly not sure.

Nor is he sure how many are left, if any are still alive. He hasn’t asked since the first time; he doesn’t want to know. What he doesn’t know, he doesn’t have to risk telling someone he shouldn’t.

Still, sometimes he wants to know anyway.

He distracts himself by taking his drink and ordering dinner with everyone else, and then conversation shifts to a story Uhura’s telling about practicing with the knives Ekaterina gave her. Potentially less deadly, definitely less worrying than dead neurologists who might or might not have been part of classified projects involving his--involving Khan.

Through dinner, he shares a couple light-hearted stories of his own, as do the others, and by the time the check comes he’s feeling pretty good about life in general. He snags it like promised, leaves a generous tip, and heads out with everyone else. Spock and Uhura grab a cab, since they’re farther away--Jim actually doesn’t know if they’re living together but thinks they might as well be. Kind of like he and Khan aren’t but are.

Bones and Maeve split off from them after a bit, and then it’s just the three of them. “So,” Jim says. “Do I want to know about the neurologist?”

“Not one of ours,” Ekaterina says. “At least if he was I did not know about it.”

“He wasn’t,” Khan says.

“How many of yours are left alive?” Jim asks.

“Do you really want to know?” Ekaterina asks.

“I probably shouldn’t but I do,” Jim says.

“Two,” she says after a moment. “One has shipped out and we are unable to reach her at this time. The other is in San Francisco but we have not dealt with him yet.”

“And no one suspects anything about the first three?” Jim asks.

“If anyone has suspicions, no one has said anything to any of us,” Ekaterina says. “Not even Maeve.”
“Okay, well, that’s good, I guess,” Jim says, his wings ruffling a bit. They’re passing the part of campus where he and Khan sometimes go flying, and he looks up at the sky, tempted for a moment. “Do you...” he says to Khan.

“I do,” Khan says.

“Then I will see you tomorrow, or whenever,” Ekaterina says, somehow catching on.

“I could carry you,” Khan points out.

“You haven’t done that since before...” Ekaterina stops. “Since before Rani.”

“I know,” Khan says quietly. “The offer is there, if you want it.”

She rubs her hands over her face and looks up at him. “I do,” she says. “I did miss that.”

“Then come,” Khan says and the three of them head up the hill.

Jim’s not sure how he expects Khan to carry Ekaterina, but he picks her up in a princess carry, her arms tight around his neck, and when he launches into the air he hears Ekaterina laugh, delighted and free. Jim grins and follows him off the hill, flying around him and laughing himself when they end up mock-racing over half of campus. He pushes himself to fly faster, following Khan as they make their way back to the apartment building, until he’s starting to feel tired and he knows if he goes much longer he’s going to fall out of the sky. Fortunately, that’s about when they land, touching down on the sidewalk outside his building.

Khan sets Ekaterina down gently; she’s smiling, looking happier than Jim thinks he’s ever seen her. She spins on her toes and turns to look at Khan, reaching up to hug him and kiss his cheeks. He hugs her back, wings folding around her for a moment, and Jim sees her look at him for a long moment. Then she kisses him chastely and murmurs something Jim doesn’t catch. “I think I would like to go for a walk,” she says, stepping back. “You two have a good night.”

“Be safe,” Khan says.

“Always,” she promises, and heads off down the block, moving quickly.

“I’m spent,” Jim admits, letting them into the building and pushing the button for the lift. “I’m sure you’re not, but I’m just a regular human, we have limits.”

“You have wings, Jim, you are hardly regular,” Khan says, stepping into the lift with him.

“You know what I meant, though,” Jim says.

“I suppose I do,” Khan says.

Jim falls silent until they get inside the apartment and he can lock the door and activate the privacy seal. “So,” he says. “How was your day, really?”

“Rather annoying,” Khan says. “We made very little progress and encountered at least four problems. Spock and I began playing chess for lack of anything else we could do.”

“Whose idea was it?” Jim asks.

“Mine,” Khan says. “But he was quick to agree.”

“Did you let him win the first game?” Jim asks.
“No, it was a fair match,” Khan says. “Besides, I won the second game, and I think I will win this one should we go back to it.”

“So competitive,” Jim teases, shaking his head. “Was that engineered into you, too?”

“Quite possibly,” Khan says, amused. “You are in a good mood tonight.”

“I had a good day.” Jim says, moving to the fridge to get himself and Khan glasses of water. “Things went right, no one got injured, I got a few things off my to-do list, and dinner was fun. Also, Jill called and said she’ll be back in a few days.”

“How has their mission gone so far?” Khan asks, taking the glass Jim hands him.

“She says everything’s fine and Evan only got injured in practice and it wasn’t that bad,” Jim says. “I think she might have almost gotten kidnapped, from what she didn’t say, but I’ll find out when she gets back.”

“Kidnapped?” Khan’s eyebrows go up.

“Planet mission that might not have gone well,” Jim says. “I’m not really sure and I didn’t see her report on it, if she filed it yet, so I don’t quite know what happened. Just a couple things she referred to that made me think it didn’t go that smoothly.”


“It usually is,” Jim says. “I got kidnapped once. Twice if you count--well, but it didn’t really count, that was just a misunderstanding and it got fixed really fast once Uhura came down.”

“What happened the first time?” Khan asks.

Jim groans. “You don’t want to know. Seriously, you don’t. It was a debacle from beginning to end, we almost lost a crew member--two, actually, and no, neither of them was me. I just got thumped on the head but good. It turned out the people we were meeting with were not the only representatives of their race on the planet and the two factions were kind of at war and yeah, it sucked and my head hurt for three days.”

“I dislike the thought of you being injured,” Khan says after a moment. “Or, for that matter, being kidnapped.”

“Yeah, I’m not a fan of it either,” Jim says. “Then again, I’m not a fan of you, you know, getting shoulders dislocated and breaking bones.” He steps closer to Khan and pokes his left shoulder. “But this is what we do, isn’t it?”

“The difference being I can heal from a broken bone more easily than you can heal from a concussion,” Khan points out.

“But I still heal, and the point is, this is what we do. You can’t keep me safe any more than I can keep you safe. I’m going to want you to go on missions with us once we leave, you know that--hell, I think you’d fight me if I tried to keep you on the ship, and that’s not a fight I want to have because I’d probably lose.” Jim sets his glass down. “It’s something we both have to get used to.”

“I suppose it is,” Khan says, setting his own glass down next to Jim’s. “It still does not mean I have to be pleased about the prospect.”

“I asked Jill about it once,” Jim admits. “After Ekaterina--after that went wrong, I asked her how she
coped. She gave me some good advice.”

“She is rather intelligent,” Khan says.

“From you that means something,” Jim says, smiling. “And yeah, she is.”

“What did she tell you?” Khan asks.

Jim scrubs his hands through his hair. “Basically, that we’re both competent, skilled adults, and we have to respect that about each other, and that if anything goes wrong, you just...do what has to get done until it’s all done and things are better and you can fall apart.”

Khan nods. “It makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does,” Jim says. “She said there’s really no trick to it, no easy way out, it’s just...what has to get done, and you do it because it’s what we’re trained for.”

“That it is,” Khan says.

Jim steps closer to him, resting his hands on Khan’s waist. “What did Ekaterina say to you, before?” he asks. “Before she went on her walk.”

“She thanked me,” Khan says. “Although I think I should have been thanking her.”

“Why?” Jim asks.

“Because I had forgotten what it was like to fly with someone,” Khan says. “Because there is a...joy in it, in feeling someone so earth-bound take to the sky. Cat always loved to fly with me, and we had less and less time for it as we grew older, and I stopped taking her with me for years, and I think we both missed it more than we admitted. I will probably take her again with me, the next time I or we go flying.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Jim says. “Did you ever take anyone else with you, other than her and Rani?”

“No, I did not,” Khan says. “No one else ever asked.”

That says something and Jim’s not sure what it is. He looks down at his hands on Khan’s waist, starting a little when Khan’s hands curl around his shoulders, fingers digging in just enough to relax some of the tense muscles. He sighs, dropping his head forward and resting his forehead against Khan’s shoulder. “It’s early, but I’m tired,” he says, closing his eyes as Khan continues rubbing the back of his neck and his shoulders.

“We can go to bed,” Khan says.

“Yeah, that’d be good,” Jim says, but it’s another minute or two before they separate. Jim smiles a little, looking at Khan. “Of course, nothing says we have to go to sleep right away.”

Khan laughs. “You have a point.”

“I usually do,” Jim says, taking Khan’s hand and drawing him toward the bed. Khan kisses him and Jim draws him down onto the bed, rolling them so Khan’s on top of him, his weight pressing Jim down into the mattress.

By the time they get to sleep, Jim’s flat out exhausted and Khan’s not speaking English anymore. Jim smiles tiredly to hear it, closing his eyes and falling asleep to the sound of Khan murmuring in Hindi.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

I need a friend for this.

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you so much to the commenters, the kudos-leavers, and everyone else for reading. I'm so, so glad to know some of you are in this for the long haul, because I am too, and it's amazing to know you're in it with me. This is officially the longest single piece of fanfic I've ever written (I have written original stuff that's longer) and I'm pretty pleased with it, to be honest, for something that started as self-indulgent crackfic I'm very surprised at how it's turned out.

“I want to go with you,” Jim admits Sunday night, draped over Khan on the bed, his hair still damp from the shower.

“This does not surprise me,” Khan says, running his fingers through Jim’s hair.

“Yeah, well, what did you expect? I know I can’t. I’m not officially on your project, I don’t know the details, I don’t even know what all you guys are doing out by the moon tomorrow other than testing shields and some other modifications you’ve made, but it feels weird that you’re heading into space without me,” Jim says, frowning at the ceiling. “Is Spock going?”

“No, he is staying on Earth to monitor and call for help if something goes wrong,” Khan says. “Katsuro, Matthew, two other people and I are going.”

“And who’s actually going EVA?” Jim asks.

“It depends on how our tests go,” Khan says. “I am, certainly, and Matthew may be. Lieutenant Raven is our backup in case we need a third.”

“Katsuro didn’t want to space walk?” Jim asks curiously.

“Matthew volunteered first,” Khan says. “I think Katsuro would be fine in space, but there will be more opportunities in future.”

“I think you’d all be fine in space,” Jim says. “Ekaterina wants to go back, I know. She mentioned to me that she was considering taking a day off to just go up into Earth orbit and play around. I offered to go with her.”

“Did she accept your offer?” Khan asks.

“She hasn’t given me an answer yet,” Jim says. “Anyway, not the point. The point is that you’re heading off on a mission tomorrow and it feels weird that I’m not going.”
“You are going to hover by Spock all day, aren’t you?” Khan asks, clearly amused.

“No, I can’t,” Jim says. “First, he’d get pissy at me, and second, I can’t because I have things I need to do, and third, I’m not supposed--am I even supposed to know what you’re doing tomorrow?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Khan says. “I have not been paying much attention to the level of classification involved with this project, since you are the only person I have been talking to about it who isn’t involved with it.”

“You haven’t talked to Ekaterina about it?” Jim asks in surprise.

“Only in passing,” Khan says. “This is not her field of expertise. She did mention to me the other day that she now has at least twelve ways to kill a Klingon, though, and that is without involving more weapons than her knives.”

“Good to know,” Jim says. “That might come in handy someday, although I hope not.”

“Agreed,” Khan says. “But then, if we are lucky the project on which I am working will end up never being necessary.”

“And the odds of that would be...” Jim says skeptically.

“I am not a bookie,” Khan says. “But I would not rate them highly.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I would either,” Jim admits. “If these modifications work, can we take one of them on the Enterprise, or two?”

“Two would be better,” Khan says. “And I don’t know. Perhaps. The problem is that the Enterprise may be ready to ship out before the shuttles are ready to deploy.”

“Yeah, but if we’re heading out for five years I’d rather have all the advantages we can first,” Jim says. “Including whatever upgrades you’ve planned for our weapons systems.”

“Katsuro worked on those while on board the ship,” Khan says. “As far as I am aware, those modifications are essentially complete.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jim says. “How did I not know that?”

“I did say essentially,” Khan points out. “There are some final details to tweak.”

“Yeah, but I feel like I should have known that,” Jim says. “It’s my ship, I’m supposed to know what’s going on.”

“I don’t know,” Khan says. “Did you ignore a status report?”

Jim sighs. “Maybe. Sometimes I don’t always read them as thoroughly as I should. I trust Scotty to tell me what I need to know.”

“Then perhaps you should speak with him,” Khan suggests.

“I will, tomorrow,” Jim says. “When I’m not distracted by you being EVA testing weapons on a shuttle.”

“Practice for the five-year mission,” Khan says simply.

“Yeah, I know.” Jim shifts, rolling on top of Khan to look him in the eye. “Tell me you wouldn’t be
distracted if it was me out there.”

Khan’s hands settle on his hips, warm and comforting. “As much as I would like to, I am not sure I could,” he admits, smiling a little. “Then again, I find you remarkably distracting regardless of where you are.”

Jim laughs. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Honesty, not flattery,” Khan says. “You distract me more than is a good thing.”

“No one’s complained about your work yet,” Jim points out. “I think you just hold yourself to a higher standard than the rest of us. I mean, I’m sure you’re capable of multitasking—I know you are.”

“Of course I am,” Khan says. “But that isn’t the point.”

“Khan, all of us get distracted practically all the time,” Jim says. “I mean, I do it on a regular basis. I’m pretty sure even Spock gets distracted once in a while.” He bites his lip, considering what he wants to say. “I’m sure you got distracted by Rani, too.”

“True,” Khan says quietly. He’s silent for a moment, and Jim waits, looking at him. “Have you dreamed of her lately?” he asks finally, changing the subject.

“Not that I remember,” Jim says. “I’d have told you if I did.” He kisses Khan lightly. “We should get some sleep. You’ve got an early start tomorrow and it’s getting late.”

“I do and it is,” Khan says, and Jim’s a little surprised he didn’t point out how little sleep he needs, but maybe he is tired. God knows after earlier in the evening he’s got a right to be. Jim smiles, remembering that, and shifts to lie next to Khan instead of on top of him.

“Sleep well,” Jim murmurs, settling into the warmth of Khan’s body and closing his eyes.

When he wakes up, Khan’s already gone, which isn’t a surprise but is a surprisingly bittersweet reminder of the days when Khan used to leave before Jim got up, back when both of them were trying to pretend this...thing between them wasn’t quite what it is.

Thing. He smiles to himself, even as he rolls over into the warmth Khan left behind and breathes in the sharp scent of his wings, different than the scent of his own. The chrono tells him he still has an hour or so before he has to get up, and he knows his alarm will go off, so he closes his eyes and lets himself fall back asleep.

“You have the same problem with him I did,” she says, looking at him in the throne room. She smiles a little and moves to sit on the throne, twisting to dangle her legs over the arm. “You can’t lie to him. Can’t even hide much.”

“I had to tell him,” Jim says, walking over to the dais. “He...I had to.”

“I know.” She looks up at the ceiling. “I know, and it was wrong of me to ask you not to tell him. I should have known you wouldn’t be able to keep it from him. I just didn’t want to hurt him.”

“He said he’d rather know,” Jim says awkwardly. “That maybe some part of you exists somewhere.”

“What else did he tell you?” she asks.

“He told me to tell you that he understands,” Jim says slowly.

“Does he?” She looks at him.
“Honestly, I don’t know,” Jim admits. “I don’t know that I do.”

She smiles. “No, you don’t,” she says, not unkindly. “But he might.”

“You think?” Jim asks.

“I think he wasn’t talking about your dreams when he gave you that message,” she says, confusing Jim further.

“Then what was he talking about?” Jim asks.

She doesn’t answer.

“Okay, well, this has been unenlightening,” Jim says after a moment. “Is this the part where you send me flying into outer space until I wake up?”

She twists to face him, sitting upright on the throne, her skirt twisted around her legs. “You know, I think in some ways you’re better for him than I was,” she says. “At least, you’re better for him now than I would be in your time.”

“Why?” Jim asks.

“Because you’re both damaged,” she says honestly. “And because you know, somewhat, what it’s like to be in his place, what it’s like to be alone and ostracized because of something you can’t control.” She nods pointedly at Jim’s wings, which ruffle and stretch a little as if agreeing.

“He wasn’t damaged when you knew him?” Jim asks.

“Not in the same way,” she says. “You should ask him about his year in London, more than what happened that you know about. He won’t want to talk about it, but he should.”

“If he doesn’t want to talk about it, he won’t,” Jim says.

“I know,” she says. “But you should still ask.”

“I will,” Jim says.

“Now you should go,” she says, as if satisfied with whatever she’s gotten out of him.

“Right,” Jim says and she flicks her hand and he spirals into space and wakes up as his alarm goes off.

He considers the dream while he showers and gets dressed and has a cup of coffee, and before he leaves to go get on with his day sends Ekaterina a brief message asking her if she’ll have time to meet for lunch or coffee later in the day.

She gets back to him almost immediately and suggests they meet at fourteen hundred hours at the usual coffee place. He accepts and puts it out of his mind while he goes to deal with ship stuff and other stuff and not bother Spock about Khan and his team being in space.

He spends the morning on the Enterprise, dealing with things, and shuttles back to HQ around lunchtime to get food and find Spock, because fuck this nonsense. In fact, he decides to find Spock before he eats just in case.

“Jim,” Spock says when he sees him. “I am assuming you are here to find out how the mission is going.”
“Whatever you can tell me, yeah,” Jim admits.

“All our tests are going as expected,” Spock says. “No one has been injured, and at the moment, Khan, Matthew, and Lieutenant Raven are EVA examining the damage to the shuttle’s exterior from the weapons fire.”

Spock’s comm-link chirps and he answers it. “We have data for you, Mr. Spock,” Matthew’s voice says. “Well, we think we have data. We want to run another test of the phasers to make sure, though.”

“We had planned for three tests,” Spock says.

“Yes, I know,” Matthew says. “I’m back on the test shuttle. Raven and Khan are still EVA and are going to stay there while we run the next tests.” There’s some noise in the background and then Matthew speaks again. “Correction. Raven’s coming back to the shuttle, but Khan’s staying EVA for the test.”

“What is the logic behind that?” Spock asks.

“Khan says he’s only getting in and out of this damned suit once,” Matthew reports, laughing. “And he doesn’t want Raven exposed to the phaser fire just in case.”

Jim frowns at hearing that. “Is he in danger from it?” he asks without thinking.

“Captain Kirk, how unsurprising,” Matthew says. “And no, he shouldn’t be. Not unless things go horribly wrong and the shuttle explodes.”

“That’s oh so reassuring,” Jim mutters.

“It’s also about as likely as Cat missing a knife throw,” Matthew says. “Okay, we’re about ready to start the test. Hang on.”

For about five minutes, they hear nothing. Jim’s wings mantle and stretch and he knows Spock is looking at him but ignores it and does not ask for an update.

“And we’re back,” Matthew says finally. “In I’m not sure who this is good news for but it’s good for someone, the phasers broke through the amplified shields and there’s exterior hull damage. Khan’s checking it out now to see if there’s an actual hull breach. He says—hang on.” Some background noise Jim can’t make out, then Matthew comes back. “He says it does in fact look like we breached the hull but he can’t tell how serious the damage since the only things online were the shields. He’s going to go in and test it out.”

“It is concerning that the phasers broke through the shields on the second test,” Spock says. “We had hoped it would at least take the third one.”

“Well, apparently when we modified the phasers, we did too good a job,” Matthew says. “Or we need to modify the shields some more. Maybe if we cycle them the way Khan suggested?”

“But we did not have the power for that,” Spock points out. “That is why we amplified them instead.”

“Well, then we need to decrease the power requirement and make it work,” Matthew says. “I have some ideas, and Khan’s muttering in my other link about shuttle systems, hang on.” This time Jim hears him, but it’s not English–Hindi, he thinks. Whatever Matthew says, he sounds amused. “Sorry, he forgot it wasn’t just us multi linguists aboard,” Matthew says when he comes back. “He says one,
he has some ideas for changing the shields to make them stronger and two, he thinks the phaser blast knocked out life support systems but left the main computer online. He’s running diagnostics at the moment. I told him not to crack the helmet and he said a few things I’m not going to repeat.”

Jim snorts at that. He sticks around a bit longer, enough to hear that the shuttle’s computer is functioning normally but life support is in fact not working and that Khan’s heading back to the test shuttle, and then heads out before he can talk to Khan, mostly to prove he can. He doesn’t trust Khan’s freaky ‘tell me the truth’ power to not get him into trouble around other people.

He drags Bones to lunch with him for the company and they spend it talking about the upcoming five-year mission, speculating wildly on what they might find and having a pretty good time doing it. The one thing Jim doesn’t mention, though, is the one thing he wants to find--has wanted to find--since he was old enough to understand about space exploration. Somewhere in this goddamned galaxy there have to be more people with wings. It still might not explain his, but they have to be out there somewhere.

By the time he gets to the cafe, his head feels full of thoughts and he desperately needs caffeine. He gets himself a coffee and finds Ekaterina already at one of the tables outside, dressed in her usual black although her shirt has Starfleet insignia on it. She has a tall cup in front of her and smiles when she sees Jim, gesturing for him to take the seat opposite her. “So,” she says, taking a sip of her drink. “What is on your mind, captain?”

“Jim for this,” he says. “It’s not--I need a friend, not a crew member.”

Something softens in her face and she smiles again. “Tell me what is wrong.”

“So many things,” Jim mutters, taking a sip of his coffee. “How much do you know about Khan’s time on Earth, after he was revived, before shit went down and you guys got revived?”

“Enough,” she says. “He does not talk about it in detail.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Jim says. “And I’m wondering if maybe he should, if maybe I should try and get him to talk about it.”

Ekaterina tilts her head to the side, looking at him. “What brought this on?”

“Okay, so this is the part that’s going to sound insane,” Jim says with a sigh. “I’ve been...I’ve had a few dreams over the last few weeks. In them I’m talking to a woman, and I’m in a--a throne room, and...I know this sounds absolutely crazy but I think I’m dreaming of Rani, and when I described the room to Khan he said it had once been his.”

Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t speak for a few moments. “What has she said to you?” she asks finally.

“The first dream she asked me to take care of him,” Jim says. “The second dream she yelled at me for letting him get hurt and made me promise again I’d take care of him. The one I had this morning, she told me to ask him about London.”

Ekaterina mutters something in Russian and takes a drink of coffee. “Then I think you should,” she says. “She--your dream-Rani--may know something I do not.”

“I don’t understand why I’m dreaming of her and Khan isn’t,” Jim confesses. “I don’t understand why I’m dreaming of her in the first place.”

“Because she is the only other person in the universe who knew what it was like to be with him,”
Ekaterina says. “And he is not an easy person to be with.” She taps her fingers against her cup, thinking. “I thought he was making a mistake when he became involved with you,” she says finally. “Obviously I changed my mind.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says. “But you had no reason to trust me.”

“It is true,” Ekaterina says.

“Did you think I’d hurt him?” Jim asks. “Or he me?”

“I thought you would hurt him,” Ekaterina says. “I did not much care if he hurt you, at that point. Then I learned what you had done for us, what you fought for us to have. Why did you do it?”

“I had to,” Jim says, wings shifting awkwardly. “It was the right thing to do.”

“Mn, perhaps, but not all men would do the right thing given the choice,” Ekaterina says. “So why did you?”

Jim sighs. “Honestly, in part it was the wings,” he says. “I didn’t want to let Khan get away before I understood why he had them, why I have them and no one else does. And he didn’t turn on me, on the Vengeance, and I thought for sure he would. I think, maybe, he felt there was a connection between us too. I don’t know. But he saved my life twice at least before we got back to Earth, and I felt like I owed him, and during his trial I found out more about what had been done to him, and I couldn’t...I couldn’t leave it there. So I testified, and pleaded for leniency.”

“Did you ask Admiral Pike to revive us?” Ekaterina asks.

“No, I didn’t have to,” Jim says. “I would have, though, if he hadn’t said they were going to. I did argue for you all to be allowed into Starfleet, though, for them to take a chance on you as possible officers.”

“That part I did know,” Ekaterina says. “You had mentioned it.” She leans forward and surprises the hell out of Jim by covering his hand with her own—other than Khan, she rarely touches anyone, Jim’s noticed. “If it was the wings, I am glad for them,” she says. “We always loved him, always will, but he was alone even among us. To see you with them, and then to see you with him, is a gift I did not think possible. I loved Rani, and I wept when she died, and yet I think you are perhaps better for my brother than she would be right now.”

Jim stares at her for a moment. “That’s what she said,” he says slowly. “In the dream. I don’t understand why. He loved her.”

“And you think he does not love you?” Ekaterina asks. “Times are different, Jim, people are different. Khan is different than he was three hundred years ago. For that matter, so am I. His experiences in this time have changed him, and you are I think more compatible with him than Rani would be. You are living proof he is not alone, not one out of billions with wings. After his time in London, after what he went through, I think he needs to know that.”

Jim decides to ignore the love thing for now because whatever, not the point. “I needed to know it, too,” he says without thinking.

“Yes,” Ekaterina says. “I believe you did.”

“It’s not about me, though,” Jim says. “So, anyway, the point is, I think—and you think, and either my unconscious or a three hundred year old ghost thinks I should talk to Khan about London, about his year without you.”
“One of these days it will be about you,” Ekaterina says. “Perhaps sooner than you know.”

“Yeah, well, today isn’t it,” Jim mutters. “Would you...be there with me, when I ask him about it?”

She looks uncertain. “Perhaps,” she says. “I am not sure he would need or want me there.”

“He trusts you more than he trusts anyone,” Jim says.

Ekaterina takes a drink of coffee. “All right,” she says finally, sitting back in her chair. “When?”

“No time like the present, right?” Jim says with a weak smile. “Tonight?”

“Your apartment, I think,” she says. “I can make dinner. 1900 hours?”

“Sure, that sounds good,” Jim says. “This could go pretty badly.”

“Oh, I expect it will,” Ekaterina says. “But that does not mean we should not try.”

“True,” Jim says, taking a drink of coffee. “At least I don’t think he’s likely to pull a knife on me.”


“I don’t heal as easily as you do,” Jim says, pointing out the obvious.

“Yes, I know,” she says. She finishes her coffee and stretches. “I should be getting back to work, I think. Will you be all right until this evening?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jim says, getting to his feet when she does. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for coming to me,” Ekaterina says. “I like to think I am your friend, too.”

“You are,” Jim says. “You’re family.”

She touches his cheek. “Family does not always mean friends,” she points out.

“Yeah, I know,” Jim says. “Believe me, I know. But you are.”

“I am glad to hear it,” she says. She stretches up on tiptoe and kisses his cheek. “Be well, Jim.”

Jim doesn’t know whether to kiss her back or not and settles on not, but he does touch her shoulder. “See you later.”

He watches her leave, moving quickly through the people on the sidewalk, and sighs. Tonight’s going to be oh so much fun.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

I'm amazed you didn't go mad.

Chapter Notes

Are you bored of me thanking you guys for commenting and reading and things? Because I'm just going to keep saying it. Also, typing is kind of agony at the moment as I appear to have pinched a nerve in my shoulder/neck, but I start PT tomorrow so hopefully I'll be back on track or at least in less pain soon. (My body hates me; seriously, what. the. fuck. this summer?)

This is a longer chapter than usual, I think, which is kind of funny because when I started it, I felt like it was going to be shorter than normal but people kept talking and things happened and 4500 words later here you are. Warnings for angst, I suppose.

As things turn out, Ekaterina gets to his apartment before Khan does, which is a little odd, but he lets her and her grocery bags in and she immediately moves to take over his kitchen. “What are we having for dinner?” he asks, poking his head in.

“Pasta puttanesca,” she says, chopping tomatoes on a cutting board Jim thinks she brought with her. “Easy, spicy, and he likes it.”

“Works for me,” Jim says. “Does beer go with that or would we be better with wine?”

“I brought wine,” she says, pointing with her knife at an open bottle. “It is breathing.” She looks at Jim when she starts chopping again, and Jim tries not to notice that she’s not even looking at what she’s doing. “You do realize that as soon as he sees I am here and making dinner, he will know something is going on,” she says.

“Yeah, that had occurred to me,” Jim says. “But we’ll deal--and that’s the door.” He heads for it, automatically locking it and setting the privacy seal once Khan’s inside. “Hey, you.”

“Hello,” Khan says. “I hear you stopped by the labs a couple times today.”

“Only twice,” Jim says sheepishly. “Did things not go well or go too well?”

“Well, we were testing the shields and not the phasers specifically, so in that sense it did not go well,” Khan says, wings stretching a little. “But we think we have ideas for how to modify them, and we will be running another test in three days.”

“And no one got injured,” Jim says.

“No, no one was injured,” Khan says. “The closest any of us came was my wing threatening to cramp from too long in that blasted suit.”
“Yeah, I don’t like them either,” Jim admits. “Maybe next time you don’t go EVA?”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. He tilts his head. “Who else is here in your kitchen?”

“Ekaterina,” Jim says. “She decided to make dinner for us.”

“Did she, now,” Khan says and there’s something in his voice that makes Jim want to confess the whole thing right now.

Instead, he grins. “Yeah, well, it’s better than takeout.”

A snort comes from the kitchen, followed by a few comments in Russian Jim decides he doesn’t want translated. Khan’s mouth twists in a smile and he walks over to Ekaterina, watching her work. “Puttanesca?” he asks, seeing what she’s doing.

“Da,” she says, adding ingredients to a pan.

Khan looks between them both. “So what is going on?”

“Can we maybe wait until the meal to talk about it?” Jim asks.

“Ten minutes, maybe fifteen,” Ekaterina says, glancing up. “You could set the table.”

“We can do that,” Jim says, moving to get plates and silverware. Khan stays where he is, clearly thinking, but Jim keeps quiet while he sets the table and gets out water glasses and wine glasses, which he only has because someone gave them to him.

In short order they have food and wine and no one’s saying a word and okay, yeah, not really a comfortable silence. Jim sighs and takes a sip of wine. “So...I dreamed of her this morning,” he says, not quite looking at either Khan or Ekaterina. “I, um, I told Ekaterina about the dreams earlier, we met for coffee.”

“I see,” Khan says and Jim can’t read whatever’s in his voice.

He looks up at Khan, though, needing to see his eyes, and there’s caution there but no anger and no hurt. The last surprises him a little, but he plunges on. “She told me I should ask you about London,” he says in a rush. “About your year there.”

Khan closes his eyes, and Jim gets the impression he’d slump in the chair if the wings allowed. He mutters something under his breath in Hindi and Ekaterina sighs, reaching over the table to take his hand. “What happened, brother?” she asks quietly.

“Must we talk about this?” Khan asks without opening his eyes. “It is the past. Let it stay there.”

Jim looks at Ekaterina who grimaces. “Not if you really don’t want to,” Jim says carefully. “But I think it might...be a good idea. I hadn’t asked because we’ve both got sore spots, and I didn’t want to poke at yours, but maybe...”

“I was...alone,” Khan says after a minute. He opens his eyes, but looks down at the table, at his hands. Ekaterina’s still holding one of them, but she sits back when he begins talking. “That is essentially how the year went. I was alone, guarded, watched almost every minute of every day. Allowed to occasionally visit my family in their tubes, when I had done something of which Marcus particularly approved. There were others I worked with, but no one was allowed to speak with me outside of work matters. I don’t know what they were told about me.” He passes his hands over his face. “But mostly what I remember is being alone, knowing Marcus could have killed my family at
any moment, knowing he would if I didn’t...please him. If I did not do what he wanted.”

Ekaterina asks a question very quietly in Russian and Khan shakes his head immediately. “No, not that,” he says, and she looks relieved. “It was about power with him, mind games and control, and he would not have done anything where he stood a chance of my gaining the upper hand, and I think he knew I would have killed him in an instant had he tried.”

Jim feels sick, realizing what she asked Khan, and wonders when he moved into a world where former Starfleet admirals could do this to people. He takes a drink of his wine to soothe his burning throat and says nothing, not sure what he can say in this situation.

“If I could kill him again, I would,” Khan says reflectively.

“Would you share?” Ekaterina asks.

“No,” Khan says. “No. He was mine to kill.”

“I tried to stop you and now I’m not sure I should have, even if I’d been able to,” Jim admits softly, looking at his wine. “Part of me still wishes he were alive to pay for his crimes, but at the same time, I hear what he did to you and...”

“Some people in this universe don’t deserve to be here,” Ekaterina says. “He was one of those.”

“He did some good things for Starfleet,” Jim says but he doesn’t know who he’s trying to convince. “But...I don’t know.” He looks at Khan, noticing how tired he looks, drawn and paler than usual. “You’re not alone anymore,” he says, stretching out a wing to touch Khan’s shoulder.

“No,” Khan agrees. “I am not.” He closes his eyes again for a moment, his shoulders hunching ever so slightly. “I dream, sometimes,” he says softly. “That I am back in London, a ghost. People walk through me, and I know I am alone, and always will be.”

“You never told me,” Jim whispers. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I haven’t had the dream in a bit,” Khan says. “And...I did not want to talk about it.” Obviously he still doesn’t; he sounds like the words are being dragged out of him, one by one. “I know it isn’t real.”

“Dreams usually aren’t,” Jim says without thinking and then wants to smack himself. “Well, usually.”

“Three hundred year old ghosts aside,” Ekaterina murmurs and Khan smiles a little.

Slowly, they begin to eat dinner, talking more about current day things: Ekaterina’s project, which she says is the most fun she’s had in a long time; Khan’s project, although he avoids too many details for fear of boring them; current status of the Enterprise and plans for shipping out in a couple months. They finish the bottle of wine and Jim insists on cleaning up, giving Ekaterina and Khan a chance to talk without him if they want it.

He hears soft voices while he loads the washer and puts away the leftovers, too quiet to tell if they’re in English or not, and lingers in the kitchen, not wanting to disturb them. He’s standing at the sink, scrubbing a serving spoon, when hands cover his shoulders and he jumps, wings flaring out before he realizes it’s Khan behind him. “Lost in thought?” Khan asks lightly.

Jim sighs, rinses his hands and the spoon, and shuts off the water, forcing his wings to settle. “I wanted to give you and Ekaterina some time.”
“Thank you,” Khan says.

“I’m not sure you should be thanking me,” Jim says. “I know you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“I did not,” Khan says. “But that doesn’t mean I should not have.”

“Yeah, I know how that goes,” Jim says. “You’re just better at getting me to talk than I am at getting you.”

“Depending on subject matter,” Khan says.

“No, I’m pretty sure that one’s universal,” Jim says. He dries his hands and turns to look at Khan. “You could probably make a fortune as an interrogator. You just look at people and they start spilling secrets.”

“Have you ever considered that you are just an honest person?” Khan asks.

“That may be true, depending on who you ask, but still,” Jim says. “What are we doing with the rest of the evening?”

“Cat and I are going flying,” Khan says. “Do you wish to come with us?”

“Sure, yeah,” Jim says, not surprised. He leans up for a quick kiss that turns into something less quick and more heated than probably it should be with them about to go flying and Ekaterina in the other room, but fuck it, it’s been a long day and he thinks Khan might need this as much as Jim himself does.

To give her credit, Ekaterina gives them a few minutes--maybe more, Jim’s not really paying attention to the time--before she knocks pointedly on the doorframe of the kitchen. “Should I go home?” she asks, smirking.

Jim wants to say yes and doesn’t, but he does turn back to the sink, taking a couple deep breaths. “Flying, right,” he says when he thinks he has a handle on himself again.

Ekaterina laughs and says something in Russian Jim really doesn’t want a translation for. Whatever it is, it makes Khan snort. “Nyet,” he says.

“Mm-hmm,” she says, clearly not buying it. “But da, let us go flying.”

They leave the apartment and head back to campus, to what Jim’s come to think of as their hill. This time he’s the first one into the air, Khan a few seconds behind him, and he pushes himself to gain more altitude, go higher and higher until everything below him looks small and he feels like he could touch the faint, wispy clouds in the sky.

He’s gotten better at flying since the first time Khan dragged him into the air, and while he’s still not quite as comfortable with it as Khan is, he no longer fears falling out of the sky and breaking things. He’s better able to judge his limits, definitely, and when he starts feeling twinges in his chest and shoulder muscles he knows it’s time to land, so he drops down outside his building and lets his wings relax.

Somewhere along the way he lost track of Khan. He looks up, but doesn’t see him in the sky. Khan still hasn’t landed after a minute or two, so Jim shrugs and goes inside. He has enough time to drink a glass of water and check his link for messages before Khan and Ekaterina come in, both looking a bit windblown. “I just need to pick up my things,” Ekaterina says, heading for the kitchen.
“Here’s your hat, what’s your hurry?” Jim asks, amused. “You could stay and hang out, you know. Also, whatever happened with that lieutenant who asked you out?” He moves to the kitchen doorway to watch her.

She looks almost embarrassed. “He asked me out again,” she says, putting knives into protective sleeves and putting those into her bag. “And then he gave me a present, a stuffed lioness that he said reminded him of me. I honestly did not know what to say, so I agreed to have dinner with him tomorrow night.”

“This isn’t a bad thing,” Jim says. “What’s his name?”


“So he’s Russian?” Jim asks.


“I didn’t think you’d have agreed to go out with a monolinguist,” Jim teases.

“A girl has standards,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “However, she may also have lost her mind. He is less than half my age, and I am not convinced he knows all of what I have done.”

“I am telling you, Cat, give him a chance,” Khan says, coming to the doorway. “He wouldn’t be working on your project if he were incompetent.”

“I don’t think I know him,” Jim admits. “What does he look like? What’s his specialty?”

“He is about Khan’s height, dark hair, dark eyes, skin about your color,” Ekaterina says, thinking about it. “On the lean side, but he has some muscle to him. His actual specialty is piloting, I believe, but his scores for advanced combat training were very high, so he was asked to assist in our project. For a human, he has skills.”

“Compared to you?” Jim asks.

She snorts. “Even Khan cannot beat me most of the time,” she points out. She finishes packing away her things and turns to face them. “I have absolutely no idea how to date. I never did it. Konstantin and I grew up together, we were past the point of awkward getting to know you conversation by the time I crawled into his bed. I do not know what I am doing, and I very much dislike that.”

“It’s not that hard, I promise,” Jim says. “You just...you go out to dinner, you talk about things you like, things you don’t, your history if you want to, maybe you get coffee or a drink after, and then you decide what else you want, if anything.”

Ekaterina sighs and pushes her hands through her hair. “I think I am making a mistake,” she admits.

“And I think you aren’t,” Khan says.

“So introduce me,” Khan says. “Lunch tomorrow?”

“Fine,” she says, but doesn’t look thrilled about it. “Alona likes him, but what does she know?”

“Cat,” Khan says quietly.

Ekaterina makes a frustrated growl and shoves her hands through her hair again. “One date,” she
says, “That is all I agreed to and likely all it will be.”

“He wouldn’t want you to be alone,” Khan says, still quiet.

“He isn’t here!” Ekaterina says, voice rising. “He died and left me alone and I am trying my hardest to keep going without him but he was part of me, he was half my soul and now all I have is a very large hole where that used to be! I knew him from before I can remember him, and in fifty-seven years of life I never, not once, wanted someone else, and now he isn’t here and I don’t know what to do without him except keep going, one day at a time. Everyone tells me he would not want me to be alone, everyone tells me he would want me to be happy, but he made me happy and now what do I have?” Her voice is thick with tears she’s not actually crying and she’s breathing harshly.

“You have me,” Khan says. “And Katsuro, and Bishop, and Alona, and...you have your family, Cat. You have us.”

She slumps against the counter, closing her eyes, and Jim sees a tear roll down her cheek. “I miss him so much,” she whispers.

“I know, milaya moya,” Khan says, moving past Jim to hold her, wrapping his wings around her. Jim can’t really see her, but he hears her start crying, hard enough Jim can see them both shaking a bit from the force of it. He slips away to get tissues, setting them on the counter, and stays quiet.

Khan rests his cheek against her hair and lets her cry it out, until eventually she pulls back, eyes red and swollen. “Well, that was suitably embarrassing,” she says, finding the tissues and blowing her nose.

“When was the last time you cried for him?” Khan asks, smoothing her hair back from her face.

“I didn’t,” she says, throwing away the tissues. “It hurt too much for tears.” She turns to the sink and turns on the cold water, running her hands under it and pressing them to her face. “When was the last time you cried for Rani?” she asks, hands still covering her face.

“A long time ago,” Khan says. “You were there.”

“I remember,” she says, lowering her hands. “But you did not cry for her for a while after she died.”

“It hurt too much,” Khan says softly.

Ekaterina smiles a little at that. “Da, well.” She takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and turns around to look at Khan. “It still may not be any more than one date,” she warns him.

“I know,” Khan says. “But I am glad you are going.”

She sighs. “I will call you when it is over,” she says. “You can listen to me talk about how horribly it went.”

“Here’s hoping I do not hear from you,” Khan says.

“We shall see,” Ekaterina says. “For now, I think I am going to go back to my apartment and sleep.”

“Are you sure you want to be alone?” Jim asks.

“I will be fine,” she says.

“That’s not what I asked,” Jim says. “We can hang out, watch something, have vodka.”
Ekaterina’s mouth twitches and she says something in Russian. “No,” Khan says.

“No what?” Jim asks.

“She thinks you are hovering because she looks terrible and you think she’s about to fall apart,” Khan says.

“She doesn’t and I don’t, it’s just...I get what it’s like to not want to be alone,” Jim says. Ekaterina looks like she didn’t just spend the last twenty minutes crying, in fact; no more swollen eyes, red nose, or anything else.

“And I appreciate the offer, but I am still going back to my apartment,” Ekaterina says. “I will see you two in the morning.” She picks up her bags and pauses to give Khan a hug, pausing next by Jim to clasp his shoulder before she leaves the apartment.

“Hell of an evening,” Jim says finally, once she’s gone.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Have you had that nightmare in the last month?” Jim asks because he has to know.

Khan hesitates, but nods. “Twice.”

“You didn’t tell me,” Jim says, hurt and anger twisting uneasily in his stomach. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Do you tell me every bad dream you have?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know, normally you wake me up from them,” Jim points out. “You should have told me, Khan.”

“I may awaken you, but often you do not tell me what you were dreaming about,” Khan says. “Jim, I did not want to talk about it. I don’t want to remember it.”

Jim sighs, anger fading at that. He knows that feeling, only too well. “Tell me next time, if you get the dream again,” he says tiredly. “Please?”

“I will,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jim says softly. “I know you don’t want to remember it, but maybe if you talk about it more, it’ll get easier.”

“It is possible,” Khan says but he sounds like he doesn’t quite believe it.

Jim walks over to him, folding his wings around Khan and taking his hands. “I’m sorry you went through it,” he says. “I know that’s not enough and it’s not really anything, and I’m still sorry. I wish I’d known. I wish you’d had someone to go to, anyone. I wish I’d been the one to find your ship.”

“Had you found our ship things might have gone very differently,” Khan says. “Even I am not sure how that would have worked. I think it would depend on who you revived first.”

“Did your ship have a system to wake someone first?” Jim asks. “Was it you?”

“It did and it was me, yes,” Khan says. “Assuming it was still operational.”

“Whatever happened to your ship?” Jim asks.
“It is in some hangar somewhere,” Khan says. “I haven’t seen it since we retrieved the last of our possessions. We hardly need it at this point. Nuclear power, in this day and age?”

“You have a point,” Jim says. He slides his hands up Khan’s arms to his shoulders and begins gently rubbing the muscles there and in his neck. Khan closes his eyes, leaning his forehead against Jim’s. “Thank you for telling us,” Jim says after a moment. “I know you didn’t want to. Ekaterina and I weren’t entirely convinced you wouldn’t attack her.”

That earns him a breath of laughter. “I would not have,” Khan says. “She gets violent when she is upset. I like to think I have somewhat better control over my impulses, sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” Jim says, smiling. “I figured it was even odds whether you would have attacked her or just refused to say a word.”

“I can hardly ask you to tell me things and not afford you the same courtesy,” Khan says.

“Well, you could, I just wouldn’t like it,” Jim says. “You were never alone before Marcus awakened you, though, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t,” Khan says. “I had my family growing up, and even after we split up to gain power, we stayed in contact. I told you Joachim worked for me, and there were one or two others who assisted me as well. And I had Rani, for such a short time as that was.”

“But to go from that to what you did,” Jim says. “Waking up alone, in a time so far removed from your own, with no guideposts. I’m amazed you didn’t go mad.”

“I think I did, a little,” Khan says. “Perhaps more than a little.”

“You know, they have these things called therapists,” Jim says, only partially kidding, but Khan laughs.

“I do not really believe a psychologist would be of much assistance in my case,” he says. “In any event, I doubt I am still mad.”

“No, I don’t think you are,” Jim says. “But I do think you should talk more about what happened to you. It still haunts you. Talk to me, talk to Ekaterina, Katsuro, whoever, just...someone.”

“And will you talk to me about your stepfather? About your mother?” Khan asks and Jim tenses.

“This isn’t about me,” he says. “And I’m over that stuff anyway, it was a long time ago.”

“And it still haunts you,” Khan says, pulling back a little to meet Jim’s eyes. “Don’t ask me to do what you will not. Talk to me, talk to Leonard, talk to Ekaterina if you like, but if you are going to ask me to talk about my time in London, I want to know more about your past.”

“Have I mentioned lately that you don’t play fair?” Jim asks around the tightness in his chest. “This isn’t about me, Khan. I don’t have nightmares about my stepfather.”

“No,” Khan says softly. “It’s never about you, is it, Jim? It’s always about the other person, always about someone else’s fears and secrets and history. It’s always about someone else. Is it easier that way? So you do not have to think about your own past, the scars you have?”

Jim steps back, wings folding behind his back. “Don’t,” he says. “Don’t do this. It’s over and done with and I’m not that person anymore.”
“Nor am I the person I was in London, or in India,” Khan says. “People change, it’s a constant of human nature, augmented or not. But our past experiences form the present and will help shape the future. Who would you be now, had your father lived? Who would you be now had Admiral Pike not walked into that bar? Who would I be had Rani survived, had someone other than Marcus awakened me?”

“Well, maybe if another insane Romulan gets caught in a black hole we’ll find out,” Jim says, trying for humor and not really succeeding. He licks dry lips, aware his wings keep shifting as Khan just looks at him. “I get what you’re saying,” he says finally. “I do.”

“Do you?” Khan asks very quietly.

“I don’t want to talk about it any more than you want to talk about London,” Jim says. “But...I will try, if you will.”

“You have my word,” Khan says.


“Now I think we go to bed,” Khan says. “I think I have sufficiently exposed my psyche for one evening.”

“And you got an armful of Ekaterina’s,” Jim says as they head toward bed.

“I have been waiting for that, actually,” Khan says. “I did not think she had wept for Konstantin yet.”

“I wish he’d survived,” Jim admits. “I didn’t realize for a long time how much she hurts because of him.”

“She had him her whole life,” Khan says. “It is hard to adjust.”

“Things just turned romantic at fourteen?” Jim asks.

“I suppose you could say that,” Khan says. “If by romantic you mean her crawling into his bed and refusing to leave.”


“She refused to wait any longer,” Khan says. “She said it wasn’t as though she could get pregnant, we’re practically immune to disease, and she was old enough to know what she wanted and with whom, and she chose him.”

“Had he felt that way about her?” Jim asks. “Hold that thought while I duck into the bathroom.”

When he comes out, Khan goes in. Jim crawls under the covers and sets his alarm, moving to fit himself against Khan once he gets into bed, his head on Khan’s shoulder and a wing over his body. “In answer to your question, he had,” Khan says. “But he knew Cat even better than I do. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for her.”

Jim sighs. “I hope her date goes well,” he says. “I can’t imagine trying to start over like she’s done.”

“As do I,” Khan says. “I will meet him tomorrow, I suppose. Do you wish to join us for lunch?”

“Yeah, call me like an hour ahead so I can make sure to be there,” Jim says.
“I will,” Khan says.

“Awesome.” Jim covers a yawn and closes his eyes. “Wake me in the morning,” he says.

He feels Khan’s lips brush his hair, and then he doesn’t know anything else.
When he gets to the HQ mess, he finds a long table full of people—Ekaterina, Alona, Henri, Khan, Spock, Katsuro, Matthew, and a handful of non-augments he either only knows by sight or doesn’t know at all. He takes his tray and slides into the empty seat between Khan and Alona, across from Ekaterina and a man in a gold shirt who looks a lot like her description of Pietrovich. At the moment, the conversation happens to be in Russian, which doesn’t surprise Jim, so he takes a sip of his water and waits for them to remember he’s there.

After a minute, Ekaterina smiles. “Captain Kirk,” she says. “How unsurprising to see you, but welcome. This is Lieutenant Pietrovich.”

“Alex,” the man says, extending a hand. “It’s a pleasure, captain.”

“Likewise,” Jim says, shaking his hand and pleased by his grip. “Hope you don’t mind me dropping by.”

“Not at all,” Alex says. “I have to confess, though, I’m dying to check out your ship one of these days. She’s gorgeous.”

Jim grins. “Yeah, that she is,” he says. “Where were you assigned?”

“Prior to my current assignment I was out on the Wells,” Alex says. “But I got asked to come back and help with the current project. Not sure how long this’ll take before they reassign me, but so far I’m liking it.” He glances at Ekaterina and smiles. “Even if I do almost get my bones broken on a regular basis.”

Ekaterina snorts. “Almost being the key word,” she says.

“What did she almost break today?” Jim asks.

“My shoulder,” Alex says. “Yesterday it was my tibia. So far I haven’t actually gotten anything
worse than a few bruises, though.”

“I told you I would not break you,” Ekaterina says.

“Well, that’s no fun,” Alex says with a mischievous grin and Ekaterina actually ducks her head, smiling a little. Jim swallows a laugh and picks up his fork.

“Alona has a new toy,” Ekaterina says after a moment, changing the subject. “She has been smiling all morning about it.”

“It’s not a toy and I have not,” Alona protests. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“What is it?” Jim asks.

Alona takes a short metal cylinder out of her pocket. She shifts her chair to set it on the floor between herself and Jim and taps it twice with her foot before quickly moving out of the way. Jim blinks as the cylinder just--grows, shooting up in height and transforming into a staff. He notes a few places with what looks like hand grips. “Wow,” he says, looking at the finished product. “That’s convenient.”

“Stronger than my previous staff, lighter--so I have to get used to the new weight, but that’s fine--and easier to carry around,” Alona says proudly. “Also easier to hold thanks to the grips. I love it. Matthew designed it and they finally got it to work right.” She stands up and taps the top of the staff three times with her palm and it collapses back in on itself, until all she has is the metal cylinder.

“She’s dangerous with it,” Alex says. “Also, it reflects phaser fire if you catch the bolt right.”

“Which I can do,” Alona says, putting the cylinder away. “It should stand up to a direct blow from a bat’leth, too. I just want to try it out against a Klingon.”

“I recommend not going to Qo’nos,” Khan says dryly and Jim chokes on his pasta.

“I’m crazy, not suicidal,” Alona points out.

That makes Jim pause and consider it. Why had Khan gone to Qo’nos? Because he didn’t think he could be followed? What had he intended to do from there? He’s never asked and now he’s not sure he wants to know.

Had he been suicidal? Thinking his family dead, with nothing else to live for, had he gone to Qo’nos thinking he was going to die anyway?

“So what do you want to do, take a ship and run into a random Klingon somewhere in the galaxy?” Alex asks, distracting him.

“Sure,” Alona says. “Can’t you just see me and Cat challenging a group of them to a fight?”

“I can, actually,” Jim says uneasily. “I kind of wish I couldn’t.”

Alona laughs at that, as does Ekaterina. “I’d lay odds on us,” Alona says. “But I bet that’s a diplomatic strategy no one’s tried. Challenge their leader to a fair fight? I mean, they believe in honor, so they might not cheat.”

“But what would you get if you win?” Alex asks.

“A promise they’ll leave us alone?” Alona shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m not a diplomat. I didn’t even rule a country once upon a time. I left that to Bishop.”
“What did you do for Bishop?” Alex asks.

Alona smiles easily. “Kept the peace.”

Ekaterina snorts at that, and Khan smiles faintly. “Not all of us could conquer the globe,” Ekaterina says. “Not all of us even wanted to.”

“You did not,” Khan says.

“No, but I did it anyway,” Ekaterina says. “Who else was there?”

“Konstantin,” Henri contributes, leaning over from Khan’s other side.

“Konstantin kept my peace,” Ekaterina says. “Without him, I would not have accomplished much of what I did. It would not have worked the other way around.”

Jim has to admit, he’s kind of fascinated. He doesn’t often hear the augments talking about their original time, about the wars and their years of ruling. “If you didn’t want to rule, why did you do it?” Alex asks Ekaterina.

“As I said,” she says. “Who else was there? We were created for a purpose, to bring order and peace. I was created for Russia, for my people, and I served them.”

“It wasn’t about wanting power for yourself?” Jim asks before he can think better of it.

She shrugs carelessly. “Perhaps in part,” she says. “We are an ambitious group, always have been. But we fought our way to the top because we thought the world needed us, because we thought no one else was capable of doing what we could.”

“No one else was,” Alona says. “Otherwise we wouldn’t exist.”

“Perhaps humankind has evolved more over the last three hundred years,” Ekaterina says. “They at least claim to be civilized these days.”

“We do our best,” Alex says.

Ekaterina smiles a little. “Da, I know. And yet you still study how best to kill people with your body.”

“Everyone needs a hobby,” Alex says and Alona laughs.

“This is very true,” she says. “Captain Kirk, what is your hobby?”

Jim shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says. “I read, I play chess, I avoid getting beaten up by people exponentially stronger than I am. I go flying, when I can.”

“Flying?” Alex asks. “Atmospheric or space?”

“Atmospheric,” Jim says, smiling a little. “These things.” He shifts his wings a little.

Alex’s eyes widen and then he laughs. “Should have figured that one out,” he says. He looks at Khan. “Do you fly too?”

“I do,” Khan says.

“That must be amazing,” Alex says, a little wistfully. “I used to be a bird-watcher, when I was a kid.
We lived in an area that had a lot of raptors, and I used to watch them fly, and I envied them how free they looked, up in the sky. I think it’s why I became a pilot, so I could try and get some of that freedom for myself. I still fly atmospheric planes when I can, mostly ultralights. Haven’t been in a while, lack of time, but maybe one of these days.” He looks at Ekaterina. “You could come with me. I think you’d love it.”

“Perhaps,” she says slowly. “I did like being in space. I have plans to go back on my next free day.”

“Did you want company?” Jim asks. “You never gave me an answer.”

“If your free day and mine match up, then yes,” she says. “I would like that.”

Jim looks at Khan. “Do you want to come too?”

“I would,” Khan says.

Jim wonders if he should have also invited Alex, decides that’s up to Ekaterina, and feels mildly awkward about making plans in front of him, but Alex doesn’t seem bothered by it. “Say you’ll come flying with me,” he says to Ekaterina instead. “Please?”

She gives him a look. “Are all humans this pushy?” she asks. “Had I forgotten?”

“You may have, but I think there is something about Starfleet officers that lends itself to pushiness,” Khan says, surprising the hell out of Jim. “Of course, I would not know personally.”

That makes Alona and Ekaterina both dissolve into laughter, and Jim feels color rise in his cheeks and stares down at his plate, torn between laughter and mortification. He goes with laughter, because whatever, and smacks Khan’s hand under the table--well, he tries, but Khan grabs his wrist before the thwap can land and Jim swallows hard. Khan lets him go a moment later and Jim shakes his head, reaching for his water glass.

“Clearly I’m missing something,” Alex says, looking between the four of them.

“Yes,” Alona says between giggles. “Yes, you are.”

Ekaterina leans over and murmurs something in Alex’s ear; Jim can’t hear it and doesn’t know whether it’s English or Russian. He has a pretty good idea of what she’s telling him, though, and is proven right when Alex blinks, looks at Jim, looks at Khan, blinks again and grins. “Right then,” he says. “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“No reason you would have,” Jim says. He still feels a little weird about other people--other, non-augmented, non-crew people--knowing what’s going on between himself and Khan, but there’s nothing he can do about it. He’s not Khan’s secret and Khan’s not his. People will talk, especially about two guys with wings.

Under the table, Khan’s hand touches his briefly, as if in reassurance, and Jim smiles a little. He’s still not convinced the augments are at least mildly empathic or telepathic; they’re kind of scarily adept at reading other people when they want to be. Khan says they’re not but for all Jim knows it’s an enhancement no one ever told them about, or an unexpected side effect no one thought to test for.

Then he thinks about all the tests they did go through while growing up and wonders if that’s even possible. Probably not. But he still wonders.

“Brother, have you a spare hour after lunch?” Ekaterina asks Khan. “I would like a spar.”
“I can arrange time,” Khan says.

She grins. “And a spare set of clothes.”

“This I have to see,” Jim says without thinking and Alona giggles.

“Shall we wager on it?” Ekaterina asks Khan.

“Seven minutes,” he says.

“Five,” she counters.

“What are you betting on?” Jim asks.

“How long it takes her to cut off his clothes,” Alona says. “She will eventually, it’s a question of how long he can block her. But please, Cat, stop with the shirt. There are going to be people watching and we don’t want them to faint.”

Ekaterina sighs. “In that case four minutes,” she says.

“Six,” Khan says.

“What will you wager me?” she asks.


“You have not cooked for me in ages,” she says. “I would like that. Very well, I accept, and I will stop with the shirt. If—and this is a very big if—you get mine off before I get yours, I will make you halva.”

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” Alona says. “Cat, I’m not sure you’re going to win this one, not with the halva incentive.”

“What is halva?” Jim asks.

“A dessert,” Ekaterina says. “Found in many places in the world, under various names. Khan has a weakness for a few kinds they make in India. I learned how to make it when I was thirteen, when I was learning how to cook.” She looks at Alona. “If I lose, I lose. He can beat me once in a while.”

“He can beat you?” Alex asks. “This I have to see.”

“No one is unbeatable,” Ekaterina says. “Except perhaps Katsuro on a good day.” She pushes back her chair. “Shall we adjourn to find new shirts and a suitable sparring room?”

“You keep spare shirts at HQ?” Jim asks Khan as they head back to the lab where he’s been working.

“I do keep a change of clothes,” Khan says. “I like being prepared.”

“Right,” Jim says. “Do I need to worry about you getting sliced up by Ekaterina?”

“Actually, no,” Khan says. “This spar, the goal is the clothes, not actually slicing each other. It’s a test of skill—how close can you get to tear fabric without cutting skin? If we did not have an audience, we would start barefoot, and go until someone lost completely, but clearly that is not ideal.”
“No, but now I kind of want to watch it,” Jim mutters under his breath, glad the others went with Ekaterina and Alona.

Khan laughs softly. “I am sure Cat would agree to a demonstration. You should ask her sometime. Also, she had a question for me about you.”

“What did she want to know?” Jim asks.

“She wants to know why you never call her Cat,” Khan says.

“Uh,” Jim says. “She never told me it was okay? That seemed to be a special thing with you guys, and I didn’t…”

“You are her family,” Khan points out, snagging a clean shirt and pair of pants from a cabinet and turning to go. “If anyone can call her by a nickname, you can.”

“Wait, pants too?” Jim asks.

Khan shrugs. “In case Cat gets carried away.”

“Right,” Jim says. They make their way to the gym and Khan sets his clothes down next to Ekaterina’s. He notes she’s taken off her boots, and Khan does the same, walking out onto the mats barefoot to face her.

“One or two?” Ekaterina asks Khan.

“Two,” he says.

She pulls two knives out of nowhere and throws them at him; Jim can’t tell if she’s actually trying to hit him or not. Either way, he catches one knife in either hand easily. “Who is keeping time?”

Ekaterina asks, glancing over at the small crowd of people--Jim, Alex, Alona, Henri, and surprisingly Spock, Katsuro, and Matthew.

“I will,” Alona says, looking at her watch. “And...three, two, one, go!”

Both of them move at the same time, Ekaterina spinning to avoid one of Khan’s knives and he ducking out of the way of hers. However, he gets a slice down her right arm, splitting the sleeve of her shirt, and she gets one from shoulder to waist on his left side. Jim winces, expecting to see blood, but he doesn’t even see a mark on either of them.

He keeps watching, fascinated by how they move, how the one time Ekaterina actually nicks Khan she curses, like that wasn’t in the plan. They’re fighting defensively, both of them trying to avoid the other while still getting close enough to cut fabric, and it’s pretty interesting to see them not trying to kill each other.

“Three minutes,” Alona calls. Ekaterina’s shirt is half off, kind of literally; she’s got the left sleeve and part of it covering the left side of her torso, but the right sleeve is gone and the right side is torn and flapping as she moves. Khan’s missing most of a left sleeve and the back where it closes around his wings is open.

“So,” Khan says, spinning out of the way of a slice. “Halva?”

Ekaterina laughs and practically dives around him to cut another part of his shirt. “Not just yet.”

In the end, he gets her shirt off a bare two seconds before his drops to the ground, shredded beyond
the possibility of repair. He has a red line across his right shoulder where she cut him, and she has one that ends just at her bra strap, left side. “At least you did not cut this,” she says, looking down. “I only have so many of these.”

“You only have so many shirts, too,” Khan points out.

“Da, but they will give me more,” Ekaterina says. “And see, I did stop at the shirt.”

“I appreciate that,” Khan says.

“So do we,” Alona says. “Sorry, Khan, but you’re not my type.”

“No, you prefer redheads,” Khan says, walking over to grab his spare shirt.

“I prefer people less than a third of a meter taller than me,” Alona says. “Redheaded is a bonus, though.”

“So if I were a few centimeters taller you wouldn’t have sex with me?” Matthew asks.

“I’d have to think about it,” Alona says solemnly.

Ekaterina pulls on her spare shirt and redoes her ponytail. “So,” she says to Khan. “Halva and dinner, although what was the official time?”

“Five minutes, thirty-six seconds,” Alona says.

“I make halva, you make dinner?” Ekaterina suggests. “Since it was over my time but under yours.”

“We could make Jim make dinner,” Khan suggests.

“I didn’t bet,” Jim protests.

“Consider it the price of watching a real spar,” Khan says as he pulls on his shirt.

Jim sighs and drops his head. “My place, 1900 hours tomorrow? I’ll make something.” He doesn’t particularly like cooking, but he has a few things he knows how to make.

Ekaterina laughs. “I see where your interests lie, captain.”

“Cat,” Alona says. “Try me with the new staff?”

“Da,” Ekaterina says. “Briefly, for then we must be back to work, no?”

“I estimate we have thirty-two minutes before we will be late returning to our projects,” Spock says and Jim realizes he wants to see this, too. He smiles at that.

Ekaterina laughs and pulls on her boots and walks out onto the mat with Alona, who activates her staff and picks it up two-handed. “Knives or no?” Ekaterina asks.

“Yes, but only if you don’t throw them,” Alona says. “I don’t want to risk damaging them if you bounce them off the staff. If you hit the staff with a knife it should be okay, though.”

“I still want to see it reflect phaser fire,” Jim mutters and Alex grins next to him.

“It’s pretty darn cool, sir,” he says. “I could get a phaser and show you.”

“Maybe later,” Jim says, watching the women on the mat.
“Khan, call time,” Alona says. “Let’s start with five minutes?”

Ekaterina nods, and Khan looks at the chrono on the wall. “And...go,” he says.

Jim’s getting used to the way Ekaterina fights, having seen her and watched her more often than some of her family, but until Alona he’d never seen someone fight with a staff before, and he finds himself fascinated by how she uses it. He thinks she might mis-judge a couple times, when a blow goes wild and Ekaterina has to dive out of the way, but figures she’s probably getting used to the new weight.

“Time,” Khan calls and the women immediately step back, both of them breathing a little harder. Ekaterina makes a face and presses a hand to her side, and Alona has a slice on her arm from a knife. “Cat, are you injured?”

“Ribs, I think,” she says, taking a careful breath. “Yes, definitely ribs.”

“Damn it, I knew I should have pulled that one,” Alona says. “Okay, this new weight is going to take a little more getting used to than I thought. I’ve just fought with the other staff so long it’s like part of me.”

“Then I recommend you only fight your family until you are used to it,” Ekaterina says.

“Aye, you’re right,” Alona says. She puts the staff away. “Are you all right?”

“I will be,” Ekaterina says.

“Do we need to take you to Medical?” Alex asks, looking worried.

“No, this will heal soon enough on its own,” Ekaterina says. “And I do not feel like getting lectured by Maeve’s doctor.”

“Maeve’s doctor has a name,” Jim feels obliged to point out. “You don’t call me Khan’s captain.”

“I could,” Ekaterina says thoughtfully. She laughs and winces briefly. “Mr. Spock, have you enjoyed watching the sparring?”

“Enjoyment is a human emotion,” Spock says. “However, I have observed many things of value in the last half hour.”

“You are half human,” Ekaterina says. “Do you not allow yourself to feel any emotions?”

“Vulcans live by logic,” Spock says. “I was raised as a Vulcan.”

“I think perhaps I am incompatible with the Vulcan way of life,” Ekaterina says. “It seems far too rigid and confining for me.”

“I believe all individuals would benefit from increased use of logic to govern their emotions,” Spock says.

“I believe that without my emotions I am little more than an android,” Ekaterina says. “And I am far, far superior to any artificial intelligence.” She touches her ribs again and makes a face.

“How badly did I get you?” Alona asks, concerned.

“I think perhaps you actually broke something,” Ekaterina admits. “It is hard to tell, and it is healing, it just pains me at the moment. It will be better by the time we are back to work. Which we should be
“You should get checked out,” Alex says, frowning.

“Shura, you have seen for yourself how quickly we heal,” Ekaterina says. “I will be fine. I am fine.”

Shura? Jim has no idea what that means and decides he’ll ask Khan later.

“You broke bones,” Alex says. “I’ve seen you guys heal cuts and bruises, not broken bones.”

“Da, well, these heal too, sometimes faster than bruises,” Ekaterina says, sounding annoyed. She touches her ribs one more time, then forces her hand to drop. “Sometimes more slowly, but they do heal and in perhaps an hour I will be perfectly fine. Now, may we get back to work? I have biology to study.”

“Biology?” Jim asks.

“Klingon biology and physiology,” Ekaterina says. “Looking for weak spots, things we can take advantage of. And perhaps other species as well. Your Federation has had problems with Romulans, have you not?”

Jim snorts. “You could call it that.”

“So we are discussing possibly learning how to fight them next,” Ekaterina says. “But for now, the Klingons, and I need to get a shirt replaced.” She bends to pick up the fabric scraps that were her shirt and Jim sees her wince when she does it. “Not bad work, brother,” she says, studying the remains of her shirt.

“Spasiba,” Khan says.

The group of them begin heading out of the gym and split into two groups—Alona, Henri, Ekaterina, and Alex to one location; Khan, Katsuro, Matthew, and Spock to another. Jim feels caught between them, but ends up following the scientists back to their lab. “I’ll see you later,” he murmurs to Khan.

“Yes,” Khan says simply.

Jim wants to kiss him, knows he can’t, settles for brushing the edge of his wing against Khan’s. “Nice work today, by the way,” he says.

Khan smiles. “Halva is a good incentive.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jim says, grinning. “Oh, quick question for you before I head out. What is Shura?”

“Russian diminutive of Alexander,” Khan says.

“Right,” Jim says. “Thanks. See you later.” He brushes his wing against Khan’s again because he can and no one’s paying attention to them, and heads back to deal with whatever else he’s got on his plate for the day.

Somewhat to his amusement, Khan beats him back to the apartment, and Jim gets inside to find him in the kitchen, chopping something into very tiny pieces on a cutting board Jim didn’t know he had. “What are you doing?” he asks, watching him.

“Okay,” Jim says. “I didn’t know you cooked.”

“On occasion,” Khan says. “I like the rhythm of it, every now and again. Perhaps more than every now and again, but your kitchen is remarkably understocked for general cooking purposes. I stopped by a store this afternoon to pick up a few essentials, as we finished earlier than we had intended. We are going out to the moon tomorrow for more tests, this time on the phasers.”

“I like how you just slipped that in there,” Jim says. “One moment cooking, the next phaser tests tomorrow. When do you leave?”

“Eight hundred hours,” Khan says, gathering up whatever he’s been chopping on the flat of the knife blade and sweeping it into a pot before picking up something else to chop. “Unfortunately, it looks like I will have to go EVA for at least part of the test, as I do not want to risk Raven that close to phaser fire. Katsuro is remaining at HQ this time, Matthew will be EVA with me, Spock will be our communications liaison on the shuttle.”

“I’m sorry,” Jim says, knowing how much spacesuits suck with wings. “Will you be in danger?”

“I should not be,” Khan says. “Not unless things go terribly wrong.”

“Right, that’s totally comforting,” Jim says, making a face at Khan. “Any word from Cat yet on her date?”

“Yes, she came down earlier to make sure she looked suitable for a date,” Khan says. “I am not entirely certain why she thinks I know these things better than she does.”

“It’s a brother thing, I think,” Jim says. “Besides, didn’t you ever date?”

“No,” Khan says. “When did I have time? Even if I had, Jim, the customs I would have known were three hundred years ago. What could I possibly know about dating in today’s culture?”

“I don’t know, we’re managing all right,” Jim says, smiling.

Khan’s mouth quirks in not-quite a smile. “Perhaps, but I am fairly certain that you following me to Qo’nos and attempting to apprehend me is well beyond what one should expect on a first date.”

“Hey, I did apprehend you,” Jim protests.

Khan turns and looks at him, raising an eyebrow. “Only because I allowed it. After, I should point out, I saved your life and those of your crew.”


“I am,” Khan says, almost like it surprises him.


“I did, in fact,” Khan says with a slight smile. “We had a disagreement about power consumption of the phaser banks, and I was proven correct.”

“Okay, I wasn’t actually serious on that one but good to know,” Jim says. “You do realize he’s not competition, don’t you?”

“For what or whom would we be competing, Jim?” Khan asks, sweeping the next chopped something into the pot.
“I really have no idea,” Jim says. “Not me, I hope.”

“I really do not think I need to worry about Spock competing with me for you,” Khan says, looking at Jim. “You are mine.”

Jim takes a slow breath. “Yeah, I am,” he says. “But I don’t know if Spock knows that.”

“Does he need to?” Khan asks.

“Probably not,” Jim says. “Definitely not.”

Khan returns to whatever he’s doing, which currently appears to be smashing garlic with the flat of his knife. “Spock and I are very similar in some ways, very different in others,” he says. “It lends itself to a not always comfortable working relationship.”

“I know,” Jim says. “But he’s my friend, and you’re...you, and you’ll both be on the Enterprise and I would really, really like it if you could at least get along without being ice cold to each other. I mean, Spock’s cold because he’s Vulcan, it’s what they do, but you know what I mean.”

“I would not use the word cold,” Khan says. “Controlled, yes, but not cold. There is fire there, under the logic. Were he ever to let the logic fail, I think I might like him better.”

“Yeah, I don’t see that happening any time soon,” Jim says.

“Neither do I,” Khan says. “But we are doing better. I am still not certain he trusts me or thinks I am trustworthy, but he and Katsuro are doing remarkably well together, and Matthew gets along with everyone.”

“What did Matthew do, back during the wars?” Jim asks curiously. “Or after them?”

“The same as Alona,” Khan says. “He kept the peace.”

“Covert ops?” Jim asks.


“How many people did Bishop kill or have killed?” Jim asks wonderingly. He’s spent a little time with Bishop; not much, not as much as Ekaterina, but enough to know the man’s unfailingly polite, almost gentle. He has trouble seeing Bishop as a cold-blooded killer.

“Not all of what Alona and Matthew did for him was assassination,” Khan says. “In fact, I think most of it was not.”

“But still,” Jim says. “He’s--I don’t know, he’s almost like Maeve.”

“No,” Khan says. “No, he is not. Maeve does not like killing but will do it if she has to. Bishop doesn’t care. He is loyal to his family, and he would do anything for Katsuro, but beyond that, he cares very little for anyone or anything, and killing a regular human would be almost like squashing a bug to him.”

“But he studied medicine,” Jim says in protest.

“Because he distrusted doctors and wanted to be able to heal himself and his family more easily without their aid,” Khan says. “Why do you think he does not practice medicine now? He could easily catch up on current technologies and standards--Maeve and Carson have done it. And I am sure he has studied, is studying, in case one of us needs help. But he doesn’t want to be bothered
with regular human patients. He would rather work with machinery and engines.”

“Why isn’t he on your project?” Jim asks, still trying to reconcile what Khan’s told him with his own impression of Bishop.

“Weapons are not his specialty,” Khan says. “And I think he and Katsuro wanted to prove to each other that they could work separately, that they could be separated.”

Jim shakes his head. “He’s always so polite,” he says.

“He always has been,” Khan says. “And he likes you and considers you one of his family.”

“That’s somewhat comforting by which I mean not really,” Jim says. He leans against the doorframe, watching Khan work. He has absolutely no idea what Khan’s making, but whatever it is smells fantastic. “But I guess maybe it shouldn’t be that surprising.”

“Which part?” Khan asks.

“All of it, really,” Jim says. “I guess Bishop’s not that different from a lot of you. I just thought he was.”

“He can give that impression,” Khan says. “And he can be gentle, when he wants to be. But if you cross him, he is absolutely merciless.”

Jim remembers Ekaterina saying Bishop had requested one of the doctors from section 31, and decides he doesn’t want to know how that person died. “Katsuro’s not like Bishop, though, is he?” he asks. “I remember you telling me once he fights to disable.”

“He does,” Khan says. “He will kill, if he must, but he prefers to disable. He felt that if he disabled an opponent but left him alive, that opponent owed him his life. It usually worked out for him. I think perhaps had he ruled somewhere other than Japan it might not have.”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Things were so different then.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Yes, they were.”

“How long until dinner’s ready?” Jim asks, changing the subject. “I can set the table.”

“Perhaps twenty minutes,” Khan says, looking at the stove.

“In that case I’m going to set the table and change out of my uniform,” Jim says. He walks into the kitchen first, though, and presses himself against Khan’s back, wrapping his arms around Khan’s lean waist. “Thank you for making dinner,” he says, pressing a kiss between Khan’s wings.

“It is my pleasure,” Khan says, covering Jim’s hands with one of his own for a minute.

Jim kisses his back again and stays where he is for a little bit before he pulls away to go set the table and change. Over dinner—which tastes amazing—they talk a little more about the tests planned for tomorrow and what might happen next, the things Jim’s dealing with, and whatever else they happen to think about.

Jim’s comm-link chirps as he’s clearing away the dishes and he sets plates down, answering it. “Kirk here,” he says.

“Hey, captain,” Jill’s voice says. “You busy tomorrow?”
“For you, never,” he says, smiling. “How are you? When did you get back?”

“Earlier today,” she says. “Didn’t get a chance to call you until now, though. You know how it is.
Coffee, the usual place, nine hundred?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Jim says. “How’d it all go?”

kidnapped and broke my leg trying to escape. Well, I did escape, just somewhat banged up, but I got
my revenge.”

“I’m going to need to hear the long version,” Jim decides.

She laughs again. “I thought you might. Buy me coffee and I’ll tell you.”

“Deal,” Jim says. He hangs up smiling.

“Who called?” Khan asks, coming into the doorway of the kitchen.

“Jill,” Jim says. “We’re meeting for coffee tomorrow morning. Apparently she broke her leg
escaping being kidnapped, I don’t even know what happened. I’d invite you to come along but
you’ll be putting yourself in harm’s way with phasers.”

“I am not going to become injured,” Khan says patiently.

“Neither was Ekaterina,” Jim says before he can stop himself. He sighs and finishes loading the
washer. “Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“Accurate, though,” Khan says. “But I am not going to get caught in an explosion.”

“You say that now,” Jim says. “Do you want to find something on screen and play chess?”

“I would like that,” Khan says.

“I’ll just be another minute in here,” Jim says.

Khan nods and heads for the living room, and Jim finishes cleaning up. He’s amused by how
domestic tonight’s been, between Khan making dinner and him cleaning up and just everything.
Domestic doesn’t usually apply to him, and yet.

He wonders what it’ll be like on the ship, once they head out, whether they’ll eat together in the mess
or not, whether they’ll play chess or one of them will play Spock. Whether Bones and Maeve will
come hang out with them, or Ekaterina, or Katsuro and Bishop. So many things will change, and at
the same time he hopes a lot of them don’t. He likes hanging out with his senior staff and the
augments, he likes just being in company.

Khan will need his own quarters on the ship, but Jim hopes they get about as much use as his current
apartment does. He probably should think about trying to be discreet, maybe, but somehow he
doubts that’ll actually happen. Not that they’re not discreet, it’s just that gossip travels on a starship
and gossip about the captain travels twice as fast as warp. And with Sulu in charge of the gossip
chain--a fact he vigorously denies but everyone knows is true--Jim has no idea how long he’ll be
able to keep his relationship with Khan a secret. Not that he wants it to be a secret, but...oh, fuck it,
he’ll deal with this when they ship out.

He finishes cleaning up and finds Khan on the couch. They end up half watching some old movie
and playing chess, but Jim demands a kiss every time someone loses a piece, which ends up meaning the board gets knocked over about halfway through the game and they end up kissing on the couch, ignoring the movie as well.

When someone knocks on the door, Jim falls off the couch and Khan doesn’t catch him in time. “You get it,” Jim says, deciding sprawled on the floor is as good a place as any to be at the moment, plus he thinks he bruised something.

Khan gives him an amused look, but gets up, stepping over him to get to the door. “Cat,” he says, and Jim decides for Ekaterina he doesn’t have to sit up just yet. “Come in.”

From his spot on the floor he can see her boots first, and wonders where she got them; knee-high, low heels, soft black leather. He thinks Uhura would like them. With them, she has on a short black dress, long-sleeved and scoop-necked, a subtle silver shimmer woven into the material. Her hair tumbles down around her shoulders, wavy and loose. “Hey,” Jim says, waving a hand from the floor. “You look gorgeous.”

“Spasiba,” Ekaterina says, looking down at him. “Why are you on the floor?”

Jim shrugs. “Seemed like a good place to be,” he says. “Why are you home so early?”

“It is after twenty hundred,” Ekaterina says. “Not that early.” She nudges Jim’s legs out of the way and sits down on the couch; Jim sighs and pushes himself up, taking the other side of the couch and leaving Khan to take the chair.

“So how did it go, then?” Jim asks.

“He asked for another date,” Ekaterina says. “He wants to take me to an amusement park where we can ride roller coasters.”

“Did you say yes?” Jim asks.

“I did,” Ekaterina says. “I am not sure why. I suppose this date went well enough.” She sighs and tucks a lock of hair back behind her ear. “Anyway, I suppose roller coasters are harmless. He suggested I invite you two along, but I am not certain how you would fit into the seats.”

“We probably wouldn’t,” Jim says, making a face. “Still, we can go along for moral support if you need it.”

“Thank you, but I think I am capable of handling a visit to an amusement park,” Ekaterina says. “Also, I am reasonably certain I can take him if he gets out of hand.”

Jim laughs at that, and Khan smiles. Ekaterina tips her head back against the couch cushions. “I still think I am making a mistake,” she says. “But he has this annoying way of being polite and pushy at the same time so I feel badly about saying no to him even though I doubt this can end well. Is this a Starfleet thing?”

“It might be,” Khan says without looking at Jim.

“Hey,” Jim feels obliged to protest. “It worked out well for us, and it’s not like you were going to make any kind of move.”

“He has a point, brother,” Ekaterina says, turning her head to look at Khan. “But I think my situation is slightly different from yours.”
“Yes,” Khan says. “You did not almost cause a war.”

“Technically you didn’t either,” Jim says. “That was Marcus’s doing.”

“Because of me,” Khan says.

“No,” Jim says. “If it hadn’t been you, it would have been something else. Someone else. You were right. He wanted that war and he was going to have it. I still...I don’t know if we stopped him in time.”

“Clearly Admiral Barnett thinks Marcus’s viewpoint had merit,” Khan says. “Otherwise I would not be doing what I am doing currently.”

“Or I,” Ekaterina says.

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it,” Jim says. “I want you both back on the Enterprise before we ship out.” He considers this for a moment. “Okay, but the shuttles would be good to have.”

“We will do our best,” Khan says.

“I know,” Jim says. “I think it’s possible.”

“Anything is possible,” Ekaterina says. “Some things are more probable than others.”

The quote sounds vaguely familiar but Jim can’t place it. “Anyway,” he says. “On another note, when do I get to watch a real spar between you two?”

Both Ekaterina and Khan laugh at that. “At some point when we will be unlikely to be disturbed,” Ekaterina says.

“You can reserve some of the gyms,” Jim says. “Usually for private games and things. I can look into it.”

“Tell me something, Jim,” Ekaterina says, sitting up a little straighter. “Why are you so eager to watch this?”

“I like watching you guys spar,” Jim says, feeling a little sheepish about it. “And what I saw earlier was kind of fascinating, it’s so different than normal. I’m curious what a real spar is.”

“Dangerous,” Ekaterina says, and Jim doesn’t think she’s kidding. She smiles, though, and looks at Khan. “Have you forgiven me for the broken leg yet?”

“Never,” Khan says solemnly and she laughs.

“You broke his leg?” Jim asks, startled.

“And his forearm, but the leg was the worst of it,” Ekaterina says. “Konstantin was grumpy with me for three days because he had to set the bones, and he did not enjoy that.”

“He never did,” Khan says. “Especially when they were yours.”

“Da, but I only broke ribs in that spar,” she says. “No setting required.”

“For which he was grateful,” Khan says.

“Yes.” Ekaterina stretches and gets to her feet. “I believe I am going back to my apartment,” she
says. “Good luck tomorrow, brother.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. He stands to walk her to the door, and she gives him a quick, hard hug before waving goodnight to Jim and leaving.

“She broke your leg and your forearm?” Jim asks once she’s gone.

“Jim, I think over the course of my life I have broken most of the bones in my body at one time or another,” Khan says, taking Ekaterina’s vacated seat on the couch. “Many of them were caused by my family. Better them than an enemy.”

“Some weren’t, though,” Jim says, remembering Khan’s comment about Viktor and the bones in his hands.

“No,” Khan agrees, and he looks down at his hands. “Some were not.”

Jim shifts to move closer to him, wanting to erase the shadow on his face. He cups Khan’s face in his hands, kissing him lightly. “Will you tell me about it sometime?” he asks softly. “I know--I saw some of the recordings, but that’s not the whole story.”

Khan looks down, then back at Jim. “Sometime,” he says. “Not tonight.”

“No,” Jim agrees. “Not tonight.” He kisses Khan again, closing his eyes and leaning into his warmth. Khan’s hands settle on Jim’s waist, just enough to keep him where he is. “Come to bed with me,” Jim murmurs, kissing Khan’s jaw, the corner of his mouth.

“Yes,” Khan murmurs back.
Jim gets a coffee and their usual table, and has just taken a seat when he sees Jill come in. She’s using a cane, though, and her right leg has a skintight purple brace wrapped around it from knee to foot. She grins when she sees him and gets herself a drink before limping over to the table and taking a seat. “Bone regen doesn’t work on me the way it does most people, or I’d be healed by now,” she says, taking a sip of her drink. “I’m one of the weird cases where it only works partially. So I’m stuck like this for another week or so, which means another week of Evan hovering. My joy is boundless.” Despite the words, she laughs, and Jim smiles, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“What the hell happened?” he asks. “How did you get kidnapped? Was this a first contact mission?”

“No, it wasn’t, which is the really annoying part,” Jill says. “We’d made what was supposed to be a routine stop for our social scientists to check in with the local population, they were doing a series of interviews with a few family groups. Well, while we were there someone mistook me for someone else—the prime minister’s niece—and decided to kidnap me for political leverage over said PM. Long story short, I escaped, but I had to jump to the ground from the room they’d kept me in. I landed badly and broke my fibula. Ended up crawling to what little shelter I could find and that’s where Evan found me a couple hours later, along with Amir and a couple other crew. Amir set the bone—handy skill to have—and beamed back up to the ship with me, where they did what they could, gave me this ever-so-stylish cast, and yelled at me when I insisted on going back down to meet with the PM about some political instability issues he probably wanted to be aware of.”

Jim shakes his head. “How far did you have to crawl with a broken leg?”

“I didn’t measure it,” Jill says. “It took a while, though. The problem was Evan didn’t know I’d disappeared because he thought I’d just gone to meet with some of the government, and it wasn’t until I missed our check-in time that anyone knew I wasn’t where I should have been. The asshole who kidnapped me did in fact steal my communicator—I got it back later—so I didn’t have a way to contact anyone and let them know where I was, assuming I could have told anyone. My sense of direction isn’t perfect and being stuffed in a bag screwed with it more.”

“Okay, but how did they get the drop on you?” Jim asks. “You’re kind of deadly.”

Jill makes a face. “I’m also short,” she says. “And when someone about Khan’s height grabs you and throws you over his shoulder and someone else thumps you on the head, you don’t have much
of a chance to use unarmed combat skills and get away. By the time I came to, I was in a bag, and my knife didn’t cut the fabric, some kind of reinforced material.”

“Bad luck all around,” Jim says. “I’m glad you’re all right, mostly.”

“Mostly, yeah,” Jill says. “Damn thing hurts like a bitch, but there’s not much I can do about it. They gave me painkillers, I’m refusing to take them because they make me stoned and that’s all I need.”

“I thought they weren’t supposed to do that anymore,” Jim says.

“Supposedly,” Jill says. “I don’t buy it. The last time I actually took what they gave me I spent two hours giggling at shadows. Of course, I hadn’t slept in three days, so there might have been some punch-drunk things going on too, but I’m still avoiding painkillers if I can help it. Evan lectures me which is why I’m escaping him.” She looks at her watch. “I figure I’ve got about half an hour before he tracks me down.”

“Which is about how long I’ve got before I have to deal with stuff,” Jim says. Specifically, reserving a gym for Ekaterina and Khan to spar and checking in on the phaser tests he possibly shouldn’t know about. Then he has actual work to deal with, but that’s less important.


“No, that’s paperwork,” Jim says and makes her laugh.

“Stuff, paperwork, broken legs, all in a day’s work,” she says, taking a drink of coffee. “We’re on downtime until I’m healed enough we can head out again, which really sucks, let me tell you.”

“Did anyone else get injured?” Jim asks.

“No, not really,” Jill says. “For which I’m grateful, I’d rather get hurt myself than have my crew get beaten up.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jim says. “Although I doubt Evan agrees with your philosophy.”

“Mm, no, he pretty much hates it,” Jill says cheerfully. “But I can’t imagine Khan would be all that sanguine about you getting injured either.”

“So far he’s the one who’s gotten hurt,” Jim says.

“So far,” Jill says. “How long do you think that streak will last once you ship out for five years?”

Jim winces. “No idea.”

“I’ll give you a hint, probably not long,” Jill says. “You’re like me, you find trouble.”

“Not on purpose,” Jim protests.

“Well, of course not,” Jill says. “But it happens anyway. That’s half the fun of it.” She grins and shrugs. “I love it. I mean, I could do without the broken leg, but boring, routine missions are boring. Give me some excitement.”

“Just so long as I don’t lose crew,” Jim says, but he kind of agrees with her.

“Obviously,” Jill says, rolling her eyes. “Do you know Jacobs? Aaron Jacobs? He’s another one like us. Talk about hotshot, but he gets his people home in one piece.”
“I’ve met him a couple times but that’s about it,” Jim says. “Doesn’t he go by Jake?”

“Yeah, he does,” Jill says. “Maybe there’s something in J names and adrenaline junkies, I don’t know. He’s shipped out at the moment, though, but when he gets back the three of us should go out if we’re both here. I think he’s got a few augments on his ship, too. In fact, I know he does. I just can’t remember which ones.”

Jim shakes his head. “I don’t know, I didn’t memorize all their assignments. I know about half of them got reassigned to HQ or R&D for various projects, though.”

“Yeah, they tried to take Amir and I fought them,” Jill says. “He stays on my ship.”

Jim laughs. “Khan and Ekaterina are both working on projects at HQ at the moment, but I’ve been promised I’ll get them back before we ship out. Katsuro, too. Bishop’s the only one I have left who’s still working on the ship, and I don’t even know what he’s doing these days.”

“Couldn’t say,” Jill says. “Oh, not speaking of anything but adrenaline junkies, Evan and I are going cliff diving next time we get a few days free. You want in?”

“Tempting, but I’m not sure I’d be good at it,” Jim says, his wings shifting a little. “Where are you going, though?”

“Spain, we think,” Jill says. “You could come along anyway, just spend a couple days in the sun. When’s the last time you had a break?”

“Uh,” Jim says. “A while ago?”

“All work and no play makes Jim a burned out captain,” Jill says, grinning. “Seriously, think about it. I’m sure that between you and me, we can arrange for a few days of downtime together. My crew’s due for some leave anyway, I need to finish healing this damn leg, so maybe...mm, ten days from now? Four days on the coast of Spain?”

“God, that’s tempting,” Jim says. “I’ll see. I have to, um, talk to Khan and see if he can get the time, too.”

“Of course,” Jill says immediately. “I figured it’d be the four of us.”

“Four of us doing what?” Evan asks, walking over to their table.

“Cliff diving, Spain,” Jill says. “I wasn’t expecting you yet. Here to lecture me?”

“No, here to stand over you until you take these,” Evan says, setting a pair of pills down on the table. Jill scowls. “Don’t want to.”

“Only one’s a painkiller and the doctor swears it won’t make you silly,” Evan says. “The other one speeds up healing.”

“Which is which?” Jill asks.

Evan grins. “That would be telling.”

“I hate you,” Jill mutters, but she takes the pills with a swallow of coffee. “Okay, captain, I need to go put my leg up before it falls off. Let me know about Spain, would you?”

“I will,” Jim says, getting up when she does. Despite the cast and the cane, she moves almost as fast
as normal, and he has to hurry to keep up. He says goodbye to her and Evan when they go one way and he goes the other, and spends the walk to the gyms wondering about Spain and whether it’s possible to go cliff diving with wings.

No one bats an eye when he reserves one of the private gyms for the evening, and about five minutes after he walked in, he heads out for the science labs. He finds Katsuro easily enough, working on one of the computers with an open link next to him. “Am I interrupting?” he asks, slipping into the room.

“Captain,” Katsuro says, looking up. “No, not at all. I am waiting to hear results on the current round of tests. The last round was more promising than we had hoped for.”

As if on cue, the link chirps. “Transmitting data to you now,” Spock says. “Khan and Matthew are getting a closer look at the target. There is substantial debris, so our sensors are of limited use at the moment.”

“Data received,” Katsuro says, looking at the computer. “Were there any problems with the test?”

“More debris than we expected,” Spock says. “We are not certain if that was a problem with the target or due to phaser damage.”

“Possibly both,” Katsuro says.

“Indeed,” Spock says. “One moment.” Jim hears voices but can’t quite make out words. “Matthew is returning to the shuttle. He was hit by a piece of debris and sustained minor injuries. Khan is analyzing the target.”

“Define minor injuries, please,” Katsuro says before Jim gets a chance.

“I will do so once I find out what Matthew meant by it,” Spock says. “He did not specify.”

Katsuro looks mildly annoyed, which amuses Jim because the man rarely shows visible emotion. “How long until he returns to the shuttle?” Katsuro asks.

“Perhaps three minutes,” Spock says. “He did assure me he was capable of returning under his own power.”

“That’s only somewhat reassuring,” Jim mutters. Either Spock doesn’t hear him or doesn’t think the comment’s worth acknowledging, because he says nothing.

Katsuro and Spock discuss data Jim doesn’t understand for a few minutes and then Spock says they’re sealing the back to let Matthew in and he’ll report back in a moment. Jim tries to settle his wings without much luck and wishes Khan wasn’t still out in the middle of the debris field. Katsuro looks up at him, clearly considering something, but doesn’t speak before Spock returns to the call.

“Matthew says he fractured his forearm and sustained some bruising,” Spock says. “The bone did not need setting and the pressure of the suit should help support it until he heals.”

“Bloody buggering debris,” Matthew says in the background. “Next time, let’s build a target that doesn’t fucking disintegrate, aye? Khan and I think that’s where we went wrong—the target just wasn’t strong enough to hold against the phaser fire, even with the buggering shields we put on it. That’s what we need to develop next, personal fucking shields so the next time someone has the bright idea to fly into a debris field they might survive intact.”

“What else did you break?” Katsuro asks.
“I don’t know. A couple ribs, maybe, or they could just be bruised, it’s hard to tell and I’m not getting out of this fucking suit anytime soon so by the time I do they’ll all have healed anyway. Khan shouldn’t be out there, there’s too much damn debris floating around and he’s going to have a hard time making it back to the shuttle without something hitting him. I tried to tell him that, but when has anyone ever been able to change his mind?” Matthew sounds grumpy, unusual for him but Jim figures he’s in pain and annoyed about having gotten hurt.


“Yeah, true,” he says. “Anyway, enough of me being pissed about getting smacked into by our target. The good news is the phasers are bloody effective. Operating at ninety percent of capacity and that was still enough to demolish the target on our second pass.”

“Khan reports he is finished scanning the target and heading back to the shuttle,” Spock reports. “Once he is aboard we will return to Earth.”

“Acknowledged,” Katsuro says. “Call me if anything happens.”

“I will do so,” Spock says and they hang up.

“What did you say to Matthew?” Jim asks curiously.

Katsuro looks up at Jim and smiles briefly. “That you could possibly change his mind, but you have methods we do not.”

Jim kind of wishes he hadn’t asked. “Yeah, I don’t know how likely that is,” he says, folding his wings back a little more tightly. “He’s more stubborn than me.”

“He is more stubborn than most of us,” Katsuro says. “A consequence of being the first.”

“He was the first of you?” Jim asks. “I didn’t know that.”

“By about eight months,” Katsuro says. “They wanted to confirm success before continuing with the other pregnancies. We are all within about a year or two of each other, but Khan is the oldest, and the first successful genetically engineered human created from in vitro. It was not always a comfortable weight to carry.”

“Still isn’t,” Jim says. He hesitates; he has things to do, people to talk to, but he pulls out a chair and straddles it, curious what else Katsuro can tell him. “Where did you fall, age-wise?”

“I am a year younger than Khan, slightly older than Matthew,” Katsuro says. “Ekaterina and I were born within a few days of each other.” He smiles a little, again surprising Jim. “Konstantin was the next oldest, after Khan, and as children, the five of us--myself, Khan, Ekaterina, Konstantin, and Bishop--were inseparable. We idolized Khan, truth be told, and we would have followed him anywhere. He knew of this, of course, and was always very conscious of being a good older brother to us, the right kind of role model for us to follow.”

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on a kid,” Jim says hesitantly.

“It is,” Katsuro says. “But none of us were ever truly children, captain. There were always rules, tests--so many tests--more things to learn. Every game we played was designed to teach us something, and we had very little actual free time. We grew up knowing we were superior, knowing we had been created for a purpose and if any of us failed along the way, there would be no second chances. Almost forty of us died along the way.”
“I know,” Jim says. “Khan mentioned it.”

“We believed in what we did,” Katsuro says quietly. “It was what we had been taught, what had been ingrained in us since we were born. Were we right? History says not. But history is written by the victors, and we lost. We were given the choice to leave in cryosleep, for a future we might never see, or to die in a manner of our choosing. We took our chances on the future. And now here we are, with a third of us gone and the rest of us still finding our way.”

“At least you have each other,” Jim says. He licks dry lips. “Khan didn’t have any of you, that year he spent in London.”

“I know,” Katsuro says. “And nothing any of us ever do will make up for that time, much as I wish it could be otherwise.” His comm-link chirps, and he gives Jim an apologetic look before answering it.

“Slight change in plans,” Matthew says. “I’m being forced to go to Medical so they can look me over and proclaim I’m fine, and I’m dragging Khan with me because he got hit on the head by debris and banged up a wing. He says he’s fine, but fuck if I know what wing healing is supposed to look like, so I want him to get checked out. Do we have any bird doctors at Medical?”

“Bones has patched me up a couple times,” Jim says. “Probably the best you’re going to get.”

“He’ll do,” Matthew says. “Also—no, I am not relaying that, because you’re not fine, that blow knocked you out cold for at least ten seconds, I saw it myself. I told you to get back on the bloody shuttle, so shut up, I’m not listening to you bitch. Spock, would you nerve pinch him or something?”

Jim rubs his hands over his face, trying not to laugh. “Anyway,” Matthew says. “We’re headed to Medical, can you meet us there?”

“I can,” Katsuro says. “Do you need me to call Dr. McCoy?”

“No, Spock’s done it,” Matthew says. “So now the doctor is bitching that he’s a doctor, not a bird specialist. Jesus bloody Christ, I’m surrounded by grumpy assholes.”

“Of which you are one of the grumpiest,” Katsuro says.

“Yeah, but at least I admit when I’m being an asshole,” Matthew says. “Seriously. Personal shields. Next project, aye?”

“Perhaps,” Katsuro says. “I will meet you at Medical.”

“If we survive until then, yeah,” Matthew says. “Later.” He hangs up.

Katsuro rises to his feet smoothly and puts away his link. “Are you coming to Medical?” he asks.

“Depends,” Jim says. “Is he going to be pissed at me for being there?”

“His bark is worse than his bite,” Katsuro says, which doesn’t really answer the question but Jim sighs and decides to go with him to Medical.

“Clearly you’ve never been bitten by him,” he says under his breath, and Katsuro chuckles.

They beat the others to Medical, getting there to find Bones and another doctor waiting as well.

“Maeve’s in the ER, she’ll come if we need her,” Bones says before Jim can ask. “It didn’t sound serious enough for us to need to call in anyone else.”

“It probably is not,” Katsuro says. “If we are fortunate, they will both be healed by the time they
“I can only hope,” Bones says.

Katsuro looks up, as though he hears or sees something the others don’t. “Here they come,” he says.

Jim gets a glimpse of them and thinks Bones isn’t going to be quite that lucky. Matthew has one arm cradled against his chest, and as he gets closer Jim can see he’s limping a little, favoring his left side. Khan looks fairly normal except for his right wing, which hangs a bit awkwardly around him, and the bruise on his right temple. Jim winces, seeing that. Spock looks fine, although Jim can’t tell if he’s amused or annoyed.

“Him first,” Khan and Matthew say in unison and Bones snorts.

“Which of you is more broken?”

“Depends on how you define the word,” Matthew says. “I’m all right, it’s mostly my arm and my ribs and they’re all healing, I can feel it. The bruising’s just going to take a while to fade.”

“I have no broken bones,” Khan says.

“No, just a head injury you’re still healing and a damaged wing,” Matthew says. “Also, don’t think I didn’t notice this.” He snaps his fingers a couple times next to Khan’s right ear until Khan irritably swats his hand away. “But you didn’t hear it, did you?”

“Hearing loss?” Bones asks sharply.

“Temporary,” Khan says, sounding more than a little annoyed. “It will heal about the same rate as the bruises.”

“You go with him,” Bones says, pointing to Matthew and the other doctor. “You, with me.”

Jim figures in for a penny and follows Bones and Khan to the exam room. Bones doesn’t look surprised to see him; Khan still looks annoyed. “What did you do to your wing?” Bones asks, picking up a device to scan it.

“I think I cracked a bone,” Khan says. “It will heal, but experience has taught me that injuries to the wings take longer. Just--” He hisses in a breath and steps away from Bones. “Whatever that was, do not do it again.”

“It doesn’t look like you tore any major blood vessels, or any muscles,” Bones says. “But I think you’re right, you did crack a bone, maybe two. I’m having a hard time getting an accurate reading.”

“I have done it before,” Khan says. “I know what it feels like.”

“When did you do that?” Jim asks before he can stop himself.

“The first time I flew I landed badly,” Khan says. “And there were a few occasions in battle where someone targeted my wings. I told you, I have broken nearly every bone in my body at one point or another.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think that included your wings,” Jim says. “How’s your head?”

“Tolerable,” Khan says.

“Any blurred vision, double vision, anything like that?” Bones asks.
“Not anymore,” Khan says. “I had some double vision shortly after I collided with the debris.”

“Did you pass out?” Bones asks.

“Matthew says I did,” Khan says after a moment. “So in all likelihood I was unconscious for a few seconds. The concussion is healing, though. The worst of it is the wing and the hearing loss, and both of those will heal.”

Bones scowls at him and scans him with another piece of equipment. “Take the rest of the day off,” he says. “I don’t care how quickly you heal, head injuries are nothing to screw with. And I’m telling Spock I told you to take the day.” He looks at Jim. “Don’t let him go anywhere. I’ll be right back.” He leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

Jim’s own wings fold around him and he doesn’t bother to force them back. “You okay?” he asks after a long moment.

“I will be,” Khan says, which isn’t quite what Jim wanted to hear.

“How much pain are you in?” Jim asks.

“Do yourself a favor, Jim,” Khan says. “Never break a bone in your wings if you can help it.”

Jim winces. “Yeah, I’ve avoided that one so far. Strained some muscles, but I’ve never broken a wing bone. And on top of the head injury...once Bones clears you to leave, I’ll take you home.”

“You have duties to attend to, and I am perfectly capable of getting myself to the apartment,” Khan says. He touches his right ear and grimaces.

“Hearing coming back?” Jim asks.

“Slowly,” Khan says. “At the moment it is ringing, which I know is a good sign, but still irritating.”

“Khan, is anything not irritating at the moment?” Jim asks.

That earns him a faint smile. “No.”

“Even me?” Jim grins.

“You should not be here in the first place,” Khan says, giving him a mock-glare. “I begin to see what Captain Kane meant about Evan’s hovering driving her mad.”

“I’m not hovering,” Jim protests, laughing. “I’m just making sure you’re all right.”

“Yes, I am sure that is what Evan says too,” Khan says. “Speaking of, how is the captain?”

“She has a broken leg and isn’t happy about it,” Jim says. “Bone regen doesn’t work properly on her so she’s got a bit longer with a cast. But she invited both of us to go to Spain with her and Evan in a couple weeks for some downtime. They want to go cliff diving. I’m not sure you can cliff dive with wings but Spain sounds like fun. You want to go?”

Khan blinks. “She did what?” he asks.

Jim laughs again. “You heard me. I know one of your ears is working fine.”

“I... do not know if I can arrange the time off,” Khan says slowly. “You would want to go?”
“I think I kind of do, actually,” Jim admits. “I mean, the cliff diving is a bit out there, but then again these are the people who went rock climbing on their honeymoon. But it could be fun, and I like Jill. She’s...honestly, she’s kind of a lot like me.”

“I had noticed,” Khan says. “Didn’t she also break her back on her honeymoon?”

“Two days out from the end of it, yeah,” Jim says. “It wasn’t her fault, though. There was a fault in her equipment and it gave way at the wrong moment, and she landed wrong. She spent a few days paralyzed from the shoulders down, but they fixed it.”

“And she just broke her leg on a mission,” Khan says. “Jim, I am not sure you and her being in the same place for any kind of athletic activity is a wise idea. It might cause a planet-wide incident.”

“Hey, I haven’t been injured lately at all,” Jim protests.

“Do you really want to risk breaking that streak?” Khan asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Okay, point one—you’re the one who’s gotten injured twice now,” Jim says, smiling in spite of himself because he has to admit this is pretty damn funny, and he can tell Khan’s amused as well. “Point two, I can swim. Point three, a few days on the coast of Spain with warm temperatures and minimal clothing and oh hey, Bones, nice to see you again.”

“I don’t even want to know,” Bones says, looking between them. “Really, I don’t. Go away. Go home. Get some rest. If your symptoms worsen, come back or call me. Do you want painkillers for the wing?”

Khan shakes his head. “No, thank you, doctor.”

“Yeah, I thought you’d say that,” Bones says and gets him with a hypospray. Khan looks absolutely furious for about three seconds before he closes his eyes, hands fisting at his sides. “Jim, take him home, he’s going to be useless in about ten minutes.”

“What the hell did you give him?” Jim asks, moving to take Khan’s arm and steer him out of the room. Khan appears to be moving on auto-pilot.

“A pain medication Maeve and Anandi cooked up,” Bones says. “He’ll metabolize it in a few hours, by which point he should be mostly healed.”

“Anandi? Are you sure you didn’t just poison him?” Jim asks.

“Eh, he’d shake that off,” Bones says. “Besides, he’s no good to you dead.”

“He is right here,” Khan murmurs but he sounds off.

“Yes, and we’re going home now,” Jim says, keeping a grip on his arm. “Did you do this to Matthew, too?”

“Oh, yeah,” Bones says. “Then I had Katsuro and Spock take him home.”

“You know, you’re not supposed to take so much joy in drugging your patients,” Jim says as they make their way outside.

Bones smiles peacefully. “I get my amusement where I can find it.”

Jim snorts. “Thanks.”
By the time he gets Khan back to the apartment the man’s barely conscious. Jim nudges him toward the bed and tries not to laugh when Khan literally falls onto the mattress, landing on his stomach with his right wing hanging over the side. Jim doesn’t want to move him in case it jars his wing or his head, but he does take off Khan’s boots and shove the pillow more under his head. “I really need a few of whatever was in that hypo,” he says to himself, way more amused than he should be.

He decides to leave Khan to sleep off the drugs and settles on his couch with a PADD, dealing with his own workload. It takes him a solid three hours to cut through a lot of red tape and paperwork, and another solid hour and a short call with Pike to arrange a week of downtime for both himself and most of his crew, even the ones not currently working on his ship, but he gets it done and tosses both PADD and comm-link down, feeling well pleased with himself.

Then he hears a soft groan from the bed and gets up, hurrying over to it. “Hey,” he says softly, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking Khan’s hand in his. “Hey, it’s okay, you’re safe.”

“No,” Khan mumbles, frowning about something. “Where are they?”

“They’re safe,” Jim says, not sure he wants to know what Khan’s dreaming about. “You’re safe. It’s okay.” He touches Khan’s wrist, the way he saw Khan do for Ekaterina.

“Where are they?” Khan asks again, sounding almost panicked.

“Khan, wake up,” Jim says, trying a different tactic. “You’re having a nightmare. Wake up.” He speaks a little more loudly, grips his wrist a little more firmly. “You’re safe. Wake up.”

Khan shudders and gasps and blinks his eyes open, but his pulse is way too fast and his skin feels way too cool. “It’s okay,” Jim says, not ready to let go of him yet. “You’re okay.”

“I sincerely hope you can find a new chief medical officer,” Khan says after a few moments. “Because I am going to murder your current one.”

“No, you’re not,” Jim says. “You just had a nightmare, it happens.”

“Which I would not have had if he hadn’t drugged me,” Khan says, raising his head from the pillow enough to glare at Jim before he drops it.

“He did it to Matthew, too,” Jim says.

“Because that makes it better?” Khan scowls and slowly pushes himself to sitting. “At least the headache is gone, I suppose that counts for something.”

“Your wing looks better, too,” Jim says.

“It is better,” Khan says, folding his wings back. “Still, he had no right to drug me or Matthew.”

“You’re still not allowed to kill him,” Jim says. “I need him alive.” He considers that for a moment. “You’re not allowed to hurt him, either. No injuring Bones.”

“Then I suggest you speak with him about unwanted medications,” Khan says.

“He does it to me, too,” Jim says, remembering more than a few unwanted hypos.

Khan mutters something not in English. “Did you reserve a gym for the evening?” he asks, changing the subject. “I find myself in need of a good spar.”

“I did, but are you--never mind,” Jim says.
“I am healed,” Khan says. “No thanks to Leonard.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want you to end up broken again and go through this a second time today,” Jim says. “Amusing as it was to watch you pass out.”

If looks could kill...Jim smiles back. “Anyway, I have news,” he says. “I finagled a week’s worth of downtime for you, me, and pretty much everyone else in my crew, even if they’re not on the ship at the moment. Starts in two weeks. We’ll get another week shortly before we ship out. Still want to go to Spain?”

Khan blinks. “I suppose,” he says. “I have never tried cliff diving before.”

“No, neither have I, and I’m still dubious about how it works with wings, but hey, a few days on the coast in the sun, what could go wrong?” Jim asks. “I’ll message Jill and let her know we’re in.” A thought occurs to him and he tilts his head, looking at Khan. “When’s the last time you had an actual vacation? Have you ever had one?”

“Not as such, no,” Khan says.

Jim shakes his head. “I’m not surprised and yet it’s still wrong.”

“Please, enlighten me as to when I was supposed to take holiday,” Khan says. “Before or after I conquered a quarter of the planet?”

“I’d say in about two weeks,” Jim says, not rising to the bait. He gets up, going to grab his PADD and send Jill a quick message. While he’s doing that, someone knocks on his door. “Could you get that?” he asks.

Khan pushes up from the bed and walks over to the door, opening it. “Cat,” he says, letting her in. “What are you doing here?”

She stalks into the apartment, clearly agitated, and answers him in Russian, speaking quickly and gesturing with sharp movements of her hands and arms. Khan listens, letting her talk, and when she throws up her arms in exasperation he moves to grasp her shoulders, facing her. She shudders and slumps in on herself, bowing her head. “Easy,” Khan says softly, folding his wings around her, holding her close. “It is all right, Cat.”

“What happened?” Jim asks quietly.

“I hurt Shura,” Ekaterina says dully.

“Alex did something that reminded her of Konstantin, and she reacted badly,” Khan explains. “She broke his arm.”

Jim winces. “Is he all right?”

“He says he is,” Ekaterina says, resting her forehead against Khan’s shoulder. “He says it is not my fault, that accidents happen and given what we do, it was likely he was going to get hurt at some point. He says his arm will be fine by tomorrow or the day after, and next time he knows not to call me Katya.”

“Konstantin was the only person who ever called her that,” Khan tells Jim.

“Right,” Jim says, wincing again.
Ekaterina sighs and moves to pull away from Khan, but he doesn’t let her go. “This isn’t your fault,” he says.

“I broke his arm,” she says. “How is that not my fault?”

“You had an understandably strong reaction to an emotional trigger he didn’t know about,” Khan says. “A broken arm is a fairly minor injury these days. You did not kill him, you did not cause him permanent damage, he is fine and he does not blame you.”

“So many minefields in my head,” Ekaterina murmurs. “I do not even know half of them until I trip over a mine.”

“I know the feeling,” Khan says, and she huffs out a laugh.

“So broken, we are,” she says and sighs. “Spar with me? I need to fight someone who won’t hold back against me.”

“Jim reserved a gym for us,” Khan says.

“Beautiful,” Ekaterina says. “Should he also call the good doctor in case I break you or you me?”

Khan growls low in his throat and says something in Russian Jim doesn’t need translated. Ekaterina snickers, though, and reaches up to pat his cheek. “Would that I could have seen that,” she says.

At that, Khan does step back, pushing her away. “No,” he says. “You know how I feel about it, Cat.”

“Da, I do,” she says. “And yes, had I been in your shoes I would feel similarly. But I had my share of pain medication forced upon me.”

“You also almost died,” Khan says. “I only had a mild headache and a cracked bone.”

“On your wing, which I know hurts more than you admit,” Ekaterina says. “So. Sparring, yes? You can pretend I am Dr. McCoy.”

Jim snorts. “I’d rather he didn’t kill you,” he says.

“He won’t,” Ekaterina says. “When do we have the gym?”

“Ah–now, actually,” Jim says, glancing at the chrono. “It’s ours until close, I didn’t know how long you would need.”

“Not that long,” Ekaterina says. “But it is good to have the time. Shall we?”

Jim considers grabbing his small medkit, decides against it, and rethinks that decision all the way to the gym, where he punches in the code to let them into the room. Since he hadn’t requested any special equipment, they walk into a fairly bare room, mats stacked against one wall and spread out over the floor. Both Khan and Ekaterina move to take off their boots and set down spare clothes, and Jim leans against some of the stacked mats, watching them move into the center of the room and settle, facing each other. Khan holds up one finger and Ekaterina throws a knife at him, aiming for his forehead if Jim’s any judge, but he catches it neatly.

“Ready?” she asks him.

He smiles. “Are you?”
Ekaterina laughs. “Are we wagering?”

“No, Khan says. “Besides, you still owe me halva.””

“I do,” she says. “And Jim owes us dinner.”

“If you don’t kill each other,” Jim says warily. “Do I count time?”

“No, but tell us when to start,” Khan says.

Jim looks at the chrono on the wall. “Three, two, one, go!” he says and Ekaterina immediately runs for Khan, twisting to kick him in the solar plexus with both feet, or would have if he hadn’t ducked out of the way. She flips backward and lands easily, spinning into another kick that connects with his shoulder. Meanwhile, he gets a slice down the sleeve of her shirt and a punch to her stomach that makes her stumble back a step.

Previously, Jim thought he knew what it was like to watch them fight. Now he realizes that for all the times he’s watched them spar, all the times he’s seen them, they’ve still been holding back. They’re not anymore. Ekaterina spits out blood when a punch connects with her jaw and Khan’s arm still bleeds from a cut she scored while slicing off the sleeve of his shirt, and both of them have bruises appearing where skin shows through the tattered remains of their clothes.

Jim takes an involuntary step forward when a knife lands in Khan’s shoulder, but Khan snarls and yanks it out, throwing it across the room where it lands in the wall and seemingly not caring that he’s bleeding in multiple places. His next kick sweeps Ekaterina’s legs out from under her, but she grabs him as she goes down and they land on the mats together. By this point they’re both showing more skin than clothes and the mats get smeared with red from their blood as they wrestle, until Ekaterina slams her head back into Khan’s face and jumps to her feet when he lets go. Khan throws his knife at her and she slaps it away, but not before it slices her hand open.

When the end comes, Jim doesn’t expect it and he doesn’t think either of them do, either. But one kick in the wrong place and Ekaterina cries out, dropping to the mats and curling up around her left leg. “Cat,” Khan says immediately, breathing hard and smeared liberally with blood. “Cat, are you all right?” He drops to his knees next to her, reaching out but not quite touching her.

“My knee,” she says through gritted teeth. She curses in Russian, sucking in a breath. “This is going to hurt.”

“Dislocated?” Khan asks.


Jim can’t see what they do but it’s enough to make Ekaterina cry out again, almost a scream. “Stay there,” Khan says, still kneeling next to her. “Give it some time.”

She growls and punches him in the shoulder. “We aren’t done yet,” she says, and Jim blinks.

“I think we are,” Khan says.

A moment later he gets knocked onto his back as she pounces on him, her hands around his throat. “I could snap your neck,” she says, and Jim gets the uneasy feeling she’s not kidding.

“Would you kill me, Cat?” Khan asks, his voice slightly hoarse from the pressure she’s putting on his windpipe.
For a long moment, she doesn’t answer. “No,” she says finally, letting go of him and rolling onto her back next to him. “But I could have.”

“I know,” Khan says, rubbing at his throat. “Feeling better?”

“Yes,” she says. “You?”

“Yes,” he says.

Both of them lie there on the blood-smeared mats, wearing little more than scraps of fabric and covered in bruises and healing cuts. “Did I break your nose?” Ekaterina asks after a moment.

Khan touches it. “No, just bloodied it,” he says. “I do think you cracked a few ribs.”

“You did the same to me,” Ekaterina says. She sighs and closes her eyes. “Jim, did you see what you wanted to?”

“I’m not sure what I wanted to see but you two kind of terrify me,” Jim says.

Ekaterina laughs. “This is not the worst spar we have ever had,” she says. “Although it was satisfying, and now I am not moving until my ribs hurt less and my knee stops throbbing.”

“I could carry you back to the apartment building,” Khan says.

“No,” she says. “We have time. Besides, I would need to put on new clothes first, as I am currently wearing a sleeve and half a leg of pants.”

“You could start a new fashion trend,” Jim says.

“Half naked woman covered in blood and bruises? I think that fashion trend existed long before I was ever created,” Ekaterina says. “And not in a good way.”

“Okay, point,” Jim says, wincing.

For a while longer, Khan and Ekaterina lie there quietly, until eventually Khan rolls to his feet and walks over to where he left his spare clothes and a bottle of water. He dampens the remains of his shirt with the water, wiping off as much of the blood as he can, before he pulls on the new clothes and his boots. “You’re going to need a shower,” Jim says honestly, looking at him. “How are the ribs and your shoulder and whatever else she broke?”

“Healing,” Khan says. “ Mostly healed in some cases. Cat’s knee was the worst of it.”

“It is better now,” Ekaterina says, getting to her feet. Jim watches as she walks over to them, but she doesn’t limp and he doesn’t see any swelling. She pulls off the sleeve of her shirt that survived and dampens it with water, wiping blood off her skin before she gets dressed again. “But I too need a shower.”

“Let’s get back to the building and you can both shower,” Jim says. “And I’ll make dinner.”

“Let me just get my knives,” Ekaterina says.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Two days til shore leave.

Chapter Notes

I thought this chapter would never end. Eight thousand words later, here we are. Hope you don't mind the longer chapters.

Also, over 15,000 hits and almost 300 kudos, you guys are the best. I seriously do not know what I did to deserve such awesome readers and what an awesome audience for this incredibly self-indulgent fic, but thank you all so so much—even if you just lurk and read, know that I appreciate you for reading! I really do get a dorky grin every time I get a comment email, and I try to respond to everyone who does comment because that’s just manners, right? Thank you guys so much for sticking with me through this insanely long madness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two days til shore leave and all anyone can talk about is what they’re doing, where they’re going. Spock and Uhura have plans to go see some of Uhura’s family, which makes Uhura smile and Spock look mildly discomfited whenever someone asks him about it. Jim wonders if he’s met her family before but never remembers to ask when no one else happens to be around. Bones and Maeve, to Jim’s surprise, are heading to Ireland. “She wants to go back, see what’s become of it since she was there originally,” Bones says over lunch. “We might go to England, too, since she spent a while there.”

Jim nods, taking a bite of his sandwich. “I saw you approved her request for transfer to the Enterprise,” he says after swallowing. “I just signed off on it this morning.”

“Thanks,” Bones says. “Yeah, we talked about that a bunch before she put in for the transfer. We know we can work together, that’s not a problem, and...” He grins crookedly and shrugs. “Didn’t really want to ship out for five years without her around.”

“This isn’t a bad thing, Bones,” Jim says, smiling back. “I like her. It’s going to be weird shipping out without some of the others I’ve gotten used to seeing regularly, like Alona and Matthew. I wonder if we could get them assigned as crew before we leave.”

“Probably, if they want to be assigned as crew,” Bones says. “Their credit’s actually fairly high with Starfleet brass at the moment. I don’t know all the details, classified projects, but apparently they’ve come up with a couple of new ideas that have folks very, very pleased.”

Jim nods. “Yeah, I know,” he says. “Khan’s working on one, Ekaterina on another. Alona’s with Ekaterina, Matthew’s with Khan. I’ll mention it to them and see what they think. I’m just not sure what they’d do on the ship. Matthew we could assign to science division, advanced weapons
specialist, but Alona is a bit trickier.”


“I’ll ask her,” Jim says. “I mean, they may not want to sign onto the Enterprise, but I’ll ask. I think it’d be good for Cat and Khan, too, if they join up. They tend to do better when there are more of them around. I mean, we’ll have Katsuro and Bishop, but those two kind of keep to themselves, I don’t usually see them hanging out with the others as much.”

“It’ll be different, on the ship,” Bones says. “Are you ready for the gossip?”

“Are you?” Jim counters, knowing that’s not fair. “God, Bones, I don’t know. Most of the senior staff knows we’re--knows--you know what I mean. But I admit part of me’s a little worried about the rest of the crew, what’ll happen when or if they find out what’s going on.”

“Worried enough to break it off?” Bones asks.

“No,” Jim says immediately. “No. That’s not...that’s not an option.”

Bones studies him for a moment. “You’re in love with him, aren’t you?” he asks, and Jim feels a surge of panic that fades slowly when he realizes no one else seems to have noticed them.

“I don’t know,” he says, wings folding around him. “I don’t...that’s not really a word we’re using.”

He rubs his hands over his face. “Are you in love with Maeve?”

Bones looks about as comfortable with that as Jim feels. “Maybe,” he says. “That’s...not something we’ve talked about.”

“Well, I mean, she transferred to the ship, she’s got to feel something for you,” Jim says, feeling a bit easier now that it’s not about him.

“She does,” Bones says. “And I care about her. I want her around. Love is...I tried that once, didn’t go so well.”

“She’s not your ex,” Jim says. “She’s...superior.”

Bones snorts. “Let’s not go there, Jim.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says. “I should get going. I have a couple errands to run, and I’m meeting Jill for coffee later to confirm our plans.”

“I still can’t believe you’re going cliff diving in Spain,” Bones says, shaking his head.

“You know, I’m not sure I can either,” Jim says. “I’m still dubious about the diving part. The Spain part I’m all for.”

“I used to think you were batshit, then I met Jill,” Bones says.

“So what, now I’m sane?” Jim grins.

“No, you’re still batshit, she’s just worse,” Bones says. “Do not break anything. I am not giving up my vacation to put you back together. And I’m not putting anyone else back together either.”

“Even if you get to drug Khan again?” Jim asks.

Bones’s mouth twitches. “Tempting, but no,” he says.
“Probably for the best,” Jim says. “He’s still pissed at you. I made him promise he wouldn’t kill you, though.”

“Did you also make him promise he wouldn’t almost kill me?” Bones asks.

“I told him he wasn’t allowed to hurt you,” Jim says. “I need you alive.”

“Thanks for your concern,” Bones grumps.

“Anytime,” Jim says, smiling brightly. “I’ll catch you later, okay?” He gets up, picking up his tray to bus it.

“Yeah, see you,” Bones says, getting up with his own tray.

Jim finishes his errands a little early and gets to the cafe, ordering a coffee and getting his and Jill’s usual table outside. She gets there about three minutes later, carrying a blue bag over her shoulder and waving at him as she goes inside to get a drink. “God, are we leaving yet?” she asks when she comes back outside, dropping into her seat. “I can’t wait. This is going to be awesome.”

“I’m still dubious about the diving part,” Jim says.

“You’ll love it,” Jill promises, taking a long drink of her coffee. “I promise. Besides, if you think you’ll land badly, just fly away from the water.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Jim says, smiling.

“Isn’t it?” Jill laughs. “Man, I wish I could fly. That would be possibly the best thing ever. I envy you, you know that?”


“Because you can fly,” she says simply. “I don’t think I’d ever want to land if I could fly under my own power. I’ve gone hang-gliding, and skydiving, and it is the most amazing, freeing thing ever, but gravity always wins in the end. To be able to just get into the air and stay there until you get tired...I wish.”

Jim considers what he wants to say next. “I don’t know if I could carry you,” he says slowly. “But Khan could.”

Something bright and eager flashes in Jill’s eyes for a moment before she looks down. “Well, maybe someday, if he wants to,” she says. “I’m not—I’m not asking, I want to make that clear.”

“I know,” Jim says. “It’s okay.”

“Anyway,” Jill says. “Spain and cliff diving and swimming and days in the sun with minimal clothing and soundproofed bedrooms.”

“I like how you threw in that last one,” Jim says, laughing.

“I can be loud,” she says with a grin. “But we’re on the first floor, you and Khan are on the second floor, and both bedrooms have privacy seals and soundproofing. And speaking of.” Jill kicks the blue bag over to him. “Everything you asked for.”

Jim feels his cheeks heat. “I...really appreciate--”

She waves a hand. “Don’t worry about it. Buy me dinner and a few drinks in Spain.”
“That I can do,” Jim says. “Although you’ll have to order, as I don’t speak Spanish. Khan does, though.”

“I speak it, and Evan’s passably fluent,” Jill says. “We’ll get by.”

“Where did you learn it?” Jim asks.

“I spent a year in Spain during high school,” Jill says. “Exchange program. I’ve kept studying since then so I don’t lose it.”


“I did it mostly because the Spain program allowed me to keep studying gymnastics,” Jill says.

“You were a gymnast?” Jim asks.

“I have medals to prove it,” Jill says, grinning. “I started when I was three, competed seriously until I started at the Academy. It’s the one sport—one of very few sports—where being short is an actual advantage.”

“The things I never knew about you,” Jim says, grinning back.

“I’ll demonstrate my tumbling skills another time,” Jill says. “Maybe in Spain.”

“I’d like to see that,” Jim says.

“I’m sure you would, captain,” Jill teases. She takes a swallow of her drink and sets the cup down. “I am also operating on negative time here, have a million things to take care of before we leave day after tomorrow, so I’m going to be rude and run. I’ll see you at the shuttle bay, right?”


“Don’t mention it,” she says, getting up and taking her cup with her. “Call me if anything comes up last minute, so I hope I don’t hear from you until I see you.”

“Likewise,” Jim says, getting up and picking up the blue bag, which surprises him with its weight. He wonders a little uneasily just what Jill put in there, since he hadn’t asked her for much. He slings it over his shoulder and heads for the apartment, hoping he’ll have time before Khan gets back to look through its contents.

When he does get back to his apartment, he finds an email from Khan letting him know he’s running more tests on the shields, trying to get things done before they leave, and might not be back until later in the evening. Khan doesn’t specify what kind of tests he’s running or where those tests are occurring, and Jim glares at the PADD for a moment before tossing it back down on his table. He considers calling Khan to find out more, decides against it, and takes the blue bag over to his bed and dumps out the contents.

“Okay, this is more than I expected,” he says to himself, looking at the items on his bed. “What was she thinking?” He sees a piece of paper and picks it up, hoping for some kind of note.

Jim - I realize you didn’t ask for all this, but you didn’t specify a lot of what you wanted so I had to make some judgment calls. You have four different lengths of rope because one size does not fit all and this way you have some options. It’s all hemp rope, which is softer and stronger than cotton, won’t chafe your skin as much. A couple other things in here should be self-explanatory, and if they’re not, we need to talk. The last item in the bag is in the black box, and I know you didn’t ask
Jim blows out a breath, not sure whether to be amused, a little turned on, or embarrassed at the thought of Jill considering his sex life while buying items for it. To be fair, he had asked her for help, since she can be anonymous and he can’t really, but it’s still a weird thing.

He sits down on the edge of the bed and opens the black box, curious about what’s in it. The contents look ordinary enough, but when he reads the little pamphlet, he grins without even meaning to. This is going to be fun, and if Khan likes it as much as Jim thinks he will--well, he’ll figure out how to pay Jill back another time.

He takes advantage of Khan not being there to pack his bag for Spain, adding some of the items Jill bought him and glad most of them don’t take up much room. What he doesn’t pack he shoves into a dresser drawer to be dealt with later.

Someone knocks on his door and he closes the drawer before going to answer it. “Hey,” he says, letting Ekaterina in. “Looking for Khan? He said he was going to be late tonight.”

“Looking to not be alone at the moment,” Ekaterina says, circling his living area. “I was made an offer today and I do not know what to do with it.”

“What happened?” Jim asks, watching her pace.

She presses her fingertips to her eyes. “I was invited to go to Russia during my week of shore leave.”

“By who?” Jim asks.

“Shura,” she says, lowering her hands. “And, oddly, Pavel. Apparently they know each other, which I did not know, but whatever, that is not important. Pavel is heading home for his shore leave, and invited Shura to go with him for a few days, and then the two of them found me today at lunch and asked me to go with them.”

“Pavel as in Chekov?” Jim asks. “My Chekov?”

“Yes, who else would I be talking about?” Ekaterina gives him an impatient look.

“Okay, point,” Jim says. “Are you going to go?”

“I do not know,” she says, continuing to pace. “It has been so long, and so much has changed, and yet I do not know all of what has changed. I do not know what things are like there, if the places I used to live still exist, if...” She presses her hands to her face again. “I do not know if I can go back without Konstantin,” she says behind her hands. “If I can be there without him.” Ekaterina drops her hands, and Jim sees that her eyes are bright with tears.

Not knowing what else to do, he walks over to her, not quite touching her. “Do you want to go?” he asks carefully.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “I do, but I am afraid of what might happen if I go, if i find the memories to be too much, if...” She sighs. “I loathe being afraid. It is a weakness I despise in myself.”

“No,” Jim says. “No, being afraid isn’t the weakness. Being afraid and going ahead anyway, that’s strength. Being afraid and letting it stop you, that’s the problem.”
“Strength or bravado?” Ekaterina asks.

Jim shrugs. “Sometimes they’re the same.”

“Sometimes,” she agrees, sighing. “I do not wish to hurt Shura, or Pavel, and I...I no longer know if I can trust myself.”

“You made one understandable mistake,” Jim says. “You can’t blame yourself forever for it.”

“Can I not?” Ekaterina asks. She sighs again and steps forward, surprising Jim when she presses her forehead against his shoulder. “But to go back to Russia, to go back to my home...” Her voice is full of longing.

Not knowing what else to do, Jim hugs her, folding his wings around her. “I think you should go,” he says. “If it’s truly unbearable, you can leave and come back to San Francisco, or go to Spain to see us, or...wherever else you want to go. You’re not trapped.”

“No, I suppose not,” she says. “I just...I miss him, and I fear going back to Russia without him will be more than I can bear. How pathetic is that?”

“It’s not,” Jim says quietly. “Not at all. Cat, you’re one of the strongest people I know, but everyone has a breaking point.”

“I do not feel very strong right now,” Ekaterina says. She steps back, and Jim lets her go, folding his wings back. “But I think I will say yes. I may be making a terrible mistake, but...I miss Russia. I would like to see it again.”

“I don’t think you’re making a mistake,” Jim says. “You’re not the only one going back to see what things are like these days. Maeve is too, with Bones, and I think I heard Katsuro and Bishop were going to Japan.”

“Da, they are,” Ekaterina says. “But I think it is different for them. They still have each other.”

“You won’t be going back alone,” Jim points out.

“I know, but...” Ekaterina pushes her hands through her hair, disheveling her ponytail. She scowls and yanks out the band, sending her hair tumbling down. “They are both so young. How can they possibly understand what life was like then? What I did, what I had to do?”

“They can’t if you don’t tell them,” Jim says.

That earns him another scowl, but Jim doesn’t take it personally. Ekaterina starts pacing again, walking a circle around his apartment. “I find I do not want their opinions of me to change because of my past actions,” she says, pushing her hair back. “But at the same time, I think both Shura and Pavel see things in me that simply do not exist. I have no conscience, and yet they think I do. They see me as a better person than I am, and I find it oddly touching. I do not wish to lose their respect, but at the same time...”

“You were--you are--upset over hurting Alex,” Jim says. “You don’t want to hurt them. If you truly didn’t have a conscience, you wouldn’t care. Neither of them are your people, why does it matter?”

“But if it came to it, if I had to pick one of them or one of my family to save, it would not be a choice,” Ekaterina says.

“Maybe not,” Jim says. “But I don’t think you’d get over it quite that easily.”
Ekaterina drops onto his couch. “I am not a good person, Jim,” she says. “I never claimed to be. I never wanted to be.”

Jim sits down next to her. “Khan’s said the same thing to me,” he says. “But I think he—and you, and for all I know the rest of your family—have a much darker opinion of yourselves than might actually be the truth.”

“Or perhaps Starfleet is inherently optimistic, and thinks better of us than is the truth,” Ekaterina says.

“Maybe it’s somewhere in the middle,” Jim says. “You’re also not who you were three hundred years ago.”

“No, that is true,” Ekaterina says, sighing. “But some things will not change no matter how long I live.”

“Maybe not,” Jim says. “But do you know what those things are?”

“Some of them,” she says. “Do you know what is constant about you, what will not change no matter what happens to you?”

“Some of it,” Jim says, smiling a little. “But there are always things you think won’t change and then somehow do.”

“Yes,” Ekaterina says. “I thought I would never meet another winged human. I thought I would be with Konstantin the rest of my life. I thought Khan would never seek out another partner after Rani died.” She tips her head back against the couch. “Two of those are not bad things to change.”

“I suppose not,” Jim says. “Will you—will you tell me about Konstantin?”

Ekaterina closes her eyes for a moment. “He was older than me, by about a year,” she says, looking at the ceiling. “My first memories are of following him around, him and Khan. I was fascinated by Khan’s wings, and Konstantin had dimples when he smiled, and I thought it was beautiful. I tried to make him smile often, so I could see the dimples. And he always had a smile for me, even if it was a bad day.”

“When did you know you loved him?” Jim asks.

“I always did,” Ekaterina says, smiling a little. “I never had a moment of realization, I just grew up knowing I loved him, that he was mine and I was his. I knew I wanted to be with him from the time I was old enough to understand what that meant. So on my fourteenth birthday I crawled into his bed and refused to leave, and he let me stay, and that was that. We were inseparable from then on, and a year later the wars started in truth. I fought harder to make sure he was safe at my side, and he did the same, and we were undefeated.”

“What did he study? What hobbies did he have?”

“He studied everything,” Ekaterina says. “He never settled on one topic the way so many of us did. He loved the social sciences, psychology, philosophy, sociology, things like that. He wasn’t much for applied math or physics, he found it not as interesting as social sciences. He was a brilliant diplomat, able to negotiate for things without losing his patience. Oh, he was so patient. He never lost his patience with me, although I lost mine with him all the time. It used to make him laugh, when I would yell at him and throw things.”

“Was he as good at combat as you?” Jim asks.
She shakes her head. “No, he wasn’t. He was good, of course, because all of us are. But he was more on a level with Bishop. Khan could often best him if they fought. But I saw him as mine to protect, and I fought to become better, to be the best so no one would hurt him. Often people thought he was the threat, as he was bigger than I am—taller than Khan, even, and bigger around in general—so they would challenge him, and I would take on the challenge instead.”

“How many people did you kill for him?” Jim asks curiously.

“Many,” Ekaterina says simply.

“Did he kill for you?” Jim asks.

“Of course,” she says as if surprised he had to ask. “Of all of us, he came the closest to being a good man, but he still killed without remorse when he had to. He and Bishop used to speculate whether conscience could be genetically removed or whether it was a by-product of how we had been raised.”

“What do you think?” Jim asks.

Ekaterina shrugs. “I do not know. I think it is entirely possible the scientists who designed us took that out of our genetic makeup. But are morals inborn or developed? Nature or nurture?”

“You guys didn’t have much nurturing growing up,” Jim says.

“Not as such, no,” Ekaterina says. “We had each other, and that was enough. I used to wish I had wings, so my brother would not have been so alone, but no one ever told us why he had them and we did not.”

“No one’s ever told me why I have them either,” Jim says, his own wings shifting a little as if in response to the conversation.

“That I do not know,” Ekaterina says. “But I am glad you do. I think...I think things would have gone very differently had you not had wings, had Khan not had them.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Jim says, feeling obscurely guilty about that and not knowing why.

“I usually am,” Ekaterina says and Jim laughs.

“Changing the subject a bit, but still sort of about family--how would you feel about working with Alona and Matthew on the Enterprise?” Jim asks. “I thought since you and Khan had been working with them now, and they don’t really have a long-term assignment, and we could find uses for them if they wanted to join the crew, and I know you guys do better when there are more of you around.”

“I would like that,” Ekaterina says slowly, a little surprised. “Will it cause problems?”

“I can’t see why,” Jim says. “I’ll talk to them after we get back from shore leave, find out if they want to sign on.”

“I think they will,” Ekaterina says. “They are not the kind of people to want to stay in one location for too long.”

“Five years on a starship, that’s definitely not staying in one location,” Jim says, smiling.

Ekaterina laughs. “True.” She stretches and gets up off the couch. “What kind of groceries do you have? I will make dinner.”
“I have whatever Khan bought the last time he went to the store, which was a few days ago,” Jim says. “You don’t have to cook for me.”

“I know, but I prefer to cook for more than one,” Ekaterina says, walking toward the kitchen.

“Did Konstantin cook?” Jim asks, following her.

“Sometimes,” Ekaterina says. “He liked to play with fire.” She turns to look at Jim and grins. “He was also very good at making things explode.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Jim says. “Were he and Khan close?”

“Brothers,” Ekaterina says, beginning to rummage in Jim’s fridge and cabinets. “Almost twins. Konstantin was only eight months younger than Khan and the two of them were always very aware of being the oldest ones, the two who acted as older brothers to the rest of us and were our examples of what we could, should be. I think some of our family thought they would become a pair, instead of Konstantin and myself, but they never saw each other that way.”

“Can I ask a question? Why did you choose Konstantin, not Khan?” Jim asks.

Ekaterina drums her fingers on the counter. “I never saw Khan as anything but a brother,” she says. “I loved him always, and always will, but there was never any kind of romantic or sexual chemistry between us. Konstantin, though, was different. He was mine, and I was his.”

“Katsuro mentioned the other day that the five of you were pretty tight as kids,” Jim says. “When did he and Bishop get together?”

“Shortly after Konstantin and I did,” Ekaterina says. “They had a more difficult time of it. Konstantin and I at least were both Russian and we knew we would be together. Katsuro was made for Japan, Bishop for Western Europe, and so they never had much time together once the wars started in earnest. I think they have had more time together since being revived than they did as adults in our original time. I doubt they will allow themselves to be separated again if they can help it.”

“Was it hard for Khan, with the five of you and him being the single one?” Jim asks. Ekaterina seems to have found enough ingredients for what she wants to make, which apparently involves various vegetables, a package of steak, and rice. She puts up a pot of water to boil and begins chopping vegetables.

“Perhaps somewhat,” Ekaterina says, glancing at him. “But he was always used to being somewhat alone, even with his family. He was the oldest, the one with wings, unique among the different. I was so happy for him when he met Rani.”

“But Rani didn’t want him back at first,” Jim says.

Ekaterina shakes her head. “She did,” she says. “But she wanted to protect her family, her people, and so she refused Khan until she made sure they were taken care of, that he would not harm them. She was never afraid he would hurt her, but she didn’t necessarily trust that he would view her people the same way.”

“He said he knew he loved her when she laughed,” Jim says, almost to himself. “But she never told him when she knew she loved him.”

“Possibly when she laughed,” Ekaterina says. “She never told me, either.”

“I wish he’d had more time with her,” Jim admits. “I wish you’d had more time with Konstantin.”
Ekaterina smiles wistfully. “As do I,” she says. “You would have liked them both. Everyone liked Konstantin. My people adored him. He really was too good for our family, in so many ways. Too good for me. I always wondered in part how I could have been so lucky to have him love me as much as I loved him.” She dumps the chopped vegetables in a bowl and begins cubing the steak.

“Because you’re an amazing person,” Jim says. “And I’m sure he recognized that. He had to.”

“Perhaps,” Ekaterina says. “I was scared, the night I came to his bed. I was afraid he would reject me, say we were too young, that I was his sister and not his lover, any number of reasons.”

“What did he say?” Jim asks.

“He didn’t say anything,” Ekaterina says. “He came to bed and before he could say anything, I kissed him, and it took him a moment but then he kissed me back, and we did not talk until after.”

“What did he say after?” Jim asks.

Ekaterina smiles. “I love you, Katya.” She looks down at the steak. “I told him I loved him, too, and he was mine, and if he ever tried to leave me I would kill him. He laughed and promised me he never would, and until we left Earth we never spent another night apart.”

“Never?” Jim asks. “Even with the wars and everything?”

“Never,” Ekaterina says. “We fought together, we ruled together, we stayed together.”


“Is it?” Ekaterina shrugs. “I suppose. I did not want to be separated from him, nor did I want to sleep alone.”

“I can’t blame you for that,” Jim says. “I sleep better when Khan’s here.”

“And I am sure he does as well,” Ekaterina says. She puts the cubed steak in another bowl and begins adding various spices and liquids to a smaller bowl, whisking them together. “I miss not sleeping alone. I miss that more than sex, if you want the honest truth.”

“I believe it,” Jim says. “I wish I could do something about it for you.”

She smiles a little, pausing in what she’s doing to put on the rice and set it to simmer. “Do you always want to fix everything, Jim?” she asks.

“Usually, yeah,” Jim says, feeling a little sheepish.

“Not everything can be fixed,” Ekaterina says. “There is no one I currently want to share a bed with. If you and Khan were not together, I might have asked him to sleep with me—not as a euphemism, just for sleep, obviously. But you are, and I am not a third wheel. I am not yet comfortable with the idea of sharing a bed with Shura. Sometimes I get nightmares, and I do not want to risk hurting him again.”

“What do you dream about?” Jim asks. “When you get nightmares.”

“Losing the wars,” Ekaterina says. “Losing my Konstantin in battle—we came close, more than once, and I was never so scared in my life. I dream that he dies in my arms. I dream of Khan falling out of the sky and dying in front of me, and there is nothing I can do to save either of them.”

“When I get nightmares it’s usually about something going wrong on my ship,” Jim admits. “People
dying, things blowing up, people getting sucked into outer space to die. I always survive, but I have to watch them die.”

Ekaterina pours the marinade over the steak, using her hands to toss the pieces and coat them all. “Life is harder than death,” she says, rinsing her hands clean.

“Yeah, that it is,” Jim says. “Do you believe in life after death?”

“I do,” Ekaterina says. “I have to believe I will see my Konstantin again someday.”

“I hope you do,” Jim says. “But I also hope that doesn’t happen for a while.”

“I have no intention of dying,” Ekaterina says, smiling a little. “Not anytime soon.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Jim says, smiling back.

“If you set the table, dinner will be ready shortly,” Ekaterina says, glancing at the clock.

“Sure,” Jim says, moving to do just that.

Just as they’re finishing dinner, Khan gets back. “Is everything all right?” he asks when he sees Ekaterina.

“Yes,” she says. “At least, I believe so. Are you hungry? We have enough left for you.”

“I would like that,” Khan says. “Tell me what happened?”

“One moment.” Ekaterina gets up to go fix him a plate, returning a moment later with the full plate, a glass of water, and silverware. Khan thanks her and she takes her seat again, gathering her hair back into a ponytail. “Shura and Pavel invited me to go to Russia with them during our shore leave,” she says. “I came by because I needed to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry I was not here,” Khan says, picking up his fork.

“It is all right,” Ekaterina says. “Jim was. We talked, and I think I am going to go. I miss my country, and I want to see what has happened to it in three hundred years. I am still...” She sighs and lapses into Russian, apparently finding words easier if they’re not in English.

Khan answers her in the same language; Jim can only get a couple words but from the tone he thinks Khan’s telling her something similar to what Jim had told her earlier. He gets confirmation of this when Ekaterina smiles and nods. “Jim said much the same,” she says.

“He is intelligent,” Khan says.

“On occasion,” Jim says, smiling.

“More than that,” Ekaterina says. “Do you have ice cream in this apartment? I think I would like some.”

“I don’t know if we do, actually,” Jim says. “But I can run out and get some. What flavor?”

“Something with chocolate,” Ekaterina says. “If I am to be a stereotypical female, I should at least play the part correctly.”

“Cat, you are not a stereotypical anything,” Jim says, making both her and Khan laugh.
“I still want chocolate,” she says.

“Then I’ll go get you some,” Jim says, getting up. “Back in twenty. Khan, do you want anything?”

“No, thank you,” Khan says.

Jim kisses his cheek and goes to get ice cream. He ends up getting whipped cream, chocolate syrup, two kinds of ice cream, and a small jar of maraschino cherries while he’s at it, because why not? It’ll make Cat happy, and although he doesn’t let himself indulge that often, Khan has a pretty big sweet tooth.

He brings everything back to the apartment and sure enough, Ekaterina laughs when she sees the results of his shopping. The three of them make giant sundaes, big enough that Jim feels overly full and a little bloated by the time he cleans his bowl. “Okay, not moving for a while;” he says, slumping a little in his chair.

“I will clean up,” Khan says, gathering empty bowls and spoons and the ice cream containers.

“Thank you for dinner, Cat.”

“Of course,” she says. “Cooking for three is more enjoyable than cooking for one.”

“Generally, yes,” Khan says.

“You’re welcome to cook for me anytime,” Jim says cheerfully.

Ekaterina laughs. “I do not want to wear out my welcome.”

“You can’t,” Jim says. “Family’s always welcome.”

“This is true,” Ekaterina says and something softens in her face. “But even so, I am sure there are nights you and my brother would prefer to be alone.”

“So we’ll kick you out after dinner,” Jim teases.

She laughs again. “Perhaps. We do only have a short while left before I will not be able to cook for you.”

“Yeah, starships aren’t much for kitchens in personal quarters,” Jim says.

“Well, maybe I can bother the cooks in the mess once in a while,” Ekaterina says.

“Probably,” Jim says. “At least, I can’t see a reason why you couldn’t.”

“We shall find out,” Ekaterina says. She stretches and leans back in her chair. “Are you ready for Spain?”

“I think so,” Jim says. “Still dubious about the diving part, but Spain itself should be worth the trip.”

“It usually is,” Ekaterina says. “I never spent much time there, but it was lovely on the few occasions I did get to see it.”

“Jill spent a year there in high school,” Jim says. “It’s where she learned Spanish, point of fact. I don’t know where Evan picked it up, though.”

“Possibly from Jill,” Khan says, taking his seat again.
“Possibly,” Jim says. “Just so long as one of you translates for me, I’ll be fine.”

“I believe we can manage that,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I wasn’t worried about it,” Jim says. “I packed earlier today, had some free time.”

“Speaking of packing, I should go take care of mine,” Ekaterina says. “Wish me luck, brother?”

“On packing?” Khan raises his eyebrows. “Surely you know how to do that by now.”

Ekaterina snorts and punches him in the shoulder when she gets up. “He thinks he is funny,” she says to Jim.

“Sometimes he is,” Jim says, hoping she doesn’t punch him.

“Sometimes,” Ekaterina says, giving Khan a look.

He pushes his chair back and tugs her down into his lap. “You will be fine, Cat,” he says, kissing her temple. “Call me if you need to talk.”

“I will,” she says, resting her head against his shoulder. “I just hope I am not making a mistake.”

“I don’t think you are,” Khan says. “I think this is something you need to do.”

Ekaterina sighs. “Probably.” She stays where she is for another moment before kissing Khan’s cheek and getting to her feet. “If I do not see you before we all leave, have a safe trip and have fun,” she says.


“Thank you,” she says. “I am sure I will talk to you at some point during the week off.”

“I hope so,” Jim says. “Let us know how it goes.”

“I will,” Ekaterina says. “Have fun diving.” She touches Khan’s shoulder and leaves.

“How did your tests go?” Jim asks once the door’s closed behind Ekaterina.

“Better than I had hoped,” Khan says. “I believe we are making progress, just in time to put everything on hold for a week.”

“Isn’t that always the way it goes?” Jim grins. “It’ll still be there in a week. And you guys need a break.”

“I suppose,” Khan says. “I am not used to not working.”

“I know,” Jim says. “It won’t kill you to relax for a week.”

“No, I don’t believe it will,” Khan says, smiling a little.

“What is Matthew doing?” Jim asks. “I know you had mentioned that your group got told to take the week since half of you count as Enterprise crew, so...”

“Matthew and Alona are going to Ireland and Scotland,” Khan says. “They may or may not be traveling part of the time with Leonard and Maeve, I am not certain.”

“Bones didn’t mention it when I talked to him earlier today,” Jim says. “Everyone but you appears to
be going back home. Did—it’s a little late now, but did you want to go back to India?”

Khan shakes his head. “No,” he says. “There is nothing there for me anymore. Perhaps someday I will want to go back, but I like the plans we have made.”

“Me, too,” Jim admits. “I like Jill, and Evan, and I’m looking forward to spending time with them. And having time to ourselves, honestly.”

“As am I,” Khan says. “Although I still think you and Jill together is a dangerous combination.”

“Says the man who got hit on the head with debris,” Jim says, rolling his eyes. “Maybe I’m the one who should be worried about you and Jill.”

Khan smiles. “I suppose we will find out.”

“I have a question for you, about her, actually,” Jim says. “And this is coming from me, not her. We were talking earlier today, and...long story short, would you consider taking her flying sometime? I’m not sure I have the strength to carry her—I mean, she’s tiny, but I don’t know if I can support another person in the air.”

“She would want to go?” Khan asks.

“More than almost anything,” Jim says. “But she was very clear that she wasn’t asking.”

Khan nods, clearly thinking about it. “I would,” he says finally. “Perhaps while we are in Spain I will get the opportunity.”

“She’d love it,” Jim says. “I mean, she’s an adrenaline junkie to begin with, and she loves skydiving, hang-gliding, anything that gets her up in the air.”

“Not a surprise,” Khan says.

“Really not, no,” Jim agrees.

“Speaking of Spain, I should pack,” Khan says.

“Do you need to get anything from your place?” Jim asks. “Not that I know what you have over there, but.”

“Very little, at this point,” Khan says and Jim laughs. “Everything I need for the trip is here.”

“Okay,” Jim says. “Then you should pack and then come to bed with me.”

“Should I?” Khan smiles.

“Yes,” Jim says, smiling back. “I have plans for you.”

“What plans do you have?” Khan asks.

“You’ll find out,” Jim says. “Pack first, though.”

Khan raises his eyebrows but Jim refuses to say anything else, and after a moment Khan gets up from his seat. “I suppose I should pack, then,” he says.

While Khan packs, Jim checks his email and responds to a couple messages; nothing urgent, just some ship’s business. He finishes with that the same time Khan sets his bag next to Jim’s, and tosses
the PADD back on his coffee table. “All set?” he asks, getting up from the couch.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Awesome.” Jim walks over to him, sliding his hands up Khan’s arms and over his shoulders to thread his fingers through Khan’s hair and pull him down for a kiss. “Let me take care of you tonight,” he murmurs against Khan’s mouth, biting his lower lip. “Let me make you feel good.”

“You always do,” Khan murmurs back.

Jim kisses him again, licking his way into Khan’s mouth and tangling their tongues together. Khan’s hands start on Jim’s waist and slide up his back, under his wings, pulling him in closer. Both of them are breathing harder by the time Jim pulls back, and he really doesn’t want to but on the other hand, both of them have on way too many clothes. “We need to get undressed,” he says, letting go of Khan’s hair and tugging on his shirt.

“Yes,” Khan says, releasing Jim and stepping back.

Despite his words, Jim doesn’t move to get out of his clothes immediately, choosing instead to watch Khan undress. “I still don’t know how anyone could look at you and not want you,” he says.

“You are biased,” Khan says. “I assure you, it happens much more easily than you think.”

Jim shakes his head, finally beginning to take off his clothes. “Lie down,” he says. “Please. However you’re comfortable.”

Khan tucks in his wings and settles on his back, watching Jim. “Tell me what you want,” he says, propping himself up on his elbows.

Jim finishes getting out of his clothes and crawls onto the bed, over Khan. “I want to fuck you,” he says, leaning down to kiss him. “And take my time.”

“All right,” Khan says softly.

“Yeah, somehow I didn’t think you’d mind,” Jim says, smiling. He kisses Khan again, harder than before; someone groans and Jim’s not sure who. He pulls back, biting a mark into the soft skin under Khan’s jaw and feeling him shiver. When he sinks his teeth into Khan’s throat, Khan’s whole body jerks and his breath catches on a moan.

“Lie back,” Jim murmurs, brushing a kiss over the mark he made. “I’ve got you.”

Khan sinks back on the bed, tipping his head back against the pillow. Jim licks a line down his throat and bites his collarbone, smiling when he feels Khan shudder under him. He traces the mark with the tip of his tongue, just because he can, and bites him again where his neck meets his shoulder. Khan makes a choked, broken sound, shifting against the bed; Jim resists the urge to try and pin him down, hold him still.

Instead he snags the lube—which somehow always ends up under Khan’s pillow, he hasn’t figured out why but doesn’t much care—and slides down Khan’s body, pausing to catch one of his hands and bite the inside of his wrist. That earns him an honest-to-God whimper, something Jim didn’t think he’d ever hear, and fuck, it may possibly be the hottest thing he’s ever heard. Curious now, he kneels up to get a little more comfortable, keeping hold of Khan’s wrist, and scrapes his teeth over the pad of his thumb. Khan hisses in a breath and his hand flexes but he doesn’t pull away.

Jim nips at his fingers, draws two of them into his mouth to tease them with teeth and tongue, taking
his cues from the catches in Khan’s breathing, the way he shifts against the bed, the flush of color spreading through his skin. When he finally lets go of Khan’s hand, it’s with another bite overlapping the first, enough to make Khan gasp and twist under him.

Honestly, Jim’s not sure which of them is breathing harder by the time he settles between Khan’s legs and slicks his fingers. Khan draws up one knee and Jim rubs his cheek against the smooth skin, kissing the inside of his thigh before he pushes one finger into Khan. He hears Khan whisper something not in English and when he glances up he sees Khan’s hands fisted in the covers. “Easy,” Jim says softly. “I’ve got you.”

He takes his time, waiting until Khan relaxes just a little, until his hands loosen a bit in the covers, before adding a second finger. When he scissors them, Khan gasps and arches up, his head falling back. He’s fucking beautiful, and Jim spends a long moment just looking at him before he remembers what he’s doing and returns his attention to coaxing Khan’s body open, bit by bit, until Khan groans and pushes back against his hand.

“Yeah,” Jim mutters, twisting his hand just to feel Khan shudder, one more time just because before he pulls back and slicks his cock. “Yeah, I’ve got you.” Khan bends his other knee and Jim lines up and pushes and fuck, he’ll never get used to how it feels to be inside him, so much heat and so perfectly tight. He sucks in a breath, reminding himself he wanted to take his time with this.

“Jim,” Khan whispers.

“I’ve got you,” Jim tells him, shifting his weight to brace on his hands, enough that he can lean up for a hard kiss before he starts moving. Khan closes his eyes but his lips are parted, and every time Jim pushes into him he can hear a soft moan. Khan’s hands come up to grasp his shoulders, fingers digging in hard enough Jim thinks they might leave bruises later, and he leans down for another kiss, swallowing the sounds Khan makes, feeling them run through him.

He wants to take his time, wants to make this as good for Khan as it is for him, but he’s only got so much self-control and with Khan moving with him, knees tight against his hips and fingers digging into his skin, even that’s slipping away faster than he wants it to. “Please,” Khan breathes against his mouth and Jim knows he’s lost.

“Come for me,” he whispers back, biting Khan’s lower lip, his jaw, anywhere he can reach. He’s got just enough leverage to bite his throat, sinking teeth into his skin, and it turns out that’s just enough to send Khan over the edge, crying out and clenching around him. Jim groans, dropping his forehead to Khan’s shoulder, trying to hang on just a little bit longer, but Khan says his name and Jim’s coming before he can breathe.

He lies flat on top of Khan for a minute or three, catching his breath and feeling both their heartbeats gradually slow. Eventually he eases back and collapses next to Khan instead, draping himself over Khan’s body and resting his head on Khan’s shoulder. They’ll need to clean up a bit but that can wait a few minutes.

Khan murmurs something in Hindi, which makes Jim smile; he has absolutely no idea what it means, but the fact that he’s not speaking English is always a good sign. He brushes a kiss over whatever skin he can reach, tasting salt. “By the way, Jill made a point of letting me know both bedrooms are soundproofed and have privacy seals,” he says, finding it amusing now, instead of mildly embarrassing.

Khan snorts. “Did she, now?”

“I thought you might appreciate that fact,” Jim says.
“This sounds remarkably like an invitation to make you scream,” Khan observes.

“It’s an invitation for whatever you want,” Jim says. “We’ll have a week. Plenty of time for...almost anything.”

“Indeed,” Khan says. “I get the sense you have some thoughts on how to fill that time.”

“I do, but you don’t get to find out what they are until we’re in Spain,” Jim says.

“Why not?” Khan asks.

“Because it’s a vacation surprise,” Jim says. “You don’t get to find out what it is until we’re actually on vacation.”

“Is this a rule of taking holiday I never learned?” Khan asks.

“It’s my rule, anyway,” Jim says, smiling. “And no going through my bag, either.”

“I would not have,” Khan says.

“Well, don’t anyway,” Jim says. “You’ll find out once we’re in Spain, I promise.”

“Am I allowed to guess?” Khan asks.

“No,” Jim says. “Well, you can guess, but I’m not going to tell you whether you’re right or wrong.”

“You are remarkably infuriating sometimes,” Khan says, but he sounds more amused than annoyed.

“It’s part of my charm,” Jim says. “Seriously, you can wait two days.”

“I suppose I have no choice,” Khan says.

Jim leans up and kisses his jaw. “I promise it'll be worth the wait.”

Khan shifts a little and kisses him. “I believe you.”

“Share a shower with me?” Jim asks, changing the subject.

“Yes,” Khan says.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Spain, and I promise you'll find out what's in the black box. I know exactly what it is, I just didn't have a way to get it across in this chapter.
Despite everything, Jim still can’t quite believe it when they get on the shuttle without any last-minute emergencies, four people and not a uniform in sight. He checks his link just to make sure, but he has no messages, nothing to keep him from Spain. “Put that away,” Jill says, laughing as she fastens her belt. “We are officially off the clock.”

“I know, but it feels weird,” Jim says, but he does put his link away. “Like I’m expecting something to go wrong and us to have to go back.”

“Bite your tongue,” Jill says. “I have damn well earned this vacation. So have you.”

“I didn’t say we hadn’t,” Jim says, fastening his own belt. “I’m just saying I’m a little paranoid.”

Evan, who’s piloting the shuttle, laughs at that. “Just because you’re paranoid—”

“Doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you,” Jim finishes, grinning. “But we should be good. Can we leave now? Before anything happens and we have to cancel?”

“Yes,” Evan says and they lift off. Jim spends the entire flight to Spain half convinced his link is going to ring, and in fact checks it once to make sure it still has signal, earning himself an amused look from Khan.

“And you say I need to learn how to take holiday,” Khan says to him.

“I didn’t say you needed to learn it from me,” Jim says, laughing.

“Both of you work too much,” Jill says, twisting around in her seat to look at them.

“And you don’t?” Jim asks skeptically.

“She does,” Evan says.
“I subscribe to the work hard, play hard, fuck hard philosophy,” Jill says.

“ Didn’t need to know that,” Jim says and she laughs.

“Seriously, though,” Jill says. “I know you understand the first part, I’m not asking about the third, but I think both of you have forgotten the second part of that idea. It’s awesome to do what you love doing, but everyone needs downtime. I love my ship, I love my people, and if I didn’t get a break I was going to strangle someone.”

“Hey, we’re here,” Jim protests. “And I agree with you that everyone needs downtime. It’s why I fought for most of my crew to get time off, too.”

“You are here and you did, but if I hadn’t mentioned Spain to you would you have thought of it on your own?” Jill asks. She looks at Khan. “I know you wouldn’t have. I think they forgot to engineer a sense of play in you guys.”

To Jim’s surprise, Khan smiles. “Entirely possible,” he says. “No one ever claimed we were particularly light-hearted.”

“You’re geniuses, you can learn how to be,” Jill says. “Amir gets into it with my chief engineer, they have prank wars going on. It’s pretty funny sometimes.”

“Anandi used to enjoy practical jokes,” Khan says. “Although you might not have found them quite so amusing.”

“What did she do, try to poison you?” Jim asks.

“Basically, yes,” Khan says.

“Since when does that count as a practical joke?” Evan asks.

“She knew we wouldn’t die from it,” Khan says. “She thought it amusing to find out how we did react, though.”

“Now I’m afraid of what Cat’s practical jokes might have consisted of,” Jim says, considering it.

“Cat liked to get close enough to call a kill without the other person having a chance to react,” Khan says. “Counting coup, we called it. She wasn’t the only one who did this, but she was usually the most successful at it.”

“Did she ever kill you?” Jill asks.

“Many times, to my chagrin,” Khan admits.

“Landing in five minutes,” Evan says before Jill can ask more questions.

“Excellent,” Jill says, all but bouncing in her seat. Jim grins to see it; Jill’s boundless enthusiasm for almost anything usually lightens his own mood, and when he glances over at Khan he can tell it has the same effect on him. “I figure we’ll get to the house, drop our things, change, and head out, yeah? We can walk to one set of cliffs from the house, it’s about a ten minute walk. Some of the others we might need to drive, depending on how far we want to go.”

“Still dubious about this,” Jim says. “But yeah, that sounds like a plan.”

“Yeah, but they’re freaking heavy when they’re wet,” Jim says.

“You do shower, don’t you?” Jill asks solemnly.

“Every month, whether I need it or not,” Jim says and she laughs. “Yeah, showers aren’t so bad because it mostly just hits the outer feathers, which are fairly waterproof, but swimming or submerging myself in water soaks the under-feathers, which are less so and tend to get heavy.”

“But you can swim,” Jill says.

“Yeah, I can,” Jim says. “I won’t win any awards for speed or gracefulness, but I can stay afloat.”

“I’m assuming you can, too,” Jill says to Khan. “Otherwise, we have a problem.”

“I can,” Khan says, smiling a little. “We all learned as children. If I fold my wings back enough, they are less of a problem.”

“Yeah, it just hurts later,” Jim says.

“Why does it hurt?” Jill asks, frowning.

“The more you fold them back, the more tension it puts on your muscles, and they tend to knot up,” Jim explains. “It’s not a big deal, it’s just an annoyance.”

“Does massage help?” Jill asks.

“Sometimes, yeah,” Jim says, glancing at Khan.

“I walk on Evan’s back sometimes,” Jill says. “It works for us.”

“You’re also small enough you can get away with it,” JIm says.

“Yes, one of the few advantages to being one point four meters tall and weighing under forty-one kilos,” Jill says. “You can walk all over people and they barely notice.”

“I notice,” Evan says, landing the shuttle deftly.

“You’re also married to me,” Jill says. “You kind of have to.”

“Jill, I’m pretty sure I’d notice if you walked on me,” Jim says, unfastening his belt. “You’re small but you’re not that small.”

“Would you like me to try it so you can confirm?” Jill asks with a grin.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll pass,” Jim says. They get out of the shuttle and grab their bags and go to deal with the rental vehicle. The representative either speaks very poor English or resents having to use it, and after about two sentences Jill flips into Spanish, chattering away at him. Jim isn’t surprised when the guy smiles reluctantly, and then more openly, and by the end of their conversation has given Jill the names of a few good restaurants that the tourists don’t know about and a couple places to shop. She smiles brilliantly and thanks him, and Evan takes the codes to the vehicle.

“Now this is more like the weather I like,” Jill says as they go outside into the heat and brilliant sunlight. She slips on a pair of oversized sunglasses, a few curls dancing in the breeze. “I hate winter. And it’s always so cold on a starship. Would it kill them to raise the temperature a couple degrees?”

“It might,” Jim says. “They regulate everything, there’s got to be a reason for it. I never found it all
“You also have big warm wings and get to wear long sleeves and pants,” Jill says. “I will change that uniform if it’s the last thing I do, but I’m fighting an uphill battle about it.”

“Don’t you have the option of wearing pants?” Jim asks.

“Sure, just like you have the option of wearing a skirt,” Jill says. “Name me one woman who does it.”

“Ekaterina,” Jim says immediately. “I’ve seen her wear a skirt exactly once and it was for a date.”

“Alona,” Khan adds. “She finds the skirt impractical for fighting.”

“It’s impractical for _everything_,” Jill says. “Now name me one non-augmented woman who doesn’t wear it.”

“You,” Jim says. “Be the first. You’re a captain, you don’t have to answer to anyone on your ship.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jill says. “But for now we are on vacation and the only skirts I have to wear are the ones I packed. To the house?”

“Yes,” Evan says, unlocking the vehicle. They dump their bags in the back and get in, and Jill navigates them successfully to the house she and Evan rented, an old stone and wood frame with fading paint and a giant front porch complete with two swings, one at either end. Despite the aged exterior, everything on the inside looks new or almost-new, from the appliances in the kitchen to the showers in the bathrooms. Jim takes his bag upstairs, where he finds the bedroom, a separate sitting room, the bathroom, and some open space that looks out over the living room downstairs.

“Half an hour and we’ll head out,” Jill calls up the stairs.

“She doesn’t waste time, does she?” Jim says to Khan, grinning as he shuts the door to their bedroom.

“No, she really does not,” Khan says, but he smiles. “I begin to see why you wanted to go on holiday with her.”

“She’s just...fun,” Jim says, shrugging. “And she makes everyone around her have fun, too. Including you.”

“Speaking of having fun,” Khan says and Jim’s stomach tightens because he knows that tone of voice all too well. “When do I get to find out what your surprise is?”

Jim considers that and laughs. “Now is good, assuming you won’t be distracted the rest of the afternoon,” he says.

“As you have assured me before, I am capable of multi-tasking,” Khan says.

“So you are.” Jim dumps his bag on the bed and opens it. “So, the thing I need to explain is that I asked for help in this, because I wanted to be anonymous and yeah, that doesn’t work for me so much. So Jill did the actual shopping.”

Khan raises his eyebrows. “Shopping for what?”

Jim digs into his bag and pulls out the first length of rope, tossing it onto the bed. “That, among other things.”
He sees heat flash in Khan’s eyes and Khan steps forward, closer to him. “What other things did she buy?” he asks, his voice deeper than normal.

Jim rummages in his bag again and pulls out a few more items—more rope, the blindfold, and the black box. “This last thing I didn’t ask for, didn’t know it existed, and it is possibly the coolest present anyone’s ever given me,” he says, opening it. “It looks—okay, it looks like a fairly ordinary pair of leather cuffs, right? I mean, not that I have a ton of experience with what those look like but it looks fairly standard to me.”

“I would agree,” Khan says, looking at the box.

“Except these have a couple tricks to them.” Jim takes one out. “Here, give me your wrist.” Khan raises an eyebrow, but holds out his hand, and Jim fastens the cuff around it. “Two pressure points here,” he says, pointing to them without touching them. “One works when you have both on, it locks the cuffs together. The other one just locks it in place, wherever it is, so long as you’re wearing it.” He touches the pressure point and hears a faint hum as the cuff activates. “Try moving your wrist.”

Khan pulls at the hold, first lightly, then more strongly, and his eyes widen a little bit when the cuff refuses to move. “That is...interesting,” he says.

“Think of the possibilities,” Jim says, touching the pressure point again and unfastening the cuff. “It only works if someone’s wearing it, but you can lock it in any position, anywhere. You can use them to suspend someone, even, although they recommend not doing that for extended periods of time. Each cuff holds up to three hundred kilos and they literally will not move once you lock them.” He grins, looking at Khan. “Worth waiting for?”

Khan smiles, lazy and confident, and the heat in his eyes makes Jim’s mouth go dry. “Absolutely.”

“I thought you might like them,” Jim says, fighting to stay casual and not just jump Khan’s bones. “I don’t know how Jill got the idea to buy them for us, but I’m glad she did.”

“She likely has a pair herself,” Khan says.

“Point, I hadn’t considered that,” Jim says. “And speaking of her, we should get changed and ready to head out.”

“Yes, we should,” Khan says, but he holds out his hand and Jim takes it, moving to stand toe-to-toe with him. Jim leans up and kisses him, swallowing a groan when Khan’s free hand closes around Jim’s other wrist, tight enough it might bruise but who the fuck cares, they’re on vacation.

He bites Khan’s lip and Khan growls low in his throat, hand tightening on Jim’s wrist and his other hand sliding into Jim’s hair, holding his head still. Jim pulls against the hold, wanting more, and curses when Khan pulls back. “Oh, come on,” he complains, lips feeling swollen and voice hoarse.

“We haven’t time,” Khan says, smooth as ever but Jim sees the want in his face, in the way he hasn’t let go yet.

Jim groans and drops his head forward and this time Khan lets go of his hair. “Goddamnit, I hate it when you’re right.”

“You don’t,” Khan says; Jim flips him off, which makes him laugh.

“Okay. Fine. Cliff diving, here we come. This had so better be worth it.” Jim looks pointedly at Khan’s hand around his wrist and a moment later Khan lets go of him.
“Jill did say this was a short distance from the house,” Khan says as they move to change and gather up what little they’ll need. “We can always walk back if we decide this isn’t to our liking.”

“Or if we decide we’d rather do something else,” Jim says.

“Indeed,” Khan says and Jim shivers.

Cliff diving turns out to be one of the most awesome things Jim’s ever experienced. He second-guesses himself all the way off the cliff but the dive down feels like flying, and hitting the water is a shock in the best kind of way. He surfaces, treading water and laughing, and in the water next to him Jill beams. “Told you,” she says, turning a somersault in the water and waving up at Evan and Khan, still on the cliff. “Come on, you wimps!” she calls.

“Wimps?” Evan calls back. “I’ll show you a wimp!” He takes a running jump off the cliff and straightens out in the air, cutting the water cleanly. He doesn’t surface immediately, though, and a moment later Jill shrieks and goes under. Jim swims a little bit out of the way of their horseplay and looks up at Khan.

“Come on in,” he calls. “This is awesome.”

He can’t see or hear what response Khan makes but a moment later he dives off the cliff, wings folded tightly back. Jim has just enough time to admire the line of his body, long and lean, before he hits the water, staying under longer than Jim expected. Longer than--right, superior lung capacity, he reminds himself.

Next to him, Jill and Evan are still horsing around, which at the moment translates to Evan treading water with Jill’s legs wrapped around his waist, both of them occasionally dipping under the water but given the way they’re kissing Jim doubts they notice. He throws a palmful of water at Jill anyway, just because, and laughs when she breaks away from Evan to splash him back. “Where the hell did Khan go?” she asks, looking around. “Did he drown or something?”

“Superior lung capacity,” Jim says. “He’s still under--” He loses the rest as something grabs his ankles and yanks him underwater, where he kicks back, squirms away, and manages to surface without choking on water. “He’s apparently decided to play,” he says breathlessly, trying not to laugh and failing.

“Brilliant,” Jill says, laughing with him. A moment later, Khan breaks the surface, looking as composed as ever. Jim, however, punches him in the shoulder. Somehow, and Jim’s a little fuzzy on how this happens, this leads to an all-out four way water battle, and Khan may be stronger and able to hold his breath longer but Jill’s scarily fast in the water and stronger than she appears. By the time they call a truce and drag themselves out of the water to climb back up to the top of the cliff, three out of the four of them are panting for breath and Jim’s wings feel like they weigh a metric ton. He does the expedient thing of sprawling out on his stomach on the rock and stretching out his wings in the sun to dry off. It shouldn’t surprise him, but it does anyway, when he sees Khan do the same thing.

“We packed lunch,” Jill says, rubbing at her hair with a towel. “They stocked the kitchen with basic groceries and some pre-made stuff, so we have some sandwiches and some kind of pasta salad and a couple other things. And beer, because we’re on vacation.”

“Don’t drink and dive,” Jim says, turning his head on the rock to look at her.

She snickers. “I’m half Russian,” she says. “I can hold my liquor. One beer isn’t going to impair my reflexes.” Before Jim feels like countering that one, she hops up and walks over to him, crouching
down next to his right wing. “God, these are gorgeous,” she says. “I’m going to be shamelessly rude and look at your wings while you’re lying there waiting for them to dry.”

“Okay,” Jim says, amused.

“Light and dark,” Jill says, glancing between his wings and Khan’s.

“In so many ways,” Khan says, looking back at Jill.

“I don’t believe that,” Jill says simply. “Or rather, it may be true but not how you mean it.”

“Explain,” Khan says, clearly curious.

“I’ve spent a lot of time talking with Amir,” Jill says, sitting cross-legged on the warm rock. “And some with Talya, and the other two on my ship--Jasmine and Eduardo. Mostly with Amir, though. He has a very pessimistic view of himself, and I think--based on my exposure to the other members of your crew, and what I’ve picked up from working with Ekaterina--I think this is something all of you have in common. You see yourselves as monsters, and you’re not. You’ve done some monstrous things, but that doesn’t make you a monster. All of you that I’ve talked to view yourselves as these dark, almost evil people, and I don’t buy it. I’ve seen too much that isn’t evil in you. You have certainly lived a darker life than most of us currently in Starfleet, but dark isn’t necessarily bad.”

“Funny,” Jim says. “I’ve tried making this argument before too. I usually get told that Starfleet is inherently optimistic and we see things in them that don’t exist.”

“Because you are and you do,” Khan says.

“No, I don’t.” Jim says. “I’ve told you, I don’t know if you’re a good man but you’re better than you give yourself credit for. A lot better. Otherwise you wouldn’t--” He stops, because they’re not alone, reminds himself this is Jill and he trusts Jill, and continues. “You wouldn’t be with me just to be with me,” he says. “If you really were the kind of person you say you are, you’d be using me for some greater purpose. And I absolutely do not believe that’s true. Remember what you told me, about the lines you won’t cross?”

“I remember,” Khan says quietly.

“People change,” Evan says, surprising Jim a little. “You may have been as dark as you consider yourself to be at one point, but that doesn’t mean that’s who you are now.”

“You wouldn’t be here if that’s all there was to you,” Jill says.

“Perhaps not,” Khan says. He doesn’t look convinced but he does look thoughtful.

“Anyway, lunchtime?” Jill asks. “Now that we’ve sufficiently examined your self-perception for now. Next time we’ll pick on Jim.”

“That’s really okay if we don’t,” Jim says, pushing himself to sit up. His wings are still damp, but the outer feathers feel mostly dry and the under-feathers are less soaked than they were. He leaves them stretched out, soaking up the warmth of the sun.

“Which is what you always say,” Jill says. She looks at Khan. “Is it just me or is he really bad about talking about himself?”

“It isn’t just you,” Khan says, also sitting up. “But I think we can avoid discussing Jim’s psyche for the moment.”
“Thanks,” Jim says lightly, but he means it more than his tone of voice would indicate. “We’re on vacation. No psychoanalysis wanted.”

“Jim, you never want psychoanalysis,” Jill says, digging in the cooler for food. “Not that I can blame you. I did therapy as a kid, I hated it. Do you want a chicken sandwich or roast beef or I think we have a grilled vegetable option?”

“Ah—roast beef, I guess,” Jim says and she tosses him a wrapped sandwich. “What were you in therapy for?”

“It was the in thing to do, I guess,” Jill says. “Khan, what kind of sandwich do you want? That and when you spend pretty much every spare hour in gymnastics they want you to see a shrink to make sure you’re not developing eating disorders or other bad things.”

“Chicken, please,” Khan says and Jill tosses him a sandwich. “Were you ever at risk for developing an eating disorder?”

“Probably, but I didn’t,” Jill says. “Neither one of my parents are all that tall so I knew I probably wasn’t going to get too big, and when you’re expending that many calories working out, you can eat a lot and it doesn’t show, plus growth spurts and things. I mean, some people I worked with still did, but I avoided it. Evan?”

“I’ll take the other roast beef,” Evan says.

Jill hands him a sandwich and takes one for herself. “We have pasta salad, but I think we forgot to pack plates although we have forks.” She sets the container in the middle of the four of them and opens it. “So help yourself and don’t get anyone sick. There’s some fruit, too, and a bag of chips, and of course the beer.” She pulls bottles out of the cooler and pops the caps before handing them out.

“How successful were you at gymnastics?” Khan asks Jill.

“Pretty good,” Jill says. “Okay, so I made it to the Olympics when I was sixteen, took home one silver, one gold, and our team took gold as a whole. After that, there’s not a whole lot left to accomplish, so I decided to apply to the Academy, I always wanted to get into space. And now here I am.”

“Do you still practice?” Jim asks.

“Eh, not really,” Jill says. “Some of it comes in handy when I’m practicing unarmed combat, but that’s about it these days. I mean, I can still do some of it, given the opportunity, and I’ve kept most of my flexibility, but I have other ways of working out these days.”

“Like cliff diving and rock climbing and Ultimate Frisbee,” Jim says, smiling.

Jill laughs. “Exactly.”

Conversation dies down as they eat; Jim surprises himself with how hungry he is, but everyone else seems to be in the same boat. Between the four of them, they end up leaving a couple pieces of fruit and chip crumbs. Everything else gets polished off. “And now, food coma,” Jill says, sprawling out on her back with her head in Evan’s lap. “Dive again in half an hour or something.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jim says, finishing the last of his beer. Before he talks himself out of it, he sprawls out similarly to Jill, wings tucked in and his head resting against Khan’s knee. He glances up and catches a brief, faint smile on Khan’s lips, and then Khan runs his fingers through Jim’s hair
absently.

The heat of the day, plus the warmth of the rock and Khan’s skin makes Jim feel pleasantly drowsy, and the fingers stroking through his hair and over the back of his neck relax him further, until he dozes off. He doesn’t know how long he naps, but he wakes up slowly when Khan squeezes his wrist. “Sorry about that,” he says, covering a yawn and pushing up into sitting.

“There is nothing to apologize for,” Khan says. “But Jill wants to dive again.”

“Okay,” Jim says. “My wings are dry, time to soak them again?” He smiles, and Khan smiles back.

“Something like that,” Khan says, getting to his feet fluidly. “Wait for me to dive first, this time?”

“What are you planning?” Jim asks, frowning at him.

“Who says I am planning anything?” Khan asks.

“I know you,” Jim says.

Khan smiles briefly. “You do.” He still doesn’t answer Jim’s question, but goes to stand on the edge of the cliff, next to Jill.

“Ready?” she asks with a grin.

“Yes,” Khan says, and together they dive off the cliff. Jim scrambles to his feet to watch--and his jaw drops when a second before they would have hit the water, Khan’s wings snap open, he catches Jill around the waist, and flies up into the sky. Jim can hear Jill’s whoop of delight, and wonders if they planned this or if it was a surprise to Jill.

“Was that supposed to happen?” he asks Evan.

“Not that I knew about,” Evan says, watching them soar. “That’s damned impressive, though.”

“I couldn’t do it, I don’t think,” Jim admits. “But he’s so much stronger than I am.”

“He was designed that way,” Evan says. “It’s still impressive, but it gets slightly less impressive when you remember he was specifically created.”

“I don’t know if the wings were part of it,” Jim says. “He told me once they were either an accident or a planned effect unable to be replicated, but he never knew which.”

“It’s possible the geneticists didn’t know,” Evan says. He rubs a hand over his beard, still looking at the figures in the sky. “Has anyone ever been able to explain yours?”

“Nope,” Jim says. “Best guess is some radiation thing or a weird born in space mutation. But no one knows.”

“And if they don’t know now, imagine what they might not have known three hundred years ago,” Evan says.

“You have a point,” Jim says. “Although the scientists were scarily good at engineering everything else about them, so...I don’t know.”

“How long can he stay in the air?” Evan asks.

“Longer than I can,” Jim admits, smiling. “I’ve never really timed it. But I mean, I’ve seen him take
Ekaterina flying, and even then he can stay in the air longer than me, and she’s bigger than Jill, so...

“I’m not worried about him dropping her,” Evan says, laughing. “Just wondering how long they’re likely to be up there.”

“No idea,” Jim says. He looks up at the sky, finding Khan and Jill easily enough even if they’ve gained enough altitude they look small against the clear blue sky. “Best guess, a while.”

Evan shrugs. “Okay.” He stretches out on the rock, shoving a folded towel under his head, and slips on his sunglasses. “Wake me when they land or something?”

“Oh, my God, that was possibly the best thing ever,” Jill says, popping upright and treading water. “I can’t even describe how amazing it was. If I wasn’t so in love with Evan and if Khan wasn’t so completely committed to you I’d consider trying to seduce him just so I could get him to take me flying more often, but I am and he is so I’ll have to settle for giving him puppy dog eyes when we have time. Speaking of, where is he?”

“Underwater somewhere,” Jim says, looking around. “He’ll surface eventually.”

“I hope so,” Jill says. “Otherwise we’ll have problems.”

“Yeah, let’s not drown anyone this early in the trip,” Jim says.
Jill laughs and splashes him. “Because drowning someone later in the trip would be okay?”

Jim grins and splashes her back, which of course is the moment Khan surfaces at just the wrong spot to get smacked in the face with water. He looks startled, and both Jim and Jill dissolve into laughter. Jim manages to choke out an apology between snickers, but Jill’s giggling so hard she falls backwards into a somersault.

“Clearly I missed something,” Khan says, but he sounds more amused than anything else.

“You know, I’m not sure you did,” Jim says, catching his breath.

Jill pops up out of the water, pushing her hair back. “You,” she says to Khan and before he answers, she swims over and hugs him. “Thank you so, so, so much.”

Jim almost cracks up again at the baffled look on Khan’s face; clearly, he has no idea how to respond to a random hug and outpouring of gratitude. Then Jim thinks about that a little more and feels depressed instead of amused. Jill lets go fairly quickly, though, before things can get any more awkward. “Seriously,” she says, treading water. “That was possibly the most amazing thing I’ve ever done.”

“I am glad you enjoyed it,” Khan says.

“So much,” Jill says. “So very, very much.”

“Perhaps we can go again while we are here,” Khan says and Jill’s whole face lights up.

“I would love that,” she says. “I don’t--I really don’t want to impose on you, I mean, but seriously, anytime you want to go flying and take me with you I’d so be up for it.”

“I understand,” Khan says, smiling a little. “And I don’t feel imposed upon. You are remarkably easy to carry.”

“Sometimes being my size has advantages,” Jill says, flipping into a somersault and coming up with her hair dripping. She pushes it back, the curls flattened by water.

“It isn’t just about size,” Khan says. “Of course, that helps, but it’s more--” He pauses, which surprises Jim; Khan’s rarely at a loss for words. “You are very good at keeping still and not interfering with how I need to move,” he says thoughtfully. “The first time I flew with Rani, we almost crashed because she was so excited she couldn’t stay still, and she got in the way of my wings. It was not the most graceful landing I ever made.”

“Ouch,” Jill says. “Who was Rani?”

“My wife,” Khan says. “She died before we left Earth.”

“I’m sorry,” Jill says. “I didn’t know. Was she one of you?”

“No, she wasn’t,” Khan says. He pushes his hair back out of his eyes; Jim notes absently that he might want to get it cut at some point. “We had six years together, and then she died.”

Jill moves a bit closer and touches Khan’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she says softly. “Six years isn’t very long.”

“No, it isn’t,” Khan says. “But it was what we had. How long have you and Evan been together?”

“We’ve been married for three years, and we were involved for two years before we got married,”
Jill says, “How long were you and Rani married?”

“Five years,” Khan says. “It took me a year to convince her to marry me.”

Jim looks at Khan, surprised. “You never told me this,” he says. “I didn’t even know you’d actually married her.”

“Of course I did,” Khan says, sounding surprised that Jim even questioned it. “She was mine, and I wanted the legal bonds should anything have happened to me or to her.”

Jim wonders what that means for the two of them and doesn’t ask, because hello awkward. “I can understand that,” Jill says. “One of the reasons Evan and I got married was because we wanted to legally be listed as each other’s next of kin should anything happen. His brother’s shipped out most of the time, and the only other family I have are my parents.”

“I didn’t know Evan had a brother,” Jim says. “He’s also in Starfleet?”

“Mm, yeah,” Jill says. “He works for Intelligence, which means I don’t know a lot of what he does and I can’t ask. We see him every so often when we’re in the same place. He’s older than Evan by a few years.”

“I wonder if he’s working with any of your people,” Jim says to Khan.

“I believe a few of mine were assigned to intelligence,” Khan says. “But I do not know their actual assignments or their colleagues.”

Jill shrugs. “I can ask the next time I talk to him. He was going to see if he could get a couple days to swing by here, but the last I heard he hadn’t found out if he could get the time or not. Anyway, want to dive again?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says.

They spend another couple hours on the cliffs, diving and swimming and battling in the water. Things get a bit heated, and at one point Evan picks Jill up and bodily throws her at Khan after she dunks him. Khan barely catches her in time and Jim laughs so hard he almost chokes on water. “I am not a water toy,” Jill protests through giggles.

“On that note I think maybe it’s time to dry out,” Jim says.

“Probably,” Jill says. She looks at Khan. “You can put me down now, I promise I won’t drown.”

Jim has the feeling Khan forgot he was holding her, but he lets go and Jill immediately swims over to Evan and splashes him. “Brat.”

“Yeah, but you’re stuck with me,” Evan says, tugging her in for a kiss.

“I know,” Jill says, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Why did I do that?”

“Point of order, you asked me out,” Evan says.

“Three times before you said yes,” Jill says. “But you proposed.”

“Why did you turn her down?” Jim asks curiously.

“He was stupid,” Jill says.
“Also I was coming off a bad breakup and didn’t want her to be a rebound,” Evan says.

“Also, stupid,” Jill says.

“Don’t make me throw you again,” Evan says, giving her a mock-glare.

“Enough with the foreplay,” Jim says. “Can we get out of the water now?”

“Yes,” Jill says, laughing. She kisses Ewan briefly and swims for the shore.

Between the towels and the sun, Jim’s wings feel mostly dry by the time they get back to the house. “Come on down when you get hungry and we’ll figure out dinner,” Jill says, moving to the kitchen to deal with the containers from lunch. “Take your time.”

Jim decides not to answer that one for fear of what she might say and heads up the stairs, Khan behind him. He closes the bedroom door behind Khan and activates the privacy seal out of habit. “That was a lot more fun than I was expecting,” he admits. “You seemed to have a good time, too.”

“I did,” Khan says simply.

“I’m glad,” Jim says. He takes the two steps to stand in front of Khan and rests his hands on Khan’s shoulders, leaning up to kiss him. “What do you want to do now?”

“What do you think?” Khan murmurs, kissing Jim back.

Jim smiles. “How do you want me?”

“So many ways,” Khan says, kissing Jim’s jaw. “I want to try some of the things you packed.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised,” Jim says. “Do I get to know more than that?”

“No,” Khan says. “Not this time.” He kisses Jim again, harder than before, teasing Jim’s tongue with his own and catching Jim’s lower lip between his teeth. “Undress for me,” he says softly.

Jim pulls off his t-shirt and swim trunks, watching as Khan crosses to the bed and picks up the blindfold. “Is this all right?” Khan asks.

“I wouldn’t have asked for it if it wasn’t,” Jim says and Khan smiles.

“Close your eyes, then,” Khan says, and Jim does. The blindfold feels soft against his face, and Khan fastens it snugly enough that it won’t slip. Whatever it’s made from blocks out everything; Jim opens his eyes out of curiosity but all he sees is darkness, not even a glimpse of light around the edges. “Can you see?” Khan asks.

“No a thing,” Jim says.

Khan runs a hand up his arm, guiding him backwards until Jim’s back hits the wall. “Stay there,” he says. “I will be right back.”

Without Khan touching him, Jim feels oddly adrift, and he splays his hands against the wall just to feel more grounded. He hears the rustle of fabric and figures Khan’s also undressing, but has no idea what else he might be doing, if anything. When Khan touches him again, taking his wrist, he jumps. “Easy,” Khan says, rubbing his thumb over the inside of Jim’s wrist. “Just me.”

“I know,” Jim says, feeling a little sheepish. “Just I didn’t realize you were so close.”
Khan kisses him, hand tightening around his wrist and somehow settling him. “Do you trust me?” Khan asks against his mouth.

“Yes,” Jim whispers back.

He’s not really surprised when Khan fastens the cuffs around his wrists, and twists his hands experimentally. They’re surprisingly comfortable--maybe not that surprising; Jim doesn’t really know what cuffs should feel like--but the leather’s butter-soft against his skin, padded just enough to be comfortable. Khan kisses him again once he’s fastened both cuffs, claiming his mouth and making Jim’s knees go weak. He reaches for Khan, but Khan catches his hands and presses them over his head, high enough that Jim can’t quite stand flat-footed. “There,” Khan murmurs, and locks the cuffs in place.

Jim’s whole body jerks and he pulls against the cuffs without meaning to, but they don’t budge a millimeter. He swallows, stretched out against the wall, weight balanced on his toes and suspended by his wrists. Not the most comfortable position in the world but there’s nowhere he can go, nothing he can do, and that turns him on more than he really wants to admit.

Khan’s mouth lands on his again and Jim whimpers into the kiss, not realizing how much he’s struggling against the cuffs until he hears Khan laugh softly. “Easy,” he says, running his hands down Jim’s chest, thumbs brushing over his nipples. “I could keep you here all night.”

“Fuck,” Jim breathes. “Khan, please.”

“Do you have any idea what you look like right now?” Khan asks, nipping his jaw, his earlobe. “How beautiful you are?”

Jim feels color rise in his cheeks and doesn’t know how to answer. He’s relieved when Khan doesn’t seem to want a response, more interested in kissing him again, hard and deep. His lips feel swollen when Khan drags his mouth away and he gasps when Khan bites him, not sure if it’ll leave a mark and not caring either way. “Please,” he whispers, his shoulders aching from the way he’s pulling against the cuffs. “God, please.”

Khan bites his collarbone, lips tracing a line down his chest and hands skimming over his body. He sinks to his knees, hands on Jim’s thighs, brushing a kiss over his hip. Jim gulps in a breath and immediately loses it when Khan lifts Jim’s legs over his shoulders, holding him suspended against the wall. “Don’t drop me,” he manages, even though that’s not really possible with the cuffs holding him.

“Never,” Khan promises, biting his inner thigh just hard enough Jim moans. He licks a line up Jim’s cock, mouthing the head and swirling his tongue over the sensitive flesh. Jim shudders, tries to arch into Khan’s mouth and gets absolutely nowhere. He growls in frustration and Khan laughs softly, the vibration making Jim shudder.

“Fucking tease,” Jim mutters, which earns him a scrape of teeth just shy of pain. “Oh, fuck--”

Khan hums low in his throat and takes Jim in deeper, enough that Jim bites his lip, head rolling against the wall. He wants more, can’t get it, doesn’t have the breath to beg and it’s not like Khan would listen to him anyway. He’s never felt quite so helpless before, but in this position he literally can’t do anything but take it, too precariously balanced and stretched out to move. That probably shouldn’t be as much of a turn-on as it is.

Two fingers thrust into him, deep and smooth and slick, and Jim cries out, pulling at the cuffs and muscles tensing. “Please,” he says, voice ragged. “God, Khan, please.”
The fingers in him curl and twist and Jim cries out again, closer than he wants to be already. As if he senses it, Khan backs off a little, gentling his mouth although his fingers keep moving in Jim, opening him up, scissoring and twisting and avoiding the one spot Jim wants him to touch. Sweat dampens the blindfold and maybe a few tears Jim can’t stop, and he can’t stop himself from begging brokenly between moans and whimpers.

When Khan raises his head Jim half-sobs, panting for breath. “Please,” he gets out. “Khan, please.”

“I have you,” Khan says, voice a little rougher than usual. Jim’s legs slip from his shoulders as he stands, pulling his hand back, and it takes Jim a moment to realize that Khan’s nudging him to wrap his legs around his waist, still pinned between Khan and the cuffs, shoulders burning with the strain of it. Jim hears sounds he thinks he should identify but can’t; he’s too far gone, shaking with need.

When Khan pushes into him, hands firm on Jim’s thighs to hold him steady, Jim almost comes then and there. “Oh, God,” he whispers, swallowing hard. “I--oh, God.”

Khan murmurs something Jim can’t understand even if it is in English but doesn’t stop, doesn’t hesitate before he starts moving, hard and deep, pressing Jim back against the wall with every thrust. Jim bites his lip against the sounds he’s making but it doesn’t help, and Khan kisses him anyway, swallowing the cries Jim can’t hold back, the pleas he doesn’t have the breath to articulate.

“I can’t, please, I need, I’m--” Jim might be embarrassed at how he’s babbling if he had the brain power, but he doesn’t and all that matters now is the need to come, his body coiling tighter and tighter. “Please--”

“Yes,” Khan whispers against his mouth and Jim keens when he comes, body jerking against the cuffs and clenching tight around Khan, who groans and bites Jim’s throat.

“Let me have it,” Jim says hoarsely, wishing he could wrap around Khan, hold him, feel the warmth of his skin, taste salt-sweat. “C’mon. Let me...”

Khan makes a low growl, driving into Jim one last time and holding, hands tightening painfully against his skin. For a moment, or five, they stay just like that, Jim mostly supported by Khan’s body and Khan’s head buried in his throat, hearts pounding. Eventually, Khan shifts, reaching up one hand to unlock the cuffs; Jim’s arms drop down at his sides and he winces at the ache. “Easy,” Khan murmurs. “I have you.”

He doesn’t put Jim down; just carries him to the bed and stretches him out on his stomach, taking off the cuffs and kissing his wrists. Jim focuses on breathing, his whole body aching, and groans in relief when Khan’s hands dig into his sore shoulder muscles, easing the tension. Khan says something in Hindi, gentle and reassuring, brushing his lips over the nape of Jim’s neck.

“Feels good,” Jim mumbles, although he feels cold without Khan’s body pressing him into the wall, his warmth surrounding Jim. “Come nap with me.”

“As you like,” Khan says, shifting him and settling next to him, an arm over his waist. Jim sighs and presses back into the body heat, breathing in the scent of Khan’s wings.

“Wake me in an hour,” he says, knowing Khan won’t sleep. “Or whenever Jill comes knocking for dinner.”

“I will,” Khan says, kissing his shoulder, his throat. “Rest, Jim.”

Jim’s asleep before he can figure out what to say to that.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Perhaps it's a night for war stories after all.

Chapter Notes

I still cannot believe the response this story has gotten, is getting. Thank you all so, so so much. Comments make my day, kudos make me grin stupidly, but mostly knowing that folks like this and are reading it is keeping me going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the end, Khan and Evan end up being the ones to decide it’s dinnertime because they’re the ones awake and Evan says he’s hungry. Jim stumbles into the shower when Khan wakes him and makes it downstairs in time to see Jill stumble out of the bedroom, hair going every which way—including straight up, which he finds kind of hilarious—and looking about as awake as Jim feels. “Food?” she asks, sleepily pushing at her hair.

“That is the plan,” Evan says, dressed similarly to Jim in jeans and a polo shirt. He sprawls on the couch, watching her. “How long do you need?”

“Ten minutes,” Jill says around a yawn. “Twelve.” She shoves at her hair again and pads back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

Jim looks at Evan. “How long will she actually take?” He has too much experience with women getting ready to buy the ten minutes.

“Twelve minutes,” Evan says, smiling. “She’s actually really good about getting moving once you get her vertical, it’s getting her awake that’s the hard part. She sleeps like the dead.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says, choosing to stand rather than sit on the couch because he’s dubious his wings will fit. Khan leans against the corner of the doorframe, and Jim looks at him and blinks in surprise. “Did I even know you owned jeans?”

“I have worn them before,” Khan says.

“No, I’m pretty sure you haven’t,” Jim says. “I’d remember.”

“Would you?” Khan asks. “Is my wardrobe that interesting?”

Jim considers answering that, remembers Evan’s there and shuts his mouth. Evan snorts, though, and glances between the two of them. “Sorry to be a damper on the foreplay,” he drawls.

“Turnabout’s fair play and all that,” Jim says, remembering earlier. “Did you get a nap?”

“Eh, a bit of one,” Evan says. “But we don’t have to be anywhere anytime tomorrow morning, so
it’s not a big deal. Jill will want to be up to watch the sunrise over the cliffs, but no one has to go with her.”

“I might,” Khan says.

“Yeah, have fun with that,” Jim says. “It’s my vacation, I’m sleeping in.”

Evan laughs. “Oh, Jill will go back to sleep,” he says. “She just likes to watch the sunrise. And the sunset. And moonrise, and...” He shrugs. “She resents sleep, does it as little as possible until she flat out crashes and you can’t wake her for ten hours.”

“I’ve known people like that,” Jim says.

“You are people like that,” Khan says.

“I am not,” Jim protests. “I like sleep. I don’t view it as the enemy.”

“Given your choice, you would do without it as much as possible,” Khan says.

“But I don’t hate it,” Jim says. “It just gets in the way of doing things.”

“Now you sound like Jill,” Evan says. “Although she admits she hates sleep.”

“Does she get nightmares?” Jim asks cautiously.

Evan shrugs. “She’s a Starfleet captain, you tell me,” he says.

“Yes, okay,” Jim says, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

“She hasn’t woken up screaming in a while, though,” Evan says after a moment. “So I think we’re making progress.”

“Do I even want to know what that was about?” Jim asks, wincing.

Evan blows out a breath. “A year after we got married there was a mission that went badly and she almost died,” he says. “The physical injuries were the least of it. She...they killed two crew in front of her, made her watch, and she couldn’t do anything to save them except hold them as they died. For months after she’d wake up screaming, or sobbing, a few times a week.”

Jim swallows hard. “Until Marcus I’d never lost a crew member,” he says. “I can’t even...”

“I can,” Khan says quietly.

“Yeah, I figured,” Evan says. “She doesn’t like to talk about it, for obvious reasons, so let’s just pretend I didn’t say anything, okay?”

“Were you on the mission?” Jim asks anyway.

“No, I wasn’t,” Evan says. “I led the party to find her and what was left of the original away team.”

“How many survived?” Jim asks.

“Three of them were alive when we got there, but one died of injuries later,” Evan says. “For about a week we weren’t sure if Jill was going to make it, either.”

“God,” Jim says. “I’m sorry.”
Evan nods. “Hazards of the job, but that doesn’t make it suck less,” he says.

“Yeah, I can understand that,” Jim says.

The bedroom door opens and Jill comes out, dressed in a purple tank top and a wildly patterned wrap skirt, her hair somewhat tamed although it still curls wildly over her shoulders and one lock seems determined to stand on end. She has a small purse over her shoulder and hops into her sandals as she comes out. “Hi, I’m ready, let’s eat,” she says, and Jim has absolutely no idea how she got it together this quickly but she’s even wearing a little bit of makeup, and he thought that took women hours.

“Where are we going? Don’t tell me you didn’t figure that out, you had twelve minutes.”

“I won’t tell you, then,” Evan says, pushing to his feet. “Do you want to try one of the places that guy recommended?”

“I want to try any place that’s got decent sangria,” Jill says, balancing a hand on Evan’s chest as she yanks on a stubborn shoe. “Did he say anything about that?”

“I think he said--hang on,” Evan says, letting her finish getting her shoes on before he goes to get the paper. “Yeah, there’s a place here he said had amazing drinks and seafood, and it’s within walking distance, maybe fifteen minutes.”

“So no DD, perfect,” Jill says. “Although I guess Khan counts as our resident sober person, since the amount of alcohol we’d need to get him buzzed would bankrupt us collectively. Khan, you get to make sure none of us pass out on the way home, okay?”

“I will do my best,” Khan says solemnly.

“Do we know where we’re going?” Jill asks.

“I have a PADD with directions,” Evan says, holding it up.


The sun is just starting to set as they walk into town and find the restaurant, but it’s still warm enough Jim’s comfortable in his short sleeves. It amuses him that Jill doesn’t walk so much as skip, dance, occasionally spin in circles, and once--when they get to a stretch of grass--she tucks the hem of her skirt into her waistband, slips out of her shoes, and executes a pretty impressive tumbling run, ending in some move that has her flipping one way then the other, landing solidly with her arms thrown up. “Not bad for lack of practice,” she says, untucking her skirt and pulling her shoes on.

“It looked pretty good to me,” Jim says, laughing.

“Floor was my strongest exercise,” Jill says. “I was good on the balance beam, too, and vault, but the bars were my weakest event.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Lack of upper body strength,” she says. “Balance I have, lower body strength I have, but my arms just weren’t as strong no matter how much I worked on them. I mean, I was still good, you don’t get to the Olympics if you’re not, but I didn’t actually compete on the bars when I got there. I got my medals in floor and beam.”

“Is there video somewhere?” Khan asks, surprising Jim.

“Oh, sure,” Jill says. “I can find it for you sometime if you really care.”
“I do, actually,” Khan says.

Jill actually blushes a little. “Remind me when we get back to the house assuming I’m sober,” she says.

“I will,” Khan says. Jill laughs and flips into a cartwheel, skirt tangling around her legs.

“Oh, I’m glad you’re here,” she says when she straightens up. “Both of you. And I think that’s the restaurant.”

“It is,” Evan says. “Are you glad I’m here?”

“Who are you again?” Jill asks.

“Some guy,” Evan says. “I don’t know. I go where you tell me.”

“I like the sound of that,” Jill says, jumping up to kiss his cheek.

The restaurant, Jim notices, is old but clean, and fairly full already, including a variety of people on the dance floor in the middle. They get a table easily, though, and menus and glasses of water. Jim takes one look at his menu and decides not to bother. “You order for me,” he tells Khan. “What little Spanish I know won’t help.”

“All right,” Khan says, smiling a little.

Their waiter comes over and Jim thinks, maybe, from the conversation he has with Jill and a little from Evan they’re discussing drinks. They agree on something--Jim catches “sangria” but doesn’t know what else--and the waiter hesitates before asking a question. Jill sighs but doesn’t look surprised as she digs out her ID. “I will be getting carded until I’m eighty,” she mutters. “Also, Jim, we ordered a pitcher of sangria for the table as the waiter assure me it’s excellent, and an appetizer sampler and I don’t know what’s in that but he says it’s all fresh caught.”

Jim shrugs. “Works for me,” he says.

Jill puts her ID away and takes a sip of water. “So far, this vacation is starting brilliantly,” she says, tucking a curl back behind her ear. Jim notices absently she’s wearing earrings, long silver dangles with purple stones in them. “I can’t believe we actually have a week.”

“Neither can I,” Jim admits. “Did you hear from Evan’s brother?”

“Cade? No, not yet,” Jill says. “Likely what will happen is he’ll email and say he can’t make it, or he’ll show up on our doorstep with his girlfriend in a couple days. You’d like Lenore, by the way. She’s a demolitions expert.”

“Nice,” Jim says, grinning.

“She’s a little crazy,” Evan says. “Good match for my brother.”

“Who is more than a little crazy,” Jill says.

“Yes,” Evan agrees. “More than a little. He’d probably get along great with Ekaterina or Alona, from what you’ve said.”

“What, does he kill people for fun?” Jim asks without thinking about it and Khan snorts.

“That’d do it,” Jim says as the waiter returns with their sangria. Evan pours them all generous glasses and Jill holds hers up for a toast.

“To vacation,” she says and they clink.

“Oh, that is good,” Jim says, taking a sip of his. “And deceptively strong.”

“Just the way I like it,” Jill says, taking another sip of hers. “Also, Evan, I heard you talking before I came out of the bedroom.”

He winces. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “It’s not like I asked you not to talk about it,” she says. “I just don’t want to go into details.”

“We don’t have to,” Khan says.

“Maybe one of these nights we’ll trade war stories,” Jill says. “Tonight, however, is not that night.”

Their appetizer sampler arrives and they order; Jim has absolutely no idea what, but he’ll eat just about anything so he doesn’t much care. And if the appetizer is any indication of the quality of the food, he’ll be very happy with whatever he does get. He ends up mock-fighting Jill for the last shrimp before letting her take it and snagging a piece of calamari instead.

Over the course of dinner, they go through two pitchers of sangria, a remarkable amount of seafood, and a conversation that wends its way from classic literature to theories about other races in the galaxy, what they might find in the next five years, what Jill might find when she ships out again. Jim’s happily buzzed when they order dessert, and is content to sit back in his chair and watch the people on the dance floor, the music just loud enough to be heard and not so loud they’ve had to shout at each other all night.

“Dance with me,” Jill says to Evan. “You know you want to.”

“I do?” Evan asks.

“You know you do,” Jill says, getting to her feet and pulling on his hand. “If you don’t dance with me I’ll make Jim or Khan do it, and that would be weird.”

“I don’t dance,” Jim says immediately.

“Do you?” Jill asks Khan.

“I think you would be better partnered with Evan,” Khan says.

“That didn’t answer the question,” Jill says. “Which means I am going to make you dance with me at some point while we’re here, but for now I want to dance with my husband.”

Evan sighs theatrically but gets to his feet and Jill tugs him out onto the dance floor. They move well together, Jim thinks, and Jill’s really pretty in her skirt and top, hips moving to the beat. Okay, maybe he’s a little more buzzed than he thought, but she is pretty. “I didn’t know you danced,” he says to Khan to distract himself.

“I didn’t say I did,” Khan points out.

“You didn’t say you didn’t either,” Jim counters. “Do you?”
Khan takes a sip of his sangria. “When we were children, we studied various forms of movement,” he says. “Martial arts, obviously, but also gymnastics, and dance. We were taught to be superior physically.”

“Did you enjoy it?” Jim asks.

“Sometimes,” Khan says. “I was never very good at gymnastics, though, because of the wings.”

“I’m not asking about your ability to do a cartwheel,” Jim says, smiling. “I’m asking if you dance.”

“I haven’t in years,” Khan says. “Not since Rani. She...she loved to dance, and she made me join her.”

“I’m terrible at it,” Jim says after a moment. “But I bet Jill would dance with you if you asked.”

“Jill has a husband,” Khan says.

“That doesn’t mean she can’t dance with someone else,” Jim says.

“Not right now,” Khan says. “Why are you so insistent on my developing a friendship with her?”

“Because she’s my family,” Jim says honestly, a little too buzzed to keep the words back and just buzzed enough he doesn’t care. “And I want her to be yours. Your family became mine, I want mine to become yours.”

“Why is she your family?” Khan asks.

It’s not a question Jim was expecting and he blinks, considering it. “She’s Starfleet,” he says. “And that doesn’t—it doesn’t make her family, but it connects us. And she’s...she’s a lot like me, and I like her. I trust her. I mean, we’re here. I wouldn’t have agreed to go on vacation with someone I didn’t consider family, and I wouldn’t have pushed you so hard to agree either.”

“If being Starfleet was all it took to make someone your family, I shudder to think of what that made Marcus,” Khan says dryly.

Jim snorts. “The uncle everyone hated.”

“You didn’t,” Khan says.

“I didn’t know any better.” Jim picks up his glass and takes a drink. “Have you heard from Cat yet?”

“No,” Khan says. “I rather hope I don’t.”

“Why?” Jim asks.

“Because if I hear from her this soon, something has gone wrong,” Khan says.

“Point,” Jim says. On impulse, he reaches out, taking Khan’s hand in his, loosely twining their fingers together. He catches a faint look of surprise on Khan’s face, but he doesn’t pull away, and Jim rubs his thumb over Khan’s knuckles. “You really want to get up at sunrise?” he asks.

“I will likely be awake anyway,” Khan says.

“But you could stay in bed with me,” Jim says, smiling.

“I could,” Khan says. “But you are the one pushing me to develop a relationship with Jill.”
“I hate it when you use my own arguments against me,” Jim says with a sigh. He glances out on the dance floor, seeing Jill and Ewan pressed together, Jill’s hands on Ewan’s chest and his arms wrapped around her waist. “Sometimes I wonder what might have happened if I hadn’t met you first,” he says, not meaning to. “I mean, not that I met you first, but...if it had been the Marshall that had gone to Qo’nos. I can’t--I can’t believe Jill would have fired those torpedoes.”

“No, I don’t think she would have,” Khan says. “But things would have been different. For one, she doesn’t have wings, and for another, she is married.”

“True and true,” Jim says. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think you and she would have made a good couple, under different circumstances.”

“Why?” Khan asks.

“Because she balances you,” Jim says. “She’s bright and fun and enthusiastic and playful, and you’re...well, not that. But at the same time, she knows what it’s like to lose people, she’s got her own scars, and I think she gets you more than you think she could. She’s...I used to pretend I was an idiot. She pretends she’s all fun and laughter, but she’s sharp, Khan. She wouldn’t be a captain if she wasn’t.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” Khan says. “In any event, this is all theoretical. She has Evan, and I have you, and neither of those things are likely to change.”

Jim smiles, tightening his grip on Khan’s hand for a moment. “No, they’re not.”

By the time they leave, Jim feels a little unsteady on his feet. Jill pulls off her sandals and walks barefoot and still trips into Evan, although Jim can’t tell if she did it on purpose or not. Either way, it gets Evan to put an arm around her and steady her. Whether or not he’s completely sober, Jim has no idea.

“So,” Jill says after a few minutes, skipping ahead of them and turning around to walk backwards. “Who’s coming to watch the sunrise with me tomorrow?”

“Not me,” Jim says fervently.

“Maybe,” Evan says, catching Jill’s sandals when she tosses them at him. “What was that for?”

“We only have a week and you’re going to waste it sleeping?” She gives him a mock-glare and tips backwards into a handstand, walking over and coming upright again. “Lame.”

“And you’re a little drunk, your point?” Evan asks.

“Only a little and I’m on vacation,” Jill says, laughing. “Khan, are you in?”

“All right,” Khan says.

“Excellent.” Jill waits for him to catch up to her, then jumps up, uses his shoulders for balance, and kisses his cheek before dropping lightly to the ground. Jim doesn’t know whether to laugh more at what she did or the look on Khan’s face, and decides it doesn’t really matter, either way it’s hilarious.

“Just how drunk are you?” Evan asks, although he also laughs.

“Not enough to go to bed with the wrong person,” Jill says, and this seems to be an old joke between them because Evan laughs again.
“Okay, what am I missing?” Jim asks.

“A year ago,” Jill says, still walking backward, “we went to a house party for the weekend, in Paris. Big old manor house, lots of people and more importantly, lots of bedrooms and corridors and things. Evan went to bed before I did, I had a little too much to drink--just a little--and walked into the wrong bedroom. I would like it noted, for the record, that all I did was take off my shoes, crawl into bed, and fall asleep, but when I woke up next to someone who was not Evan we were both very confused. He hadn’t even registered me coming in, as he’d had more than a little too much to drink, and for the first three minutes we were awake he thought I was a bad hangover hallucination.”

“How often do you have too much to drink?” Jim asks, laughing.

“Not as often as it sounds like, and I haven’t had too much to drink tonight,” Jill says, making a face at Jim. “I just don’t always have the best sense of direction in the world.”

“No, that’s what she has me for,” Evan says.

“This is true,” Jill says. “I have you for many reasons, but that is one of them. Nighttime swimming, anyone? Not diving, we’d probably crash and break something, but swimming?”

“We’re not exactly dressed for it,” Evan points out.

“You’re all wearing underwear, aren’t you? Either way, I don’t care. I’ve seen it before.” Jill shrugs. “Unless you’re all afraid of one short woman in a tank top and panties.”

“Oh, what the hell,” Jim says. “Count me in.”

Evan sighs. “I’m going to regret this when I have to carry you home,” he says. “But sure, for a bit.”

“Khan?” Jill asks, challenging him.

“All right,” Khan says.

Jim’s just grateful that it’s a full moon, or close enough that they can all see to walk down the cliff to the water. He slips once and Khan grabs his arm, steadying him; Evan almost slips but catches himself. Jill doesn’t seem to have any problems. Immediately after reaching the shore, she unites her skirt, tosses it aside, and dives into the water, giving Jim just enough of a chance to notice her panties match her tank top. Why he noticed that, he has no idea.

After a moment, her head pops up. “Oh, man, this feels fantastic,” she says, pushing her hair back. “C’mon in.”

Evan’s next into the water, since he doesn’t have to get a shirt off over a pair of wings, but Jim’s right behind him and Khan hits the water a second after Jim does. The water does feel incredible, Jim thinks, cool and refreshing and just enough of a bite to make his skin prickle. He surfaces and rolls onto his back, wings heavy under the water but not enough to pull him down--until someone grabs him and pulls, and even after he kicks away and his head breaks the water again, he doesn’t know who it was. Jill’s underwater, Khan’s nowhere to be seen, and Evan pops up a moment after Jim does, looking both amused and a bit out of breath. “Who got you?” Jim asks.

“Either my wife or your partner,” Evan says. “I didn’t get a good look or an idea of hand size.”

“Yeah, me either,” Jim says. “We should get them.”

Evan snorts. “I’d like to sleep in the bed, not on the couch.”
“Would she really kick you out?” Jim asks, grinning.

“Possibly,” Evan says. “More likely she’d just kick me, though, and she kicks hard.”

Jim would respond but he gets yanked underwater again. This time he’s sure it’s Jill, and he grabs back, wrestling with her until they both have to surface or risk drowning. She laughs so hard she falls back into the water, and this time Khan catches her, keeping her head above water while she has a full-blown giggling fit.

“Oh, God, now she’s done it,” Evan says. “A little too much sangria, a little too much vacation, we’re going to have to carry her home, she’s hopeless.”

“I am not,” Jill protests but it’s breathless and she keeps snickering between words. “I’m just...happy. I’m allowed to be happy. Everyone should be happy on vacation.”

“Jill, I think you’re past happy and into blitzed,” Jim says, even though he’s laughing, too.

“I’m really, really not,” Jill says. “What I am is a little bit drunk, relaxed, on vacation, and probably having a belated freakout over the whole kidnapped broken leg thing that’s manifesting itself as mild hysteria, because at the moment I am safe and with people I trust and--shit, fuck, here come the goddamned shakes, why did I--” She shuts up as her teeth start chattering, and without saying a word Khan carries her out of the water, Evan and Jim scrambling after him. Jill ends up huddled between Evan and Khan, who doesn’t appear to want to let go of her; Jim keeps quiet and kneels nearby, knowing all too well what this feels like. He’s been there himself.

Eventually, Jill stops shaking, but she’s still breathing hard, wrapped around her knees with her hair spilling over her back and arms. Jim moves a little closer and frowns, noticing a scar up her left thigh.

“Shouldn’t regen have--” he murmurs to Evan, nodding at it.

Evan shakes his head. “Regen doesn’t work properly on her,” he murmurs back. “Bone, dermal, any of it. She’s got a few scars.”

“If by a few you mean many,” Jill says without looking up. “My back’s the worst of it, but my body’s a patchwork. I’m okay with it, though. I like having the visible reminders of what I survived, and they’re rare these days.”

“What happened to your back?” Jim asks.

Jill rubs her hands over her face. “I almost broke,” she says. She twists so she’s facing away from Jim and pulls off her tank top, pushing her hair over a shoulder so he can see. From about her shoulderblades to her waist, her back’s crossed with thin pale lines, not quite parallel to each other, some crossing over others. “Old-fashioned, bloody effective, and painful as hell,” she says. “The lash marks got infected, and they couldn’t heal them without scarring. I’ve mostly got full sensation back there, but a few places are numb, and a couple spots are more sensitive than they should be.”

Khan moves to look, still touching her shoulder, and Jill huffs out a breath that could almost be a laugh. “You haven’t got any,” she says. “Curious what they look like?”

“Not physically,” Khan says, and Jill sighs.

“True,” she says. “Sometimes I wonder if it isn’t worse that way. At least I can look at my scars and say I did this, I survived and I am here to talk about it. You--and everyone else for whom regen works properly--carry them inside, and no one asks because no one knows they exist.” Jill pulls her tank top back on and shakes her hair back before turning to face Khan. “Maybe this is a night for war stories after all,” she says quietly.
“Maybe it is,” Khan says. He shifts to sit cross-legged, wings folded back, and Jill mimics his pose, sitting almost knee to knee with him. She’s so small in comparison to him, Jim thinks, and yet it doesn’t matter at all.

Evan folds himself down on the ground on Jill’s right, and Jim faces him, until they’re sitting in a not-quite circle, all mostly naked and that doesn’t matter either. “Who’s first?” Jill asks.

“I think you are,” Evan says when neither Jim nor Khan answer.

Jill smiles a little, without humor, and looks at her hands. “I couldn’t save them,” she says. “That was...the hardest. I watched two of my crew, two people I worked with, trusted, liked, bleed to death in front of me, and all I could do was hold them and lie to them and promise it’d be okay.” She scrubs at her hands, almost violently. “Sometimes I can still feel their blood on my skin. Evan says I was covered in it when they found me, between theirs and mine. I don’t remember that. I don’t remember anything after Suriya died, not until I woke up in medbay nine days later. I wish I did, I wish I remembered what I’d told them, what I didn’t tell them. I found out later that I didn’t tell them the important things, I didn’t break, but I don’t remember it. Maybe it’s better that way. I almost died, and I don’t remember being hurt that badly, and maybe it’s better I don’t. But God, I remember Suriya dying in my arms, I remember Drew’s eyes when he died, asking me why this had to happen, why...” Jill swallows hard. “Sometimes I dream they tell me it’s not my fault, and sometimes I dream they still ask me why it happened.”

“You never get answers,” Khan says, startling Jim a little. “At least they do not blame you. For years, decades, I dreamed of men, women I’d lost in battle, and they always asked me why I killed them, why I led them to death. I never had an answer for them. I was, as we all were, fighting for peace, but could there have been another way to go about getting it? That I don’t know.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Jill says softly.

“And it was not yours,” Khan says. “Do you believe that?”

“Probably about as much as you do,” Jill says, managing a smile. She looks at Jim, then. “You’d never lost a crew member until Marcus attacked your ship. Do you know how much I envied you that, how much I even hated you a little for it—and at the same time, I pitied you, because it’s...the first time you lose a crew member, it’s horrible and awful and you never, ever get over it. It gets easier but it never goes away.”

“I know that now,” Jim says.

“I know you do,” Jill says. “And I’m sorry.”

“Were Suriya and Drew the first ones you lost?” Jim asks.

“They were the first ones lost under my command,” Jill says. “It was my landing party, my mission, and my responsibility.”

“But not your fault,” Evan says.

Jill doesn’t answer that, and again to Jim’s surprise Khan reaches out, taking her hand. She holds on tight, Jim notices, and neither of them move to let go.

Jim licks dry lips. “I wanted you dead,” he says to Khan. “After what you did, after what I saw you do, I wanted you dead. I was sent for the express purpose of killing you. Spock talked me out of it, I don’t know if you knew that, but he did, and then...everything changed, and you were telling the truth and Marcus was lying to me and eighteen of my people died because he wanted a war he was
willing to go to any lengths to provoke.”

“And because of what I did,” Khan says.

“Maybe,” Jim says, since it’s a night for honesty. “But did you have any other options?”

“At the time, I didn’t think so,” Khan says.

“Tell me something,” Jim says, because he wants to know and he’s never asked and if not tonight, then when? “Why did you run to Qo’nos? Why there?”

Khan looks down, and Jill tightens her grip on his hand when he pulls back a little. He smiles, faintly, and lets her keep hold of him. “Because I did not think I would, could be followed,” he says. “I had faith in my ability to survive, although to be fair, I did not much care if I lived or died at that point. My thoughts, beyond escape, were that if I could get to Qo’nos, I could get somewhere else, either outside Federation space or even back into it, without being noticed.” His mouth twists in what isn’t quite a smile. “I was going to let the Klingons kill you, and then...that message, and everything changed.”

“Yeah,” Jim says, reaching for Khan’s other hand. “Yeah, it did.”

“What was it like?” Jill asks softly. “To hear it?”

“Hope when I thought it was gone,” Khan says. “A reason to stay alive, when I had nothing left to live for.” He looks at Jim. “Because they were still safe, and you hadn’t fired them, and I had a reason to fight for them again.”

“You really thought Marcus would kill them himself?” Jim asks. “He meant me to do it, to murder seventy-two innocent people.”

“I know,” Khan says. “And never find out. Or maybe he meant you to learn about it after, I don’t know.”

“I don’t think he expected me to survive,” Jim says honestly. “Or my ship. He came after me to make sure I’d killed you, and then...he wanted to kill me, when I hadn’t.”

“I almost resigned from Starfleet when I found out the truth,” Jill says, jolting Jim’s attention away from Khan. “I’m not the only one. A lot of us, a lot of officers--to have the admiral in charge of Starfleet go so completely wrong, it left a lot of us with a bad taste in our mouths. I know at least three officers of varying ranks who did turn in their commissions, and I know half a dozen more who are thinking about it, have been thinking about it. The...what Admiral Pike did, what you did, Jim, with awakening the augments, integrating them, that’s kept a few people from walking away. But still, it’s not an easy thing to stomach, to know that the man who supposedly ran Starfleet was so...twisted.” She nods at Evan. “He wanted to quit. I talked him into staying, and then I got promoted, and now it’s more complicated.”

“Just a bit,” Jim says. “I didn’t...I didn’t know.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Jill says. She smiles a little. “Someone asked me a couple weeks ago what I thought about the whole thing. I said I had no idea why anyone would create a winged human but by God I was glad there were at least two of them.”

Jim really has no idea what to say to that, and Khan’s poker face is too good for him to get anything there. “Just one, you see, that’s a freak thing, genetic engineering gone too far, or an attempt to play God that we shouldn’t have, or maybe just random chance manifesting itself in ways no one would
have expected,” Jill says, and Jim notices she still hasn’t let go of Khan’s hand and he hasn’t forced
her to. “But two, that’s more than chance, more than coincidence, and for those two people to meet
under those circumstances, when possibly being like each other was the only thing that saved you
both?” She shrugs. “I believe in luck, I believe in fate, I believe in a lot of things I maybe shouldn’t
these days, but I believe there’s absolutely a reason you two are the way you are, and that you are
what you are to each other, and I’m glad for it.”

“Why do you believe in fate?” Khan asks, which isn’t what Jim expected him to ask but he doesn’t
know what that was.

“I need to clarify that,” Jill says. “I believe in free will, absolutely. But I also believe that sometimes
things are more than coincidence, more than chance, and sometimes things happen in ways that we
can’t predict or would never have predicted and yet they need to happen just those ways. I survived
Suriya and Drew for a reason I don’t understand. I became friends with you two for a reason I don’t
understand, but I’m grateful for it. Maybe I had to survive them to become who I am now, because
without that, I don’t know if I’d be where I am now and if I wasn’t here I might not have known
you, and I think both of you need me.”

“You might be right about that,” Khan says softly.

“Which part?” Jill asks, smiling.

He smiles back. “Yes.” To Jim’s surprise, he visibly hesitates. “Rani would have liked you, I think,”
he says after a moment. “You remind me of her, in many ways. She was bright, like you, and quick-
tempered, and absolutely, steadfastly loyal to the people she considered hers.”

“You’re one of mine,” Jill says simply.

Khan says something quietly in Russian and Jill answers him, nodding. Then she shifts to her knees
and crawls into his lap to hug him, and if she says something in his ear Jim has no idea. Khan holds
her, which surprises Jim a bit, and folds his wings around her.

After a moment, Jill laughs. “Okay, suddenly warming up now, that’s a nice trick. I am cold, and
you three have to be freezing, how about we gather up the clothes and head back to the house and
beds and things?”

It’s a good idea in theory, but Jim ends up carrying his shirt and Khan’s clothes because he doesn’t
want to wrestle the shirt on and Khan doesn’t put Jill down. His wings stay wrapped around her and
Jim thinks they’re talking quietly the rest of the walk back, but he can’t make out any of the
conversation.

Evan lets them back into the house and Khan sets Jill down on the front porch. She says something
to him in Russian, a question by the inflection, and he nods, leaning down to kiss her forehead much
the way Jim’s seen him do for Cat. She smiles and kisses his cheek and goes inside, disappearing
into the downstairs bedroom with a wave for Jim, Evan following her. The door closes quietly and
Jim shrugs before he begins climbing the stairs.

“You want a shower?” he asks Khan when they get into their room. “Everything okay?”

“I do and it is,” Khan says. “Join me?”

“Yeah,” Jim says, stripping out of his damp jeans and shorts. The hot water feels way too good after
the chill of the water and the cool night air, and he stays there for a while, letting it warm him
through. Khan catches him around the waist and kisses the back of his neck, his own body heat
making Jim feel almost too warm, a nice change from earlier.

Eventually, they get out of the shower and dry off with towels nicer than Jim has in his apartment and crawl into bed. “What were you and Jill talking about, when you carried her home?” Jim asks, lying on his side facing Khan.

“Family,” Khan says.

“Hers or yours?” Jim asks.

Khan smiles a little. “They are in many ways the same. I hadn’t realized I felt that way about her until tonight.”

“What changed?” Jim asks.

“My perception,” Khan says. “Some of what she said, some of what you said. I am not sure I can put a finger on exactly what.”

“Fair enough,” Jim says, reaching for his hand. “I’m glad, though.”

“I thought you might be,” Khan says.

“Are you going to get up at sunrise with her?” Jim asks.

“I believe so,” Khan says. “Will you join us?”

“No,” Jim says firmly. “I’m sleeping in. It’s what vacations are for.”

“Is it?” Khan smiles. “Another rule I never learned?”

“There are many rules you never learned,” Jim says, smiling back. “I can teach you more tomorrow.”

“Can you, now,” Khan murmurs and he tugs Jim a little closer, until their lips meet and suddenly Jim wonders how tired he is after all.

It turns out not as tired as he thought, but by the time he actually passes out Khan’s already mostly unconscious, one arm flung possessively over Jim’s body and Khan’s head tucked into the back of his neck, above his wings. Jim falls asleep smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I have to admit I really like Khan and Jill interacting; they balance nicely. I will try not to overwhelm you with her, though, and I apologize if anyone thinks this chapter was too much.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

The things I never knew about you.

Chapter Notes

In which not much happens but I wrote almost seven thousand words anyway. I feel like I should apologize for that.

Also, a couple other notes that I forgot to put in here when I posted the chapter (it's been a LONG week):

1. Many thanks to a friend of mine (who is not actually reading this) for letting me borrow and tweak Lenore just a bit. Cade is also not a character I invented, I'm just borrowing him and tweaking a bit.

2. Sort of speaking of Jill, this chapter got delayed a bit because I've been working on a FF AU. Remember what Jim said about "If things were different"? Well, in this AU they are, and I have zero idea where it's going but I'm having fun with it. I am, however, hesitant to post it because it's het with an OFC and I fear being hit with heavy blunt objects for inflicting a Mary Sue upon people. However, that being said, I've run it by a couple people who say it's not terrible. So, if you would like to read said het AU, please drop me a comment and I will see what I can do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jim wakes to sunlight coming through the shades and an empty bed, which doesn’t surprise him. The sun hits the bed at the right angle that he can’t tell the difference between its warmth and any lingering body heat Khan left behind, but either way it feels good and he sprawls out, closing his eyes and feeling the sun warm his skin and his wings. Eventually, though, he realizes he has to use the toilet, and while he’s doing that he might as well get up and see if Jill and Khan are back from the sunrise, so he pulls on now-dry jeans and pads to the bathroom. He hears voices when he emerges and walks to the open area, looking down at the living room below.

The couch faces away from him when he looks down, and he can see Jill sitting on one end, cross-legged, wearing a blue bathing suit and the same wrap skirt from last night. Her hair looks damp and Jim guesses they went swimming, or diving. Khan takes the other end of the couch, shirtless--and Jim spares a moment to appreciate that--and in black swim trunks, both of them barefoot.

“When did you know?” Jill’s asking Khan at the moment, and this seems awfully private and Jim doesn’t want to intrude but he’s curious enough to admit he wants to overhear. Quietly, he folds himself down on the floor to listen.

“When she laughed,” Khan says and Jim knows exactly what they’re talking about. “When she trusted me enough to laugh at me. When did you know?”
Jill smiles--Jim can just catch the side of her face--and tucks a curl back behind her ear. “When he broke up with the one before me,” she says. “I knew I was interested in him, had been ever since we ended up both on the Marshall, but he never seemed to see me as anyone other than that short girl who went skydiving on her birthday and could occasionally best him in hand to hand. He’s a better shot with a phaser, but I can beat him about half the time in unarmed combat. Anyway. He was dating this...person, we’ll say, because I really didn’t like her, and they broke up badly, and he moped about it for a couple weeks, and all I wanted to do--besides punch her for hurting my Evan--was cuddle him and kiss him and make him smile, and I knew I was completely sunk.”

“Did you punch her?” Khan asks.

Jill laughs. “I asked her to spar with me, because I did that with almost everyone, and I beat the crap out of her.”

Khan laughs as well. “Somehow I am not surprised,” he says.

“Yeah, she transferred off the ship a week later,” Jill says, smiling. “And then Evan turned me down twice when I asked him out, and I punched him the second time--just in the stomach, not like I gave him a black eye or anything, and he wheezed out that okay, he’d go out with me if I would agree to stop hurting him. So we spent our next free shift together, and then I dragged him into bed with me, and then I never let him get away and two freaking years later he finally proposed.”

“Why didn’t you propose to him?” Khan asks.

“I was afraid he’d say no,” Jill says. “And I couldn’t have dealt with that. Why did it take Rani a year to agree to marry you?”

“She didn’t see the need for it,” Khan says. “She said she was mine and I was hers and everyone knew that, everyone we cared about, and if anything happened to me she knew my family would take care of her, and if anything happened to her she knew I would kill whoever was responsible and it wouldn’t matter anyway. But I wanted it, and eventually I wore her down. We had a small wedding, but it was...it was what we wanted.”

“Would you do it again?” Jill asks and Jim wonders what she’s getting at for a moment until it clicks.

“I don’t know,” Khan says after a pause. “Things are...to say the least, very different these days. He isn’t her, and things between us are different than they were between myself and Rani.”

“But he’s yours,” Jill says softly.

“Yes,” Khan says without hesitation.

“When did you know?” Jill asks.

“Before he did,” Khan says.

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jill says, idly playing with the wrap on her skirt. “Not much for self-introspection or self-analysis, is our Jim.”

Jim wants to protest but she’s got a point, and anyway they don’t know he’s there. He thinks.

“He isn’t much for anyone else doing the analyzing either,” Khan says and Jill laughs.

“No, that he’s not,” she agrees. “But we love him anyway.”
“Do we?” Khan asks in that maddening way he has.

Jill snorts and stretches out a leg, poking his thigh. “You tell me.”

“I haven’t even told him,” Khan says. “At least, not that he understood.”

“Other languages are so useful,” Jill agrees. “I curse out Evan all the time in Russian, although by this point he’s picked up a bit. Hindi was your first language, wasn’t it?”

“We learned multiple languages simultaneously,” Khan says. “For a while, we developed a pidgin speak that none of the scientists could understand. But they were very keen on us developing a first language associated with the country from which our genetic material had come, with the second being English for those of us it wasn’t our first. So I suppose my first official languages were Hindi and English.”

“But you don’t sound like it,” Jill says. “You sound like you’re from London.”

“When one is alone in a strange land, one acclimates rather quickly,” Khan says. “I learned very rapidly how to sound like a local upon being revived, and kept it. And it suits me these days.”

“What did you used to sound like, though?” Jill asks.

“Why does it matter?” Khan asks.

“Because I’m curious,” Jill says. “Because language is such a vital part of who we are, how we interact with the world, and for you to make such a drastic change in what you sound like...I know you changed, pretty drastically, as a person. I want to know both parts of you, the three hundred years ago you and the current you.”

Khan’s wings shift a little, and Jill moves closer to him, resting a hand on his leg. “Just between us,” she says softly.

“I am not even sure where I would begin,” Khan says. “I...pushed away that voice, that sound, it was too familiar of a time that no longer existed.” But even as he says it, his voice shifts a bit, and Jim stays quiet, fascinated and afraid to breathe.

“Tell me about Rani,” Jill says gently.

“She was so beautiful,” Khan says. “That was the first thing I noticed about her, her temper was the second. She was so angry with me, so furious that I had dared to take over her town, its people, imprison those who fought against me, including her father and her brothers. She came to bargain for their release, and I asked her what she would give me, and she said she would give me nothing. She did not fear me, even though she had seen me kill men in front of her. I was fascinated. I told her I would release them if she would stay with me as a hostage on their behalf, and she told me if I laid one finger, one feather on her, I would not live to do it again.”

As he talks, his voice does change more, shifting from its clipped British familiarity into something Jim can’t quite place, also clipped but in a different way, different vowels, and he sounds wholly unlike the man Jim’s known this whole time.

“What did you tell her?” Jill asks.

“I said I would like to see her try,” Khan says and smiles a little. “But then I said I did not do such things, and none of my men would touch her or I would kill them myself, slowly. So she agreed to stay.” He stops, breathes out slowly, and when he speaks again his voice is back to its usual British
Jill says matter-of-factly. After a moment, Khan nods. “It is.”

Jill hugs him, all but crawling into his lap to do it, but pulls back when someone knocks on the door. “What the hell?” She gets up, crossing to the door, and Jim takes advantage of it to make some noise and come downstairs. “Cade, you couldn’t call first?” she demands and punches someone in the arm.

“Ow,” he says. “Sorry, we didn’t know we were going to get here until like two in the morning and then we--anyway, it’s not my fault, Lenore got caught up on a job and we ran late and hi, is there coffee? Is Evan awake?”

“Not yet, I haven’t woken him yet,” Jill says, stepping aside to let in two people. One’s clearly related to Evan, although Jim thinks he’s a little shorter. Also he has dark hair as opposed to Evan’s auburn, and no beard, but the eyes are similar. The other is a tall, willowy blonde with scorch marks on her boots and a burn on the cuff of her shirt. “Although it appears you woke Jim, well done, and now I have two shirtless men in the living room, nice. Khan, Jim, this is my brother-in-law Cade and this is Lenore, and if Lenore doesn’t like you she’ll blow you up, assuming she’s noticing.”

“What?” Lenore asks. “Does something need blowing up?”

“No, not right now,” Jill says. “We’re on vacation, no explosions.” Lenore sighs. “Well, that’s no fun.”

“I’m surrounded by lunatics,” Jill mutters.

“Of which you are simultaneously the biggest and the smallest,” Jim says. “Hey, Cade, Lenore.” He shakes hands with Cade and tries not to notice the dagger strapped to his hip.

“It’s true,” Jill says. “I am completely batshit, we acknowledge this. How long are you two here for and are you staying with us?”

“We got a hotel room in town,” Cade says. “We’re here for...two days? Maybe three? Depends on whether I get called. Anyway, Jill, I beg you, coffee?”

She rolls her eyes. “I need to wake Evan,” she says. “So you can either give me ten minutes, make it yourself, or ask Khan or Jim to do it.”

“I’ll make it,” Jim says, deciding not to speculate on why Jill needs ten minutes to wake Evan. He disappears into the kitchen as Jill disappears into the bedroom and focuses on making a big pot of coffee, getting down a row of mugs and finding the sugar and the milk.

He hears footsteps and turns to see Khan. “Did you have fun on the cliffs this morning?” he asks.

“We did,” Khan says. “I took Jill flying for a bit and then we dove. When did you wake up?”

“Just a little while ago,” Jim says. “I heard you and Jill talking but they knocked on the door before I could figure out whether it was safe to come down or not.” All completely true and in no way nearing a lie, and Khan seems to buy it. “Can you go ask Cade and Lenore how they take their coffee?” Jim asks.
“I can,” Khan says, but he pauses to touch Jim’s shoulder, lean his forehead against Jim’s temple for a moment before he goes. Jim smiles, feeling warm through from the brief contact, and begins adding milk and sugar to mugs for the people he knows use it.

In about eleven minutes everyone has coffee and a spot somewhere in the living room; Evan, Cade, and Lenore take the couch, Khan and Jim take the loveseat opposite, although with their wings they barely fit, and Jill sits cross-legged on the coffee table in the middle, reminding Jim a bit of Alona. “So,” Jill says after a moment. “Breakfast? We have basic groceries in the house, who’s cooking that isn’t me?”

“You don’t like cooking?” Jim asks.

“Hate it,” she says cheerfully. “And I’m pretty terrible at it.”

“Since I’d rather you didn’t burn down the house I’m making a house rule for the week that Jill’s not allowed to do anything in the kitchen but make coffee and toast,” Evan says and he doesn’t sound like he’s kidding. “I guess I can do breakfast. French toast okay?”

“I can cook,” Khan says at the same time.

Jill looks between them. “Flip a coin?”

“Have you one?” Khan asks.

“No, so I’m saying you do it,” Jill says. “French toast and some form of protein?”

“I will see what is available,” Khan says, pushing to his feet.

“Put on a shirt first,” Jill says. “I don’t want you to get burned.”

“I will heal,” Khan says mildly.

“Still hurts,” Jill says.

“So, do you have to get all your shirts custom tailored or something?” Cade asks curiously as Khan shakes his head but goes upstairs for a shirt. “I mean, I can’t imagine t-shirts normally come with wing slits.”

“Nice use of tact, there,” Jill says.

He shrugs. “I can’t imagine it’s not something they don’t get asked normally.”

“Yeah, it is,” Jim says. “And yeah, we do. Winter coats are the worst of it, really, but everything has to get tailored. I know a few stores that’ll do it for free if you buy enough, so I tend to buy clothes in bulk. Khan’s sister Cat, she sews some and fixed a lot of his shirts for this vacation. But uniforms are a pain.”

“Uniforms are always a pain,” Cade says. “I generally avoid them. Cat, that’s Ekaterina? I’ve heard of her. I’d love to meet her.”

“If you end up in San Francisco before we ship out, I can introduce you,” Jim says. “Why do you want to meet her?”

Cade grins and shrugs. “I like knives, and she has a reputation.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Jim says. “She almost slit my throat the first time I met her. Khan says she
wouldn’t really have but I’m not sure I believe him.”

“She would not have,” Khan says, coming back downstairs in a black t-shirt and jeans. Jim tries not to be sad about it, although the way the jeans fit, it’s kind of a trade-off. “How did you hear of my sister’s reputation?”

“I know one of the folks on her project,” Cade says. “He said the first time they sparred she had his pants around his ankles in two minutes flat and he hadn’t even noticed she was doing it, he was too busy trying to avoid getting his bones broken.”

Jim snorts. “Yeah, that’s Cat all right.” Khan smiles before heading into the kitchen to make breakfast.

“I want to meet her,” Lenore says.

“I think that might make something in the universe go boom,” Cade says dubiously.

She grins. “This is a problem?”

“When do you guys ship out again?” Cade asks with a sigh.

“A month, maybe,” Jim says. “They keep changing the date on us, and I want to get a couple things accomplished before we head out. Khan’s—wait, can’t talk about that one, sorry.”

“Oh, we’re very familiar with that one around here,” Jill says. “Cade, how many people did you kill this past month?”

“Starfleet doesn’t sanction assassination,” Cade says.

“Which doesn’t answer the question,” Jill points out.

“Doesn’t it?” Cade grins and drinks his coffee.

“Lenore, are you with intelligence too?” Jim asks.

“I go where I want, mostly,” Lenore says. “Sometimes I work with Cade, sometimes I go to different planets or places that need my skills.”

“Where were you before this?” Jim asks.


“Yeah, something like that,” Cade says. “I think, I don’t really remember, it was get in, do the job, avoid the explosion, get out.”

“Been there,” Jim and Jill say in unison.

“Speaking of,” Cade says. “Broken leg much?”

“Don’t even start, I’m fine,” Jill says. “I had my freakout last night, it’s fine, we’re fine, everything’s fine. Two working legs, I won’t even scar because it was a clean break, all healed, everything’s just peachy keen.”

Cade raises his eyebrows. “So the whole being dumped in a bag and kidnapped thing?”

“Not my idea of a good time but I got out,” Jill says. “Can we please drop it?”
"How many times have you been kidnapped now?" Cade asks.

Jill sighs. "This makes five. Seriously, Cade, drop it or I’m asking Lenore to blow you up."

"She wouldn’t," Cade says. "I hope."

"He’d probably dodge the blast," Lenore says. "Quick on his feet."

"Runs in the family," Cade says. "Although Jill’s quicker than I am, which is unfair because I have longer legs."

"Yeah, but you’re bigger," Jill says. "There’s less of me, I can move fast."

"I can’t keep up with her either," Jim says, smiling. "Although sometimes I swear she just disappears."

"Yes, I know," Cade says. "And then you look around and she’s ten meters ahead of you looking at you impatiently like ‘where did you go and why are you taking so long to get here?’"

"Pretty much," Jim says.

"What is this, pick on Jill morning?" Jill asks, but she laughs.

Something in Russian comes from the kitchen and Jill laughs more, calling back something that sounds rude although most of Russian sounds rude to Jim so he has no idea what she actually said. Either way, Cade doesn’t appear to react and Lenore seems lost in thought, so Jim shrugs it off and drinks more coffee.

"Are you two coming diving with us today?" Jill asks Cade. "Khan and I were talking about checking out this set of cliffs that’s supposed to be spectacular, but we’d have to drive. I think technically our vehicle holds five, but I can sit on someone’s lap."

"Uh, maybe," Cade says. "We might just go back to the hotel for a bit and crash, though. It’s been a long few days."

"What happened in Sao Paulo?" Jill asks.

"Can’t talk about it," Cade says apologetically. "Let’s just say it involved a well-timed explosion and a better-timed transporter."

"Lenore’s specialties," Jill says.

"Only sometimes," Lenore says. "Sometimes it’s the other way around."

"What, a well-timed transporter and a better-timed explosion?" Jim asks.

"Exactly," Lenore says.

"I have to admit I’m not the biggest fan of explosions," Jim says. "They tend to involve things going wrong on my ship."

"Then you’re not doing them right," Lenore says.

"I’m usually not trying to do them at all," Jim says.

"Most people aren’t," Cade says.
“Most people are boring,” Lenore says.

“No, we just like staying in one piece,” Jim says.

“Which is why you’re going cliff diving on your vacation,” Cade says.

Jim laughs. “Okay, you have a point, but in my defense, Jill talked me into it.”

“Did she talk you into it or just drag you along?” Cade asks, grinning.

“A little of both,” Jim says. “She’s scarily good at that.”

“Trust me, I know,” Cade says.

“Again with the picking on me,” Jill complains. “Evan, he’s your brother, make him stop.”

“Cade, stop picking on my wife,” Evan says amiably.

“If I must,” Cade says.

Khan pokes his head out of the kitchen. “Breakfast is almost ready, if someone wants to set the table,” he says.

“Evan, you and Cade do it,” Jill says.

“Yes, dear,” Evan says, pushing to his feet. “Anything you say, dear.” Cade sighs but also gets up and the two of them go to set the table.

Khan made French toast and bacon for breakfast, and another pot of coffee, and it looks like a ton of food but by the time they finish there’s nothing left except one piece of bacon that Cade and Jill bicker over before splitting in half. Jim looks at her a little disbelievingly. “Where do you put it all?” he asks.

“I burn a lot of calories,” Jill says. “High metabolism that hasn’t slowed down yet and I’m always moving.”

“Even in her sleep,” Evan says. “I have bruises to prove it.”

“Did I kick you last night?” Jill asks. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, just the once though,” Evan says. “It’ll bruise but I’ll be okay.”

“Violent sleeper,” Jim says.

“On occasion,” Jill says. “I am way too full to dive right now, I need like half an hour to an hour. Jim, you and I can clean up, though, since Khan cooked and the brothers set the table.”

“Sure,” Jim says, getting to his feet and beginning to gather plates and silverware. It doesn’t take long to clean up from breakfast and when they finish, everyone moves back into the living room in much the same spots as earlier.

“I think Lenore and I are going to head back to the hotel and get some sleep,” Cade says after a moment. “We have no idea what time it is, really, and we’re zonked. We’ll find you guys later in the day?”

“Sure,” Jill says, lying on her back on the coffee table. “If we’re not here we’ll be somewhere
playing in the water or shopping if I can drag the boys along with me. I probably can’t though so odds are we’ll be in the water.”

“Shopping or stealing?” Cade asks.

Jill snorts. “That was years and years ago, thanks. You didn’t even know me then.”

“You were a thief?” Jim asks, startled.

“Briefly,” Jill says. “More to prove I could do it than anything else. I didn’t steal much and I usually put it all back. I gave it up, reformed and all that, when I started at the Academy. I was good, though. I’m small, I’m flexible, and I’m sneaky.”

“Did the Academy know about that?” Jim asks.

“Nope,” Jill says. “And they never will, right?”

“Right,” Jim says, grinning. “What else did you used to do that I should know about?”

“Gamble,” Jill says. “Not seriously, just for the fun of it. I still like to play when I get the chance, I’m remarkably good at poker.”

“Yeah, count me out,” Jim says. “I have two giant tells I can’t stifle.”

“Man, that’s got to suck,” Cade says, getting to his feet. “Although it’s so not worth playing against Jill, she will take all your money and smile at you while she does it. The last time we played, there was also a lot of vodka involved and Evan got home to the five of us sitting in the kitchen in our underwear with one guy wearing a strategically placed towel because someone, and I honestly don’t remember who, thought strip poker was a good idea. Evan just blinked at us and was like ‘Can I get you guys anything? Coffee, food, your pants?'”

“For the record, it wasn’t me,” Jill says, turning her head to look at Jim. “Also I was still mostly dressed.”

“Mostly,” Evan agrees. “Not that you would have cared if you hadn’t been.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone in that room had seen breasts before,” Jill says. “And mine aren’t even all that exciting.”

Jim has no idea what to say to that one so he keeps quiet. “Anyway, see you guys later,” Cade says. “Nice meeting you two.” He waves, and Lenore raises a hand and they leave, shutting the door behind them.

“I still need a bit of time before we head out,” Jill says, stretching and dangling her legs and arms off the side of the table. “Man, am I full. Khan, breakfast was delicious, thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Khan says. “Do we have enough items in the house to put together lunch, or will we need to stop somewhere?”

“I think there’s enough to get us through today and then we’ll need to hit a store,” Jill says. “Evan? You looked more closely than I did.”

“I think you’re right,” Evan says. “We’ll make sure before we head out. Where did you want to go?”

“The ones we read about, remember?” Jill says. “Khan took me flying this morning and we could just see them, and they look spectacular. Of course, everything looked amazing up in the air, oh my
God, but these in particular looked like a lot of fun, and it’s an easier climb back up than the ones we went to yesterday or so it appeared to us. Not that it matters to Khan, but the rest of us will appreciate it.”

“Please don’t steal my wife,” Evan says to Khan. “I kind of like having her around. I’ve gotten used to it.”

“I’d appreciate that too, for the record,” Jim says, but he grins when he says it and Jill laughs.

“No one’s stealing anyone,” Jill promises. “I worked way too hard to get you, I am not about to leave or get stolen away.” She makes a face at Evan and sits up. “And if you think I would, maybe I need to kick you again.”

“No hurting me, it’s in our marriage vows,” Evan says.

“Is it really?” Jim asks, laughing.

“I think the actual vow was something like me promising not to beat him up without cause,” Jill says. “And then he promised to never give me cause. A promise he totally breaks all the time, for the record.”

“Yeah, and I have a bruise in the shape of your foot on my thigh,” Evan says. “So your point?”

“I was asleep,” Jill protests. “You cannot hold me responsible for violence inflicted while I was unconscious.”

“I think I am safer sleeping with you,” Khan says to Jim.

“Right, because I’m sure Jill could actually hurt you,” Jim says skeptically. “But I prefer you sleeping with me, so let’s keep it that way, okay?”

“Of course,” Khan says.

“Are we ready to head out yet?” Jill asks. “I think by the time we get there and set up I’ll be ready to dive.”

“We all need to change,” Jim says, pushing to his feet with a groan. He’s a bit sore from all the exercise yesterday, and his shoulders still ache a bit from the cuffs. But he knows that the best thing for it is movement, and also he really does want to go diving again. “And get lunch together, and things.”

“Lunch I can do since it doesn’t involve cooking,” Jill says, jumping to her feet. “I’ll take care of it while you three change and get whatever stuff you’ll need, just don’t take too long.”

“We’ll try not to,” Jim says, heading up the stairs, Khan following him. They change into swim trunks and in Jim’s case, a t-shirt, and throw dry clothes and a few odds and ends into a bag. Before they head downstairs, though, Jim catches Khan’s hand and tugs him in. “I didn’t get a proper hello from you today,” he says, teasing about it.

“And what does a proper hello consist of?” Khan asks, lips a breath away from Jim’s.

Jim grins and kisses the hell out of him, until Khan’s hand tightens on his, until Khan’s free hand curls around his other wrist and Jim gasps into his mouth. “Something like that,” Jim says, a little shakily.
Khan hums thoughtfully and kisses him again, not letting go of him. Jim’s knees go to water and he presses against Khan, making a desperate sound that maybe should embarrass him but it just gets Khan to kiss him harder, tighten his grip, and really there’s nothing embarrassing about that at all.

“Will that suffice for a ‘proper hello’?” Khan asks, smooth as silk, letting go of Jim.

“Oh, you bastard,” Jim says around a groan. “I hate it when you do this to me.”

Khan laughs and Jim punches him in the shoulder. “I will tell Jill and Evan you will be down in a minute,” he says, picking up the bag and heading out of the room. “I suggest you take that time to settle yourself.”

“Really hate you right now,” Jim calls after him, but he smiles anyway.

He does take a minute to tell his cock to shut up and remember how to breathe, and when he feels mostly settled he heads downstairs, finding Jill carrying a cooler out of the kitchen and Evan emerging from the bedroom with a backpack over one shoulder. “Let me take that,” Jim says, moving to intercept the cooler.

“I can handle this,” Jill says, refusing to let go. “You could get the door for me, though, and then Evan can open the back so I can put it down.”

Jim decides discretion is the better part of not getting punched after she puts the cooler down and hastily moves to get the door. Evan follows them outside and opens the back of the vehicle, and Jill loads in the cooler easily, ducking back inside to get her own bag. Evan tosses in his backpack, Khan adds the one with his and Jim’s things, and a moment later Jill runs outside and throws her own tote into the mix. “Evan, we have keys and codes for the vehicle?” she asks, slamming the trunk shut.

“House keys, vehicle codes, check,” Evan says, slipping on his sunglasses.

“Lunch we have, water, other drinks,” Jill says. “Everyone have a towel and something to put on after the water? Did I forget anything?”

“We do and I don’t think so,” Jim says, putting on his own sunglasses as Jill does the same.

“If we did we’ll remember it later, we won’t be that far,” Evan says. “Let’s go.”

They climb into the vehicle, Evan driving again, and head out, following Jill’s directions. “Does he usually drive and you navigate?” Jim asks curiously.

“He hates my driving,” Jill says. “He thinks I go way too fast and drive too aggressively--”

“Which she does,” Evan says.

“Which I don’t, so shut up, but whatever, in the interest of peaceable vacations we have the general rule that he drives, I navigate.”

“Which of you is the better pilot?” Jim asks.

“We’re about even,” Jill says. “Which of you is the better pilot?”

“I have no idea,” Jim says, looking at Khan. “I’ve never seen you fly a shuttle.”

“I am qualified,” Khan says.
“I’m sure, you’ve just never flown when I’ve been on a shuttle,” Jim says. “Maybe one of these days.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says.

“Do you not enjoy it?” Jill asks, twisting to look back at him. “You don’t sound like you do.”

“I do not dislike piloting,” Khan says. “But it is also not something I particularly enjoy. There is not as much...if I am to be operating a vehicle, I prefer something with more feedback from the environment.”

“You’d rather drive a vehicle like this one, or fly something atmospheric,” Jill says.

“I would,” Khan says. “I like the feel of the road, the way weather conditions can change your experience. The sound of the vehicle, for that matter.”

“Maybe we’ll make you drive later this week,” Jill says. “Have you ever been on a bike? Motorcycle, I mean, not a two-wheeled bike.”

“I have,” Khan says and Jim blinks because holy hell, image he never knew he needed until just then. “Cat used to love racing with Konstantin, and she taught me how to ride.”

“We should go sometime,” Jill says, grinning. “Jim, you in?”


“Nice image,” Jill murmurs. “Of course, now I’m picturing you both in leathers and yeah, happy Jill.”

Evan snorts. “Don’t take it personally,” he says. “She does this to everyone.”

“Only the pretty people,” Jill says, smacking Evan’s arm. “And it’s not like I’d ever do anything about it, just...can you blame me? Would it help if I pictured you in leathers too?”

“Would that make you happy?” Evan asks.

“Only if I got to peel you out of them after,” Jill says sweetly and Jim chokes on a laugh.

“Jill, I suggest you stop before you somehow invite us all into an orgy,” Evan says after a moment.

“I haven’t been to one of those since the Academy,” Jill says. “And it wasn’t all that great then, either.”

“You had an orgy at the Academy?” Jim asks, startled. “What were you doing and why wasn’t I there?”

“One, you weren’t at the Academy yet, remember I’m older than you,” Jill says. “Two, it was...honestly, it wasn’t the best sex I’ve ever had, not by a long shot, and it wasn’t the best sex I’d ever had then, either. I mean, everyone had a good time, and all, but we decided after not to bother doing it again, it was just too complicated to arrange and find a room and just other logistics. We did end up getting a bunch of people together for play parties, though, generally had one right after finals ended.”

“What is a play party?” Khan asks.

Jill blows out a breath. “Right,” she says. “A play party is, well, what it sounds like. You get people
together, and set up areas where they can have kink scenes, and depending on how you arrange it people either sign up for a scene or just first come, first served. They generally--so, it depends on the people arranging it, and how they want to handle it, but a lot of play parties that I’ve been to don’t allow sex or sexual contact, and if you want that you have to go somewhere else after the scene or the party. The ones we had at the Academy we tended to divide into two rooms, one where we allowed sex and one where we didn’t. Both of them were pretty popular. After the first party we threw we had to find a bigger space for the next one.”

“The things I never knew about you,” Jim says, a little stunned. “This was not going on when I was there. I would have known.”

“Couldn’t say,” Jill says. “We did it my junior and senior year, and after that I was out and stopped paying attention.

“Did you play?” Khan asks curiously.

“Sometimes,” Jill says. “I tended to be a watcher and a host, someone who made sure everyone else was having a safe, sane, and consensual time, but I didn’t play often myself.”

“Did you ever go?” Jim asks Evan.

“A couple times,” Evan says. “I was a year ahead of Jill, so it didn’t start until my senior year.”

“The things I never knew about you, either,” Jim says. “Jill, how many of these have you been to?”

Jill laughs. “My past is many and varied, and Olympic athletes are a bunch of mostly young men and women who are in amazing physical shape, full of adrenaline, and totally horny. That was a good time. A really, really good time.”

“Did you have play parties at the Olympics?” Jim asks.

“Nah, we couldn’t risk marks showing outside uniforms or people being too sore or aching to compete,” Jill says. “We just fucked a lot.”

“And by a lot you mean...” Jim says.

Jill laughs again. “Enough that it’s moderately embarrassing now. I think I got, like, six hours of sleep the first week I was there, and most of that was the night before I competed. No, maybe more, because I did try to get a decent night’s sleep before I competed, but other than that, it was crazy.”

“Weren’t you only sixteen?” Jim asks.

“So? That’s legal for consent most places,” Jill says, shrugging. “I didn’t get sick, I didn’t get pregnant, and everyone enjoyed themselves. Besides, how old were you your first time?”

“Uh,” Jim says and ducks his head sheepishly. “Fifteen?”

“My point,” Jill says. “Khan, how old were you?”

“Older,” Khan says and doesn’t elaborate.

“I was twenty, but apparently a late bloomer,” Evan volunteers. “And we’re here.”

“Out of curiosity, how many orgies and play parties and things have you been to?” Jim asks Jill as they get their stuff and go to set up on the cliffs.
“Um,” Jill says. “It depends on how you count the Olympics, because a lot of that kind of blurs together when I try to think about it. Play parties I did once I was legal, and Evan and I still go occasionally when we’re around and one’s happening. But I’m all monogamous now, so it’s all different.” She shrugs and sets the cooler down. “I like sex, always have, and I refuse to be ashamed of it.”

“When was your first?” Jim asks.

She smiles a little wistfully. “Fifteen,” she says. “He was a fellow gymnast, a year older than I was. The sex wasn’t brilliant, but I had such a crush on him. Then two months after we started dating he told me he’d realized he was actually gay. This explained so much, and then he became my flamboyant best friend.”

“Where is he now?” Jim asks.

“He runs a theater in Boston,” Jill says. “Happily married for the last seven years. I see him when I can.”

“He’s a fun guy to spend time with,” Evan says. “Although he keeps flirting with me.”

“He flirts with everyone,” Jill says. “Well, no. He flirts with all the men. His husband doesn’t care, though.”

“Do you?” Jim asks her.

“Why would I?” Jill asks, looking puzzled. “Oh, man, check out the water.” She skips to the edge of the cliff, peering down into the blue. “I can’t wait to get in there.”

“Race you into the water,” Jim says on impulse, looking down with her. He pulls off his shirt and steps out of his sandals as Jill unties her skirt and kicks off her shoes. She dives off the cliff a second before he does, but they hit the water at almost the same time. Jim comes up grinning, although he almost swallows a mouthful of water when Jill pulls him under.

They spend the entire day on the cliffs or in the water, diving and playing. Jim flat out falls asleep for an hour after lunch, but he’s not the only one. When he wakes, groggy and body heavy, Evan’s still out cold but he can just spot Khan in the air, and Jim guesses from the lack of Jill on the cliffs she’s up with him. Jim smiles and considers joining them for a moment before deciding he’s way too comfortable where he is.

By the time they pile back into the car, the sun’s starting to set and Jim feels exhausted physically. Evan looks tired, too, but Jill looks like she could keep going for hours, and Khan—well, that’s not a fair comparison. “Dinner?” Jill asks.

“Nap,” Jim says, leaning his head against the window. “Wake me when we get to the house.”

“That’s ten minutes away,” Jill points out.

“So I’ll take a ten minute nap,” Jim says. “You three can figure out dinner without me, right?” He doesn’t much care if they don’t; he closes his eyes and zones out, vaguely hearing voices but not caring what they say.

He wakes when the vehicle stops, and blinks his eyes open. “This isn’t the house,” he observes.

“Nope, it’s the parking lot of the place we’re going for dinner,” Jill says.
“Right,” Jim says, rubbing his hands over his face. Actually, food sounds good; lunch was a long time ago. “How are you not exhausted?”

Jill shrugs and unbucks her belt, getting out of the car. “I’m solar powered?”

“Entirely possible,” Evan says, also getting out of the car.

“But there’s no solar power in space,” Jim says.

“Caffeine,” Jill says solemnly. “I don’t know. I don’t get tired easily until I do and then I crash for like twelve hours and you can’t wake me for almost anything.”

“That’s what Evan said,” Jim says.

“He’d know,” Jill says. “C’mon, let’s go eat.”

Chapter End Notes

I adore Benedict Cumberbatch, and I loved him in STID, but Khan isn't supposed to be British. (To be fair, Ricardo Montalban wasn't Indian either, but that's not the point here.) The voice thing is something I've been thinking about for a while, and it's crossed Jim's mind before too (in some previous chapter, I forget which) but Jill's pushy enough to ask about it.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Sometimes I wonder just how real you are.

Chapter Notes

Have some porn, with a side of talking and some mild angst. There will be things happening in the next few chapters, I promise, but we're on vacation at the moment so everything's kind of slow and lazy and yeah.

Also! For those of you who are not subscribed to me, I did finally cave and start posting the het AU I was talking about in the notes last chapter. Three chapters are up so far, with a fourth on its way assuming anyone likes it enough for me to continue. If you like Jill enough to read it, you can find it here: Wild Card. I admit being completely neurotic about this one, because it's been a long time since I posted any het and I don't think I've ever done it with an OC (I've done slash with an OC, but that was a different fandom), so if you do read, I beg of you to tell me what you think, even if you hate it.

Also also, for those curious when this will end - I do have a stopping point in mind, and I was thinking of trying to get to 50 chapters and finish, because that seemed like a good solid number, but I have a bunch of stuff to get through first so 50 no longer seems like the best option. But I do know where this is going to end, I promise.

Four days into vacation and Jill finally crashes, falling asleep in the car on the way back from the cliffs. No one can wake her when they get back to the house, and Evan ends up carrying her inside, looking wholly unsurprised. “She might wake up in the morning,” he says as Jim opens the door. “But I wouldn’t expect anything out of her for about twelve hours or more.”

“Good to know,” Jim says. “I was wondering when she’d eventually fall over.” It really has been a long few days, full of unfamiliar physical exertion and some seriously intense sex; fortunately, neither Jill nor Evan has commented about the bite mark on his shoulder or the faint bruises on his wrists. Then again, Jim’s pretty sure those scratches on Evan’s back weren’t there two days ago, and he’s not about to ask.

Thinking about the marks on his own skin makes him smile a bit, though, and he has plans for the rest of the evening that might or might not lead to more. He catches Khan’s curious glance, but keeps silent as he gets the bedroom door for Evan, shutting it quietly after him. “Do you want anything to drink or anything?” Jim asks, walking over to Khan.

“No,” Khan says. “Do you?”

Jim grins and shakes his head, leaning up to kiss him. “I want to take you to bed,” he says, taking Khan’s hand and moving to the stairs. “I have plans.”
“Do you, now,” Khan says, following Jim up the stairs. “What are these plans?”

“You’ll find out,” Jim says teasingly. “I promise you’ll like it, though.”

“This is usually the case,” Khan says.

“Usually makes it sounds like there’s been an occasion or two when you haven’t,” Jim says, frowning. “Has that ever happened?” He shuts the door behind Khan and activates the privacy seal even though he doubts anything will wake Jill and Evan won’t say a word regardless of what he hears. Still, it’s only polite.

“No,” Khan says. “I should think you would have known that.”

“Just making sure,” Jim says, taking Khan’s hands and leaning in to kiss him, licking his way into Khan’s mouth and slicking Khan’s tongue with his own. He’s not surprised when Khan lets him control it, although his hands tighten on Jim’s and he tugs Jim in closer, until their bodies press together and Jim can feel the heat from Khan’s skin. “You need to get naked,” Jim murmurs against his mouth, biting his lower lip.

“I should think you do, too,” Khan says, stepping back to pull off his clothes.

“I will,” Jim says, doing the same. “Lie down? On your stomach?”

“As you like,” Khan says, although he stops to kiss Jim before he moves to the bed. Jim just looks at him for a moment, pale skin and dark hair and black feathers, half in shadows and half illuminated by the moonlight shining in through the blinds.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs to himself before moving to get the items he needs. He runs a hand down Khan’s back, between his wings, and back up again. “Hands over your head,” Jim says, moving to shove a pillow under Khan’s forehead so he’s not smashed into the covers. “Comfortable?”

“I am fine,” Khan says.

“No argument,” Jim says, smiling. He fastens the cuffs around Khan’s wrists, careful not to make them too tight, and locks them in place when he has Khan where he wants him. Khan makes a soft sound and pulls at the hold, testing it much the way Jim does, but the cuffs don’t budge. “Perfect,” Jim says softly.

He keeps a hand on Khan, touching his back, his hip as he moves to kneel between Khan’s legs, sliding both hands up his spine and back down, digging in enough that it’s almost a massage. Down more, over his hips, fingers digging into the curve of his ass enough to spread him open; he can feel Khan shiver, almost imperceptibly, and smiles to himself before he leans down and licks him.

Khan’s breath catches in his throat and he tenses; Jim tightens his hold and licks him again. He can taste salt from the ocean water overlaying something musky he can’t quite define. It’s not unpleasant, though, just a bit different, and Jim settles in to hopefully drive Khan out of his mind. He remembers what Khan’s done to him and focuses on trying to copy that, noticing what makes Khan gasp softly and what makes him shiver or push back just a little.

“Jim,” Khan says, voice ragged around the edges.

Jim smiles to himself and turns his head, just enough to bite Khan’s thigh. Khan groans and his muscles tense, and Jim bites him again, overlapping the first mark and making Khan shudder. He snags the lube and opens it, slicking two fingers and pushing them in deep. That earns him a choked moan and Khan pushing back against his hand. “Easy,” Jim murmurs, resting his other hand in the
small of Khan’s back. “I’ve got you.”

He knows what he wants, isn’t sure he has the patience for it, but damn if he’s not going to try because Khan’s worth it. Jim slides his free hand up Khan’s back and scratches back down, twisting the fingers inside him, working him open. Khan draws his knees up under him and Jim presses a kiss to his spine. “I’ve got you,” Jim says again, grabbing the lube and slicking a third finger. “Just let me in...”

“Jim,” Khan says again, raw and hoarse.

“Yeah,” Jim whispers. “Let me in.” Three fingers deep inside him, and God, he’s so hot inside, so tight it makes Jim swallow hard. His own cock aches and he ignores it because this isn’t about him right now, it’s about taking Khan apart and if Jim gets distracted he’ll never forgive himself.

Khan shudders when Jim finds the right spot to press, breath coming harsh in his throat. He makes a choked, broken sound when Jim does it again, and Jim can’t see it in the darkness but he knows there’s color in Khan’s skin, down to his collarbone, flushed where he’s normally pale. It makes Jim want to mark him, create more color in his skin, scratches and bites and bruises that won’t last.

He drags the nails of his free hand up the back of Khan’s thigh and over his ass, seeing faint lines appear in the moonlight. Khan shivers and Jim bends his head, biting hard and not letting go for a moment, enough to leave marks behind, a bruise that will take longer to fade than the rest of it. Another bite and a twist of his hand and Khan’s whole body jerks, pulling against the immovable cuffs, a desperate sound escaping his throat.

“That’s it,” Jim murmurs, not even sure Khan can hear him or make sense of his words. “You’re safe, just let it go.” More lube now, and he almost holds his breath when he works in a fourth finger; it’s more than he’s ever done before and he’s not sure--but Khan gulps in a breath and Jim can feel him trying to adjust instead of protest. “Tell me what you want,” Jim says, a little louder.

For a moment, he doesn’t know if he’s going to get an answer; he thinks Khan might be beyond words, which is such a fucking rush he can’t even think about it properly. But he hears Khan inhale deeply, clearly trying to steady himself. “More,” he says finally, and his voice has nothing of its usual cool control.

Jim grits his teeth and focuses on breathing, on what he’s doing rather than the need to pull his hand back and replace it with his cock, to just shove Khan against the bed and take. Instead he slicks up the rest of his hand liberally and keeps working Khan open with four fingers, waiting for him to relax just a little more, millimeter by millimeter. He finds patience from somewhere and loses track of time, too focused on what he’s doing, on Khan’s reactions.

When he folds his thumb tight against his palm and presses, Khan makes a sound Jim’s never heard before which goes straight to his cock. “Easy,” Jim whispers, touching him with his free hand, stroking the line of his back between his wings, down over the curve of his hip. “Let me in.”

“He doesn’t know which of them is breathing harder, to be honest, but Khan keeps making these sounds, these half-broken desperate noises that Jim honestly thinks might be enough to get him off without even being touched. He swallows and sucks in air through his teeth, moving his hand,
twisting his arm, saying things he doubts either of them understand. “Come on,” he says, soft and urgent. “Come on, let me have it.”

Khan gasps, shaking so hard the bed shifts; he doesn’t come so much as he just breaks, clenching so tight around Jim’s wrist it aches. Jim slowly stills his hand, knowing from experience how overwhelming it can be, but he doesn’t pull back until Khan breathes out slowly, slumping against the bed and still shivering. Then it feels like Jim can’t move fast enough even though he’s as gentle as he can be, easing his hand out of Khan’s body and grabbing a wipe for quick cleanup before he moves to unlock the cuffs and lie down next to Khan, pulling him into his arms and wings and holding him tight. “I’ve got you,” he whispers, over and over. “You’re safe.”

Khan says something not in English, sounding absolutely wrecked, and Jim holds him tighter, rubbing the back of his neck and his shoulders. “Easy,” he murmurs. “It’s okay. You’re safe, and I’ve got you.”

When the shivering stops, Jim doesn’t let go even though his own cock is demanding attention; now is not the right time and if he has to get himself off later, that’s really okay. This was worth it. But Khan seems to have other ideas, and before Jim can even figure out what he’s doing Khan pushes him onto his back and slides down his body, hands on Jim’s hips and—oh, fuck, his mouth really should be illegal and Jim isn’t going to last more than seconds like this. He curls his fingers in Khan’s hair, needing to hold on to something, aware he’s probably pulling and unable to stop himself.

He lasts longer than he expects but he still comes almost embarrassingly fast, hips jerking against Khan’s hold on them and back arching off the bed. Jim sucks in air, heart pounding, and doesn’t know if he collapses against Khan or Khan against him and either way it doesn’t matter that they’re both messy and the covers are wrecked and Jim really needs to do a proper clean-up. He’s too tired right now, too content to wrap himself around Khan and breathe in his scent and listen to his heartbeat.

Eventually he moves enough to unfasten the cuffs and toss them somewhere not on the bed. After that he convinces himself to disentangle himself from Khan and get up to go wash up properly, and when he comes back with a warm cloth Khan’s stripped the bed and is remaking it. “Let me do that,” Jim says, handing him the cloth and nudging him out of the way. It doesn’t take long; they’ve gotten a lot of practice at this.

They settle back into the clean sheets, Khan fitting himself against Jim’s back the way he usually does, head tucked against the nape of Jim’s neck and an arm over his waist. Jim smiles sleepily and closes his eyes.

When he wakes in the morning, the bed is empty and the angle of the sun indicates a couple hours past sunrise. Hardly a surprise, then, although Jim doubts Jill was actually awake to go watch the sunrise with Khan like they’ve been doing. He rolls out of bed and pulls on jeans before going to use the bathroom and make his way downstairs.

Somewhat to his surprise, he finds Khan and Jill on the couch as usual, both of them with coffee mugs and dressed like they were outside although not in the water. “When did you get up?” Jim asks, rubbing his eyes. “And is there more coffee?”

“There is,” Khan says. “I went to watch the sunrise this morning.”

“I’ve been up, oh, ten minutes,” Jill says, looking at the chrono on the wall. “Maybe fifteen. Fucking sleep.”
“Maybe if you did it more regularly you wouldn’t need it for so long,” Jim says, going to get himself coffee.

“Such a waste of time,” Jill complains. “Seriously, all the medical advances we have these days and no one’s figured out how to get by without sleep?”

“They figured it out about three hundred years ago,” Khan comments.

“You need some sleep,” Jill says. “Don’t you?”


“Sometimes I really hate you,” Jill grumbles. “So not fair.”

“I know the feeling,” Jim says, returning to the living room. Khan looks mildly amused and Jim sits down on the coffee table facing them. “Is Evan still asleep?”

“He went for a walk,” Jill says. “He’ll be back in a bit.”

“You didn’t want to go with him?” Jim asks.

“I was asleep when he left,” Jill says, making a face. “Anyway, he likes going out by himself now and again. He’s more solitary than I am by nature and living on a starship it’s hard to get a lot of solitude.”

“Yeah, I understand that,” Jim says, wondering how Khan will handle it once they ship out. Jim’s always preferred being around people, but Khan is more like Evan, more introverted and content with his own company.

They’ll figure it out. Khan doesn’t have a lot of patience for people he doesn’t know well, or doesn’t want to know, but with his family he’s...different. And they’ll be on the ship, too. Cat, Katsuro, Bishop, Maeve, and maybe Alona and Matthew. Hopefully, anyway. Then there’s Spock, and Bones, and although Jim knows Khan doesn’t consider them family, they’re still part of Jim’s and thus different from the rest of the crew.

In-laws? He tries not to laugh at the thought, even though in some ways it’s absurdly accurate. A smile quirks his lips and he tries to hide it behind his mug.

“Share the joke,” Jill says with a grin. “What’s so funny?”

“It...really wouldn’t make sense,” Jim says even though it probably would. “Passing thought.”

Someone’s comm-link chirps before Jill can push more, and three people check their pockets. “Mine, I believe,” Khan says, taking his out and answering. He smiles when he gets a response, and Jim knows who it has to be even before Khan says Cat’s name.

The fact that she’s only calling now, five days into vacation, is probably a good sign, Jim thinks, but he studies Khan’s face, his wings and his body language for confirmation. Whatever she’s saying to him, Khan seems relaxed about it, and smiles again at something she says. He answers her in Russian, and Jim looks at Jill for a translation.

She shakes her head. “Something about a place she used to live,” she says, unabashedly listening. It’s fair enough, Jim figures; Khan knows Jill speaks Russian, and he hasn’t left to find privacy, so he must not mind.
Unfortunately, there’s not much to listen to. Cat does most of the talking, with Khan commenting occasionally. He looks as happy as Khan ever looks—which is to say, hardly at all, but Jim’s had enough experience reading his voice and his wings by now to know when he’s pleased.

Then his eyes widen and he stands up swiftly, asking a question as he leaves the room and goes outside. “Uh, what was that?” Jim asks Jill.

“I don’t know,” she says, frowning. “He said ‘you did what?’ and then he left.”

“Um,” Jim says and drinks more coffee. “That could either be good or bad.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jill says. “We’ll dig it out of him when he comes back.”

Evan comes back before Khan does, looking well pleased with the world. He leans down to kiss the top of Jill’s head and tug a curl before he goes to get himself a cup of coffee. “Have you guys eaten breakfast yet?” he asks, poking his head out of the kitchen.

“Nope, wanna make it?” Jill asks.

“Sure,” Evan says. “Omelets? Jim, anything you don’t want in yours?”

“No, I’ll eat anything,” Jim says. “Was Khan still talking to Cat when you got back?”

“He was talking to someone, yeah,” Evan says. “I don’t know enough Russian to know what they were discussing, though.”

“We’ll find out,” Jill says cheerfully.

Jim drinks his coffee and listens to the sounds of Evan making breakfast, and just as Jill goes to set the table Khan returns. “What happened?” Jim asks immediately. “What did Cat do?”

“She slept with Alex,” Khan says, looking like he doesn’t know how to feel about it. “Not sex, I need to clarify, but they shared a bed. At her invitation.”

“Whoa,” Jim says. “Is she okay? I mean, how is her trip going? Was she--did--” He fumbles, not knowing how to ask what he wants to know.

“The trip is fine,” Khan says, sitting back down on the couch. “She says she got along fine with Alex’s family, and met Pavel’s briefly. She visited a few of the places she used to spend time in--those that are still around--and said it was difficult, but something she needed to do, was glad she did. Apparently there is a painting of her in some museum, which she found hilarious. Alex did offer to introduce her to some of the politicians in Moscow, but she decided that she would not be able to keep a straight face and thus it would likely be a bad idea. Either that, or she would find herself drafted into service and she would much rather ship out on the Enterprise.”

Jim laughs. “Yeah, that sounds like Cat. But why did she sleep with Alex?”

“She said she missed sharing a bed, and wanted to see if she could do it again without nightmares,” Khan says.

“Did it work?” Jim asks.

“It did,” Khan says. “Although she says Alex steals the blankets and she had to steal them back in the middle of the night.”

Jim laughs again at that. “Evan’s making breakfast,” he says. “It’s just about ready.”
They eat, and after breakfast Cade and Lenore show up, somewhat unexpectedly to Jim who’d thought they had gone off on a job somewhere, some planet he can’t pronounce the name of, but either it finished and they’re back or they never went in the first place. Either way, the six of them pile into the vehicle--Jill sits on Cade’s lap mostly because Evan’s driving and with the wings it’s difficult even for her to fit elsewhere--and head to the cliffs they’ve become attached to, the ones they went to on the second day. They’ve gone elsewhere, but they keep coming back to these.

Lenore seems more interested in sunbathing than diving, but the rest of them exhaust themselves in the water--or in the air, depending on person. Jim somehow isn’t surprised when Khan dives down to the water, scoops Jill out of it, and flies away, but it’s still incredibly funny to watch. Cade’s jaw drops, literally, and he shades his eyes with a hand, watching Khan circle lazily in the air above.

“That’s fucking brilliant,” he says in awe. “Can you do that?”

“Probably not,” Jim says, looking up as well. “I wish I could, though.”

“Yeah, me too,” Cade says, giving him an envious look. “You can fly, though, right?”

“Yeah,” Jim says, feeling mildly sheepish about it. “Khan taught me, you want to know the truth.”


“He probably taught himself,” Jim says. “As far as I know, neither of us ever met another human or humanoid with wings until we met each other.”

Cade shakes his head. “I can’t even imagine it,” he says. “I mean, Jill dragged me hang-gliding with her once, and that was pretty amazing, but it’s not the same.”

“Wouldn’t know, I’ve never been hang-gliding,” Jim says, grinning. “When did you guys go?”

“After she recovered from breaking her back,” Cade says. “Well, no. She recovered, then she and Evan shipped out for a bit, and then when they got back from that we all went. She likes to try something new every vacation she gets, and Evan’s usually right there with her. He swore off rock climbing after their honeymoon, though.”

“Did Jill?” Jim asks.

“She never swears off anything,” Cade says. “Although I don’t actually think she’s been rock climbing since then.”

“She hasn’t,” Evan says, swimming over to join them. “Because I won’t go with her, and we don’t get so much free time we want to spend it separately. She’ll talk me into it one of these days, though, I know it.”

“What hasn’t she been able to talk you into?” Jim asks.

Evan snorts. “You say that like I have a chance of saying no to my wife and making it stick when she really wants something.”

“Does anyone?” Jim asks.

“No,” Evan and Cade say in unison, and Jim laughs. “Then again, I’d think you’d know something about that,” Cade says, grinning. “When was the last time you said no to him?” He nods up at the figures in the sky.

“Um,” Jim says. “Let me get back to you on that. He doesn’t--” God, talking about his relationship
with Khan is so fucking weird. “He doesn’t ask for a whole lot, usually, so when he does I know it’s important.”

“Jill asks for things all the time,” Evan says. “Or rather, she tells me I will do things all the time. But there’s a difference between that and when she really wants something.”

“You two still talking about kids?” Cade asks.

“Someday,” Evan says. “Yeah, I think so. But with her now being captain, it’s kind of...we’d need to take a few years somewhere, long enough for her to have the baby and for him or her to grow up a bit. Kids are on starships these days and all, but there’s a difference between having a five-year-old on a ship and a baby who’s still nursing, especially when its mom would be the captain.”

“You know, I have to admit I’m kind of glad I don’t have to worry about that,” Jim says. “I don’t think I ever want kids.” Khan did, though, at one point, but that was different and things are different and Jim still doesn’t know if he wanted a child simply because Rani did or because he wanted to be a father. Either way, it’s not entirely a moot point; if they really wanted a child, they could find a way to have one. But Jim really doesn’t and is willing to let sleeping dogs lie.

“You’d be a great uncle, but maybe not a father,” Evan says and makes Jim laugh. “Would any of Khan’s people consider it, do you know? I mean, I know they’re older, but genetic engineering has to be good for something.”

“Most of them can’t,” Jim says. “He told me once that the scientists who designed them made most of them sterile on purpose, I guess as a control group. Only a couple of the women are capable of having kids, and he didn’t know who among the men could father a child but he can’t.”

Cade whistles between his teeth. “That’s cold.”

“So was a lot of how they grew up,” Jim says. “None of them know who their parents were, for example, and they didn’t get a whole lot of nurturing from the doctors and scientists who raised them. All they really had were each other.”

“That explains a lot,” Evan says quietly.

“Yeah,” Jim says. “Yeah, it does.”

“Are they ever coming down?” Cade asks after a moment, looking up at the sky.

“I have no idea, but they’ve really gotten into this over the last few days,” Jim says. “I know Jill loves it, and Khan seems to be enjoying taking her up in the air.”

“Seems to be?” Cade eyes him. “He grabbed her out of the water. What part of that indicates a guy who is doing something because he has to?”

“I take almost nothing for granted where he’s concerned,” Jim says. “It’s probably safer that way.”

Cade snorts and looks like he wants to say something but doesn’t. Jim looks at him, curious.

“What?” he asks when Cade keeps quiet.

“Not really my place or my strong suit, but, uh, are you counting how he feels about you in that?” Cade asks, looking about as sheepish as Jim feels. “Because I have to tell you, man, that’s so far beyond obvious it’s like staring at the sun. At least, it is to me. Granted, I observe people for a living, but even so.”
Jim blinks, realizes he’s blushing, and rubs wet hands over his face. “I, um,” he says. “No. That...that’s different.” He remembers Jill’s question and Khan’s answer and decides he needs to talk to Cat and find out how a few things sound in Hindi, because it seems really unfair that Khan could have been...that he...Jim sighs and falls back into the water, letting it cover him for a moment before he surfaces.

“Didn’t mean to embarrass you,” Cade says apologetically. “Just--you asked.”

“Yeah, I did,” Jim says. “It’s okay. It’s just--I mean, what made you decide that?”

Cade blows out a breath and it’s his turn to duck under the water for a moment. “His attention’s almost always on you,” he says. “If you’re talking, if you’re moving, anything, he’s usually watching you. He doesn’t touch you that often but when he does, it’s like he’s reminding himself you’re still there, like you’re real. He stays near you most of the time, and I will lay you odds that no matter what he and Jill are doing right now, part of him keeps glancing down to find you. Things like that.”

“I can’t tell if that sounds like love or obsession,” Evan says. Jim thinks he means it for a joke but his face flushes again anyway.

“What, like you’re not always looking for Jill, wherever she is?” Cade asks and Jim feels almost pathetically grateful for it. “You can find her in the middle of a crowd of two-meter tall people within six seconds or less. You touch her all the time, unless you’re working. Need I go on?”

Evan grins sheepishly and looks up at the sky. “Okay, point made,” he says. “And I think they’re coming back down to the water.”

In fact, they are, and Jill dives out of Khan’s arms a moment before he folds his wings back and arcs down toward the water. They hit a second apart, and Jim takes a deep breath while he can, fairly certain one of them will yank him under within moments. He’s not wrong, and the water battles begin anew, with Jim and Evan and Cade eventually teaming up against Jill and Khan. The three of them lose, which surprises no one, but at least they put up a good fight. Or so Jim tells himself when he practically crawls up the path to the cliff and throws himself down on the warm rock, panting for breath.

This may, he thinks, be the best time he’s ever had in his life, and he smiles against the rock.

Gentle fingers brush over his wet hair and down the back of his neck and Jim reaches up without looking, wrapping his hand around Khan’s wrist and tugging him down. “I’m real,” he mumbles, not even sure why he says it, except Cade mentioned and...

To his surprise, Khan doesn’t act like Jim’s just said something both blatantly obvious and completely stupid. Instead, he sits down next to Jim, his hip near Jim’s head and his legs stretched out alongside Jim’s body. “Are you?” Khan asks, so softly Jim doubts anyone else can hear them.

“Yes,” Jim says, turning his head and blinking up at Khan. “Yeah, I am, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“What made you think I thought you would?” Khan asks curiously.

“I thought it bore repeating,” Jim says, not letting go of Khan’s wrist.

Khan smiles a little. “As you like.”

“I do like,” Jim says. “I also like not moving right now, so you should come down here and kiss me.”
“I think you’ll find the angle would be remarkably difficult,” Khan says and Jim sighs.

“Fine, make me do all the work.” He shoves himself up, scrambling to his knees, and leans over to kiss Khan, lighter than he’d like but they kind of have an audience and Jim would rather not give them a show.

Not that he seriously objects to exhibitionism, or at least hasn’t minded in the past, but this is...different. Like everything else about it.

When he pulls back from the kiss Khan pulls him in again and okay, maybe Jim doesn’t care so much about the other four people on top of the cliffs after all. He leans his forehead against Khan’s when they do separate, breathing a little harder than usual. “Never figured you for an exhibitionist,” he says, smiling.

Khan threads his fingers through Jim’s. “I should think one kiss hardly counts as exhibitionism,” he says. “Besides, this is a safe place.”

“Yeah,” Jim says, knowing what he means. “Yeah, it is.”

They kiss again, slow and easy, but this time when Khan pulls back Jim lets him go, because otherwise they really are going to run the risk of giving the others a show they might either not want to see or enjoy too much, depending on person and voyeuristic tendencies.

Khan’s still looking at him, though, and Jim can’t read whatever’s in his eyes. “Tell me what you’re thinking,” he says, rubbing his thumb over Khan’s knuckles, warm damp skin that hasn’t tanned or reddened despite all the time in the sun.

“Sometimes I wonder just how real you are,” Khan says softly.

“As real as you are,” Jim says. “I’m not a dream, I’m not a hallucination. I’m...I’m real. Flesh and bone and blood and feathers.”

“If you were not real, how would you know?” Khan asks and this may be one of the weirdest conversations they’ve ever had but it feels like they’re almost not quite talking about something seriously important.

“I’m not going anywhere, Khan,” Jim says rather than answer an impossible question. “You know that. I’m here, I’m solid, I’m not going to disappear the next time you close your eyes.”

“I know that,” Khan says but something about it rings false.

“Walk with me,” Khan says, and Jim’s suddenly aware there are four other people on this cliff and he gets the sense whatever Khan’s about to say, he doesn’t want anyone else accidentally overhearing, possibly not even Jill.

Jim pushes to his feet and considers. “In the water,” he says, and Khan nods. They walk down rather than dive, and slip into the water when they get there, swimming out until neither of them touch bottom. “Tell me,” Jim says, resting his hands on Khan’s shoulders, trusting Khan to keep them afloat.

“A dream,” Khan says. “Nothing more than that.”

“London again?” Jim asks.
“Yes, but different,” Khan says. “I--” He stops, mouth twisting in what isn’t quite a smile. “This is patently ridiculous.”

“It’s not,” Jim says. “It’s bothering you.”

“It should not be,” Khan says.

“Forget should,” Jim says. “Forget should and just tell me.”

Khan breathes slowly. “I was in London,” he says. “Walking down the street to Section 31. It was night, and no one was around. And...you were there, but...you did not see me. You walked through me, as if I was not even there. I turned, and you did not...” He shakes his head.

Jim doesn’t know what to say so he just wraps himself tighter around Khan, holding him as close as he can get in the water. “I see you,” he says finally. “I’m here. You’re here. We’re both real and this thing is real and I am not going away.”

“Do you know, it was worse than the usual dream,” Khan muses, almost to himself. “Because normally when I dream of being alone in London the faces are never people I know. But this...” He shakes his head almost violently, as if to clear his mind.

“Khan,” Jim whispers and kisses him because there’s nothing else he can say, nothing else he can offer that will make this better. Khan kisses him back like he’s drowning and Jim’s his only source of air, hard enough Jim groans into his mouth and his fingers tangle in Khan’s hair.

“I never wanted to need you,” Khan whispers against his lips. “And then one day I did and it was too late.”

“And now you’re stuck with me,” Jim whispers back. “Because I am not giving you up, not for anything.”

The ghost of a smile touches Khan’s lips. “I can think of worse fates.”

Jim bites him for that, just under his jaw and hard enough it will bruise. Khan goes tense against him, breath hitching. “Was that meant to be a deterrent or a reward?” Khan asks, but his voice isn’t quite steady.

“Yes,” Jim says and kisses him again.

The bruise hasn’t quite faded by the time they make their way back up to the top of the cliff, but no one comments on it or the new mark where Jim’s throat meets his shoulder. Jim’s just as glad, and sprawls out on the rock again, drawing Khan down with him.

“Everything all right?” Jill asks from where she’s--Jim blinks, because she’s in some weird pose where she’s lying on her stomach but her feet rest on either side of her head and her arms are outstretched.

“What the hell is that?” he asks. “And yeah, it’s fine.”

“Stretching,” Jill says, pointing one foot then the other. “I took yoga when I was studying gymnastics, helps with core stability and flexibility and all sorts of good things. Ballet, too, although I never got en pointe. I still practice yoga when I have the time, which is less often than I’d like but I manage.” She unfolds herself, lifting both legs and lowering them down so she’s lying flat on the rock, then pushes up into a pose Jim thinks he’s seen somewhere before.
He watches her move through poses, vaguely recognizing a few from a previous girlfriend who’d been into it. She’d tried to get him to take a class with her. It was one of many reasons she hadn’t lasted more than two weeks.

“She does this at sunrise, when we come here,” Khan murmurs to Jim.

“Do you join her?” Jim asks. “Do you know yoga?”


“Do you want to start practicing again?” Jim asks. He considers the idea of watching Khan do yoga and is suddenly glad he’s lying on his stomach.

“I think perhaps I might,” Khan admits. “Would you be interested in learning?”

“Uh,” Jim says. “I don’t know. Can I get back to you on that?”

Khan laughs. “I will take that as a no.”

“I didn’t say that, just...I don’t think it’s my thing,” Jim says, grinning sheepishly. “Maybe. I don’t know. If no one else was around.”

“We should be able to arrange that,” Khan says.

Jim watches Jill stand on one foot and stretch her other leg up in the air, holding it with a hand, and shakes his head. “I have no idea how she does that,” he says.

“Practice,” Khan says. “Sometimes I wonder how she survives within the confines of a starship.”

“She goes on missions a lot,” Jim says. “At least, that’s my guess.”

“Is that how you survive?” Khan asks him.

“Yeah, in part,” Jim says. “But I’m less...believe it or not, but she’s more--she has more--” He stops, looking for words. “She has a lot more energy to burn off than I do,” he says finally. “I can focus a lot more, when I’m on board or whatever. She...I don’t know. Sometimes I think she’s not human, she’s just a ball of energy wrapped in skin.”

“I think I should like to see her acting as captain sometime,” Khan muses.

“Yeah, well, you’re shipping out with me,” Jim says, nudging him.

“I said I should like to see it, not live with it,” Khan counters. “But that is an apt analogy for her.”

“Maybe one of these days you will,” Jim says. “No idea when, but we’ll figure it out. For now, though, I think I’d like to figure out food and drinks and maybe a shower.” He pushes himself up, shifting to sit on the rock. “Hey, Gumby,” he says, forgetting exactly what he’s referencing. “Food?”

“Yes,” Jill says, stretching her arms over her head, fingers linked and palms turned up. “Well, back to the house so we can shower and get clothes and then food.”

Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

At this point all of us have limited data.

Chapter Notes

And we're back from vacation! As promised, things are happening.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time they leave Spain, Jim thinks he needs a vacation just to recover from his vacation, one where he doesn’t have anything to do but sleep and eat. He’s grateful he doesn’t seem to be the only one in that boat; Evan looks tired, too, and in fact Jill pilots the shuttle back to San Francisco so Evan can sleep. How Jill’s still bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Jim has no idea, but maybe she’ll crash in the next day or two. Either way, she seems awake enough to get them back in one piece, so Jim tips his head back against the seat and zonks out.

Definitely the best vacation he’s ever had, he thinks, smiling sleepily. They should do it again sometime, or something. When the four of them will have time like this again he doesn’t know, but they’ll figure something out.

Fingers stroke the inside of his wrist and over his palm and Jim sighs a little, turning his hand into the caress without opening his eyes. He thinks he could stay like this for a while, even though the shuttle seat isn’t the most comfortable thing in the world with wings. But he’s tired and Khan’s touch feels good and no one’s saying anything he has to pay attention to, and it’s easy to drift like this.

When the shuttle touches down lightly Jim grumbles in minor disappointment. “Home?” he asks Khan as they get out and grab their bags. “We probably need to do laundry and I wouldn’t mind a real nap.”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“We’ll catch you around,” Jill says, slinging her own bag over her shoulder. “As far as I know we’ve got a couple days before we ship out again, so hopefully we’ll see you.” She leans up to hug Jim, ruffling his hair when he bends to hug her back. “This was awesome.”

“Yeah, it was,” Jim says, smoothing his hair down and watching her hug Khan, who simply picks her up and gets punched in the shoulder for it. Both of them smile, though, and Jill kisses Khan’s cheek before he sets her down.

“Take care, you two,” she says, taking Evan’s hand.

“You do the same,” Jim says. Evan raises a hand and Jim does the same, and then they go in separate directions.
Jim hails them a cab back to his building, and once inside he moves to do the laundry because if he puts it off his clothes will sit in their bag for months. That’s about as far as he gets before he flops down on the bed, though, kicking off his shoes and closing his eyes. A moment later he feels Khan’s fingers stroke through his hair and down the back of his neck and tips his head forward, exposing more of his neck.

Someone’s comm-link chirps and Jim scowls in protest. “You get it,” he says, refusing to move.

“I believe it is your link,” Khan says, but the bed shifts as he goes to pick up the link.

“Yeah, well, anyone looking for me likely knows you’d be with me,” Jim says. “And I am not moving for anything less than Pike calling.”

Of course, given his luck that’s just who it might be, and Jim tenses, hearing Khan answer the link. The tension ebbs when he hears Khan say Bones’s name, and Jim blinks and blearily raises his head, listening in. “Yes,” Khan says. “Just a short while ago. Yes, that would be acceptable. 1900 hours? Yes.” He hangs up and crosses back to the bed. “We are apparently meeting Leonard and Maeve for dinner tonight, along with possibly Alona and Matthew,” he says, gently rubbing the back of Jim’s neck.

“You should call Cat and see if she wants to join us, too,” Jim mumbles.

“I will,” Khan says. “In a short while.” He keeps petting Jim, though, fingers rubbing the back of his neck and his shoulders; Jim sighs and goes liquid under his touch.

He falls asleep without realizing it and only becomes aware he’s been out for a while by the different angle of the sun and how groggy he feels. He pushes himself to his knees and then to sitting, rubbing his hands over his face. “What time is it?” he mutters.

“Just after 1800 hours,” Khan says and Jim looks over to see him on the couch, reading a book.

“Have you heard from Cat?” Jim asks, covering a yawn.

“Yes, she will be joining us for dinner,” Khan says, marking his place in the book and closing it. “Not with Alex, however.”

“Ohkay,” Jim says. “What are you reading?”

“Agatha Christie,” Khan says. “She amuses me.”

“Poirot or Marple or something else?” Jim asks. “I’ve read a few of her books.”

“At the moment, Poirot,” Khan says.

“I always liked him better,” Jim says. “I think I want a quick shower before we head out, do I have time for that?”


“So, no company then,” Jim says with what is definitely not a pout. He pushes up from the bed and undresses on his way into the bathroom, leaving a trail of clothes behind him. It doesn’t get Khan to join him, though, and Jim sighs, ducking into the sonic shower and getting clean as quickly as he can.

He pulls on clean clothes and runs a brush through his hair, and then they head out. Jim’s not really
surprised to see they’re going to the usual pub, although he hopes someone had the sense to call ahead or they might end up waiting for a while. To his relief, they get pointed to a big round table in the back and take seats, with Alona and Matthew sliding into chairs just as they finish sitting down. “Welcome back,” Alona says. “How was Spain?”

“Out of this world amazing,” Jim says. “How were Ireland and Scotland?”

“So good to go back,” Alona says, grinning. “A lot of it’s changed, obviously, but a lot of things haven’t, and, oh. We had such a good time hiking and exploring and things. Did you enjoy the diving?”

Jim gets interrupted by Bones and Maeve coming to the table, with Cat right behind them, and then everything turns into a flurry of hellos and ordering drinks and asking how vacations went. Cat looks more relaxed than normal, Jim thinks, although maybe he’s just projecting. Either way, she smiles easily and leans down to hug Khan before taking her seat.

Over nachos, Jim learns that Alona and Matthew had a brilliant time, that Bones and Maeve spent a day of their vacation helping a local hospital after witnessing a car crash and being the first ones on-scene to help the survivors. “Were they okay?” Jim asks, torn between laughter that of course Bones spent part of his shore leave working as a doctor and worry for the people who’d crashed.

“They will be, yeah,” Bones says. “I notice you didn’t break anything, well done.”

“None of us broke anything,” Jim says, rolling his eyes. “It was amazing, though. You might even like it.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking I can live without this experience,” Bones says.

“I thought I could, but man, it was...” Jim shakes his head. “I don’t even have words for it.”

“What did you think?” Alona asks Khan.

“I enjoyed it,” Khan says, taking a sip of his pint. “The whole trip was well worth taking.”

“And Cat, your trip, was it worth it?” Alona asks.

“It was,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “It was good to be back in Russia for even a short time.”

“And how did things go with Alex?” Alona asks, grinning back.

“They went fine,” Ekaterina says, a hint of color in her cheeks. “However he steals the blankets.”

Alona chokes on her beer and Maeve stares at Ekaterina as if in shock. Matthew looks almost as surprised as Maeve, and immediately asks a question in Russian. Ekaterina shakes her head violently and explains, and Jim has a guess what she’s clarifying.

There’s something about sharing a bed that means something to Khan and his people, something Jim’s not quite getting. He knows it’s important—hell, it took a lot for him to get Khan to spend the night with him, even after they started having sex. But...and then it clicks and he sits back in his chair. Of course. How did he not see it before?

Sex can be meaningless, although Jim doubts any of the augments are that light-hearted about it. But sleeping with someone, sharing a bed, that’s revealing vulnerability, allowing someone else to be with you while your unconscious takes over. Nightmares, dreams, whatever, it’s not something even the augments can control, and to share that with someone else...
Jim takes a drink of his beer and wonders what this means for Ekaterina and Alex, if anything. He doesn’t think he has a place for Alex on his ship, he’s already got a good pilot, but...if she wants it, maybe they can work something out. Speaking of, though. Jim leans over and touches Alona’s shoulder. “Can I talk to you and Matthew after dinner for a minute?” he asks. “Or, really, whenever you’ve got time.”

Alona looks curious. “Is now acceptable?” she asks.

“Yeah, I guess,” Jim says, since everyone at the table is in his crew. “I was--I was wondering if you and Matthew wanted to sign on with the Enterprise, ship out with us when we leave.”

She looks less surprised than Jim would have expected, but maybe someone said something to her. Alona takes a sip of her drink and looks at Matthew, saying something in maybe Gaelic? It sounds like a lot of nonsense to Jim, but he’s used to that by now.

Matthew looks thoughtful and answers her, absently drumming his fingers against his glass. Jim glances at Khan and Ekaterina to see if he can get an idea of what they’re discussing, but both of them have on their poker faces. He sighs and takes a sip of his beer.

“Conditionally yes,” Alona says to Jim.

“What’s the condition?” Jim asks.

Alona considers her words. “We have been made another offer that we cannot currently talk about,” she says finally. “And whether or not we sign on with your ship will depend on the outcome of that offer and whether the two are compatible.”

“Intelligence wants you,” Jim says, putting pieces together.

“You are occasionally intelligent,” Alona teases. “And yes. We will need to talk with them and determine what they want from us before we can agree to serve on the Enterprise. But better the spy you know, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “Definitely. Let me know how it goes, at least whatever you can tell me.”

“Of course,” Alona says.

They go through another round of drinks with their meals and split a few desserts among the table; Jim’s feeling almost uncomfortably full when he grabs the check--for which he has to fight Ekaterina and Alona, but they let him win. The lot of them are about to head out of the pub when Jim’s comm-link goes off. “Kirk here,” he says, wondering who the hell is calling him now when he’s technically on vacation and most people who would be calling are with him, except maybe Spock.

“Jim,” Pike says and Jim tenses because this can’t be good. “I need to see you. Now. Who’s with you?”

Jim gives him the names, wishing he hadn’t had that second beer. “Where do you need me to go, sir?” he asks.

Pike gives him a location at HQ and tells him to bring Khan, Ekaterina, Alona, and Matthew with him. Something cold trickles into the pit of Jim’s stomach but he says he’ll be there as soon as possible. “We’ve got to go,” he says, getting up from the table. “Bones, Maeve, I need to steal everyone else, I don’t know why but Pike asked and--”

“When he asks, you jump,” Bones says, also getting up. “Let us know what’s going on.”
“If I can,” Jim promises. “Let’s move.”

They’d need two cabs, so Jim and Khan slide into one and the other three say they’ll meet them there. Jim watches them take off running and wonders which of them will arrive first. “Did the admiral say anything about why he needed to see us?” Khan asks softly.

Jim shakes his head. “Just that he needed to see me now and to bring all of you guys with me.”

Khan presses his lips together, looking concerned, but when Jim takes his hand in the darkness of the cab, his fingers are warm and he doesn’t pull away. “It’ll be okay,” Jim says even though he has no idea what “it” even is.

“We shall see,” Khan says.

The two of them arrive at HQ seconds before the other three get there; annoyingly, none of them are out of breath or even all that rumpled. “This way,” Jim says, taking them to Pike’s office. He knocks, gets a muffled “Come in”, and opens the door. “Sir? What’s going on?”

Pike’s out of uniform, which makes Jim feel better about his own civvies. The stacks of actual paper on his desk, though, that’s new, and the screen on the wall is playing some news channel. “We have a problem,” Pike says, coming around his desk. “And for once, Kirk, it’s not exactly anything you did.”

Jim doesn’t really feel comforted by that. “Sir?” he asks.

“For the last month or so we’ve been getting some noise from a new fringe group,” Pike says, gesturing for everyone to take seats at the table. “I’ll spare you the long version, but the short version is that they’re rabidly against the augments. They think we never should have revived you lot and that you,” he says to Khan, “should have gone back into cryosleep.”

“Not exactly surprising,” Khan says.

“Yeah, something like that,” Pike says. “The problem is we can’t tell how serious this group is and how much money they’ve got behind them, so we’re choosing to take them seriously until we can determine that they’re either all nutjobs or shut them down or both.”

“Better to overreact than underreact,” Ekaterina says. “But why are we meeting now? Has there been a credible threat?”

“Bomb threat,” Pike says tiredly. “It’s being checked out now, but the problem is this group didn’t make any demands in exchange for telling us where the bomb was. No demands to talk to someone from your group, no demands that we put you back into cryosleep—which we wouldn’t do, for the record. Just a bomb threat and a sarcastic suggestion that we use enhanced senses to find the bomb.”

“So let us find the bomb,” Alona says. “We can do that.”

“We have people specifically trained in this,” Pike says. “I’m not risking playing into their hands by giving them exactly what they want. You can recover from almost anything but I’m pretty sure even one of you could get taken out by a sniper’s head shot, and if that’s their plan...”

Alona scowls. “Do you really think they are that well organized and equipped?” she asks.

“I just don’t have enough information,” Pike says, sounding frustrated. “If I give you what I have, do you think you can learn more?”
“Absolutely,” Alona says. “Cat and Matthew and I can handle that. Khan’s a bit too conspicuous.”

Khan’s mouth quirks. “Unfortunately you are likely correct,” he says.

“I usually am, bird-man,” Alona says, grinning at him. “Do I take it that this supersedes our current assignments?”

“At least for the next couple days,” Pike says.

“I know someone who might be able to help with the bomb threats,” Jim says carefully. “She’s a demolitions expert, she could probably--”

“What’s her name?” Pike asks.


Pike nods. “I’m familiar with her reputation. We’ll call her in if she’s willing to help.”

“How did you meet a demolitions expert?” Alona asks curiously.

“She’s Jill’s brother-in-law’s girlfriend,” Jim says. “And she wants to meet Cat anyway, so there you go.”

“While I realize this may fall on deaf ears, I would like you and the rest of your people to exercise a bit of caution until we get this group dealt with,” Pike says after a moment. “The last thing any of us needs is one or more of you getting blown up due to unhappy terrorists.”

“We will of course do our best to avoid that eventuality,” Alona says solemnly. “The data, admiral?”

Pike slides a memory chip across the table and Alona tucks it into a hidden pocket on her sleeve.

“What was the bomb threat?” she asks. “Rather, where did these people say the bomb was?”

The location Pike tells her makes no sense to Jim, and he says as much. “We’re not sure why there either,” Pike admits. “We think it’s likely a fake, but we don’t know.”

“When was it called in?” Ekaterina asks.


“Right,” Alona says, getting to her feet. “Cat, Matthew, let’s go. With your permission, admiral?”

“Don’t get blown up,” Pike says but waves them off and the three of them head out, moving quickly.

Jim looks at Pike once they’re gone. “So how much trouble are we in, sir?”

Pike sighs and drums his fingers on the table. “We have an unknown terrorist group threatening a bunch of people who haven’t done anything in this century to warrant being threatened,” he says. “Public opinion about the augments tends to be more in favor of giving them a second chance, although some people still believe otherwise.” He looks at Khan. “Your actions didn’t exactly help your cause.”

“At the time, I did not think I had a cause,” Khan says calmly. “Just a need for escape.”

“Yeah.” Pike sighs. “Yeah. This could either be over very quickly or turn into a PR nightmare, and I do not know which one it is likely to be. I don’t know who these people are, where they came from, why now, any of it. Jim, watch your back, I don’t need you getting in trouble for fraternizing with
the enemy--who isn’t the enemy but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says automatically.

Pike scowls. “Be careful,” he says. “Both of you. Neither of you are exactly inconspicuous.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says again, his wings shifting a bit. Next to him, he sees Khan’s do the same thing and resists the urge to reach for his hand. “Anything else you want us to be aware of, sir?”


They leave, and Jim is very proud of his restraint in not touching Khan until they’re almost off campus. “So this could be problematic,” he says finally, taking Khan’s hand.

Khan shrugs. “It is likely smoke and no fire.”

“Probably, but even still, if we get some radical fringe group shouting about how you and your people are all evil, it’s not going to look good,” Jim says.

“Do you honestly think that likely?” Khan asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “I think I want to find out what Alona and Cat and Matthew find out.”

“Probably wise,” Khan says.

“You’re taking this very calmly,” Jim observes.

“Jim, do you really want to know how many times in my life people have wanted me dead for being who I am?” Khan asks, amused.

“Okay, point,” Jim says, grinning sheepishly. “Think it’s safe enough to walk home?”

“I think so, yes,” Khan says. “Besides, it is a pleasant evening.”

“That it is, although it’s not as warm as Spain,” Jim says. “God, that was a good vacation.”

“It was enjoyable,” Khan admits.

“Says the man who kept flying off with Jill,” Jim teases and Khan laughs. “Although to be fair, she is kind of the right size for that. Are you back to work on the shuttles tomorrow?”

“I am,” Khan says. “I presume you will be catching up on paperwork that accumulated during vacation?”

Jim groans. “Don’t remind me. Yeah. Want to do it for me?”

“No,” Khan says firmly.

“Please?” Jim gives him a hopeful look and they both laugh, which always makes Jim feel warm inside. Knowing that Khan trusts him enough to let down his guard a bit, to relax and laugh and tease--Jim still hasn’t gotten used to how that makes him feel, and honestly, he doesn’t want to any time soon.

“You are the captain, not I,” Khan says.

“You’d be a good captain,” Jim says, thinking about it. “But I kind of don’t want you to get
promoted because then you wouldn’t be on my ship.”

“I have no intention of serving elsewhere,” Khan murmurs.

“Even if it meant you’d get your own ship?” Jim asks, a little uncertain. He looks at Khan, but can’t read his face in the darkness.

Khan’s wings shift and one reaches out to touch Jim’s shoulder. “I am doing what I want to be doing, Jim,” he says. “Not everyone wants his own ship to run, and these days, I do not.”

“You are, however, spectacularly bad at taking orders,” Jim says after a moment. “At least, when you don’t like them.”

“And I am sure you are always a model officer,” Khan says skeptically.

“Well.” Jim laughs. “Got me there, I guess. I try, though, these days.”

“You are a good captain,” Khan says quietly and Jim can’t stop himself from flushing.

“Thank you,” he says, not quite looking at Khan. “If we hurry we can make the light.”

They get back to the apartment without saying anything else, but Jim’s somehow not surprised when Khan pushes him up against the wall once the door closes, hands on Jim’s shoulders and mouth on his. Jim groans and fists his own hands in Khan’s shirt, pulling him closer, spreading his legs for the thigh Khan presses between them, and it’s like they haven’t had sex in days even though hours is more accurate.

He grinds down against Khan’s thigh, biting at his jaw, his throat. Khan takes his hands and pushes them back against the wall, fingers tightening just enough to get the unspoken message across; Jim shudders and nods, flattening his hands against the wall and tipping his head back.

Khan sinks to his knees, fingers unbuttoning Jim’s jeans and drawing down the zipper. Jim swallows hard, looking down at him, but has to close his eyes when Khan takes him into his mouth or risk coming way before he wants to. Each breath feels like it’s scorching his throat and he can’t get enough air even though he can hear himself panting. “Wait,” he gets out, a gasp more than a word. “Wait, don’t--I don’t want to--I want you to fuck me.”

He hears Khan growl, low in his throat, and shudders, the sound and the vibrations almost enough to push him over the edge, but then Khan stands and pulls him over to the bed with one hand tight around his wrist. They get out of their clothes somehow—Jim’s a little fuzzy on the details and thinks he hears ripping fabric somewhere, but it doesn’t matter, not when they’re skin to skin and Khan’s so warm against him, hands running over his body. “Please,” Jim whispers, rolling onto his stomach and fumbling for the lube, shoving it back toward Khan. “God, just...”

“Please,” Khan whispers back, and one slick finger pushes into Jim without warning. Jim bites off a moan against the mattress and draws his knees up under him, fingers curling in the covers just to hold on to something. Khan doesn’t give him much time to adjust before he presses in a second finger, the burn enough to make Jim gasp and arch his back.

“I don’t need--just fuck me,” he says.

Khan ignores him, like he often does, and crooks his fingers; Jim cries out into the bed, shuddering. He doesn’t want to come like this; he wants Khan inside him, on top of him. “Please,” he says, the word a rasp in his dry mouth. “Come on. Fuck me.”
“Impatient, aren’t you,” Khan murmurs, but he pulls his hand back.

“You make me that way,” Jim says, smiling against the covers. “God, the things you do to me.” He closes his eyes when he feels Khan’s cock pressing against him and has just enough time to take a steadying breath before Khan pushes into him and Khan’s hands close around his wrists. The bruises from vacation haven’t completely vanished yet and it hurts when Khan’s hold on him tightens, and it’s so fucking good Jim whimpers. “Please,” he says again. “God, please.”

Khan bites his shoulder, just below where his uniform will cover it, hard enough Jim’s body tightens with the pain and pleasure of it. “More,” he says, pulling at the grip on his wrists, moving with Khan as best he can. “God, come on, give it to me, I need it, just--” He has no idea where this desperation came from; they’ve had a week of play and sex and some of those marks are still healing, and yet it’s like Khan hasn’t touched him in days, like they’ve been forcibly separated and are making up for lost time. Jim hears himself begging, demanding, words tumbling out of him in gasps and groans, mingling with the low growl in Khan’s throat, his harsh breathing.

Sweat rolls into Jim’s eyes and he blinks it away, licks it off his upper lip. “Come on,” he says, so damn close and yet not there. “Let me have it, give it to me, just give it up, please--”

“Come for me,” Khan says in his ear and bites his earlobe. “Come for me, Jim.”

Jim doesn’t know if he makes a sound or not when he comes; he can’t hear anything over his heart pounding, blood roaring in his ears. Khan’s right there with him, biting his shoulder again, shuddering as he drives one last time into Jim’s body and holds still.

Eventually Khan eases his grip on Jim’s wrists and slips out of him, and Jim moves to lie flat on the bed, still trying to catch his breath. “Where the hell did that come from?” he asks finally, aware his voice is hoarse like he’s been screaming.

“Are you complaining?” Khan asks, also sounding rougher than normal. “Did I hurt you?”

“No and no,” Jim says although he raises a hand to touch his shoulder. “But I want a shower, once I can move.”

“I want to look at your shoulder,” Khan says.

“Don’t heal it,” Jim says. “You didn’t break the skin, my uniform will hide it, I want the bruise.”

“Let me look,” Khan says and Jim sighs, letting Khan turn on the bedside lamp and study his shoulder. Khan gets out of bed and Jim grumbles in protest, but relaxes when he sees Khan return with a tube of cream rather than the regenerator. The anesthetic cream does ease the throbbing a bit, and he sighs again when Khan’s done with him.

“Shower,” Jim says, trying to convince himself. “In a minute.”

He’s asleep before the minute’s up.

In the morning, he gets a shower, and Khan treats his shoulder again with the cream before they get dressed and head out for the day. The bruise still throbs faintly under his uniform, and the ones around his wrists are either too faded to be seen or hidden under his sleeves, but he can still feel them when he presses his skin.

He tries not to do that when anyone else is around, though.

As expected, he spends a solid morning on paperwork despite most of his crew having been on shore
leave the previous week. He and Spock hide in a spare office at HQ and hack through most of it as efficiently as they can, which for Spock is saying something, but it still takes them forever. “How did your vacation go?” Jim asks two hours in when he desperately needs a break and another cup of coffee.

“It was interesting,” Spock says. “I had not met many members of Nyota’s family before.”

“Did they like you?” Jim asks.

“She tells me they did,” Spock says. “Although her cousin did threaten me with bodily harm if I hurt her.”

Jim snorts. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Did you enjoy Spain?” Spock asks.

Jim comes back over to the table with his coffee. “It was amazing,” he says. “You might even have liked it, as much as you like anything. I think that was possibly the best vacation I’ve ever had.”

“What made it so amazing?” Spock asks curiously.

“A week in the sun with nothing to do but sleep, eat, play in the water, and, uh, yeah,” Jim says, touching his wrist without meaning to. “And just...I was dubious about the cliff diving, but it was just--it was like flying, to dive off the cliff, and the water felt so good at the bottom. It was a hell of a rush. I’ve never done anything like it before, not really. And--yeah, the four--well, six, sort of--of us had just a great time. Jill’s a fantastic person to go on vacation with because she gets so into everything, and she just drags you with her.”

“Six?” Spock asks.

“Evan’s brother and his girlfriend showed up for a few days,” Jim says. “Speaking of. Have you been paying any attention to the news lately?”

“I have not observed anything out of the ordinary,” Spock says. “Is there something I should have been aware of?”

Jim rubs a hand over the back of his neck and fills Spock in on last night’s meeting with Pike. “Have you heard of anything about this?” he asks.

“I have not,” Spock says. “Would you like me to investigate further?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “Alona, Ekaterina, and Matthew are looking into it, and I’m assuming Pike has people on it too, so there’s probably nothing else we can do, but the whole situation makes me uneasy. I just don’t know where this group of people came from, or what they want. We can’t put fifty-four people back into cryosleep, you know? I don’t understand what they want to accomplish.”

“It does seem illogical,” Spock agrees. “Was last night’s bomb threat indeed false?”

“Since I haven’t heard anything about it today I’m going to guess it was,” Jim says. “Khan thinks this is likely smoke and no fire, and he’s probably right, but it still makes me uneasy.”

“If this group of people is targeting the augmented humans, it is possible you could be considered a target as well due to your relationships with them,” Spock says, which doesn’t make Jim feel any better.
“Yeah, but they’re spread out through a bunch of ships and divisions and things,” he says. “I mean, you could just as easily target Jill, or Bones, or any of the other captains they’re serving.”

“But only you and Dr. McCoy have close personal relationships with them,” Spock says.

“Yeah, but how widely known is that?” Jim asks, not sure who he’s trying to convince.

Spock just looks at him and Jim sighs. “I should tell Bones what’s going on, in case...well, just to fill him in. Let’s get through the rest of this and I’ll meet him for lunch.”

It takes them another two hours, but they get it done. Jim’s head aches dully as they head over to the mess and he ducks into a restroom to raid the first-aid kit and take a blocker. By the time he gets his tray, he finds Spock, Bones, Maeve, and Ekaterina at a table. “No Khan today?” Maeve asks when Jim takes his seat.

“I haven’t heard from him,” Jim says, frowning. “Let me call him quick and find out if he’s joining us.” He takes out his link, but Khan doesn’t answer. Jim frowns more and leaves him a quick message before putting his link away. “Maybe he’s just busy with whatever needed doing. I mean, Katsuro and Matthew aren’t here either, so...”

“Matthew and Alona are not around,” Ekaterina says. “They are...investigating.”

“Investigating what?” Bones asks. “Is this related to whatever you all talked to Admiral Pikes about last night?”

“It is,” Ekaterina says and fills him in briefly. “The bomb threat, as we thought, was not real, but Alona thinks she has an idea of where to go to learn more, so she and Matthew are doing that today. I offered to go with them but we decided two people would be less conspicuous than three.”

“Probably,” Jim says. “I just wish I knew where this group came from and why now.”

“As do we all,” Ekaterina says. “It makes very little sense. Illogical, even, would you not agree Mr. Spock?” She smiles, and Spock almost smiles back.

“In fact I would,” he says. “There does not seem to have been any kind of triggering incident that I am aware of, but I have limited data.”

“At this point all of us have limited data,” Ekaterina says. Her comm-link chirps and she answers, setting it to privacy mode. “What?” she says after a moment, looking concerned. “No, of course, but...” She lapses into Russian, still frowning. Everyone at the table’s quiet, watching her, and Ekaterina chews on her lip, tugging at her ponytail in a very un-Cat-like nervous habit. She listens for a while, then sighs and forces herself to stop playing with her hair. “Da, of course,” she says. “We will be there in ten minutes.”

“What the hell?” Jim asks when she hangs up.

“You need to come with me,” Ekaterina says, getting up from the table. “Alona has found something but we need someone with more experience with Starfleet to interpret it fully, and also--you need to come with me.”

“Right,” Jim says, already getting to his feet. “Where are we going?”

“I will tell you on the way,” Ekaterina says and there’s something she’s not saying and Jim’s stomach twists uneasily.
He waits until they’re outside to ask, though. “What is it, Cat?” he says, barely keeping up with her. She gives him an unhappy look. “Alona found Khan,” she says.

“Where was he?” Jim asks, because that doesn’t make any sense, he saw Khan this morning, how could--”What happened to him?”

“He was kidnapped on his way to HQ this morning.” Ekaterina says. “There were several of them, they drugged him and got him off the street before anyone noticed. She and Matthew didn’t even know he was missing but they found him while looking for other leads on this terrorist group. He...he was injured, Jim. He is healing, has healed some of it, but they kept him drugged and whoever was in charge knew enough about our physiology to know how best to interfere with our regenerative abilities.”

“And the people who grabbed him?” Jim asks numbly.

“Alona and Matthew left two alive,” Ekaterina says. “They are waiting for us to arrive before we call the authorities. We did not...we did not want them to find Khan like he was.”

Something cold twists in the pit of Jim’s stomach and he focuses on breathing, on putting one foot in front of the next and keeping up with Ekaterina. “Is he--we should have brought Bones,” he says.

“No, he will be all right,” Ekaterina says, touching Jim’s arm. “I promise, Jim.”

“How badly was he hurt?” Jim asks.

She presses her lips together. “I don’t know all the details,” she says. “Alona assures me nothing is beyond what he can heal from, but he was still unconscious when she found him.”

“Let’s move,” Jim says and they start running.

They get to the location—it looks like a regular, ordinary San Francisco house, and Jim stands outside staring at it for a moment before Ekaterina takes his arm and they walk up the steps to the front door. Ekaterina knocks in a quick, complicated pattern and a moment later Matthew opens the door. He has a smear of blood on his cheek and a phaser in his right hand, and looking past him Jim can see three bodies on the floor. “Upstairs,” he says. “He’s finally shaking off the last of the drugs.”

Jim bolts for the stairs without waiting to hear more, and finds Alona and Khan in an empty room that might have been a bedroom at one point. Alona kneels on the floor, and Khan—Jim has to stop and force himself not to throw up, because Khan’s covered in blood and bruises and so, so pale, even for him. He lies on his side, wings folded back, and Jim can see lacerations on his wrists where he must have fought being restrained. He has pants on, but no shirt, and it’s obvious he’s not quite conscious. “Khan,” Alona says softly, touching his cheek. “Brother. Easy.” She looks up when she sees Jim and holds up a hand, shaking her head. Jim swallows hard and stays where he is.

Khan takes a breath, then another, then moves, one hand closing around Alona’s throat as he shifts to his feet and shoves her against the wall. Alona doesn’t look surprised but she does smack Khan upside the head with her staff. “Khan,” she says, more a rasp than a word. “Idiot. You’re safe, stop trying to kill me.”

It takes a moment, but Khan abruptly releases her, breathing hard. “Alona,” he says slowly.

“Yes, thank you,” Alona says, coughing. “We can go into details later, for now we need to contact the local authorities and let them know—"
“We need to get out of here,” Khan says, as if he didn’t even hear her. “It’s not safe. The whole--this was a trap, I was to be the bait.” He turns and sees Jim and Jim didn’t even think he could get paler but apparently he was wrong. “You need to get out of here now.”

“Right, let’s go,” Jim says. “Do you have time to wash off some of the blood first? I mean, Alona and Matthew took care of the guys who got you--and we’ll talk about that later, but--”

“We haven’t time to talk about this,” Khan says, but he looks around and finds his shirt crumpled on the floor, pulling it on hastily. “It isn’t about the people who grabbed me, the house itself isn’t safe. I heard them talking about it briefly when the drugs wore off.”

He still looks like hell but it’ll do until they can get him back to Medical, Jim thinks, and steps aside so Alona and Khan can get by. “What’s wrong with the house?” he asks, following them down the stairs.

“Explosives,” Khan says, and Jim’s stomach clenches uneasily.

They make it out of the house without anything blowing up, and Alona takes a moment to call Pike and tell him to send in the bomb squad and the authorities to deal with the bodies and the two men still alive. Jim takes that time to study Khan, not pleased with what he sees, and when he touches Khan’s hand he frowns at how cool his skin feels. “We need to get you to Medical,” Jim says. “How badly--”

“I am fine,” Khan says but Jim doesn’t buy it.

All four augments suddenly look at the house, like they’re hearing something Jim can’t. “Move,” Ekaterina says and takes off at a sprint, Alona and Matthew on her heels. Khan locks a hand around Jim’s wrist and follows, all but dragging Jim along when he can’t keep up.

They get half a block, and then all Jim hears is a whistle and a roar. Something slams into him and the world goes white, then black, and he knows nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t shoot the author!
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Do we have any leads?

Chapter Notes

Um. Hi. Apologies for the longer-than-usual delay in updating; I kind of wrecked my car and got a concussion and yeah, no writing happened for about a week. I'm fine, the car is totaled but I'll be buying a new one or new-to-me one soon, so, uh, kind of yay on that? I don't even know, guys, it's like 2013 hates me or something. But! Progress, even if not much happens this chapter, but hey, Jim's awake. *ducks and runs*

He hears voices, muffled and distant like he’s underwater. Spain, maybe? But he doesn’t feel the cool water around him, and he can’t see anything, and his eyelids feel too heavy to lift. He tries to remember what happened, to take stock of his body. He feels heavy, sluggish; his body aches dully all over, and he doesn’t seem to have the ability to move, but he decides he’ll deal with that later, once he remembers what’s going on.

Jim focuses more on the voices--they sound familiar, but he can’t quite make out what they’re saying. He struggles to focus, to pay attention. “All right,” someone--female, familiar says. “He’ll be all right. Dr. McCoy said he might not wake up for another eight to twelve hours.”

“I know,” someone else--male, British, and Jim knows that voice, knows it almost as well as he knows his own, but...he grunts in frustration but thinks it must be only in his head, as he doesn’t hear a sound.

“But you’re not leaving until he wakes up,” the woman says.

“No,” the man says.

Who the--Jim can almost picture him, but there’s a block on his name, and he knows he’s forgetting something, something important, but he’s so tired, and so heavy, and he falls asleep again before he can remember.

He wakes again to voices, less muffled this time but still just outside his ability to remember whose they are. “You will not do him any good if you fall over,” someone--female again, vaguely accented--says.

“I am fine,” the British guy says again. Jim all but groans in frustration when he just cannot remember the guy’s name. He can see the face--dark hair, pale skin, pale eyes--and he knows this guy’s important to him, but--

Images flash in the darkness; black feathers, a fight with Klingons, cliffs overlooking the ocean, a bunch of other things he doesn’t have context for but knows are his own memories.
He focuses on the here and now, what his senses are telling him. He can feel fabric against his skin, something taped in the crook of his elbow. Someone’s holding his left hand, fingers warm against his, and that’s a good thing but he can’t remember why. His eyelids feel far too heavy to open but he’s determined to see what’s going on, to remember the man sitting with him and whoever’s talking to him.

It takes almost all the strength he has, which admittedly appears to not be much, but he blinks once, then again, eyes tearing up from the light in the room. “Jim,” the man says, immediately standing up. “Easy.”

Jim tries to say something and ends up making a feeble croak instead. He scowls, forces himself to swallow, tries again. “What happened?” he asks hoarsely.

“There was an explosion,” the man says, and Jim can see a house in his mind, and--

“Khan,” he says, going limp with relief. “Are you okay?”

“Better than you, at the moment,” Khan says. “You were seriously injured by the blast. Do you remember?”

“Bits and pieces,” Jim says, clumsily raising a hand to wipe at his watering eyes. “Were you injured? How long have I been out?”

“Minor injuries,” Khan says. “You have been unconscious for most of a day and a half. Are you in pain?”

Jim has to stop and think about that. “Uh,” he says. “I think I’m okay. Everything aches, but nothing’s throbbing in pain.”

Khan nods. “I will go fetch the doctor,” Ekaterina says, getting up from her chair. “It is good to see you awake, Jim.” She touches his cheek gently and hurries out of the room.

“So,” Jim says, wishing he wasn’t lying flat on his back in bed but not quite sure he’s capable of sitting up at the moment. “What happened?”

“The house was a trap,” Khan says. “I was meant to be the bait as well as a target.” He looks grim for a moment. “Jim, you were the other target. If any of my people got caught in the explosion, that would have been a bonus, but the intent was to kill you.”

“But I didn’t even know you were missing,” Jim protests. “It was--it was luck Alona found you, wasn’t it?”

“She was meant to,” Khan says. “And then bring you to the house. Luck was in my hearing about the planned explosion and waking up in time to get us out of there before it exploded.”

“That’s...a lot of planning,” Jim says slowly. “Who was behind it all?”

“We don’t yet know a specific person, but the effort appears to have been spearheaded by former section 31 agents,” Khan says. “They have been planning ever since I blew it up.”

“So why was I the target and not you?” Jim asks, but Khan doesn’t get a chance to answer him because Bones is rushing into the room, followed by Maeve and Ekaterina.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Bones says, scanning him with something.
“How badly was I injured?” Jim asks warily.

“We gave you three pints of augment blood to save your life,” Bones says, scowling at him. “You’re stuck here for at least another two days, so don’t even argue with me about it, and no, we don’t know all the side effects of giving you the blood but at the time it was either that or risk you dying.”

“Uh,” Jim says. “What about the others?”

“They heal faster than you do,” Bones says grimly. “Ekaterina escaped the worst of it, Matthew just had some broken bones and burns. Alona had a concussion from the blast and a couple broken bones, and Khan was a mess, but we discharged him last night, not that he’s gone anywhere.” He glares at Khan, who looks back impassively. “Even though I told him you weren’t likely to wake up until about now.”

“Right,” Jim says. He’d say more, but he doesn’t know what else to say and he’s kind of exhausted already. Bones keeps fussing over him, running scans and things, and Jim ends up closing his eyes, not really paying attention to whatever he says.

“Don’t tire him out,” Bones says to Khan; Jim caught that, at least. “He needs to rest.”

“‘m fine,” Jim mumbles even though his eyelids still feel too heavy to lift and all he wants to do is sleep for the next week.

“You will be,” Bones says. “For now, rest. Are you in pain?”

“Nah,” Jim says but he has to think about it.

“Yeah, I don’t believe you,” Bones says and hyposprays him. Jim grunts in protest but a few seconds later he has to admit he feels better, if also completely out of it. “I’ll be back to check on you later. Get some sleep.”

Jim mumbles something that might be an assent or might just be a grunt; he’s not really sure. He lets himself drift, feeling warm and floaty and relaxed, and when he opens his eyes again the sun has set and the only light on in the room is dim and angled away from him. No one else is in the room, which he finds both good and disappointing—good, because maybe it means Khan (and how the hell did Jim forget his name?) is getting some sleep or food or a shower or something. Disappointing, because he wouldn’t mind finding out exactly why he was the target and the progress on the investigation and things.

Then he turns his head, just to see the door, and sees someone standing in the doorframe, mostly in shadow but from the outline he thinks it might be Ekaterina. “Cat?” he says softly. “Is that you?”

She immediately turns and comes over to him. “Jim,” she says, touching his cheek. “Back with the conscious?”

“For now, at least,” he says. “What are you doing here?”

“My turn to play bodyguard,” she says as if it should be obvious. “We made Khan go home a few hours ago, he will be back in the morning. You just missed Katsuro and Bishop.”

“Why do I need a security detail?” Jim asks, licking dry lips. “Can you help me sit up and is there water around here somewhere?”

“You need a security detail because we have not dealt with the people who were behind the bomb,” Ekaterina says, slowly raising the head of the bed. Jim hates, hates that it makes him feel dizzy, but
he closes his eyes and after a moment it passes. She hands him a cup of water with a straw in it and he takes a sip; it may possibly be the best thing he’s ever tasted.

“What can you tell me?” he asks when he’s sipped enough that his mouth doesn’t feel completely parched and he feels a bit steadier.

Ekaterina sighs and takes the chair next to his bed. “Section 31,” she says. “They have been planning revenge on Khan since he blew up their facility in London, those that survived. They wanted you because in their eyes you are a traitor, because you not only allied with Khan but you fought for him. They kidnapped him, and the plan was to leave enough clues that some of us would find him, bring you to the house, and then it would explode, leaving no survivors. The flaw in their plan was that they did not realize how quickly he metabolized the drugs they were giving him, and thus he overheard part of the plan and also was awake enough to warn the rest of us and get us out of the house. Still, it almost worked. You nearly died, Jim, and had it not been for our blood you very well might have. Khan was only saved from permanent injury because of his regenerative abilities. Had he been a normal human he would have died.”

“How do you know who was behind it?” Jim asks.

“Khan heard them talking,” she says. “And Alona got some more information before she and Matthew went to the house.”

“How badly were you hurt?” Jim asks.

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Ekaterina says. “You and Khan were the worst of it, which was exactly what they wanted.”

“Are we still at risk?” Jim asks cautiously.

“Yes,” Ekaterina says, not bothering to sugar-coat it. “We have not located the people responsible for the plan, and we all think they will try again now that their first attempt failed. All of my brothers and sisters are in danger, but Khan most of all, and you as well. Probably also Dr. McCoy, and possibly Shura depending on how good their intelligence is.”

“So what are we doing about it?” Jim asks.

“At the moment, you are recovering,” Ekaterina says. “I am not engaged in the investigation primarily, although Alona is keeping me informed. But you must rest, Jim. Even with our blood in you, you will be a while in recuperating.”

“Whose blood do I have in me?” Jim asks out of curiosity.

“Mine,” Ekaterina says. “And Maeve’s. Khan would have insisted on using his but he was in no shape to insist on anything.”

“How badly was he hurt?” Jim demands.

Ekaterina bites her lip. “He almost died,” she says after a pause. “He...it wasn’t the injuries inflicted in the house, but he was still reacting to the drugs, and then he was injured trying to protect you from the blast. He--he threw himself over you, just as it went up, and he saved your life but almost at the cost of his own. Dr. McCoy was furious with him, although I don’t know why, as had he not done what he did you would have died.”

Jim swallows hard and rubs a hand over his face. “But he’s going to be okay, right?” he asks.
“Yes,” Ekaterina says immediately. “Yes, he will be fine. He is already mostly healed, and Anandi is staying with him at your apartment to make sure he will be all right. Neither you nor he are to go anywhere alone until this is dealt with.”

“Right,” Jim says because bitching would be pointless and also he can barely sit up at the moment. “Does it count if we’re together?” he asks anyway, because hey, loopholes.

“Get out of hospital first and we will see,” Ekaterina says. “Are you in pain?”

“Tolerable,” Jim says. “ Mostly I just feel heavy.”

She touches his cheek gently. “I will be right back.” She leaves, presumably to get the doctor or Maeve or something, and when she returns with Maeve Jim mentally awards himself a point, but then Maeve gives him something that makes him warm and floaty again and he closes his eyes because keeping them open takes too much work.

When he opens his eyes again the sun shines through the windows and Khan and Anandi are sitting in his room. “When can I go home?” Jim asks because if all he’s going to do is sleep, he’d rather do that in his own bed.

“Stay awake for longer than ten minutes and we will see,” Anandi says, smiling. “Also, it is easier to protect you here.”

Khan says nothing to that, but he takes Jim’s hand, his own fingers warm. “Are you in pain?” he asks.

“I don’t want any medication,” Jim says rather than answer directly.

“Now you sound like Cat,” Anandi says, amused. “Perhaps the blood transfusion had some side effects. I will go tell Dr. McCoy you are awake.”

Jim scowls because Bones will drug him and he really doesn’t want more drugs, but she leaves anyway and Jim’s left looking at Khan who might be paler than he should be, but his hand feels warm and solid and Jim doesn’t see shadows under his eyes. “Cat told me you almost died trying to save my life,” he says because--he doesn’t really know why, actually, but it has to be said.

“I healed,” Khan says, his hand tightening on Jim’s. “I knew I would.”

“You can’t do that,” Jim says. “You can’t risk your own life just to protect mine.”

“Would you not have done the same?” Khan counters and Jim scowls again because maybe he would have but that’s not the point. Isn’t it?

“How long until I can get out of here?” he asks instead, realizing he has no clear idea of what his actual injuries are or were. His whole body feels heavy and sluggish and things ache dully, but he hasn’t even looked under the sheets or at the bandages to have an idea of how badly he was hurt.

“Perhaps another day, maybe two,” Khan says and he doesn’t sound pleased about it either. “You...you nearly died, Jim, despite three pints of my sisters’ blood and the combined skills of Leonard, Maeve, Bishop, and everyone else. You had a skull fracture, multiple broken bones, burns, internal damage—the transfusion saved your life, and is allowing you to recover more quickly than a normal human would, but still not as quickly as one of my people, and some of the bones are barely healed. Leonard was concerned there might be brain damage.”

Jim swallows hard. “I’m okay, though, right?” he asks.
“You are,” Khan says, but his hand tightens on Jim’s again. “Leonard said you are healing more quickly than he expected, and from what he can tell nothing will be permanently damaged. But you are still at risk from the section 31 personnel. We all are.”

“So what are you doing about it?” Jim asks.

This time Khan scowls. “I am not being allowed to do much,” he says, voice clipped. “I am too visible a target to go undercover and attempt to find the perpetrators, and my family has decided I am not to be allowed to go places by myself, although to be fair none of us are going anywhere alone until this matter is resolved. Leonard is essentially living here, as there is more security and he is considered a high risk target due to his involvement with Maeve, and Alex has been reassigned and shipped out, destination classified.”

“This really sucks,” Jim says wearily. “Do we have any leads?”

“Very few,” Khan says. “Alona and Matthew are working on it, and Aisha as well, but they are chasing covert personnel who have spent months hiding their tracks and working on plans. Even for us, this is difficult, and not all of Marcus’s secrets were exposed after I killed him.”

“No, I didn’t think they had been,” Jim says, rubbing his forehead with his free hand. “My head hurts.” He doesn’t mean it to be a serious complaint, just an observation, but of course he says it right as Anandi returns with Bones.

“Skull fracture will do that,” Bones says, scanning him with things and poking him in annoying places. Jim grumbles and swipes at him but doesn’t manage to keep him from doing his job, and a hypospray later he’s back in the warm floaty place he didn’t really want to be.

He does manage to keep hold of Khan’s hand, though, because if he can only keep one thought in his head it’s that he’s not going to let anything happen to him, even if he has to physically keep hold of the man. He hears a soft laugh from Anandi but Khan doesn’t let go of him, and it’s enough that Jim lets go of consciousness.

When he wakes again he feels more clear-headed and less sluggish, but also colder. Khan’s not in the room, the angle of the sun tells him it’s late afternoon, and Katsuro and Bishop stand by the windows, talking quietly enough Jim can’t catch the language. “Hi,” he says, aware how dry his mouth feels and how raspy he sounds. “What’ve I missed? Is there water?”

Katsuro comes over to him immediately, handing him a cup, and Jim sips carefully. He hates this part of being injured; how exhausting everything is, how something as simple as taking a drink of water feels like climbing Mount Everest. “Khan will be here shortly,” Katsuro tells him. “Ekaterina dragged him out for an hour so they could spar. She did assure me she would not injure him.”

“That’s somewhat reassuring,” Jim says. “Has there been any progress in the investigation?”

“Not as far as I am aware,” Katsuro says. “But it has only been a few hours. Admiral Pike did stop in earlier, but you were asleep and he did not wish to disturb you. He will be back, and he may have more information.”

“I can hope,” Jim says, licking dry lips. “This sleeping all the time thing has got to stop.”

“Healing requires energy,” Bishop says, coming over to the bed. “The more healing required, the more energy required to complete it, and in your case your body is still adjusting to the augmented blood, which also takes energy.”

“What are the side effects from the transfusion going to be?” Jim asks.
Bishop shakes his head. “We don’t fully know,” he admits. “We know our blood can heal, but we
don’t know if there will be permanent effects. It is possible you may end up somewhere between
where we are and where you were.”

“What else is possible?” Jim asks.

“That there will be no lingering effects other than the rapid healing,” Bishop says. “That much we
have already observed. We think it...unlikely that you will become completely like one of us, our
engineering is too complete for a few pints of blood to completely overwrite your genetic code. But
we have never tried this before.”

“Why did you?” Jim asks, afraid he already knows the answer.

“You were dying,” Bishop says simply. “It was a last-ditch effort to save your life. Your body had
experienced too much trauma and was shutting down.”

“Right,” Jim says, rubbing a hand over his face. His head aches dully again and he ignores it, not
wanting more medication. “Well, I’m glad it worked.”

“As are we,” Bishop says, surprising him with a gentle touch to his shoulder. “We almost lost you
and Khan both.”

Jim tries to imagine surviving where Khan didn’t, or vice versa, and feels cold. To know that he was
alive but only because Khan gave his life to save him--or to have Khan have tried but not succeeded-
he swallows, hard, and his hand wants to tremble around the cup of water. He sets it down quickly
and wishes Khan were there.

And like magic, Khan and Ekaterina come into the room, both looking a bit bruised around the edges
but mostly okay, although Khan has a smear of blood on his cheekbone and Ekaterina has an arm
wrapped around her ribs. “I thought you weren’t supposed to get injured,” Jim says. “You’ve got
blood on your face, there.” He gestures to his own face, and Khan wipes at his cheek with a sleeve.

“It isn’t mine,” Khan says. “I am unharmed. Cat has a few bruised ribs.”

“I’m amazed your ribs aren’t splinters for all the times they’ve broken,” Jim says.

“Fortunately there is no limit to how many times bones can knit,” Ekaterina says. “You look more
alive, Jim.”

“As opposed to mostly dead?” Jim tries to smile, doesn’t quite manage it. “Has there been any
progress?”

“We have not yet heard from Alona, Matthew, Aisha or Amir,” Ekaterina says. “And I am not being
sent after them despite my concern. Your admiral Pike says that if we do not hear anything in six
hours, we will send more personnel, but he does not wish to risk too many of our family.”

Khan doesn’t look pleased by this and Jim frowns. “But you guys stand a better chance of
surviving,” he says.

“Yes, and we are also higher risk targets due to that,” Ekaterina says. “We don’t know how good the
section 31 agents’ information is, whether they have pictures of all of us or some of us or none. Pike
is concerned that Alona and the others may have already been discovered, and they are waiting for
us to send in more.”

“So they can take out all of you,” Jim says, rubbing his forehead again. “Fuck. This really...why
now? Why wait for us to get back from shore leave? Why not try and get you during downtime?”

“Not all of us were on shore leave,” Khan says, crossing to him and taking his hand. He presses the spot between thumb and forefinger and Jim hisses in a breath, because that’s sore but then his headache fades a bit. “We do not yet know the why of the timing.”

“We don’t know much, do we,” Jim says grumpily.

“No,” Khan says. “No, we do not.” He lets go of Jim’s hand, and Jim almost pouts at him before realizing Pike’s standing in the doorway.

“Sir,” he says, wishing he wasn’t wearing a fucking hospital gown and lying in a damn bed, but also aware he’s kind of pathetically weak at this point and he’s not sure he’s capable of standing without help.

“Kirk,” Pike says, coming into the room. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, sir,” Jim says, wishing his head didn’t ache and knowing better than to say anything. “Looking forward to getting out of here.”

“Yeah, take it easy on that,” Pike says, frowning. “We can protect you better in here.”

“I appreciate that, sir, but I’d still like to go home,” Jim says. With Khan, where he can press himself against Khan in bed and wrap around him and feel him, warm and solid and alive, feel his pulse and hear him breathe, and okay, yeah, he’s not up for sex but this lack of touching thing fucking blows.

As if reading his mind, Khan touches his forearm, mostly hidden by the covers and Jim doesn’t even care if Pike notices; he knows they’re involved, and it’s not like they’re making out in front of him. Although that thought is kind of hilariously wrong and makes him want to giggle inappropriately, and he thinks maybe he does need more pain medication or something.

“Well, we heard from Alona,” Pike says and Jim doesn’t miss how all four augments almost consciously relax. “She says she thinks they’re making progress and haven’t been discovered, but she and Matthew will be out of touch for at least twelve hours or so, possibly longer.”

“What about Amir and Aisha?” Khan asks.

“Amir checked in an hour ago,” Pike says. “Aisha is with him. They also said they might be out of touch for a while.”

“Where are they?” Jim asks.

“Amir and Aisha are in London,” Pike says. “Alona and Matthew are as far as I know somewhere in the Bay area.”

“Also, Jill let you steal Amir?” Jim asks.

“He volunteered and she accepted,” Pike says. “Captain Kane was very concerned about you, Jim. She offered to assist with the investigation herself, and we might take her up on it depending on how things go.”

“She could be useful,” Khan says, surprising Jim.

“Really?” he asks.

“She is good at sneaking around,” Khan says. “Small, quiet, and flexible.”
“Yes, we know,” Pike says. “But she’s also fairly well known in Starfleet, so she might have trouble. Still, it’s an option to consider.”

“It is,” Jim says, not sure how he feels about Jill putting herself in harm’s way for him. He knows she likes things risky, and yet.

“Okay, some of you need to leave,” Bones says, coming into the room with Maeve. “He needs to rest, and there are too many people in here.”

Khan clearly isn’t going anywhere, but Katsuro and Bishop murmur goodbyes and slip out of the room. Ekaterina moves over to the windows, folding her arms over her chest. “I’ll check in with you later, Kirk,” Pike says. “Sooner if I know anything.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jim says, appreciating the courtesy. Pike nods and leaves, and Jim closes his eyes and lets Bones and Maeve fuss over him, checking things and scanning things and muttering to each other in medical-talk he doesn’t pretend to follow. One of them gives him more medication he doesn’t want but which does ease his headache, along with the other bodily aches he was ignoring. He feels less floaty, though, and not about to drift into oblivion, which he appreciates.

Khan moves back to the bed when Bones and Maeve leave, taking his hand, and Jim holds on tighter than he needs to but he’s not willing to let go, not right now. If this is the most contact he can have, he’ll take it.

Ekaterina says something in Russian, and Khan answers her, glancing over his shoulder to where she stands by the windows. “What?” Jim asks.

“He is fussing,” Ekaterina says affectionately. “You worried him.”

“I am not fussing,” Khan says, giving her an annoyed look.

“You totally are,” Jim says, laughing even though it makes his ribs hurt a bit. “But it’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Khan says something in Hindi and Ekaterina snorts. “It is fair to admit you were worried, brother,” she says in English for Jim’s benefit. “I was terrified.”

“You thought we both might not make it,” Jim says, even though the words make him feel cold and hollow and his hand tighten on Khan’s.

“I did,” Ekaterina says steadily. “You made me cry, damn you both.”

Jim winces at that, at the thought of her crying because of them. “I’m sorry,” he says even though it wasn’t his fault, there was nothing he could do about it.

She shrugs. “It happens. As it turns out, the good doctor has an adequate shoulder for weeping on, once he is no longer in surgery, although I am not certain which of us was more embarrassed afterwards. He would not let me get drunk, though. Said if he could not, I could not either.”

“That’s fair enough,” Jim says. “How long was it before you knew whether--I mean--” He hesitates, not sure how to ask what he wants to know.

“Khan was in surgery for three hours, you for five,” Ekaterina says. “Simultaneously, and Dr. McCoy operated on you while Bishop worked on Khan--there was some argument about that, as Bishop has not been practicing medicine in this century, but he won. He has been studying, after all, and he did have others to assist him, including Carson. But it was not until after you came out of
surgery that we knew for certain Khan would live, and we did not know about you for hours after you came out of surgery. Even after we knew you would live, we did not know for a time if there would be permanent damage.”

She says it so matter-of-factly and yet Jim can hear the anguish in her recitation, what the hours of not knowing must have been like. For her to come so close to losing Khan, her closest brother, while still grieving for Konstantin, and for her not to know about Jim, either—his stomach twists uneasily. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

“I should never have taken you with me to the house,” Ekaterina says suddenly. “I should have thought, realized enough to see the obvious. Had I not been so stupid—”

“Cat,” Khan interrupts softly. “It isn’t your fault.”

“Isn’t it?” she asks bitterly.

“No,” Jim says. “No, it isn’t. I would have insisted on going regardless of what you told me.”

“But had I not said anything,” Ekaterina persists.

“This isn’t your fault,” Jim says firmly.

She subsides, but it’s obvious she doesn’t believe it. Jim sighs; she’s too stubborn for anything he says to penetrate her skull, and from Khan’s silence he thinks the same thing. Not for the first time, Jim wishes Konstantin had survived, were here to comfort her.

“When can I go home?” Jim asks instead.

“Perhaps tomorrow,” Khan says, not sounding thrilled about it.

Jim groans. “This blows.”

“Technically, the blowing up already happened,” Ekaterina says, and Jim snorts.

“Thanks for the reminder,” he says. He’s tired, and things don’t quite hurt but don’t feel quite comfortable, either. He closes his eyes, and pretends not to smile when he feels Khan’s fingers brush through his hair gently.

By the time he gets to go home, it’s a day and a night later and he’s feeling better enough to yell at Bones and scowl at Maeve—who smiles sweetly at him and gets him with a goddamned hypo and makes him call her all kinds of names that make her laugh. Bones just ignores him and fusses and between his fussing and Maeve’s fussing and Khan’s fussing and everyone else’s Jim’s sick to death of being fussed over and is ready to shoot things.

He’s still exhausted by the time he gets from the cab into his apartment, though, but it doesn’t stop him from ducking into the shower and dragging Khan in with him. It’s not about sex; Jim’s not really up for that yet, much as he wants to be. But it is about just being with Khan, getting clean and getting to hold him under the water, wrap around him the way Jim’s wanted to do for days and feel his skin, wet and warm and miraculously whole.

He hangs on longer than he should, until he’s almost trembling with exhaustion and the water’s starting to run cool, until Khan gently nudges him back and shuts off the water. They dry off and crawl into bed, and Jim fits himself against Khan again, legs and arms and wings tangling, his head on Khan’s shoulder and Khan’s fingers sliding through his damp hair and over the back of his neck.
His throat closes on the words that want to slip out and he turns his head, brushing a kiss over Khan’s collarbone instead. “We’re not safe here, are we?” he asks because they still haven’t identified the mastermind or minds, because the threat from section 31 is still there. Because Jill’s gotten pulled into this, along with Evan, and is now somewhere Jim doesn’t know about doing things Jim’s not being told about.

He *hates* it, hates that his friends have been pulled into this, that his fucking *family* is at risk because—not entirely because of him, because a lot of it’s because of Khan, but Jim’s got his own role to play in this. The injustice of it all, that he has to lay low and stay protected while everyone around him risks getting tortured or blown up or worse, burns in his gut and he swallows the rage, swallows the fear, and closes his eyes.

Khan murmurs something in Hindi and Jim sighs, relaxing despite himself. He’s just too damn tired, and too physically fragile right now, to fight it. “You didn’t answer my question,” he says, though.

“What would you have me say, Jim?” Khan asks softly. “No, we are not safe here. We are not safe anywhere right now, but the building has been checked, and you know my family is watching us.”

“I just...hopefully they wouldn’t think taking out an entire building of civilians and Starfleet officers was worth it,” Jim says tiredly.

“I hope not,” Khan says, which isn’t reassuring, but there is no reassuring right now, it’s all risk and covert ops and Jim’s too fucking visible to participate. Even if it wasn’t for the wings, he’s too well known, too prominent.

“Maybe Alona will have something by tomorrow,” Jim says into the darkness.

“Perhaps she will,” Khan says. “Perhaps one of the others will as well.”

“I can hope,” Jim says. He sighs again. “I’m so tired, Khan.”

“Rest, mahiya,” Khan says, rubbing the back of his neck in the way that always makes him melt. “I have you.”

Khan can’t keep him safe forever, but for now Jim’s willing to pretend. He falls asleep easily, dreams not following him for once.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

What does it say about my life that this is turning out to be a normal day?

Chapter Notes

First of all - happy 50th anniversary to Doctor Who! I am up way too late trying to get this chapter posted before I go and have a day of celebration and cake and squeeage.

I still cannot believe the response this story has gotten, is getting. You guys are amazing and you make me so, so thankful to be writing in this fandom and writing this story. All the comments and the kudos are just amazing to receive, and I nearly fell over earlier when I saw the hits counter had passed 20k. I've never written a story this long before and I honestly don't know if I would be still going with it were it not for you, lovely readers, so thank you, thank you, thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He wakes to the sound of someone pounding on the door. “What the--” Jim says groggily, catching the jeans Khan throws at him and sitting up to pull them on. “Who the hell--what time is it, even?”

“Just after four in the morning,” Khan says, fastening his own pants but not bothering with a shirt. He waits for Jim to finish scrambling into the jeans and opens the door. “Alex,” he says, sounding surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“We need help,” Alex says, walking into the apartment with Ekaterina behind him. “I didn’t--I didn’t know where else to go, I didn’t know who I could trust.”

“Wait, weren’t you shipped out?” Jim asks, deciding staying seated on the bed is the better part of not falling over.

“I was,” Alex says. “And then I got contacted by...by someone asking me to spy on Cat, on the augments, and I think...if I say no, I think my family’s in trouble. I pled family emergency and got them to ship me back to San Francisco, but I don’t know what to do now.” He looks at Ekaterina, and Jim can see the anguish on his face even in the dim lighting. “I’m not about to betray you, but I need to keep my family safe. I don’t know what to do.”

“Who contacted you?” Jim asks, giving up and getting up to turn on more lights. He wobbles a little, though, and Khan takes his arm and guides him to a seat on the couch. Jim scowls at him but decides to stay put.

Alex shakes his head. “I didn’t get a name, and the transmission was blocked, so I don’t have a face either. I got told I had three days to consider it. This is day two.”

“Are they bugging you? Tracking you?” Khan asks.
“They said they wouldn’t,” Alex says. “I don’t know. I shouldn’t be here, God, it’s just--I don’t know what to do and I don’t know who in Starfleet I can trust anymore. I don’t know how high up this goes, how many agents section 31 still has and how many people they’ve compromised.”

“It’s okay,” Jim says even though it isn’t, even though his whole body hurts and he’s cold and all he wants to do is go back to sleep. “It’s okay. We can talk to Pike. I know he’s not compromised, I’d bet my life on it.” He folds his wings around himself for the warmth, and isn’t surprised when Khan drapes a blanket around him.

“You should sleep, Jim,” he murmurs.

“Uh, no,” Jim says, but he tips his head back into Khan’s touch, his fingers warm against the back of Jim’s neck. “Contact Pike, would you? Let him know Alex is here, that...we have problems.”

“Can it not wait a few hours?” Khan asks and sighs. “No, I know it can’t.” He brushes his fingers through Jim’s hair and moves to get his comm-link. Ekaterina sits down on the other end of the couch, and Alex perches in the chair, looking way too young and innocent to be mixed up in all this.

“How are you feeling, Jim?” Ekaterina asks, touching his wrist where it pokes out from under the blanket.

“Like I got blown up,” Jim says, too tired to obfuscate. “Do not give me any pain medication, I’m all right.”

“I have none to give you,” Ekaterina says, smiling. “I do have hopes of hearing from Alona or Jill soon, though. The last information I had was that the two of them were teaming up. San Francisco may never be the same.”

“What about Matthew and Evan?” Jim asks, and he has to smile back, because Alona and Jill together is kind of a terrifying combination.

“Backup, I suppose,” Ekaterina says. She glances up, listening to whatever Khan is saying; Jim can’t quite make out the words as he’s being quiet and Jim’s exhausted, but Cat has better hearing than he does. “I believe we may be getting a visitor soon,” she says.

“I need a damn shirt,” Jim says even though moving feels like way too much effort.

“Stay there, I will get you one,” Ekaterina says, touching his wrist again and getting up. While she goes to get him clothes, Khan comes back to the couch, looking displeased.

“Admiral Pike is on his way over here,” he says. “He did not trust a link not to be monitored, and wants to speak to Alex in person. I am going to suggest they go to Cat’s apartment once they get here. You need to rest.”

“I need this resolved,” Jim says. “So, no. No kicking people out of this apartment if they’ve got information. I’ll sleep later.”

Khan’s face tightens and Jim sighs, rubbing his forehead. “I’m okay,” he says, not sure who he’s trying to convince. “Just...I’m okay. I just want this resolved.”

“As do we all,” Khan says.

Ekaterina hands Jim a shirt and ends up having to help him pull it on over his wings because he’s embarrassingly too tired to manage it. She says nothing, though, just helps him get the shirt settled, and then Khan hands him a pair of pills and a glass of water. His expression all but dares Jim to
argue so Jim doesn’t and doesn’t ask what he’s taking, just knocks the pills back with a swallow of water.

Whatever Khan gave him starts to kick in before Pike gets there, and he feels warmer and less achy but also a bit out of it. He tries to focus when Khan lets Pike in, and thinks vaguely that his apartment isn’t designed for five people in it, especially when two of them have wings. “Kirk, you look like hell,” Pike says when he sees him.

“’m fine, sir,” Jim says, hating that his voice sounds slurred. “Just tired.”

“He should be asleep,” Khan says.

“So should everyone else,” Jim says around a yawn. “Alex is in trouble, sir.”

“I got that impression,” Pike says, turning to Alex. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Alex licks his lips nervously. Jim tries to listen, but the pills are working and he’s zoning out and he’s finally warm, wrapped in a blanket and his own wings. He dozes off, listening to voices talking quietly, and only rouses halfway when he realizes Khan’s picked him up. “Please tell me they left before you did this,” he mumbles against Khan’s shoulder.

“No one is here but us,” Khan promises him. “Cat and Alex went back to Cat’s apartment, Pike went either back to his home or his office, I am not sure. We will meet up later in the day, once everyone has had a chance to sleep a bit and Leonard has had a chance to look you over.” He lays Jim down on the bed gently. “For now, you need to sleep.”

“Stay with me,” Jim says, reaching for him. “Please.”

“I am not going anywhere,” Khan says, fitting himself against Jim’s back, pulling the covers over them both. “I have you, Jim. Just rest.”

Jim’s asleep before he can respond.

He wakes feeling better, if still aching in every bone and like he could use another twelve hours of sleep. But he can smell coffee and Khan’s not in the bed, so Jim slowly pushes himself to his feet and pads into the small kitchen, wrapping his arms around Khan’s waist and pressing a kiss to his shoulders, just above his wings. “Coffee,” he mutters. “Please tell me you made enough for me.”

“I did,” Khan says, sounding amused. “Leonard will be here in about fifteen minutes. He wanted you to come into Medical, I told him you weren’t going anywhere and he could poke and prod at you all he wanted here.”

“You two are not getting into a pissing match over me,” Jim warns him, moving to get himself a mug and blessed caffeine.

“Oh, believe me, this was nothing compared to the lecture I got after waking up post-surgery,” Khan says, smiling a little. “I honestly feared he might have a stroke while yelling at me. He was rather...agitated. I am still not sure how this translated to everything being my fault, but I didn’t ask.”

“At least he didn’t drug you,” Jim says. “Wait, did he?”

Khan scowls. “He did.”

“Okay, yeah, not really surprised,” Jim says, taking the first life-giving sip of coffee. “Oh, that’s good. And Maeve’s almost as bad as Bones.”
“I had noticed,” Khan says darkly. “She will likely show up with him.”

Someone’s comm-link goes off and Khan moves to grab it. “Yes,” he says, putting the link on speaker mode.

“We got one,” Alona says, breathless and excited. “We got one. Three left, and we don’t know how far up the chain this goes but Pike’s safe, Barnett’s safe. Goddamn, but this was fun and Jill’s a hell of a fighter. Clearly she learned a lot from Cat. I am fucking exhausted, we’ve been running for about three days straight now, so Jill and Matthew and Evan and I are going to find a safe place and hole up for a few hours before we track down the other three. I think Amir and Aisha are closing in on one in London, but we haven’t heard from them in the last twelve hours so I don’t know what’s going on there. How’s the captain?”

“Well,” Jim answers for himself. “I’m all right. Glad to hear you’re all okay. Is—-the one you got, is he alive or dead?”

“Oh, he’s very dead,” Alona says cheerfully. “Jill and I can’t decide which of us got the kill, though. We decided to take him out rather than risk him blowing up more people. We did get some information from him first, though, and we think we know where we’re headed next once we either get some sleep or some stimulants.”

“I have stim-pills,” Jill says in the background. “They won’t replace sleep but they’ll do in a pinch, keep us running for another day or so. Hey, Jim, how the hell are you?”

“I’m okay,” Jim says again. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fantastic,” Jill says. “This has been tremendous fun, and I got to climb up a wall and drop down on someone’s head, always a plus. I totally want Alona and Matthew on my ship, though.”

“Tough, I offered first,” Jim says. “My crew, you can’t have them.”

“Technically we did not accept your offer yet,” Alona says, laughing. “I am flattered, though. Matthew would be flattered, but he and Evan are searching our agent’s room. But we need to get going and get someplace safe. Please let Admiral Pike know we have identified the four people responsible for this debacle and have taken care of one of them, and we are all uninjured. We will check in again when we have more information or in twelve hours, whichever comes first.”


“Always,” Alona promises. She hangs up and Jim blows out a breath.

“Well, that’s progress,” he says, taking a drink of coffee. “I wish we’d hear from Amir and Aisha, though.”

“As do I,” Khan says. “Perhaps Cat will have heard something by the time we see her.”

“When are we doing that?” Jim asks.

“It is just past eleven now,” Khan says. “We are meeting in Admiral Pike’s office at one. Are you hungry?”

“No, not really,” Jim says. “I know I need to eat, but I’ll get a protein bar or something after Bones is done with me.”

Khan doesn’t look pleased, but he nods, taking a sip of his own coffee. Jim finishes his just as
someone knocks on the door and sets the mug down, going to let in Bones and Maeve. “I’m alive,” he says unnecessarily. “Do you really have to poke and prod at me?”

“Yes,” Bones says. “Sit down on the bed and don’t argue with me.”

Jim scowls at him but sits down, not willing to admit he’s tired enough standing takes effort. “As for you,” Maeve says to Khan. “I have hypos and I’m not afraid to use them if you don’t let me look you over.”

“I am fully healed,” Khan says flatly.

“Then this won’t take long, now will it?” Maeve smiles brightly and Jim snorts. “Take your shirt off.”

“Is this really necessary?” Khan asks.

Maeve takes a hypo out of her pocket. “Yes. Shirt off, brother.”

Jim tries not to laugh, fails miserably, and realizes he’s tired enough that he’s not going to be able to stop laughing without help. Bones gives him an annoyed look when he devolves into snickers and giggles, but one gentle push and Jim falls over on the bed, wings tucked back and still laughing helplessly. “Did you give him anything this morning?” Bones demands of Khan.

“Only coffee,” Khan says, pulling his shirt back on.

“He needs more sleep,” Bones grumbles. “What happened in the middle of the night?”

“Alex is in trouble and came here,” Khan says, moving to sit next to Jim and take his wrist. His touch settles something in Jim and he breathes out slowly, relaxing a bit. “We have a meeting with Admiral Pike in an hour or so.”

“Goddamnit,” Bones curses. “I just put him back together, he needs more time. Does he have to be at this meeting?”

“Yeah, I really do,” Jim says, not bothering to sit up. “I’ll sleep later.”

“If you keep pushing your body like this later is going to be sooner than you think,” Bones tells him. He gets Jim with two hypos, not looking pleased about either one. “This’ll keep you going for a few hours, but if you’re not back in bed by the time they wear off—well, someone’ll have to carry you because once this wears off you will fall over.”

Jim already feels better, and pushes himself up, leaning into Khan for a moment. “Thanks, Bones,” he says. “Maeve, we good?”

“By which you mean small and terrifying,” Jim says, smiling.

“Something like that,” Maeve agrees. “Leonard, we should be going.”
“Yeah, probably,” Bones says, straightening up. “Do not push it too much, Jim. I’m serious. And you--take care of him.” He glares at Khan, who looks back impassively.

“I always will,” Khan says, and something warm curls in the pit of Jim’s stomach.

Bones sighs. “You know, I actually believe that, but I’d feel better if you weren’t running out to meetings with Admiral Pike and whoever else in an hour.”

“Needs must,” Khan says.

“I know. I still don’t have to like it.” Bones sighs again. “I have other patients who might actually listen to me. I’ll be by later to check on you both. You have the medication, right?” That’s clearly addressed to Khan, who nods.

“No more than two every six hours, I remember, Leonard,” Khan says patiently.

“After the hypos I gave him he shouldn’t need anything for a few hours, but make sure he takes them before four hours are up,” Bones says.

“He’s right here,” Jim grumbles.

“Yes, and you’ll never listen to me so I’m telling him,” Bones says. “But we need to go. Do not get blown up again.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jim says around a yawn.

To his surprise, Maeve bends to hug first Khan, then Jim, kissing both their cheeks before she straightens up. She smells good, Jim thinks, something fresh and clean and maybe a hint of the aftershave Bones uses, but he’s not sure. Then they’re gone, and Jim falls back on the bed, too tired to think about putting on his uniform even though he knows they need to go.

In the end, Khan helps him get into the damn uniform—which is kind of embarrassing and would be more so if Khan actually commented on it, rather than just steady Jim when he needs it and help his clumsy fingers fasten things. “Shouldn’t I be healing faster than this?” Jim grumbles when they’re both ready to go.

“Jim, anyone else and we would be planning your funeral,” Khan says quietly.

Jim doesn’t know what to say to that. “Is it possible the augmented blood is causing some of the exhaustion? Bishop--didn’t he say something about that?”

“It is possible,” Khan says. “I do not know specifically what Bishop said, but your body may still be adjusting to the blood, and that likely takes energy. If we see him, we can ask.”

“Let’s get a cab to HQ,” Jim says. “I’m...not up for the walk.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Khan says, resting a hand in the small of Jim’s back as they leave the apartment.

It’s weird to see Ekaterina in an actual uniform, Jim thinks when they get there. Alex is there, too, looking nervous, and of course Pike. But Barnett’s there, too, which surprises Jim a little, and--”Matthew,” he says, startled. “Shouldn’t you be--I mean--”

“I came back to report in,” Matthew says. “Evan is with Alona and Jill, and the three of them are safe for the next few hours, although I don’t think any of them are getting sleep.”
“Please tell me you’re not implying what I think you were implying,” Jim says warily.

Matthew laughs. “No, not at all. Just that they are running on adrenaline and stimulants and I expect us all to crash at some point, but hopefully we will get the last three before that happens.”

“You’re no good to us if you fall over,” Barnett says, but Jim can hear the concern in his voice.

“We can run for days on no sleep if we have to,” Matthew tells him calmly. “I cannot speak for Captain Kane or Commander Kane, but both of them assured me they are used to operating on minimal sleep. The captain in particular said she rarely sleeps through the night, so this is nothing new for her.”

Barnett frowns, but doesn’t argue. “What other information do you have for us?”

Matthew gives him three names. “They are the ones we are searching for,” he says. “One of them we believe has gone to ground in London, and Amir and Aisha are tracking him down. The remaining two we think are somewhere in the San Francisco area and we will find them. We would like to bring in Cat to help us track down the two in the area and also determine how widespread their network of influence is.”

“Da,” Ekaterina says immediately. “With your permission, admirals?”

“I think you’d do it even if I didn’t give it, but yes,” Pike says. “As for Lieutenant Pietrovich, do you have any suggestions?”

“We use him as a double agent,” Ekaterina says. “He contacts whoever he needs to and informs them he will help them if they promise to keep his family safe. We put discreet guards on his family, and we use Shura to feed them information about what we are not actually doing. With a bit of luck we will only need to do this for a day or two.”

Alex looks nervous but determined. “It’s just my parents and my grandmother,” he says. “My brother’s shipped out and I don’t think they can get to him. I’ll pass on whatever information you tell me.”

“How good are your acting skills, son?” Barnett asks.

Something passes over Alex’s face and when he looks at Barnett again it’s with the cold eyes of a sociopath. “No, she doesn’t suspect anything, why would she?” he says coolly. “I mean, she trusted me enough to share a bed, why would she think I’d go behind her back like this? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not exactly thrilled with getting blackmailed into helping you, but I’ll do it if it’ll keep my family safe, and to hell with whatever they think.”

Jim blinks, startled, and clearly Barnett wasn’t expecting that either. “You’ll do,” he says. “And we’ll keep your family safe.”

“I do trust that was acting, and not the truth,” Ekaterina murmurs.

Alex grins sheepishly. “Of course it is. Cat, you know I’d never--”

“I know,” she says, touching his hand. “And if you did, I would kill you myself.”

“Can we not threaten murder in front of Starfleet admirals?” Jim asks plaintively.

“We should get going,” Matthew says. “Cat, you’ll need plain clothes before I take you back to the others, obviously, and we’ll need a way to keep in touch with Alex.”
Pike goes to his desk and returns with a box, handing it to Ekaterina. “This should help,” he says.

She opens the box and takes out two small earbuds. “Da, I think it will,” she says. “I take it this is a two-way link?”

“Press the button to activate it and again to shut it down,” Pike says. Ekaterina nods and slips one bud into her ear, handing the other to Alex, who slips it into his ear. Both of them shake their heads, making sure the earbuds will stay in place.

“Do you have another set of those?” Matthew asks. “I could really use one for Alona or Jill.”

“Yes, but please try to return them, these aren’t cheap,” Pike says, getting another box for Matthew.

“We’ll do our best,” Matthew says. “With your permission, admirals, we have a few people to track down.”

“Dismissed,” Barnett says and Matthew and Ekaterina leave quickly. “Kirk, you look like you need to get back to bed before we have to carry you there.”

“I’m fine, sir, just a bit tired,” Jim says even though he would really like to crawl back into bed and stay there for about twenty hours.

“You don’t look fine,” Pike says frankly. “Go home. Go back to bed. Heal up. We’ll call you if we need you. If you hear anything from anyone, call me directly. Lieutenant, stay for a bit, I want to discuss exactly what information you’ll be giving these people.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex says.

“Dismissed, Kirk,” Pike says and Jim sighs and salutes before leaving, Khan right behind him.

They take a cab back to the apartment and Jim changes into pajama pants, tossing his uniform on the floor to be dealt with later and crawling into bed. “If you get comfortable, I will give you a massage,” Khan says.

“Best idea I’ve heard all week,” Jim mumbles, moving to do just that.

Khan turns him into pudding and Jim falls asleep somewhere in the middle. He wakes up to the sound of voices and it takes him a solid two minutes to realize that he recognizes all three voices and no, they’re not speaking in English. With a sigh, he pushes himself up from bed, walking over to where Khan sits on the couch with Jill and Matthew. “Why are you here?” he asks, rubbing his face with a hand.

Jill launches herself at him before he even finishes the question, wrapping herself around him in a hug hard enough he thinks she bruised his already-fragile ribs. “Easy,” Khan says, but he smiles when he says it. “Please do not break him again.”

“Oh, God, you had me so scared,” Jill says, loosening her hold but not letting go of him. “Also, hi, you look like hell but apparently that’s better than you were looking, so we’re making progress. But. God. So good to see you up and moving and not, you know, unconscious in a biobed.”

“And you’re talking a million words a minute,” Jim says. “What the hell are you on?”

“Stim-pills,” Jill says, squeezing him again and stepping back. “They’re going to wear off in about twenty minutes and I’m going to crash for about six hours, and it’s not safe where Alona and Evan are right now. We have the comm-link, and I know they’re all right, and Evan got some sleep earlier
so he’s staying with Alona, who—lucky bitch that she is—doesn’t need sleep the way I do. Matthew came back here with me to make sure I made it safely, and apparently my apartment isn’t safe right now or something, I don’t know all the—Matthew, why are we here other than needing to make sure these two were okay?"

“Evan made me promise you would not go back to an empty apartment to sleep off the crash,” Matthew says in the tone of voice that makes Jim think he’s told her this before. “With Cat on her way to find Alona and Evan, we came here so Khan can keep an eye on both of you while you sleep, assuming no one objects to this plan.”

“I’m not going to be in any shape to notice anything in twenty minutes,” Jill says. “But seriously, if it’s a problem, tell me and I have enough time to get a cab to my apartment.”

“You don’t sleep well alone, do you?” Khan asks.

“I tend to get nightmares,” she admits, ducking her head.

“Stay here,” Khan says. “The bed is big enough for you and Jim to share, and I can wake you if you have any night terrors.”

Jill leans down and hugs him, murmuring something in his ear in Russian. “Jim, do you mind?” she asks, straightening up.

“This is strictly platonic sharing a bed, right?” Jim asks, grinning.

She snickers. “Promise. We can even put a bolster between us if you want. I tend to cuddle, fair warning.”

“I think I can live with it,” Jim says. “Seriously, though, you’re practically vibrating.”

“Yeah, the stims do that,” Jill says. “It’s kind of funny when they wear off, the last time I took them like this I fell asleep in the middle of a party. A really loud party. Evan had to carry me to bed. For the record, I really resent being dependent on chemistry and biology like this, and I want it noted that I still think sleep is an incredible waste of time and I shouldn’t have to do it and I should be out there with Alona and Cat and Evan helping find people.”

“Complain to the designer,” Jim says, covering a yawn with his hand. “Do I have to take any medication? Didn’t Bones say something about that?”

“Yes,” Khan says, getting up and going to get it. He hands Jim two pills and a glass of water and Jim knocks them back.

“What did I just take, anyway?” he asks after he’s swallowed.

“Pain medication and antibiotic,” Khan says. “Although with my sisters’ blood in you we think it unlikely that you can get any kind of infection, Leonard would rather not risk it. You are still too physically fragile to chance it.”

Matthew touches his ear. “Yes, we’re here,” he says. “Did you learn anything? Jill says she needs about six hours, can it wait until then?” He looks at Jill and nods. “Yes. She will be staying with Khan and the captain until she wakes, and—right. Yes. Did Cat—all right. I will meet you in an hour, if I will be sooner I will let you know. Stay safe, sister.” He touches his ear again. “We have information but Alona wants to wait for you before we go after the next one on our list. She says eight hours would be even better, to give her and Cat and Evan a chance to plan. I am going to head down and find them now, and when you wake up, call me and we’ll either come get you or find a
way for you to come to us. I’d normally ask Khan to help you get to us, but he’s both a bit conspicuous and also hovering over Jim.”

“I am not hovering,” Khan says, annoyed.

“Are you going to let him out of your sight for more time than it takes to use the bathroom or take a shower any time in the next week? No? You’re hovering, brother. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, either.” Matthew’s face sobered. “I haven’t seen you like this since--”

“Since she became ill,” Khan says softly.

“Difference is, Jim’s healing, will heal,” Matthew says, also quietly. “You know that.”

“Had she been alive in this time, she might have survived,” Khan says, sounding like the words are being dragged out of him.

Jim hasn’t dreamed of Rani in a while, but if he thinks about it he can remember her face, big dark eyes and dusky skin and a tiny mole just outside her right eyebrow. He moves a little closer to Khan, touching his wrist, offering support without saying anything, and Khan takes his hand in a grip a little too tight for comfort but Jim doesn’t protest.

“Fate,” Jill says. “Sometimes things happen because they happen.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “And despite everything, I do not wish it differently.”

“Whoa, I’m starting to fall over,” Jill says, putting a hand to her head. “Jim, which side of the bed do you use?”

“The right,” Jim says. “What does it say about my life that this is turning out to be a normal day?”

“What, you don’t normally share beds with short women crashing from overuse of stim-pills while recovering from nearly being blown up and having half your extended family out searching for people who are trying to kill you?” Jill asks.

“Uh,” Jim says. “No, I really don’t.”

“You’re missing out,” Jill says. “And...okay, couch is good.” She all but collapses onto the couch, and tips over sideways. “There’s the crash. I’ll just...” She’s asleep before she can finish the sentence.

“That wasn’t twenty minutes,” Jim says inanely.

“No, but thank God,” Matthew says. “She was making me exhausted just watching her. I can carry her to bed.”

“Let me,” Khan says, moving to pick Jill up. She’s dead weight in his arms, but he carries her easily over to the bed and sets her down, taking off her boots and tucking the covers around her. Jill rolls onto her stomach, shoving her face into the pillow, and doesn’t move again.

“You should sleep, too,” Matthew says to Jim.

“Probably,” Jim admits reluctantly. “I think the pills are kicking in.”

“Here, I’ll leave first,” Matthew says. “I’ll be back for Jill later, or someone will. Call me when she wakes up, or if anyone contacts you.”
“We will,” Khan says.

“See you later, brother.” Matthew pushes himself to his feet with an easy grace Jim envies and crosses to Khan to clasp his shoulder, murmuring something not in English Jim doesn’t catch. Whatever it is makes Khan smile briefly and nod, and then Matthew leaves, closing the door behind him.

“This is so weird,” Jim says, looking at Jill in his bed, on Khan’s side of the bed, and despite the pills and his fatigue he’s not sure he’ll be able to sleep like this.

“Lie down, mahiya,” Khan says, and Jim sighs and crawls into bed. Khan sits on the edge, fingers running through his hair and down the back of his neck. It’s familiar and comforting and soothing and Jim’s out like a light before he knows it.

He wakes with someone warm and snuggly and with an awful lot of hair cuddled up to him. Jim coughs on a curl, pushes the hair out of his mouth, and realizes that at some point Jill rolled over and tucked herself under his chin. “Save me from death by hair,” he calls out to Khan, keeping his voice low so he doesn’t wake Jill. “How long was I out?”

“Five hours,” Khan says, coming over to him. “She does have rather a lot of hair, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, and I’m choking on it,” Jim says, brushing more curls out of his face. “Help.”

“I used to have this problem with Rani,” Khan says absently. “I used to think it had a mind of its own and would try to strangle me in my sleep. Hers was straight, but longer than Jill’s, and it got everywhere.”

“What did you do about it?” Jim asks.

“Threatened to buy scissors,” Khan says. “She eventually started braiding it back when we slept. Here.” He moves around the bed and gently gathers Jill’s hair back, fashioning a loose braid that gets most of it out of Jim’s face. Jim sighs in relief, but frowns when Jill doesn’t so much as twitch.

“Should she be sleeping through all this?” he asks warily.

“Evan has told me she sleeps through anything when she is sufficiently tired,” Khan says. “I would not be concerned.”

“’m awake,” Jill mumbles without opening her eyes. “You feel good.”

“Thanks, your hair tried to kill me,” Jim says.

“It does that,” Jill says. “How long was I out?”

“Five hours,” Khan says.

She groans and mumbles something in Russian that doesn’t sound good. “God, my head,” she says, slowly sitting up and rubbing her temple. “Stim-crash headaches are the fucking worst. Anyone have pain killers?”

“I do but I don’t know if I’m allowed to share,” Jim says.

“I have some in my bag, I think,” Jill says. She groans again and gets out of bed, padding over to the couch and picking up her bag. After rummaging in it for a moment she takes out a pill bottle and dry-swallows two, tossing the bottle back into her bag and falling down on the couch. “I’m going to need
an hour at least before I’m human enough to go anywhere. And a lot of water. Jim, can I raid your kitchen for water?”

“Mi casa es su casa,” Jim says, sitting up.

“Gracias.” It still takes Jill a moment before she pushes up and goes to find water. She drinks two glasses straight down, barely pausing to breathe, but slows down by the time she gets to the third. “Did I miss anything exciting?”


“You didn’t wake me?” Jim’s turn to groan. “Fuck, Khan, why didn’t you wake me?”

Khan merely looks at him and Jim groans again. “Please tell me you told them I’d call them when I woke up and they could come back,” he says.

“I did,” Khan says mildly. “However I would suggest a change of clothes and possibly a shower first.”

“I would suggest me getting out of here first, as your place isn’t that big,” Jill says from the kitchen. “Or I can stay and be nosy, I’m good at that.”

“You also don’t take up much room,” Jim says. “I need a shower. Khan, would you call Spock and let him know I’ve returned to consciousness and he and Uhura can come by in about half an hour?”

“As you like,” Khan says.

“What I’d like is a lot of things I’m not about to get right this moment,” Jim says under his breath. Sex is pretty high on that list, for the record, but that’s not happening with Jill in the apartment and even after she leaves, it might not happen if Khan thinks he’s not up for it.

He’ll talk Khan into fucking him later, he thinks, getting up from the bed and going to duck into the shower. While he’s under the water, Khan comes in with clothes for him, and Jim manages to get a couple of kisses that he wishes could turn into more but people are coming over and Jill’s still out there and goddamnit, this really, really sucks.

He manages to dry off and get dressed and have a cup of much-needed coffee before what feels like the world descends on his apartment. Okay, maybe it’s not the world, maybe it’s just Spock and Uhura and Sulu and Chekov and Scotty and Bishop and Katsuro and there are way, way too many people in his apartment.

“I’m fine,” Jim says for the umpteenth time. “I’m in one piece, healing up, just a bit tired at the moment. Jill was crashing here earlier, she’s heading out soon, I think.”

Jill holds up a finger from her spot in the kitchen where she’s talking to someone via her comm-link, but whatever she’s saying isn’t in English so Jim ignores her. “Every time I have stopped by to see you since the explosion, you were unconscious or asleep,” Spock says reprovingly.

“Healing takes energy, Spock, and I got blown up,” Jim says, rubbing a hand over his face. “I’m all right. See? I’m conscious and here and dressed and talking with everyone.”

“You saved his life,” Spock says to Khan.

Khan shrugs like it doesn’t matter, but one of his wings reaches out to touch Jim’s shoulder.
“Thank you,” Sulu says. “For, um. For saving him.”

“My sisters did more of the saving than I did,” Khan says.

“That’s not entirely true,” Bishop says. “I mean, yes, without the blood transfusion, but--” He stops when Khan gives him a look, and when he continues it’s in Japanese, asking a question.

“I really hate it when they do this,” Jim mutters to Uhura.

“Japanese isn’t one of my best,” she mutters back. “If I get the gist, he’s asking why Khan doesn’t want--” She pales, looking at Khan, then at Jim. “Is that true?” she asks Khan. “What he said, is that true?”

“What did he say?” Spock asks.

Uhura swallows, looking at Khan, who meets her gaze steadily. “I didn’t know,” she says. “Would you really have?”

“It is of no matter,” Khan says, voice clipped.

“It matters,” Uhura says softly.

“What matters?” Jim demands, frustrated.

Uhura shakes her head. “It’s not--I think you two need some privacy. It’s--it’s good to see you awake, captain.” To Jim’s surprise, she gives him a quick hug before making her goodbyes and leaving, taking everyone else with her except Katsuro, Bishop, and Jill.

“You didn’t tell him,” Bishop says when they’re down to five in the apartment.

“What would the point have been?” Khan asks impatiently.

“Would someone please tell me what’s going on?” Jim demands.

Khan growls low in his throat. “I thought I was dying,” he says, not looking at Jim. “I woke up during surgery, once, and I thought I was dying, that I had finally pushed my body beyond even its limits. I asked Bishop if you were all right, and he said he didn’t know, that there had been so much damage to your body, even with what I had tried to do. And...” Khan’s wings fold around him and he pushes his hands through his hair. “I asked him to let me die.”

“Khan,” Jim whispers, stunned and horrified and somehow not surprised. “People need you. Cat needs you.”

He’s barely aware of Katsuro and Bishop leaving, of Jill staying quiet and in the kitchen. All his attention’s focused on Khan, on the tired, defeated look on his face. “A person can only lose so much, Jim,” Khan says warily. “After Rani died, I kept going, because I had duties, responsibilities, people who needed me. Cryosleep was a blessing, oblivion for centuries, and then...everything changed, and now here we are, and I thought I had lost you. I thought I had failed. Tell me why I should have wanted to survive that.”

“Because your whole life can’t be about me,” Jim says through the tightness in his throat. “Because your family still needs you, because you’ll probably outlive me someday, decades from now, and what will you do then? Because--” He gives up on words and moves to stand in front of Khan, hands on his face. “Because you’re mine, and I’m not about to let you give up on life.”
Khan kisses him, hard and desperate, his hands sliding into Jim’s hair and his wings wrapping
around Jim’s body. “I thought I had lost you,” he whispers against Jim’s mouth.

“Never,” Jim promises, leaning his forehead against Khan’s. “I will always find a way to come back
to you. I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Khan says.

“I’m keeping this one,” Jim says fiercely.

The sound of Jill clearing her throat makes Jim curse and Khan growl again, but they separate. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry, but Matthew and Cat are on their way to get me and then we’re going to go
do dangerous things and I’d really rather get out of here before you two start tearing each other’s
clothes off,” she says in a rush. “We have information, I’ll tell you about it later, they’ll be here in ten
minutes.” She puts her link away and walks over to Khan. “And for the record, you asshole, if you
die on me I’m finding your ghost and dragging it back to Earth and making you watch terrible
movies for decades, or whatever else I can come up with.” She punches him in the solar plexus, hard
enough Khan’s breath whooshes out of him and he steps back. “I almost lost both of you and you do
not get to do that to me, you bastard. You don’t get to decide when you’ve had enough. If I had to
keep going when Evan was in surgery and I didn’t know if he was going to survive, you have to do
the same.”

“Are you going to punch him again?” Jim asks cautiously.

“Do I need to?” Jill asks.

“No,” Khan says, sounding a bit breathless.

“Good, because I’d really rather not,” Jill says and hugs him instead, hard enough Jim wonders if he
hears things crack or if that’s just his imagination. “You just--I was so fucking scared, and I get that
you need Jim but there are other people on this planet who need
you again I am going to punch something.” Her voice sounds shaky and she sniffs.

“Please do not punch me again,” Khan says carefully.

“I can’t hurt you,” she says, sniffing again.

“My solar plexus would disagree,” Khan says, and Jill laughs shakily.

“I’ll have a meltdown about this later,” she says, but it’s still a minute or two before she lets go of
Khan, and he of her. Jim pretends not to notice the way she scrubs at her eyes and takes a few deep
breaths.

“What information do you have?” he asks, giving her a chance to compose herself.

“We think we have a location for the second man,” Jill says. “And possibly the third, who’s not a
man, but we think we know where she is, too.”

“Don’t get yourselves blown up,” Jim says. “Please, for the love of God.”

“I won’t, I promise,” Jill says. She goes to her bag and gets out a comb and a couple of bands,
quickly braiding her hair back. “Okay. Messy emotional meltdown averted for the moment, back to
business, my head is still pounding but nothing for it but time.” She coils the braid at the back of her
head and secures it with the second band. “And there’s the door. I’ll get it.”
Jim’s greeting dies in his throat when he sees Jill go pale. “This isn’t set to stun,” the dark-haired man standing there with a phaser says, pointing it at Jill’s head. “And you’re not one of them. Please don’t make me shoot you, captain.”

“What do you want?” Jill asks steadily.

“I want them,” the man says, nodding at Khan and Jim. “But I’ll take you, too.” He steps into the apartment, and Jill backs up slowly, hands in plain sight. “A hostage to guarantee their behavior does make my life easier.”

A woman with short red hair and dark skin walks into the apartment behind the man and closes the door behind her. “Our lives, darling,” she says and the man laughs.

“Yes, true. Still, this does make things a bit...simpler. If either of you tries anything, I will hurt her. Captain, I’m aware you’re still recovering, so I don’t expect much from you, but as for you, freak.”

The man’s cold eyes meet Khan’s. “Do as you’re told, and she’ll be fine. I won’t bother trying to hurt you, but if you try anything, I will hurt her--and I can be very, very creative when I want to be. But you should know that already, shouldn’t you?”

“Let her go,” Jim says, mouth feeling dry as the Sahara. “She’s not--let her go.”

“Mm, no,” the man says. “She killed a friend of mine earlier today, so...no, I’m afraid she’s coming with us.”

Jill smiles coldly. “Are you sure you shouldn’t be worried about me trying something?”

In response, he backhands her with the hand not holding the phaser. Jill stumbles back and spits out blood, landing on her knees in front of the couch. “I really don’t think I need to worry about you,” the man says dismissively. “Although you do look good down there. How many cocks did you suck to get your ship, captain?”

“Try it and I’ll bite yours off,” she says through gritted teeth.

Jim knows Jill has a weapon in her bag, that she’s probably trying to get to it, but the woman takes out a comm-link and says “Five to beam up, now,” and the transporter takes them before he can even see if Jill’s grabbed her bag.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, please don't shoot the author! I promise a happy ending. Eventually.
They beam into a room with no windows or doors, white walls, and a really obnoxious forcefield separating him and Khan from the two section 31 agents--and Jill, who Jim sees did grab her bag, but he doesn’t know if she’ll be able to do anything with it. He also doesn’t know who has the earbuds, whether Jill has one in her ear or not, and even if she does he has a sinking feeling wherever they are is shielded.

Jill stays on her knees; Jim can see her cheek beginning to bruise where the man hit her. Rage swells in his gut and he steps forward, but the forcefield stops him. He slams a hand against it in frustration.

“What do you want with us?”

“Your deaths, eventually,” the man says, looking away from Jill for a moment to study him. “Eventually. I’m in no rush, and I’ve got nothing else to do since the freak blew up my operation and murdered my admiral. Technically I don’t exist, you see, so no one’s looking for me.”

“Oh, we were,” Jill says, not getting up. Jim would be more worried if he didn’t think she was planning something. “I even know your name, Malcolm Baker. And yours, Verity Stewart. Did you think we were that stupid?”

“I think you’re in a shielded location you don’t know, you’ve got no way out unless Verity or I let you out, and you don’t want to die,” Malcolm says, studying Jill. “So I think you’ll do whatever I tell you.”

Jill laughs. “Clearly you don’t know me at all.”

He hits her again, the other cheek, and her head snaps back and Jim sees the rage on Khan’s face. Jill falls over her bag, but Jim thinks she’s faking being dazed and out of it. Don’t do anything stupid, he
“She’s worth more alive than dead right now, because you won’t want me to hurt her,” Malcolm says to Khan and Jim. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t, and it doesn’t mean I have to leave her untouched. Do you know what she did to my friend, my brother?” He kicks Jill’s hip. “Tell them.”

“Kidney stab,” Jill says, her voice weaker than usual. “Very painful, long way to die, but Alona also shot him, so technically I think she got the kill.” She manages a smile, even with a split lip. “You, though, I’ll take down myself.”

“I’d love to see you try, darling,” Verity says, pointing a phaser at Jill’s head.

“If you think threatening me with death is going to scare me, you really know nothing about me,” Jill says, pushing to her feet slowly. “I’ve almost died more than once. I’ve been tortured and survived it. I was almost raped once. I’m not scared of death and I’m not scared of what comes after it, so if you want me dead, you might as well just shoot me.”

“I want you dead,” Verity says. “But unfortunately, we can’t always get what we want.” She shoots Jill, though, and Jill crumples, dropping to the ground without a sound. “Set to stun,” she says before Jim can breathe. “She’ll wake up eventually, but I don’t trust her not to try something. Malcolm, search her, would you?”

Malcolm grins and does just that, finding three knives and the phaser in Jill’s bag. He also takes her boots, for some reason Jim can’t figure out, and it makes Jim feel sick to see the man’s hands roughly patting Jill’s limp body down. When he’s done, he sets her on a chair and cuffs her to it; her head falls back and she slumps in the chair, looking tiny and fragile and a bit battered from the blows to her face.

Jim swallows, but his wings don’t stay still and when he glances at Khan he sees the man’s wings have stretched out fully. “So what’s the plan, then?” Jim forces himself to ask. “You keep us here, torture us and kill us, and then what?”

“I fully expect the other freaks to come looking for you,” Malcolm says, straightening up. “I don’t expect either Verity or myself to survive the encounter, but if we can take some of them out with us, it’ll be a good way to go. This whole place is rigged with explosives, set to detonate at either of our verbal commands. Might take out a few civilians, but collateral damage is always so messy.”

“Where are we?” Jim demands.

“No, I don’t think I’m going to tell you,” Malcolm says.

Jim’s not really surprised. He’s also tired, and curses his body for not healing faster. There’s a bench in the back of their half of the room, and he sits down on it, folding his wings back and studying the forcefield to see if he can find a way to disable it. He’s certain Khan has at least one knife on him somewhere, so if they can find a weak spot, maybe. But this looks like similar technology to the brig cells on the Enterprise, and Jim doesn’t know a way to break out of those either.

He wonders if Khan does, though. If the man figured out an escape plan while they had him prisoner on the ship, before they moved him to medbay. “Hey,” he says softly, while Malcolm watches Jill with a look that makes Jim very uneasy and Verity moves over to a computer in the wall. “Come here for a second.”

Khan walks over to him, his wings still stretched out slightly, shielding Jim from the rest of the room. “Tell me,” Khan murmurs.
“Do you know a way to get out from behind this forcefield?” Jim asks, so quietly he can barely hear himself, knowing Khan will hear it.

“Perhaps,” Khan says after a moment. “But I would need a little time and they would likely see what I was doing. I am not...comfortable risking Jill’s safety for our own.”

“No, neither am I,” Jim admits. “I just...there has to be something we can do.”

“At the moment, I am not certain what,” Khan says wearily.

A groan makes them both turn and Jim push up from the bench, walking over to the forcefield. “Fucking hell,” Jill says, blinking her eyes open. “If you’re going to stun me, at least have the courtesy to give me painkillers after. Stun headaches suck donkey balls through a straw.”

Jim has to snicker at that. “I thought stim-crash headaches were the worst,” he says.

“It’s all relative,” Jill says, and he doesn’t miss that she’s twisting her wrists, looking for a way out of the cuffs.

“I could just stun you again,” Verity offers, pointing her phaser at Jill’s face.

“Sure, if you want me to wake up and vomit all over your floor,” Jill says. A look of distaste crosses Verity’s face at that and she lowers the phaser. “Covert ops bothered by puke? That’s rich. Does blood bother you too?”

“No, not at all,” Verity says, smiling. “Would you like to test it?”

Jill shrugs. “I have enough scars, one or two more won’t bother me.”

“Curious,” Verity says, setting the phaser down and walking over to Jill. “Why do you have so many scars?”

“Because regen isn’t perfect and I’m a freak in my own way,” Jill says. “Did I mention I can also dislocate various body parts?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Verity asks, puzzled.

In response, Jill yanks her right hand out of the cuffs and stands up, punching Verity in the face and swinging the chair around to hit her in the head with it. Verity falls to the ground, and Jill punches the release on the cuffs to get her left hand free, throwing the chair at Malcolm and hitting him in the chest. He stumbles back and grabs a phaser as Jill makes a dive for her weapon. Both of them fire almost simultaneously, and Jim can’t breathe, not sure who’s still alive.

No one moves on the floor for an agonizing few seconds. Then Jill hisses in a breath and crawls over to Verity, one hand pressed against her ribs. “Grazed me, didn’t hit me full on, but I’m going to need medical treatment at some point,” she says. “Jim, don’t look.”

Jim looks anyway, because this is his fault, and swallows bile when Jill efficiently snaps Verity’s neck.

“No,” Jill says, taking a breath, then another. “I’m good at killing. I shouldn’t be, but I am, and I like it. Malcolm, though, I think either he’s faking it or I got really lucky, because I barely aimed.” She breathes again and pushes herself to her feet, swaying a moment. Jim can see the phaser burn
through her shirt and sees blood trickling through her fingers where she presses her hand against her side.

“He’s dead,” Khan says. “You hit him in the throat.”

“I’d still like to make certain,” Jill says, and takes her phaser and walks over to Malcolm, shooting him squarely between the eyes. “Sorry to deprive you of the kill, Khan, but I didn’t want to risk either of them being alive before I find the controls to let you out of there, and...I’m going to fall over in a minute.”

“How badly were you hit?” Jim demands.

“Hopefully not enough to kill me,” Jill says, stumbling to the computer on the wall. She studies it for a moment, then moves to a panel next to it. “Of course it’s coded and I don’t know the code, and...let’s see if this works.” She shoots the panel, sending sparks flying everywhere. It does, in fact, bring down the forcefield, and a moment later Jill collapses.

Jim runs for her, feeling for a pulse and relieved when he finds one, a little weaker than it should be and slower but there. “Is there any kind of medkit in here?” he asks. “She’s--I don’t know what I can do for her.” He touches Jill’s face, worried by how hot her skin feels. “Jill, come on, wake up, talk to me.”


“No, not right now,” Jim says, keeping pressure on the wound in her side even though it’s not bleeding much. “Tell me how you got out of the cuffs.”

“I can dislocate my thumb,” Jill says, words slurring. “Most cuffs are too big on me anyway, if I pop my thumb out it’s easy to slide my hand through.”

“How’d you learn that?” Jim asks.

“Gymnastics,” Jill says. “I can dislocate my shoulders, too, although that hurts more. It’s cold in here, Jim. Please let me sleep.”

Khan comes over with a medkit and a blanket, and between the two of them they bandage Jill’s wound and wrap her up. She’s shivering by the time they finish, and Khan gently pulls her into his lap, wrapping his wings around her. “She’s burning up,” he says, looking at Jim.

“There should be something in the medkit to help with that,” Jim says, searching through it. He finds the pills and manages to get Jill’s attention enough to get her to swallow them. “I’m, um, going to see if I can find out where we are and contact someone to help us get out of here.”

The computer, as Jim expected, is locked, and he doesn’t think shooting it will help. He fiddles with it enough and manages to find a handprint scanner, and with a grimace for what he has to do he hauls Verity’s body over and puts her hand on the plate. The computer obligingly grants access and Jim lets her body fall, turning back to the screen.

He’s somehow not surprised to find out they’re just outside London, in a sub-basement of some old building from what he can gather. He still doesn’t find a way out of the room that doesn’t involve beaming, but he manages to lower some of the shields, enough to get comm-links working, and calls Pike.

“Kirk,” Pike says. “Where the hell are you? What happened?”
Jim blows out a breath and tells him what happened as quickly as he can. “Jill needs medical
treatment, stat,” he says. “She was shot, she’s not...she’s stable, I think, but she needs a doctor.”

“Are you and Khan all right?” Pike asks. “Do you have a way out of there?”

“We’re fine, sir, and no, not that I can find,” Jim says.

“All right. Sit tight, we’ll be there in a minute. See if you can transmit your coordinates to me so we
can lock onto you.”

“I’ll do what I can, sir,” Jim says. He gets off the comm-link and sends Pike what information he has
about their location before looking for a way to lower the shields some more. Everything on the
computer is encrypted, but Jim’s not a genius for nothing, and he manages to lower the shields
without triggering the explosives wired into the room. A minute later, he hears a familiar sound and a
transporter beam wraps around him, and he emerges in Starfleet Medical, Khan on the floor next to
him still holding Jill.

“Well, you didn’t get blown up, but what the hell happened to her?” Bones asks, moving with
Maeve and another nurse to gently take the unconscious Jill and lift her onto a gurney.

“The bad guys didn’t like her,” Jim says absently. “She got backhanded twice across the face,
stunned once, kicked once, and then shot, I don’t know how bad it is. We bandaged it as best we
could, and I gave her pills from the medkit because she was burning up, but...”

“If she needs blood, use mine,” Khan says, pushing to his feet.

“You are not a permanent donor,” Bones says crankily.

“She’s my sister,” Khan says. “If she needs blood, take mine.”

Bones sighs. “We’ll see, but Maeve, could you get him set up just in case?”

“Of course,” Maeve says, touching Khan’s arm and leading him down the hall. Jim stands there, not
sure who to follow or where to go, and of course that’s when Ekaterina and Matthew and Alona and
Evan run in.

“She’ll be okay, I think,” Jim says quickly to avert the panicked look on Evan’s face. “She’ll be
okay. A little worse for wear, but Bones is on it.”

“Tell me what happened,” Evan demands.

“We were waiting for Cat and Matthew to come get Jill, and someone knocked on the door and she
answered it, and it...wasn’t them,” Jim says. “Malcolm and Verity, I think their names were. They
decided to take all three of us, use Jill as a hostage to ensure Khan and I didn’t try anything. We
beamed into a secure location. Long story short, Jill got out of the cuffs they had her in and took
down both of them, but she got injured in the process. I think she might have a cracked cheekbone or
something, from the bruising, and she got shot with a phaser--not full on, but I don’t know how
serious it is.”

“I take it you and Khan were unable to assist in eliminating the threats?” Ekaterina asks.

“Forcefield,” Jim says with a sigh of frustration. “We couldn’t see a way to get it down without
getting Jill in more trouble, and Malcolm really didn’t like her.” He decides not to mention his fear
that Malcolm would have done more than just beat Jill up, given opportunity. There’s no reason
Evan needs to know that.
“We were unavoidably detained by their minions,” Matthew says, and Jim realizes he’s got a fading black eye and Ekaterina has a couple tears in her shirt. “Evan and Alona were waiting for us at the rendezvous point, and when we did not return with Jill, they came looking for us. My earbud was broken in the fight, and Cat was drugged, but four of them are now in custody, the others are dead, and we are fine.”

“For varying definitions of fine,” Evan says. “Is Jill in surgery?”

“I think so,” Jim says. “Bones took her that way, and Khan went with Maeve to give blood in case she needs it.”

Evan sighs. “I hate it when she does shit like this. She’s turning me gray before I’m even forty.”

Evan’s hair is still mostly auburn but Jim keeps his mouth shut about that one. “She, um, undoubtedly saved her own life, and probably ours,” he offers instead.

“Oh, I didn’t say it wasn’t the right thing to do,” Evan says. “Let me guess, she dislocated her thumb to get out of the cuffs?”

“She’s done that before?” Jim asks.

“Multiple times,” Evan says. “It’s not that big a deal once you get used to it, and she says it doesn’t hurt much. The first time she dislocated her shoulder, though, I about had a heart attack.”

“Those are painful,” Matthew comments.

“Apparently it hurts less if you do it on purpose, or so she tells me,” Evan says. “I don’t think I really believe it, but she also says she’s used to pain, she spent over a decade as a competitive gymnast and she’s spent longer than that as an active Starfleet officer. Pain is in the job description.”

“Not always,” Jim feels obliged to protest. “At least, not if it goes according to plan.”

“And things do that how often?” Evan asks wearily.

“Okay, point,” Jim has to concede. “Let’s go--I should find Admiral Pike and debrief. You should find whatever observation room they’re using.”

“No,” Evan says. “No, I want to be in on the debrief. I don’t like watching the doctors work on her, it’s...I’ll see her when it’s over, when she’s in recovery.”

“Oh, okay,” Jim says. “Fair enough.” Evan looks fragile enough right now, which isn’t really a word Jim ever thought he’d use for the man. But then again, he’s seen how much Evan loves Jill, and this...Jim sighs and rubs his forehead, his wings wrapping around himself briefly. “Let’s go see if Admiral Pike is in the building somewhere.”

Ekaterina takes out her comm-link and dials. “Admiral,” she says after a moment. “Where would you like us to meet you for the debrief? We have Captain Kirk, Matthew, Alona, Commander Kane, and myself. Captain Kane is in surgery, and Khan is donating blood.” She listens for a moment. “Yes, we will head there now.”

“Where are we going, and please let it be in the Medical building?” Jim asks tiredly, following Ekaterina as she starts walking.

“It is,” she says. “We are borrowing an empty office near main reception.”
That’s not far away, and Jim sighs in relief. He takes out his link and sends Khan a brief message letting him know where they’ll be. The five of them get to the office before Admiral Pike, but ten seconds after they walk in Admiral Barnett walks in, looking disgruntled. “Sir,” Jim says, belately aware he’s wearing civvies and is actually barefoot. How did he not notice before now he doesn’t have shoes on? For that matter, he thinks Jill’s boots and her things are still at the building outside London.

“Chris should be here in a moment,” Barnett says. “Kirk, sit down before you fall over. Kane, you do the same. Were you injured in the fight?”

“No, sir,” Evan and Jim say in unison. “His wife’s in surgery, sir,” Jim says, nodding at Evan. “She was shot.”

“She going to be all right?” Barnett asks.

Jim drops into a chair, straddling it to make room for his wings. “I think so, but I don’t know, sir,” he says, wishing he didn’t see Evan’s flinch at that. “She should be, though.”

“We’ll keep this short,” Barnett says. “Matthew, tell me the other guy looks worse than you do.”

Matthew grins. “The other guy is dead,” he says cheerfully. “Well, some of them. Four are in custody.”

“We might actually learn something,” Barnett comments as Pike walks in. Jim moves to stand and Pike waves him back to his seat.

“I doubt that, sir, but it’s worth trying,” Jim says.


“We were on our way to get Captain Kane when we were attacked by a group of minions,” Ekaterina says. “They drugged me, broke Matthew’s earbud and his nose. We fought back, and they apparently had incomplete information about our metabolisms because the drugs did not knock me out, they only made me a bit groggy. We killed those we could not avoid killing, left four alive.”

“You haven’t seen physical comedy until you’ve seen Cat on drugs throwing men over her shoulder,” Matthew adds. “Well, she threw him, I caught him and broke his neck. Then she fell down.”

“I did not fall,” Ekaterina says indignantly. “I was tripped by one of the ones we’d left alive and landed on top of him.”

“You fell down,” Matthew says. “It was really, really funny, mostly because you couldn’t pick a language to stay in when you started lecturing the poor idiot. She was sitting on his back, occasionally kicking him, and telling him all the mistakes he and his companions made in trying to capture us, but she was alternating between Russian, English, Greek, Hindi, and something I don’t know, Polish maybe. The poor guy ended up passing out from fear, I think.”

“Is he in custody?” Pike asks, trying not to smile and not doing a very good job of it.

“He is,” Matthew says. “If you tell him Cat wants ten minutes with him, you’ll probably get everything he knows, but that might be against the Geneva convention.”

“Not if they don’t actually give me the ten minutes,” Ekaterina says thoughtfully.
“Moving on,” Pike says. “Alona, Commander Kane, when did you two come into the picture?”

“We knew there was a problem when my earbud went dead,” Alona says. “We tried calling Cat and Matthew via their normal links, but neither of them answered, so we set out to look for them. We found them without too much difficulty and got there just before Cat actually passed out. Delayed reaction to the drug likely caused by adrenaline. While we waited for her to wake up, we called you to inform you and have someone come pick up the four people still alive. Then we tried calling Captain Kirk, Khan, and Captain Kane simultaneously. None of them answered their links. We decided not to split up again as we were waiting for Ekaterina to shake off the drugs, and we did not want to risk any two of us getting ambushed again. We went to Captain Kirk’s apartment once officers arrived to deal with the bodies living and dead, and determined that no one had broken in but also no one was home. We were not sure what to do next, and decided to head to Medical in case they had come here for some reason, and as we were on our way we got a phone call that the three of them had contacted Admiral Pike and would be arriving shortly.”

Pike nods. “Kirk, what happened? I know you gave me the two-minute rundown, but more detail would be good, and Will hasn’t heard the story yet.”

“Sir,” Jim says, pushing himself to his feet anyway because he hates sitting while giving reports. “It was me, Khan, and Jill—Captain Kane—in the apartment. We were waiting for Ekaterina and Matthew to get there, and someone knocked on the door, and she thought it was them. It wasn’t. She named them Malcolm Baker and Verity Stewart. Malcolm had a phaser on Jill, and said he’d shoot her if we didn’t play along, and then Verity put in a call to someone and we all beamed into a shielded location. Khan and I ended up on one side of a forcefield, Jill was on the other with Verity and Malcolm. She, um.” Jim glances at Evan and blows out a breath, then continues. “Malcolm hit her a couple times when he didn’t like what she said to him, then Verity stunned her because she didn’t trust Jill not to try something. Malcolm searched her, cuffed her to a chair. She woke up, and either she’s secretly telekinetic or something, because she got out of the cuffs, punched Verity and hit her in the head with the chair.”

“How the hell did she manage that?” Barnett interrupts.

“She can dislocate her thumb voluntarily, sir,” Evan says. “Combine it with how small her wrists are and she doesn’t usually have a problem slipping out of cuffs if they’re not sized for children.”

“Lucky,” Ekaterina grumbles. “I have yet to be able to voluntarily dislocate any part of my body, not for lack of trying.”

“It still sounds painful,” Jim says. “Anyway, Jill knocked out Verity, threw the chair at Malcolm, and the two of them dove for phasers and fired about simultaneously. We didn’t know for a few seconds what had happened, but then Jill moved. She’d been hit, but she was able to get the forcefield down before she passed out, and then I got the shields down and called you, sir.”

“How did she get the forcefield down?” Barnett asks.

“She, um, shot the panel controlling it,” Jim says, smiling a little. “Shorted out the controls and brought it down.”

“Is Verity still alive?” Barnett asks.

Jim shakes his head, wishing he couldn’t see Jill’s hands on Verity’s head. Quick twist, sharp and sure, and one *crack* that he thinks he can still hear. “No, sir. Captain Kane took her out. We didn’t want—Jill didn’t want to risk her waking up before she was able to get us out from behind the forcefield, and she knew she only had a short time before she was going to pass out, so...”
“How did she do it?” Evan asks softly.

“Broken neck,” Jim says after a pause.

He thinks he sees approval in Alona and Ekaterina’s eyes, and looks away. “Under the circumstances, I think there’s no problem with calling it self-defense,” Barnett says. “Have we been able to locate the third person, the one who was based in London?”

“No word from Amir and Aisha yet,” Ekaterina says. “Alona and Matthew and I would like to head there next to find them.”

“I want all three of you to get cleared by Medical first,” Pike says firmly. “That’s not a request.”

“I was not even in a fight,” Alona protests.

“You’ve been in several over the last few days, and how much sleep have you gotten?” Pike gives her a look. “All three of you are getting cleared by Medical before you go anywhere.”

Jim glances up as Khan appears in the doorway. “How is she?” Evan asks immediately.

“Stable,” Khan says. “There was significant damage, but she will make a full recovery.”

“I see you helped with that,” Evan says, nodding at the bandage in the crook of Khan’s elbow.

Khan shrugs. “She saved my life, undoubtedly. Two pints of blood is nothing compared to that.”

“I would not call it nothing, but an acceptable payment on a life debt,” Ekaterina says.

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “The doctor tells me she should be conscious in a few hours, Evan, but you may go sit with her in about an hour.”

“If we have to get cleared by Medical so does he,” Alona says firmly.

Pike sighs. “Yes, fine, go deal with it, all four of you. Kirk, Khan, a moment, please.”

Ekaterina raises her eyebrows, but slips out of the room, pausing to touch Khan’s shoulder and murmur something in his ear first. Alona, Matthew, and Evan follow her, and out of curiosity Jim looks down and realizes Khan’s also barefoot and wonders if the man has noticed yet.

“What?” Khan murmurs to him, coming to stand by him; Jim smiles a little and nods down at their feet. Khan looks down, and Jim sees his lips twitch in what isn’t quite a smile.

“Something funny, gentlemen?” Barnett asks.

“No, sir, not really,” Jim says but he has to struggle not to laugh. “It’s just--we--” He points down, and Barnett and Pike look down, and then Barnett actually laughs, surprising the hell out of Jim.

“We’ll get you some spare boots before you end up walking around San Francisco barefoot,” Pike says solemnly.

“Thank you, sir, but if we could just get a cab home, that’d probably be easier,” Jim says.

“Yeah, about that,” Pike says. “We need your help, both of you. There’s a lot of information encrypted in the computers in that room you were in, along with a lot of explosives. We’ve got a few demolitions experts working on the explosives part, and they say that it’s not all that sophisticated, so it should only be a few hours before the room’s safe enough to go back into. We’d like the two of
you to return and try and break the computer encryption and figure out just what information is
stored in there and how widespread this net is.”

“Sir, I’m not a hacker,” Jim says carefully.

“No, you’re not,” Pike agrees. “But Khan has extensive experience with how section 31 agents think
and operate, so he’s likely our best bet to get into the computers. And to be frank, you’re safer with
him than you would be anywhere else. Both of you are still targets until we neutralize the last of this
threat, so we’d like to have you both where we can keep an eye on you.”

Not to mention, Jim thinks, that Khan would likely refuse to go without him even if it were a direct
order. He doesn’t comment on that, but when he glances at Khan he thinks he can see a similar
thought in Khan’s eyes.

“Do you need anything from your apartments?” Barnett asks, and Jim almost laughs at the plural. He
can’t even remember the last time Khan went to his place, and he’s had an idea in his mind for a
while now, but with them about to ship out he doesn’t know if they have time. Assuming they still
are shipping out on schedule; with this, everything’s a mess.

“Shoes,” Jim says, managing a smile. “I guess the clothes we’re wearing now will suit, unless either
of you objects.”

“It’s fine,” Pike says. “Anything else?”

“There are two pill bottles in the bathroom,” Khan says and Jim wants to glare at him, but at the
same time he knows he probably needs the meds. “Prescriptions for the captain.”

“We’ll get them,” Barnett says. “Anything else? We’d rather not have you go back there until we’re
certain it’s safe.”

Which means sex is probably not an option for a while, either, Jim thinks and refrains from sighing.
“I guess just pack us both a bag,” he says. He fumbles in his pocket for the access card to his
apartment and holds it out to Pike. “Where are we going to stay until then?”

Barnett clears his throat. “We’ll need your access card, too,” he says to Khan, who doesn’t smile but
almost smirks instead.

“Everything I might need is at the captain’s apartment,” Khan says blandly, and okay, well, that’s
one way to do it, Jim thinks. He doesn’t know if Barnett was truly oblivious to them being a pair or
just wanting to be, but he flushes dull red.

“Right,” Pike says. “For now, we’ve arranged for you to get one of the guest suites on the tenth
floor, for visiting families.” He gives Jim an access card. “We’ll call you when we need you to head
back to the London facility, and someone will be by with your things shortly.”

“I’d like to see Jill first,” Jim says.

“Of course,” Barnett says. “You’re not under arrest, Kirk. But you are still recovering, so please take
it easy as much as you can.”

Bones is going to throw an absolute fit, Jim thinks and this time he does sigh. “Yes, sir. With your
permission?”

They find Ekaterina and Alona with Evan in the hallway outside the ICU. “They won’t let me in for a little bit longer,” Evan says, running his hands through his hair. “Apparently it was pretty close there for a while, and without Khan’s blood...” He sighs. “Dr. McCoy gave me a somewhat amusing rant on how he is tired of putting people back together and that if I get myself shot, blown up, or a house falls on me he’s quitting.”

“But she will be all right,” Alona says softly, touching Evan’s shoulder. “We are waiting for Matthew to get clearance from Medical. Cat and I are already cleared. What is the plan for you two?”

“We’re, um, going back to that facility in London once the demolitions people have cleared it,” Jim says. “They don’t want us going back to my apartment until things are clear, so for now we’re staying here, I guess. Someone’s bringing us stuff.”

“And boots, I should hope,” Alona says with a snicker.

“I hope,” Jim agrees. Truth be told, his feet are kind of cold at the moment, but he’ll deal. Then he realizes something and his stomach tightens. “Evan, is anyone going to be here with you? With Amir in London, and these folks headed there, and us headed there, are you...you shouldn’t be alone.”

“Jill will be awake soon,” Evan says, rubbing the back of his neck. “And Cade called, said he’ll be here in a bit. Lenore got called in to help with the London facility, which doesn’t surprise me, but they don’t need him, so he’s taking some leave time and he’ll be here. But Jill will be awake soon, and I’ll be fine. Dr. McCoy did say she should recover fairly quickly.”

“What was the damage?” Jim asks hesitantly.

“Cracked cheekbone, split lip, some bruising, and the phaser shot,” Evan says. “Which broke a few ribs and did some internal damage. A lot of internal damage. I expect a few of our friends to start stopping by once they hear she’s in Medical again. I’m kind of surprised Jake hasn’t shown up yet, but maybe he’s shipped out.”

“Who is Jake?” Alona asks.

“Aaron Jacobs,” Evan says. “Goes by Jake. He captains the Wells. He and Jill were in Academy together, and she considers him the brother her parents never gave her.”

“Does he have any of us on his ship?” Ekaterina asks.

“He does but I don’t remember who,” Evan says, tipping his head back. “I think he’s got three, though.”

“We can find out,” Ekaterina says. “It is of little importance right now.”

Matthew emerges from a room across the hall, looking disgruntled and still pulling his shirt back on. He has a tattoo, Jim notices curiously, an intricate knotwork band around his bicep, done in shades of green and brown. “When did you get that?” he asks, nodding at the artwork.

“Centuries ago,” Matthew says, pausing to look at his arm before he pulls on his shirt. “We can’t scar, but we didn’t know if we could get inked, so I volunteered to try it, and it worked.”

“Do any of the rest of you have tattoos?” Jim asks.

“Some of us do,” Alona says. “Do you want to see?”

“Depends on where they’re located,” Jim says cautiously.
She laughs and pulls up her shirt, turning around to show Jim the Celtic tree inked into her lower back. “Maeve has one, as well,” she says, dropping her shirt. “Bishop and Katsuro I think got matching tattoos when they were eighteen, but theirs are very subtle. A few other people. We never convinced Cat, but Konstantin had one on his right bicep.”

“What was it?” Jim asks.

“A wolf,” Ekaterina says. “For me. I am considering getting one.”

“A wolf?” Jim asks, and she smiles a little.

“We mated for life,” she says, touching Evan’s shoulder. “Something I think you know something about.”

Evan laughs. “If she’s not the death of me first.”

Bones comes out of the room behind them. “You can see her now, but she’s in and out,” he says, and Evan’s on his feet before he finishes talking. “No more than two at a time.”

“I think Evan needs some privacy with his wife first,” Ekaterina says.

“It’s fine,” Evan says. “We have a routine. She’ll tell me she’s fine, I’ll tell her to stop doing shit like this, she’ll tell me I knew who she was when I married her, I’ll tell her she promised me in our wedding vows she wouldn’t unnecessarily risk her life or limbs. She’ll tell me this was necessary, then she’ll apologize, fall back asleep, and when she wakes up we’ll have this conversation again. Eventually she’ll stop apologizing and start bitching at me for hovering over her when she’s fine, goddamnit, and would be more fine if they’d let her go home, and we’ll start arguing over that until they let her get out of here, and then we’ll argue over her pushing herself in recovery and me hovering and fussing and we’ll be back to normal just before she gets herself almost killed again. If you want to witness part one of the all-too-familiar routine, please feel free.”

Jim laughs. “With an invitation like that, I have to accept,” he says, following Evan into the room. Jill lies in the biobed, hooked up to various tubes and machines, bandaged and still a bit bruised. She seems mostly unconscious, but when Evan crosses to her and bends to kiss her forehead, she rouses a bit, blinking.

“Hey, baby,” Evan murmurs, gently stroking her hair.

“’m okay,” Jill mumbles, looking at Evan with blurry eyes.

“I know you are,” he says. “Stop doing shit like this.”

She manages a weak smile. “Who d’you think you married?”

Evan sighs. “Can we skip to the part where you apologize and go back to sleep?”

“Had t’do it,” Jill says, words slurring. “Saved Jim. An’ Khan. An’ I didn’t trust that asshole not to...” She fades out.

Evan sighs again. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. Why do you always bring out the psychopaths?”

Jill doesn’t answer. Evan shakes his head and kisses her forehead again. “Love you, even if you are going to drive me insane,” he says, and Jim sees Jill smile faintly.

“Sorry,” she whispers back.
“Rest, baby,” Evan murmurs, taking the chair next to her bed. “I’ll keep you safe.” Jill’s left hand lies on top of the covers, and Evan clasps it gently. After a moment, Jim slips out of the room.

“That went scarily like he said it would,” he says, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck.

“I would like to see her,” Khan says, handing Jim a canvas bag and slipping into the room. Jim looks in the bag and laughs when he sees a pair of socks and boots. He sits down on a chair in the hall to pull them on, and he can tell they’re not his but they’re standard-issue boots, they’ll do.

“Better?” Ekaterina asks.

“Yes,” Jim says, hiding a yawn behind his hand.

“You should sleep,” Alona says. “The three of us are heading to London in a few minutes. We have new earbuds, and will be using one pair of them between Cat and Khan in case you need us. Let us know when you arrive.”

“We will, and I’ll get a couple hours when Khan comes back,” Jim says. “I don’t know when they’re going to ask us to head to London.”

“Hopefully not before you have had some sleep,” Ekaterina says. “And here is my brother.”

Khan emerges from Jill’s room looking mostly satisfied. “She will be all right,” he says. “Are you three leaving?”

“Da,” Ekaterina says. “You have your earbud?”

He touches his left ear. “Yes.”

“Good.” Ekaterina leans up to hug him, kissing his cheeks. “Be safe, brother.”

“And you,” he says, hugging her back, his wings briefly folding around her. “Try not to get drugged again.”

“I will do my best,” Ekaterina says. “Try not to get blown up or kidnapped.”

Alona and Matthew say their goodbyes and the three augments leave, just as Cade rushes in, looking rumpled and a bit frazzled. “She’s okay,” Jim says before he can even say hello. “Evan’s in with her now, if you want to go see. We’re going to go get some sleep before they send us wherever we’re going.” He doesn’t know how much Cade knows about what’s going on and doesn’t want to let anything slip he shouldn’t.


“How do you--never mind,” Jim says.

Cade shrugs. “I have my sources and the three augments leave, just as Cade rushes in, looking rumpled and a bit frazzled. “She’s okay,” Jim says before he can even say hello. “Evan’s in with her now, if you want to go see. We’re going to go get some sleep before they send us wherever we’re going.” He doesn’t know how much Cade knows about what’s going on and doesn’t want to let anything slip he shouldn’t.


“How do you--never mind,” Jim says.

Cade shrugs. “I have my sources, and my girlfriend’s out there trying to defuse the place you were being held.”

“Okay, point,” Jim says.

“You go get some sleep, I’ll go see my sister-in-law,” Cade says. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Jim says. He shakes Cade’s hand because it seems like the right thing to do and heads to the lifts with Khan. They find their room easily enough and Jim sees two bags against the dresser. “Efficient,” he comments.
“Starfleet can be, when it suits their needs,” Khan says. He goes to the dresser and picks up the pill bottles, tipping out one from each and handing them to Jim. “Do you need water?”

“No, I can get these down,” Jim says and swallows the pills. “Hopefully they won’t make me too stoned by the time we need to leave.”

“I do not like the idea of you risking your recovery by going,” Khan admits. “But I like the idea of you staying here without me less.”

“Yeah, I thought it might be something like that,” Jim says, taking Khan’s hands. “I’ll be okay. I’m already feeling better than I did earlier. I’m just tired, is all. But I don’t know how much use I’ll be to you once we get to London. I’m really not a hacker.”

“You are, however, intelligent,” Khan says. “I think you will be more useful than you think you will. We will find out in a few hours. For now, rest.”

“Rest with me,” Jim says. “Please.”

“As you like,” Khan says. They take off their recently-acquired footwear and move to lie down on the bed, Khan fitting himself against Jim’s back, an arm over his waist. It’s familiar and comforting and Jim sighs, closing his eyes.

“She scared me,” he admits after a moment.

“As she did me,” Khan says softly. “The way Malcolm looked at her...”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Jim says with a sigh. “I also...I want to know how she defines almost...you heard what she said.”

“I did,” Khan says. “And yes, I wondered about that.”

“We can talk to her about it another time, if she’s willing,” Jim says. “For now, I would really like to get some sleep before we head back to that place.”

Khan kisses the back of his neck. “I have you,” he murmurs. “Sleep, Jim.”

Jim sighs. “What time is it even?”

“I have no idea,” Khan says, sounding amused. “Does it matter?”

“No, not really,” Jim says. “I was just curious. I’m all mixed up.”

“Either late or early,” Khan says. “Either way, you should sleep.”

“Getting there,” Jim says, smiling. “Wake me when someone calls.”

“I will,” Khan says.

Jim honestly doesn’t know if he can sleep, despite how tired he feels; he’s still a bit keyed up from everything, and his brain’s running a million kilometers a second, wondering what they’ll find on the computers, if there are more people they need to worry about besides the one remaining in London, what...

“Seriously, shut up and go to sleep,” she says, and Jim blinks, wondering when he got here.

“Hi,” he says, looking at her sprawled sideways in the throne, skirts rucked up around her legs, hair
spilling over the arm.

“Hi. You were thinking too loudly for me to ignore you,” she says.

“How does this work? Do you have like a constant line into my head or something?” Jim asks curiously.

She doesn’t answer, which doesn’t really surprise him. Jim sighs. “Well, if you’re not going to say anything, can I just go to sleep?”

“You scared him,” she says. “And I won’t...I won’t lie and say I don’t miss him, but I don’t want him with me, not right now, not because of you. That’s not right.”

“I know,” Jim says. “And no offense, but I’m not ready to let go of him.”

“I’d take offense if you were,” she says tartly, making Jim smile.

“Point,” Jim says. There’s a stool behind him, somehow, and he takes a seat, wings shifting and settling. “Why did you never tell him when you got sick? Before it was too late for him to do anything about it?” he asks after a moment.

Her face clouds. “I made a mistake,” she says. “I didn’t find out I was sick until it was almost too late, and then I put off telling him because I didn’t want him to be upset with me, I didn’t want him to worry. I was wrong. I also didn’t know he could have done something about it, we never really talked about that. And I think...it was my time. I didn’t have enough time with him, not nearly, but I think it was my time.”

Jim doesn’t ask her why she thinks that. He doesn’t put much stock in fate.

“You should sleep more,” she says. “You’re still healing, and you’ll have a lot to do in the next couple days.”

“Do you know what the side effects from the transfusion will be?” Jim asks curiously. “You seem to know a lot of things.”

“I don’t,” she says. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Jim says with a sigh. “Talk to you the next time you decide to show up.”

She smiles and flicks her hand at him, and the next thing he knows, Khan’s gently shaking his shoulder. “Time to go?” Jim mumbles, scrubbing at his eyes.

“Yes,” Khan says.

Chapter End Notes

I freely admit I got the dislocated thumb idea from a White Collar fic I read in which Neal escaped from cuffs by doing just that. I don't know if that's White Collar canon or a bit of fanon (haven't watched that show in ages) but I liked the idea, so I ran with it. However, for the life of me I can't remember what fic I found it in, nor can I remember the author, so apologies and if I ever find it I'll make sure to credit them.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

This is going to suck.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so my life? Is an example of Why We Can't Have Nice Things, apparently. I am so very sorry for the delay in posting between last chapter and this chapter and hope y'all haven't given up on me. I also hope this chapter makes up for the delay. There's, like, plot. And banter. And stuff. (No porn, though, sorry.)

Many, many thanks to my sounding board foxtales, who undoubtedly had no idea what she was getting into when she emailed me because now I keep throwing things at her to see what sticks and what sucks.

Also, I really do think this story is winding down; I expect it'll come to a final conclusion by or before chapter 60. However, I have learned through ten years of writing and fandom (more, probably) that when I say I'm done with something, the universe laughs at me and I end up writing a lot more. So with that in mind, would you guys be interested in reading more about the folks in this universe once I finish the main arc? With maybe some spotlights on the augments and folks who didn't get as much screen time in this story? Or are you ready to be DONE with me?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When they beam back into the white room, the bodies are gone, but Jill’s things aren’t. Jim silently goes to collect her boots and her bag, setting them next to the shorted out control panel. Then he picks up the chair and throws it across the room, mostly because the sight of it still makes things twist in his stomach. Khan looks at him when he throws the chair, but doesn’t comment.

“Had to be done,” Jim says briefly.

“I did not say anything,” Khan says. “How did you gain access to the computer last time?”

“I used Verity’s handprint, so that’s not quite an option,” Jim says, crossing over to the computer.

“Not as such, no,” Khan says, studying the screen. He types in a command, looking annoyed when it doesn’t work, and tries something else. On his third try, he apparently succeeds and they get a list of files, but none of the names make sense to Jim; they appear to be random strings of numbers and letters.

“This is going to take a while,” he says.

“Yes,” Khan says. “Especially since we do not even know entirely what we are looking for.”
Jim resists the urge to bang his head against the wall. “I guess let’s start at the top and work our way down,” he says.

“The files themselves will likely be encrypted,” Khan says. “How are you at cracking passwords?”

“Uh,” Jim says. “Okay, so there was that one time but no one’s supposed to know about it and--” He shuts up when he sees the amused look on Khan’s face. “Yeah, okay, I can give it a try.”

It takes them two hours to decrypt the first three files, and the information they get doesn’t prove to be all that useful. “Projects that were ongoing at the archive,” Khan says, reading over them. “I am fairly certain all of them have been shut down or were blown up.”

This time Jim does bang his head against the wall. “At least it’s getting easier to decrypt them,” he says.

Khan touches his left ear. “Da,” he says, turning away from the computer. Jim realizes Cat must be calling and goes quiet. “No, minimal at best, but I think it may get easier from here on out.” He snorts. “When has that ever been the case? No.” He smiles faintly and his wings relax a little. “What information do you have? Have you--ah. He might be useful here, although we are making some progress.”

“If someone’s coming to us, make them bring coffee,” Jim says.

“Did you--yes,” Khan says. “No, I still do not know another way into the room. I know. Yes, I know. Take care, sister.” He touches his ear again. “Matthew is on his way to us and Cat says he will bring coffee. He is apparently frustrated with their inability to find the last agent and has decided to come be frustrated at encrypted files instead.”

“Is he any good at hacking?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. “And he is good at data analysis.”

“Okay,” Jim says. “So I guess Cat and Alona and Amir and Aisha aren’t having any more luck than we are?”

“Apparently not,” Khan says. “The fourth agent is proving to be smarter than the other three, or at least better at hiding. Matthew has hopes of finding something on the computers here that may lead to him.”

“Do we even know if it’s a him or a her? Do we have a name?” Jim asks, pushing his hands through his hair.

“We know it is a him,” Khan says. “I do not know his name, however.”

Jim sighs. “Well, let’s start on the next file, I guess.”

They have it mostly decrypted and Jim thinks they might actually get some useful information from it when the sound of an incoming transporter makes them look up. Matthew materializes in the middle of the room holding a tray of go-cups. “Coffee delivery service,” he says, holding out the tray. “Jim, yours is the one with the stirrer sticking out of it.”

“Thanks,” Jim says, taking his coffee. “Not having a lot of luck?”

“I’m having phenomenal luck at finding jack shit,” Matthew says, handing Khan a cup and tossing the tray after the chair lying on its side. “What about you?”
“About the same,” Jim admits. “We don’t even know what we’re looking for.”

“Well, what have you found so far?” Matthew asks.

Khan motions him to come over. “We just finished decrypting this file,” he says. “I think it may actually have information we can use.”

“Really? That’d be a stroke of luck,” Matthew says, moving to look at the screen. “I see...huh. Addresses, locations, but I’m not familiar enough with current London geography to know where they are.”

“I think they are safe houses,” Khan says, pulling up a new window overlaying a map of London with the locations highlighted. “Note how they are spread out throughout the city.”

“I do see the obvious, yes,” Matthew says, sipping his coffee. “Jim, how much do you know about London?”

“Not a whole lot,” Jim admits. “But we can send the list of locations to Cat or Alona and ask them to check them out carefully.”

“It’s more than we had when I left, sure,” Matthew says.

Khan emails the list to Ekaterina and Alona and calls Ekaterina to let her know about the data. “She says they will check it out,” he says. “Also she says London is unbearably gray and damp and she would much rather have a meter of snow and cold air rather than this dreariness.”

“She’s certifiable,” Matthew says. “Also Russian, and I think the two terms are interchangeable.”


“I like the unpredictability of weather,” Matthew says. “But I prefer sunshine to rain, and summer to winter. As most sane people do, I expect.” He takes a drink of his coffee and moves to the screen next to Khan’s. “What are you using to decrypt the files?”

“A variant on dictionary,” Khan says.

“That’s actually working?” Matthew asks in surprise.

“It is a variant,” Khan points out. “And yes, it has been.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Matthew says. “Tell me the variant you’re using and I’ll see if I can get anywhere. Seriously, though? Dictionary still works in this century?”

“I think either they did not have much stored on these computers or they never thought anyone would attempt to break the encryption,” Khan says. “It has taken us a while to get through the first few files, but I am starting to recognize a pattern to the codes. The rest of the files should be easier to translate, but I am not sure we will find anything useful.”

“Only one way to find out,” Matthew says, flexing his hands. “Unless Jim you’d rather? I don’t think there’s room for three people to tackle this.”

“No, you do it,” Jim says. “There’s a satellite workstation over here, send me what you get as you get it and I’ll try and analyze it.”

“Will do,” Matthew says. He and Khan start discussing options for decrypting the files and Jim moves over to the other workstation to see what they have so far. He learns more about what was
going on at section 31—quite a lot he didn’t know about, and some things he’s not sure he’s supposed to know now. Some of it makes him feel a little queasy, truth be told, and he finds himself somewhat grateful Khan blew most of it up.

He’s about to start reading a new file when he hears Khan snarl and slam a fist into the wall, barely avoiding hitting the computer. “What the hell?” Jim asks, walking over to him and Matthew.

Khan doesn’t answer, just turns and walks away from the computers, wings bristling and body language screaming anger. “Matthew?” Jim asks softly. “What is it?”

Matthew presses his lips together, then motions for Jim to read what was on Khan’s screen. At first, it doesn’t make sense—medical records of an unnamed subject, all kinds of tests, things Jim’s never even—“Oh, my God,” he whispers when the pieces come together.

“They were thorough,” Matthew says, his voice having none of its usual lilt. “Very, very thorough.”

“Are any of them still alive?” Jim asks.

“No,” Matthew says.

Jim’s wings fold around him for a moment before he forces them back and goes after Khan, who’s currently pacing back and forth along the bench in the back of the room. “Hey,” Jim says quietly. “Hey. Easy.”

Khan stops, but the look in his eyes makes Jim’s stomach clench. “I can’t take back what happened to you,” Jim says, reaching for Khan’s hands. “But it won’t ever happen again. I swear it.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Jim,” Khan says, voice tight.

“If anyone tries to get their hands on you, they’ll go through me first,” Jim says, deadly serious. “You’re mine.”

Slowly, Khan breathes out. “I know it is over,” he says. “And yet.”

“And yet you don’t believe it,” Jim says. “Not really.”

“It is...difficult to accept sometimes,” Khan says, tacitly agreeing with Jim. “I can still remember it, so clearly. The gift of a photographic memory is often more of a curse.”

Jim leans his forehead against Khan’s, wrapping his wings around him as much as he can. He doesn’t know what to say, what will make this better. He forgets sometimes just how damaged Khan is, and there’s nothing he can do to fix him. Khan’s not a broken computer; there’s no spare part to swap out.

“We should get back to work,” Khan says after a bit.

“In a moment,” Jim says, not ready to let go of him yet. “I’m sure Matthew can handle things for thirty seconds.”

That earns him a faint smile and Khan’s lips brushing against his own. “Later,” Jim says, almost to himself. “Later, we’re going to have time and privacy and a bed and...yeah.”

“Yes,” Khan says simply. He kisses Jim again, lightly, and pulls back. Jim folds his wings back and lets go of him, not convinced he’s fine but he can’t do anything about it now.

“I’ve got the next two files decrypted,” Matthew says when Khan walks over to him. “You don’t
want to read them. Trust me. I’ve downloaded them to a memory chip, wiped them off the computer, you can thank me later.”

“All right,” Khan says, not asking questions. “Next file, then?”

“I think I’m recognizing a pattern here,” Matthew says, gesturing to something on his screen. “Anything with this code in the file name is medical sciences, and they all have a variant on the same root password. Sloppy work–very, very sloppy work–but makes my life easier. Let me handle those files, yeah? I’d rather you didn’t break your fist or the computer.”

“Seconded,” Jim says.

Khan glances between them and his mouth twists in not quite a smile. “All right,” he says. “What am I to be working on, then?”

“This set,” Matthew says, pointing. “No idea what’s in them.”

“Well, then,” Khan says. “Let us find out.”

The next few hours pass in a blur of data and a growing headache on Jim’s part. He takes the pills Khan gives him at one point, and shortly thereafter words start blurring on the screen in front of him. “I need five minutes,” he says, moving to the bench in the back of the room and sprawling out on his stomach.

“How long does he actually need?” he hears Matthew ask Khan, but he’s asleep before he hears Khan’s answer.

He wakes feeling decidedly unsettled and cold, and tries to remember his dreams for about ten seconds before deciding he really doesn’t want to know. “How long was I out?” he asks, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “Can we get out of here soon?”

“Only an hour,” Khan says. “I was not expecting you to wake yet. But yes, we think we are going to take a short break soon, to eat if nothing else.”

“Alona checked in about twenty minutes ago,” Matthew says, turning to look at him. “The four of them are fine, if cold, and they’ve been to about two-thirds of the places on the list we sent them. They haven’t found our mystery agent yet but they have found evidence that he’s been some of the places they’ve gone, so they’re definitely on the right track. I suggested they meet us for a meal but she said they grabbed a bite not too long ago and don’t want to take the time away from the hunt anyway.”

“Who is letting us out of here?” Jim asks, standing up.

“We found the escape hatch,” Matthew says with a grin. “It was hiding.” He walks over to the control panel Jill shorted out and lifts it up, revealing a handle. When he pulls the handle, a portion of the wall slides back, revealing stairs up. “I tested it before, it leads up to the outside. I knew there had to be a way out that didn’t involve beaming, this building’s too old for transporter technology. So while Khan kept poking at files, I started poking at the room and I found the way out.”

“Nice,” Jim says. “So let’s get out of here and get some food.”

They do just that, heading into the dusk and drizzle. “Do you know this area of London at all well?” Jim asks Khan.

“Somewhat,” Khan says. “If I remember correctly, we should encounter options for dining if we
“Head east.”

“Which way is east?” Matthew asks.

Khan starts walking rather than answer, and Jim shrugs, following him. Matthew snorts and falls into step next to Jim. “We found a lot of nothing and more of absolutely fucking useless information,” he says cheerfully. “And we think, maybe, we have a name for our mystery buggering agent, although personally I prefer You Bloody Arsehole.”

“What’s his name?” Jim asks, grinning.

“Ikan,” Matthew says. “No fucking clue if it’s a first name, last name, nickname, or lover’s nickname, but it’s more than we had before. Not by a whole hell of a lot, but hey, now we don’t have to call him our international terrorist of mystery anymore. Ikan’s easier to say.”

“Must you always prattle so much?” Khan asks, although it has the sound of a long-standing annoyance, and Matthew laughs.

“Someone’s got to make up for doom-and-gloom you,” he says, punching Khan’s shoulder. “Besides, Jim likes my prattling.”

“Jim’s staying out of this,” Jim says hastily.

Matthew says something in Russian, laughing as he says it. “Nyet,” Khan snaps, and Matthew laughs harder, clapping Jim’s shoulder.

“Christ, I don’t know how you put up with the bastard,” he says. “God knows I couldn’t do it, and I grew up with him.” He steps closer to Jim, though, and his hand stays on Jim’s shoulder, and too quickly or quietly for Khan to notice whispers “I need five minutes of your time without him.”

Jim doesn’t know what to say to that, but nods, and Matthew laughs harder, clapping Jim’s shoulder.

“Christ, I don’t know how you put up with the bastard,” he says. “God knows I couldn’t do it, and I grew up with him.” He steps closer to Jim, though, and his hand stays on Jim’s shoulder, and too quickly or quietly for Khan to notice whispers “I need five minutes of your time without him.”

Jim doesn’t know what to say to that, but nods, and Matthew laughs, launching into a story Jim hasn’t heard before about them as teenagers. “I hated Alona, for a while, because she didn’t grow much, and I was all arms and legs, so for a while she could easily defeat me in combat because she was more used to her body than I was,” Matthew says. “And I still had it better than Khan, who was growing into arms, legs, and fucking wings. He ever tell you about the first time he tried to fly?”

“No,” Jim says, looking at Khan. “How did it go?”

“The flying was not the problem,” Khan says. “Landing, on the other hand…”

“He broke four bones and sustained a concussion,” Matthew says. “Cat had to literally sit on him to keep him in bed until the bones healed. She was pissed because she’d just discovered the joys of sex with Konstantin, and now she had to take time away from fucking to play nursemaid.”

“No one else could have done it?” Jim asks.

“Ekaterina’s always been possessive of Khan,” Matthew says, a little more seriously. “She wouldn’t let anyone else take care of him when he was injured unless it was Maeve or Bishop. Khan and Konstantin, her brother and her mate. We used to call them the unholy trinity.” He sighs and scruffs a hand through his hair. “God, I miss him.”

“As do I,” Khan says softly.

“I think there’s one on the next corner,” Jim says, looking ahead.

In fact, there is one, and they get a quiet booth in a back corner and a waitress in a remarkably low-cut top. She gives all three of them a once-over and Matthew grins back. “Don’t waste your time with them, love,” he says, jerking his head toward Khan and Jim. “Dull and duller here. It’s a sad life for me.”

The waitress laughs. “Let’s make it less sad, then,” she says. “What’ll it be, gentlemen?”

They end up getting three pints of beer, which makes her smile in approval, and Matthew tosses in an order for some kind of fried appetizer before she disappears to get their drinks and they look at the menus.

Jim decides easily enough and tosses his menu down, wondering what Matthew wants to talk to him about and how they’ll manage it without Khan around. Matthew seems to be having similar thoughts, and finally he sighs and drops his menu on top of Jim’s. “Brother,” he says. “I need...I found some information and I need you to not--I need you to stay calm about it.”

“Tell me,” Khan says, setting his own menu down.

Matthew licks his lips, an uncharacteristically nervous gesture. “The medical data I found,” he says. “The--thanks, love.” He pauses and gives the waitress a smile, but doesn’t try to flirt as she takes their orders and hands out pints and the basket of fried--Jim thinks they’re mushrooms, maybe. He takes one just out of curiosity and decides they’re pretty good.

“I think I know where you are going with this,” Khan says once the waitress has left them. “It did occur to me, in my year in London.”

“Three hundred years later and we’re still fighting the same goddamned battles,” Matthew says wearily. “Jim, half the tests done to Khan were because your scientists, your Starfleet, was trying to figure out how he had been created so they could do it again. So they could engineer a more perfect human again, in this time, only to do it without the drawbacks we have, you see.”

“No,” Jim whispers. “No, they wouldn’t, that’s...it’s illegal, we don’t...” But he stops, because he thought Starfleet did a lot of things differently, too, and was Marcus really an outlier or just the prime example of a corrupt organization?

“Don’t you?” Matthew asks quietly.

Jim rubs his hands over his face and takes a drink of his pint. “Shit,” he says. “What do we do?”

Matthew blows out a breath. “Haven’t a fucking clue,” he says. “I copied all the data I found onto a memory chip, wiped it off the computers, and I sent Alona and Cat a message letting them know what to look for and how to delete the data. They’ll pass it on as well, but there are only so many of us, and I have no idea how widespread this information was shared. I know you trust Admiral Pike, Jim, but how innocent do you really think he is?”

“He wouldn’t have anything to do with this,” Jim says firmly. “Barnett--I don’t know about him as much, but I swear, Matthew, we can talk to Pike.”

“I think he is correct in this,” Khan says and Jim feels something in his gut unclench a bit.

“Fine,” Matthew says. “Fine, we’ll talk to him when we get back to San Francisco, but we’re not doing it before then and not over a link, it’s too easy to track those and I don’t know how many sleeper agents are still out there.”
“Uh, when are we going back, anyway?” Jim asks, diverting the train of thought. “You two can run
for days on no sleep, but I can’t. Well, I could but I think he’d get cranky at me.”

Matthew snorts. “How can you tell the difference between that and him normally?”

“Because when he’s cranky I don’t get laid,” Jim says and earns himself a full laugh from Matthew
and something that might be a snort or a snicker from Khan.

“You know, given the lack of privacy in that white room I’m rather okay with him being cranky at
you,” Matthew says, considering it. “I mean, if one of you were female--okay, if both of you were
female, there could be possibilities. But I have yet to meet any species that can voluntarily change
sex.”

“I’ve met some non-binary species,” Jim says. “But I don’t know of any that can switch.”

“I would love to meet said non-binary species someday,” Matthew says. “I mean, don’t get me
wrong, I’m cisgender and very content with my maleness and my prick, but it’s always seemed
so...arbitrary and weird that what we have between our legs defines so much of who we are as
people. Alona and I used to have a theory that some day, thousands of years from now, we’d evolve
past it. But I move three hundred years into the future and you’re still putting women in short skirts,
so I think my hope is dimming.”

“I didn’t design the uniform,” Jim protests.

“Have you argued against it?” Matthew asks.

“Uh,” Jim says. “No? It’s not really--”

“If you’re not arguing against a uniform that reduces half your operating force to eye candy, you’re
part of the problem,” Matthew says. “And I have really spent far too much time with the women in
my life listening to them bitch about the damned skirt. Seriously, though, what’s the problem with
pants? And long sleeves? It gets fucking cold in space.”

“Must you always talk so much?” Jim asks plaintively.

Matthew laughs. “Oh, this is nothing,” he says. “Alona and Cat and Konstantin and I used to sit up
and talk for hours at night, when we were supposed to be sleeping. Khan stayed up with us but
rarely said much, and Konstantin never said a word if Ekaterina would say two for him, but Alona
and Cat and I would talk all night long. We had such plans, back then. We were going to save the
world, help it find its future, lead it to peace.” He sighs and takes a drink of his pint. “We were
fucking idiots, and we spent three hundred years in cryosleep because the world we tried to save
couldn’t bring itself to order our executions, even though none of us would have hesitated were the
shoe on the other foot.”

“And here we are,” Khan says quietly. “With a third of us gone, and the rest finding homes for
ourselves, to be scattered across the galaxy.”

“They would have approved,” Matthew says after a moment. “I think. I don’t know. God, I miss
them. A hundred times a day I think I should tell Konstantin something, or Rachel, or think I see
Ada’s smile on someone else’s face, or...and I still have Alona, I still have Cat and you and Katsuro
and Bishop, and it’s still so hard. How the hell did you do it, Khan?”

“I had no choice,” Khan says, fingers tightening around his pint glass. “I had no choice. I had to
keep you safe, and to that end I...endured. I did what I had to do because I was driven by
despersion, because I had nothing else left and if I lost even the hope of keeping my family safe then
I might as well have put the phaser to my head and pulled the trigger myself.”

Matthew reaches for his hand and gently loosens it from the glass, gripping it hard. Jim’s mildly surprised when Khan doesn’t pull away but returns the pressure, enough that both their knuckles go white. “You saved us,” Matthew says softly. “You did it.”

“But so many lost,” Khan says, sounding exhausted.

“You couldn’t have stopped it,” Matthew says, not letting go of his hand. “You know you couldn’t have. It’s been three hundred years, Khan, things break down. Given the equipment we had when we left, it’s amazing over fifty of us survived intact.”

This feels like a conversation they’ve needed to have for a while, Jim thinks, staying quiet and still even though he wants to reach for Khan’s other hand, wrap him in his wings and remind him that he’s not alone, not now, not anymore. Maybe it’s better that Matthew’s the one saying these things, instead of Jim or even Ekaterina or anyone else.

“I see their faces when I sleep,” Khan murmurs.

“What do they say to you?” Matthew asks.

“Live,” Khan says.

“You should listen to them,” Matthew says. “They were smart people.” He hesitates a moment. “Do you ever dream of her?”

“I don’t,” Khan says with a pointed look at Jim.

“Wait, what?” Matthew stares at Jim. “How is that— that’s not possible. How are you dreaming of a woman three centuries dead you never met?”

“You know, I’ve asked that same question,” Jim says. “She won’t tell me. I—” He stops, breathes, tries again. “I dreamed of her last night, before we went to London. I have no idea how this works. She said I was thinking too loudly for her to ignore me, but she didn’t answer me about how she knew that or anything.”

Khan snorts. “She used to tell me the same thing when I would not sleep,” he says.

“Okay, that’s just freaky weird,” Matthew decides. “And you’re sure it’s her.”

“I’m either talking with a ghost in my dreams or my unconscious has conjured up a woman that looks exactly like she did, dresses like she did, and keeps meeting me in a place that once belonged to Khan,” Jim says. “You tell me which is more likely.”

“Honestly I’ve got no fucking idea, I didn’t even believe in ghosts until two minutes ago,” Matthew says.

“Someone scare you, love?” the waitress asks, balancing plates easily.

“Not exactly,” Matthew says. “Now I’m just very confused, but that’s an eternal state of being for me.”

“You look good confused,” she says, setting down plates. “I’ll snag you a refill on your beer. Anything else you want?”

“If I asked for your contact info would I stand a chance in Hell of getting it?” Matthew asks with a
She considers and gives him a long look. “I’ll think about it,” she says and heads back to get him a refill.

“What would Alona say?” Jim asks, trying not to laugh.

“She’d be right there with me asking for her info,” Matthew says. “We have a very honest and open relationship, and Alona is an equal opportunity hedonist.”

“This explains so much,” Jim says. “And now I’m really scared to leave her alone with Jill. I don’t want to know how open and honest her marriage is.”


Jim thunks his forehead against Khan’s shoulder.


“Not helping,” Jim says with a groan.

Khan touches his ear. “Yes,” he says and slips into Russian. Jim straightens up and looks at Matthew for a translation, eating a few chips mostly because they’re on his plate and he actually is hungry.

“He’s telling her some of what we learned,” Matthew murmurs, picking up his burger. “Not all of it.”

Only hearing one side of the conversation isn’t really helpful and Jim sighs, deciding to eat first and ask questions later. The waitress returns with Matthew’s beer and a slip of paper, and he smiles and makes a show of tucking the paper into his shirt pocket. Shortly after she leaves them, Khan touches his ear again. “So?” Jim asks.

“They have found a place to spend the night,” Khan says. “They think they know where Ikan is and he is not likely to move before daylight. The problem is that he was smart enough to pick a hiding point that has a high risk of collateral damage and civilian involvement, and since they do not have an actual image of what Ikan looks like, they risk taking out the wrong target if we cannot get them better data. There has to be an image of him somewhere on those computers, or somewhere in the ocean of data we haven’t sorted through yet.”

“Lovely,” Matthew says. “Might I suggest we stop by a pharmacy on the way back to our place and stock up on stim-pills?”

“Coffee,” Jim says. “I’m not taking whatever the hell Jill was on. I saw her crash.”

“Yeah, but it kept her going for a long time,” Matthew says. “We may not get a chance to sleep for some time.”

Jim sighs and hangs his head. “Fine, but neither of you are carrying me to bed when I fall over. Just let me lie there.”

“I promise to leave your masculinity intact by refraining from lifting you,” Matthew says solemnly and Jim throws a chip at him.

They finish dinner amicably enough despite the altercations, and Matthew snags the check, scribbling down a generous tip and a contact email that might even be real, Jim has no idea. On their way back to the building, they do find a drugstore next to a coffeeshop. Jim goes to the latter with
Khan while Matthew ducks into the former. “This is going to suck,” Jim predicts, taking a sip of his coffee.

“It will likely not be pleasant,” Khan concedes.

“Yeah. Just get me home before the pills wear off, okay?” Jim asks.

“I will,” Khan says. Jim knows he can’t really promise that but he feels better for hearing it.

Matthew comes into the coffeeshop then and hands Jim a bottle. “Take two, don’t call me in the morning, and they’ll keep you going for about eighteen hours after which you’ll fall over for about six to eight hours depending on your size, exhaustion level, and other random factors about which I don’t give a shit because I’m not a doctor.”

“I really hate you,” Jim says, but he opens the bottle and knocks back two pills with a swallow of coffee. “I didn’t buy you coffee. Khan did. He likes you better.”

“That’s all right, I love you anyway,” Matthew says, slinging an arm around Jim’s shoulders and smacking a kiss against his cheek. “But I love Khan more because he bought me coffee.”

“I’m not giving it to you if you’re going to kiss me,” Khan says, holding the cup out of reach.

“I won’t kiss you,” Matthew says, letting go of Jim. Khan eyes him, but hands over the coffee without incident. Jim’s still on guard waiting, but nothing happens until they’ve left the shop and are back on the sidewalk. Then Matthew pinches Khan’s ass and Jim almost spills his coffee, he’s laughing too hard to hold on to it.

“Was that really necessary?” Khan demands.

“I said I wouldn’t kiss you,” Matthew says through snickers. “Besides, it’s not my fault you have a great ass. You could pretend I was Jim if it makes you feel better.”

“It wouldn’t make me feel better,” Jim mutters.

“Would you rather I grabbed your ass?” Matthew asks.

“Just keep your hands and your lips to yourself, thanks,” Jim says, holding up a hand. “And everything else I’m not thinking of right now but which you could potentially use in ways I don’t want to think about.”

“Well, you’re no fun,” Matthew says.

“I have a very honest and open relationship that does not involve third parties,” Jim says.

“You’re also not female and thus not of much interest to me,” Matthew says, patting his shoulder. “Sorry, I’m wired heterosexually. I’ve always admired people who weren’t, but my dick doesn’t do much for other men.”

“Why do I need to know this?” Jim asks plaintively.

“Because if I must suffer so must you,” Khan says.

Jim swallows the first three responses he wants to make and settles for a drink of coffee. Fortunately, the rest of the walk back passes without incident, and they make it safely back into the white room.

“Right, new goal time,” Matthew says, stretching his hands. “Find a picture of You Bloody Arsehole
Ikan. We’ve got three geniuses in a room, we should come up with something.”

“Here goes nothing.” Jim says, moving to the workstation he’s been using.

Khan shakes his head. “I will keep working on the data stored on these computers,” he says. “Jim, I suggest widening the search.”

“Cyberspace, so much fun,” Jim says, already opening up a window and refining a search. “This would be easier if we had more of a name to go on.”

“One was enough for us,” Matthew points out.

“I always wondered about that,” Jim says, looking up. “Why do all of you only use one name?”

“Because surnames are a family name, and we didn’t know ours,” Matthew says. “We were assigned surnames, of course, but we talked it over as a group when we were around thirteen or fourteen and came to the conclusion that our having surnames served no purpose, as we had no family history to inherit and most of us were incapable of passing on our genes. So we rejected the names that had been given to us and chose to use our given names as our sole identifiers. Some of us even changed our given names, although most of us were used to the names we’d had and kept them. We did talk about creating a common surname for the lot of us to use, but decided it would be too confusing and also we couldn’t agree on one.”

“That...makes sense,” Jim says, considering it.

“We thought so,” Matthew says. “Then again, we were engineered for superior intelligence.”

“And apparently superior ability to talk,” Khan mutters. “Can we please get back to work?”

“What, you can’t multitask?” Matthew asks. “What kind of superior human are you?”

Khan ignores him. Matthew laughs, but turns his attention back to his screen, and the three of them settle in to search and decrypt information.

Four hours in, Jim strikes gold with a search he honestly didn’t think would yield any results, but apparently he’s either just that lucky or that good. “I have something,” he says, staring at his screen. “I think it’s legit.”

Khan and Matthew both move over to his screen immediately. “What do you have?” Khan asks.

Jim points at the image. “He doesn’t look like much, does he?” he asks. It’s hard to judge height from the image, but Ikan doesn’t look all that physically imposing. Slight, with dark hair and eyes and a skin tone that indicates a mixed racial background; he could fit in anywhere, really, be anyone. Which is kind of the point.

“I remember him,” Khan says slowly. “The others I didn’t know, but him, I remember him.”

“I’d say that means we’ve got our asshole,” Matthew says. “Well done, Jim.”

Jim emails the picture to the four augments on the hunt, copying Pike just for good measure. “Do you think we can go home now?” he asks. “The rest of it can wait, right?”

“In such a hurry to be rid of me?” Matthew asks.

“I want to go home,” Jim says.
“Okay, fair enough,” Matthew says. “Call your admiral, let’s get out of here.”

Jim does call Pike, and shortly thereafter they get beamed back to Medical. Barnett isn’t there when they meet Pike to debrief, for which Jim finds himself grateful and a little depressed at being grateful. “We found some...disturbing information, sir,” he says when it’s the four of them in an empty office.

“What did you find?” Pike asks.

Jim glances at Matthew, who sighs. “How much do you know about what the late Admiral Marcus was planning with section 31?” he asks.

“I take it you’re going to tell me things I didn’t know,” Pike says.

“Possibly,” Matthew says. “We found quite a bit of medical data on the computers. Much of it had to do with what happened to Khan after he was revived. Your scientists were...thorough.”

Pike grimaces. “What did they want?”

“So many things,” Matthew says. “But we think a lot of it had to do with them figuring out how we were created, so they could do it again. Engineer a more perfect human.”

“That’s illegal,” Pike says. “And immoral, and unethical, and...I won’t ask if you’re sure.”

“You may wish to review what your scientists are studying,” Matthew says.

Pike sighs and rubs a hand over his face. “Great. Who among your people can help with that?”


“Perhaps Maeve and Carson,” Khan says. “Since it is in large part medical.”

“That’s why I was thinking of Bishop,” Matthew agrees. “But Anandi would really be your best bet, her and Bishop. Of all of us, they studied the most about how we came to be and would know what to look for.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Pike says. “Any word from the four in London?”

“They are holed up for the night,” Khan says. “We were able to get them a picture of Ikan, so they have better data, and with luck they will be able to move on him tomorrow.”

“I’ll hope,” Pike says. “Keep me posted. Kirk, we’d still like you to stay here tonight, just in case Ikan has agents we don’t know about.”

Jim sighs. “Yes, sir. Is Captain Kane still here? I’d like to check on her.”

“She is,” Pike says. “Go see her and then get some sleep.”

They leave and find Jill’s room easily enough. Jim’s not surprised to see Evan in the chair next to her bed, but he doesn’t recognize the woman on the other side. She’s not Starfleet; she has too many visible piercings and other jewelry, and he doesn’t miss the flash of wariness in her eyes when the three of them come in. “Right, my cue to leave,” she says, standing and gathering a large tote bag.

“They’re okay,” Jill says tiredly. “I promise.”

“Yeah, no,” the woman says. “I’ll be back to check on you later.” She bends and kisses Jill’s forehead. “Hurry up and heal faster.”
“I’m working on it,” Jill says, closing her eyes.

“Take care of her,” the woman says to Evan. “See you around.” She slips past Matthew and leaves.

“Friend of yours?” Jim asks.


“No,” four people say in unison. Jill sighs and thumps her head against the pillow.

“We have more information, and we think we know where the last agent is,” Jim says. “So, progress.”

“Hey, it’s something,” Jill says. She shifts a little in the bed and winces.

“Do you need more pain med--never mind, don’t answer that, I’ll be right back,” Evan says, getting up. Jill scowls at him but doesn’t protest.

“I hate pain meds,” she grumbles. “Especially since the only ones that really work on me are fucking opiates.”

“Why is that?” Jim asks. “I thought we had better options these days.”

“No idea,” Jill says. “Theoretically we do. Theoretically I shouldn’t have scars either. My body’s fucked up.”

Jim winces. “When do they say you can get out of here?”

“When I stop needing IV pain meds,” Jill says. “So anywhere from now to a few days, I don’t know.”

“Do not rush it,” Khan says, moving over to her bedside. “We need you fully healed more than we need you right now.”

“Now you sound like Evan,” Jill says. She sighs and closes her eyes. “Keep me posted, okay?”

“I will,” Khan says, bending to kiss her cheek. He moves out of the way when Evan returns with the nurse, and they make their goodnights and leave.

“I’m going to go find a place to crash for a few hours,” Matthew says. “Call me before you head back to London, okay? I’ll go with you.”

Khan nods. “We will.”

Matthew studies him for a moment, then pulls him into a hard hug. “Take care of yourself, brother,” he says.

“I will,” Khan says, hugging him back.

Jim isn’t surprised to get hugged next. “Take care of him,” Matthew murmurs in his ear. “He’s not as strong as he pretends to be, and we all forget that.”

“I will,” Jim murmurs back. “I promise.”

Matthew nods and lets go of him. “See you two around,” he says, heading down the hall.
Jim looks at Khan. “Back to our room?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

Inside the guest suite, Jim locks the door, activates the privacy seal, and walks over to Khan. “Are you okay?” he asks, running his hands up Khan’s arms to his shoulders, gently pressing down on the tense muscles. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I will be,” Khan says, bowing his head slightly under Jim’s touch.

“Not what I wanted to hear but I’m not surprised either,” Jim says. “It’s been a rough day.”

“Yes,” Khan says. “Do you think you can sleep?”

“I don’t know,” Jim admits. “Do you think you can wear me out?”

Khan grins briefly. “I can certainly try.”

Jim laughs and drags Khan’s mouth to his.

Chapter End Notes

A couple notes about things in this chapter:

1. A dictionary attack is a type of hacking attack that basically uses a list of words like you’d find in a dictionary to find the right password. It can be successful, especially if you have a weak root password (I work in IT and have seen this happen).

2. A lot of Matthew’s thoughts on sex and gender and things like the damn Starfleet uniform—hi, author has issues, let me show you them. I loathe the short skirt and short sleeves AOS women are forced into and it serves absolutely no purpose. I will change it by hook or by crook. I much preferred Next Gen uniforms, which were freaking unisex. (I also grew up on TNG, not TOS, which explains a lot.)

3. If you're reading Wild Card, you may recognize the mystery woman in Jill's room. If you're not--well, why not? :P
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

If they were intelligent enough they'd never have taken us on in the first place.

Chapter Notes

So, happy holidays if you're celebrating this time of year (my holiday was a month ago, and I had a lovely Thanksgivukah). Stay warm if you're in an area that's been getting hit with bad weather (Canada, I'm looking at you) and if you're on the East Coast of the US where it's close to 70 degrees in some areas...yeah, I got nothing. Go home, winter, you're drunk.

I think there will be about four or five more chapters in this story total, at most, and then we'll actually be done. Thank you all so, so very much for sticking with me and cheering me on and getting into this universe almost as much as I have. (And remember, I do have this other story here involving a lot of the same people in different situations, and that will be taking up a lot of my time once I finish this one, so feel free to hop over there and start reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They lose time to kissing, just kissing, tangled in each other, Jim’s hands in Khan’s hair and Khan’s hands on Jim’s back, just below his wings. “Tell me what you want,” Khan says against Jim’s mouth, biting his lower lip just hard enough to make Jim shiver.

“I want you to fuck me,” Jim says, returning the bite. “I just...don’t know if we have stuff.”

“Before we get too distracted, we should find out,” Khan says, but it takes two more kisses before they separate. Khan moves to check his bag while Jim does the same, and Jim doesn’t know whether to feel relieved or embarrassed when he finds the lube tangled in his pajama pants.

“Got it,” he says, tossing the tube onto the bed.

Khan smiles and closes his hand around Jim’s wrist, pulling him in for another kiss. “You should undress,” he says, nipping at Jim’s lip.

“So should you,” Jim says, stealing another kiss before he moves to get out of his clothes.

“Soon,” Khan says, but doesn’t move, eyes intent on Jim. The sheer focus of his gaze makes Jim’s fingers clumsy and he looks away so he can finish getting out of his clothes without tripping over them. When he’s naked, he looks at Khan again, not surprised when Khan reaches for him, pulling him in close and kissing him hard.

“God, it feels like forever since you’ve touched me,” Jim says, kissing the corner of Khan’s mouth, his jaw.
“It has been some time,” Khan says, bending his head to bite Jim’s throat, not quite hard enough to mark him but enough that Jim shudders and arches against him. “Perhaps we should move this to the bed,” Khan murmurs against Jim’s skin.

“Only if you get naked, too,” Jim says, tugging at Khan’s shirt.

“Lie down,” Khan says. Jim kisses him one last time and moves to stretch out on the bed, watching Khan undress efficiently. Not for the first time, he thinks Khan’s too beautiful to be real.

“Come here,” Jim says, holding out a hand. Khan moves to the bed, taking Jim’s hand and crawling over him, leaning down for a kiss. Jim pulls him down, wanting to feel Khan’s weight on top of him, swallowing a groan when things line up just right. He makes a sound of protest when Khan draws back, glaring at him. “What the hell?”

“Turn over,” Khan says, brushing fingers down the center of Jim’s chest. “You will be more comfortable that way.”

Jim grumbles but rolls onto his stomach, wings half-folded. He pillows his head on his arms, sighing a little when Khan’s hands slide down his back between his wings, short nails not quite scratching him. “Just relax,” Khan murmurs, brushing a kiss over the back of Jim’s neck. “Let me take care of you.”

“I thought the plan was to wear me out,” Jim murmurs back. Khan’s hand slips between his legs, cradling his balls, and he groans, legs spreading automatically.

“I can do both,” Khan says; Jim can hear the smile in his voice.

He feels like this isn’t quite right, like after the day they’ve had he should be the one taking care of Khan, but maybe he’ll have a chance for that later, and he knows Khan well enough to know trying to turn the tables on him right now won’t get him anywhere. Khan wants him like this right now, and Jim’s just selfish enough to go with it.

Khan kisses the back of his neck again, his shoulders, hands sliding over his skin as his mouth moves lower, tracing a path between Jim’s wings. Jim sighs and arches a little into the touches, belatedly wondering where the lube went and if he should--and then Khan licks a line up his center and he gasps, muscles going tense in an instant. “Fuck,” he whispers.

He hears a soft, contented hum and Khan licks him again, hands spreading him open and holding him just firmly enough Jim can’t really move. “God,” Jim manages, shivering all over. “Please.”

There’s nothing quite like the feel of Khan’s tongue against him, working him open. Jim swallows and tries to breathe, nails digging into his palms. He can’t come from this, and Khan knows it, but God, it drives him crazy, pushes him right up to the edge until he’s whimpering and trying to squirm back against Khan’s mouth. All that gets him is Khan’s hands holding him tighter and Khan’s tongue pressing into him and Jim whines, a sound that would be mortifying if he had the brainpower for thought.

When Khan pulls back with a gentle bite to one ass cheek, Jim almost sobs, desperate for more. “Please,” he says, ragged and hoarse. “God, just fuck me already.”

“I said I would wear you out first,” Khan murmurs, his own voice husky. Jim bites his lip against a pitiful whimper and loses his breath when two slick fingers push into him without warning.

“I don’t--oh, fuck--I don’t want to come before you’re in me,” he manages, swallowing hard.
“You won’t,” Khan says, as if it’s that simple, as if he’s not keeping Jim on the razor’s edge with his fingers moving and pressing inside him.

“I think I hate you,” Jim groans; Khan laughs softly and presses another finger into him. “Oh, fuck. Khan, please.”

Khan murmurs something Jim can’t quite understand, but then his fingers slip out of Jim’s body and Jim whimpers, feeling empty—but only for a moment, and then Khan’s cock enters him and he keens, long and low. Khan fits himself against Jim’s back, biting at his shoulders, hands on his hips. “God,” Jim whispers. “Just—oh, that’s—”

It’s perfect, is what it is, and he’s needed this for days and it feels so good he doesn’t ever want it to stop, but he needs to come, so badly. “Not yet,” Khan says in his ear and Jim growls at him.

“I can’t,” he gets out, body shaking with strain and need. “Please, I can’t, I just—”

“Not yet,” Khan says again and Jim sobs in frustration.

He can’t think, he can barely breathe, he’s so close and yet not there, and Khan won’t let him get there. Jim hears himself begging shamelessly, words tumbling over each other and coming out as gasps and moans more than coherent sounds.

Khan bites his earlobe, sharp enough that it breaks through the fog in Jim’s brain. “Now,” Khan says and wraps his hand around Jim’s cock and twists just right and Jim cries out, free-falling into a moment of perfect nothingness.

He comes back to himself slowly, breathing hard and body gone limp. Khan lies on top of him, head tucked against Jim’s shoulder. “God,” Jim manages.

“Are you all right?” Khan murmurs.

“That was amazing,” Jim says, and Khan laughs softly. “Could use a shower, though.”

“Yes,” Khan says, but it still takes a minute before he moves. Jim feels cold where his weight was and shivers involuntarily, managing to get out of bed and follow Khan to the bathroom.

They share a lazy shower and go back to bed. This time Jim fits himself against Khan, head on his shoulder and fingers tracing idle patterns over his torso. “Are you all right?” he asks softly.

“I thought I was done fighting these battles,” Khan says after a pause. “I suppose I should have known better.”

“You’re not alone in this one,” Jim says because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“I know,” Khan says. “That...helps.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Jim says.

Khan’s silent for a long moment. “I believe you believe that,” he says finally.

“No,” Jim says, and rolls on top of him, hands on Khan’s face to make Khan look at him. “No, you’re going to believe me because it’s true. Because you’re mine, and I’m not going to let anyone hurt you again. I’m not going to let anything happen to you so long as I’m alive, and if Rani can find a way to talk to me three hundred years after she died then I can find a way to watch over you after I’m gone, too.”
Khan says nothing, but the look in his eyes hurts Jim’s heart. He swallows, tells himself he’s a fucking Starfleet captain and he can do this. “I love you,” he says roughly. “I love you and I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Jim,” Khan says and stops, like he doesn’t know what to say, and Jim kisses him, hard and messy and desperate. Khan’s arms wrap around him, holding him tight, until they’re panting into each other’s mouths and Jim’s whole body prickles as his cock tries to get hard again even though he really can’t recover that fast.

“You’re not alone,” Jim whispers against Khan’s mouth. “Not ever again.”

“No,” Khan murmurs and kisses Jim again.

It’s hours before they fall asleep, and Jim’s whole body aches dully by the time he lets himself drift off, Khan pressed against his back and an arm around his waist. But he falls asleep smiling.

He wakes blurrily a bare three hours later when Khan rolls out of bed, touching his ear. “Yes,” he says. “Did you--” Khan curses in English and Russian. “Do you know--yes, all right, should I tell Matthew? All right, if you’re sure. Yes. Call me as soon as you hear something. Be careful, sister.” He touches his ear again and mutters something Jim doesn’t want translated.

“What happened?” he asks, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

“They lost Ikan,” Khan says, looking decidedly cranky about it. “They think they know where he went, but at the moment they are picking up his trail again. They think he may have taken a hostage.”

“Shit,” Jim mutters. “Is there anything we can do?”

“Cat did not think so,” Khan says. “You should sleep more.”

“I’m okay,” Jim says. “I don’t even know what time it is.”

“London or San Francisco?” Khan asks.

“Does it matter?” Jim groans and rubs his hands over his face. “Do you think there’s any sense in us going back to London? Maybe we could find out more about Ikan on the computers?”

“It is possible,” Khan says. “Are you certain you are up for it?”

“No, but if I fall asleep I’ll have you and Matthew to stand guard over me,” Jim says, getting out of bed. “You should call him and let him know, and then someone should arrange for us to get beamed back over there.”

Khan picks up his comm-link as Jim ducks into the bathroom; when Jim comes out, Khan ducks in, and within ten minutes both of them have on clean clothes and are heading down to meet Matthew in the lobby.

“How the fuck did they lose him?” Matthew demands when they meet him. He’s changed clothes, but hasn’t bothered to shave; idly, Jim wonders if he got any sleep. “Four of them, one of him, and now he’s vanished and has a hostage? This shouldn’t be possible.”

“I was not there,” Khan says, also sounding irritable. “I do not know what happened.”

Matthew sighs. “I’m beginning to wonder if anyone experimented on him,” he says. “How much of
“Your blood did they take?”

“Quite a bit,” Khan says. “It is possible.”

“Butchers,” Matthew mutters. “Anyway, we need to get to the transport station so they can beam us back to London and we can attempt to figure out where this arsehole’s gone.”

“Can we get coffee on the way?” Jim asks around a yawn.


Armed with coffee and bagels, they get back to the white room in London. Jim takes his cup and his bagel over to the workstation he’s been using and stares at the screen, his brain going completely blank for a moment. “I have no idea what to look for,” he admits, almost to himself.

“You got lucky yesterday,” Matthew says, glancing over at him. “Go with that.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says, taking a sip of coffee. “Still don’t quite know how I pulled that off, but I’ll see what I can do.”

The three of them fall silent, each intent on their workstations. Jim has no idea what Matthew or Khan are looking for, or if they’re having any luck; he certainly isn’t and he’s tired enough he can’t quite put pieces together.

After about three hours of getting nowhere, Khan touches his ear. “Yes,” he says and both Jim and Matthew stop to look at him. “Yes. We will be there as soon as we can. Be careful with him, Cat. We think--da.” He smiles briefly. “All right. We will see you soon.” He touches his ear again. “They have him,” he says. “They just beamed into a secure room at Starfleet HQ. Apparently he wants to talk to me.”

“Great, because that’s not a trap or anything,” Jim says. “You’re not going in there alone.”

“No, I am not,” Khan agrees. “Matthew, can you--”

Matthew holds up a finger, already on his comm-link. Jim moves over to him, as does Khan, and a moment later Matthew hangs up and Jim feels the transporter take them.

They end up in an observation room, with a one-way window facing a small room empty of everything but two chairs and the man in one chair, cuffed at wrists and ankles. He looks relaxed, Jim thinks, and doesn’t trust it. “We searched him thoroughly,” Ekaterina says. “And the room is shielded in case we missed anything.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better,” Jim says under his breath.

Pike doesn’t look pleased either. “He wants to talk to you,” he says to Khan. “He won’t talk to anyone else. I don’t even know if he’ll talk to you, but you’re our best shot at finding out whatever he knows.”

“Well, then,” Khan says. “Let us find out.”

“You said you weren’t going in there alone,” Jim says as Khan heads for the door.

“Needs must,” Khan says. “I will be fine.”

Jim scowls. “I don’t like this,” he says.
Khan touches his shoulder, but doesn’t try to reassure him before he goes through the door. Jim looks at the other people in the observation room—Pike, Matthew, Alona, Ekaterina—and blows out a breath. “Where did Amir and Aisha go?” he asks, realizing they’re missing two people.

“They are searching Ikan’s hideout,” Ekaterina says.

“What happened to the hostage?” Jim asks. “I heard he had one.”

“Dead,” Ekaterina says briefly. She doesn’t elaborate and Jim sighs.

In the interrogation room, Khan turns the other chair around and straddles it, arms folded on the back. He studies Ikan, not saying a word, and Ikan looks at him. “You remember me,” Ikan says finally.


Ikan smiles. “You think you can stop us, but you can’t,” he says. “You took out my colleagues, my friends, and you’ll either kill me or send me to prison, but either way, do you really think the four of us were all that was left? We’re everywhere, freak, and you can’t stop us. You’ll never track us all down, you’ll never be rid of us. We studied you, and I’d have loved to study your crew, but you...you were fascinating. We learned so much, and if you think you and your crew are the only ones like you, you’re wrong. Science has advanced so much in the last three hundred years. We can make better humans. Better than you.”

Khan looks bored. “Petty words from a petty man,” he says. “The last gasps of relevance from a body that has become irrelevant. Without Marcus, you are nothing, you have no authority, no power. I do not doubt that there are more of you out there, but you are leaderless, directionless. I have nothing to fear from you or your compatriots.”

Anger flashes over Ikan’s face and he leans forward, pulling at the cuffs. “You’re wrong,” he says intently. “We won’t stop until you’re dead.”

“I am exceedingly hard to kill,” Khan says.

“We’re stubborn,” Ikan says.

“You are nothing,” Khan says. “You have nothing. You have failed, and you will continue to fail.”

Ikan snarls at that, pulling harder at the cuffs, but they hold firm. “You’re nothing more than a freak of nature,” he snaps. “A dictator out of his time. You shouldn’t even be alive.”

“Perhaps not,” Khan agrees. “But I am, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“You think that, but you’re wrong,” Ikan says.

“Am I?” Khan snorts. “I think not. Take your suicide pill now that you’ve given me what little information you actually possess. If all you want to do is try and taunt me with inaccurate data, I have nothing more to say to you.”

“What, you don’t have the courage to kill me yourself?” Ikan sneers.

Khan smiles coldly. “Do you have any idea how many men like you I have killed in my time?” he asks softly. “Do you have any idea how easy it would be for me to snap your neck? But you are not worth it. You have no information I need, you have no value, and I need not bother myself with taking your life. You are enough of a coward to want me to do it for you, rather than have the
courage to kill yourself. But I will not.”

Rage twists Ikan’s face, but he says nothing.

“You failed,” Khan says again. “You did not kill a single member of my family. You did not kill Captain Kirk. You did not kill Captain Kane. Tell me, why should I be afraid of you and your remaining agents, when you have done nothing so far?”

Jim thinks he maybe shouldn’t be quite so turned on by this, but it’s kind of—okay, it’s a lot hot to watch Khan like this, cold and controlled and absolutely certain of himself. Next to him, he sees Ekaterina smile a little, and Matthew’s outright grinning.

“We’ll keep coming,” Ikan says finally. “Eventually, we’ll wear you down.”

“I doubt that,” Khan says, standing up. “We are warriors. We know not to drop our guard.” His eyes skim over Ikan. “Especially with cowards.”

“I am not,” Ikan hisses, “a coward.”

“Then take your pill,” Khan drawls. “Isn’t that what you are programmed for? To die in the event of capture, so as not to let any of your precious information fall into the wrong hands? Or would you rather rot slowly in prison for the rest of your miserable life?”

Ikan’s face twists again in rage, and then he makes a sudden, sharp movement of his head. A moment later, he slumps in the chair, his lips turning blue. Khan stays where he is, watching until it is obvious Ikan has died, then walks back into the observation room. “One less loose end,” he says, unfurled. “He was not going to tell us anything, and in prison, he would have been able to pull strings and manipulate people. Now he can do nothing.”

Pike looks a bit nonplussed. “We don’t just kill people these days,” he says.

“I did not kill him,” Khan points out. “He killed himself.”

“How did you know he had a suicide pill?” Pike asks.

“He was a covert agent for an organization that officially did not exist,” Khan says. “All of them have suicide pills, I am certain of it. Death is the only way to ensure one does not break under questioning, and I highly doubt his colleagues would have been as kind to him as official Starfleet regulations would ensure.”

“How many of them do you think are still out there?” Pike asks.

Khan’s mouth twists. “More than we will ever find,” he says. “I think the actual threat level from them is minimal. As I said to Ikan, they have no leader, they have no direction. Their resources are limited and they have very few ways of gathering more. While I am certain there are sleeper agents still out there, I am not concerned about them.”

“Nor am I,” Ekaterina says. “I think at this point they will have seen the death of their top four remaining agents and realized taking us on is a lost cause. They are supposedly intelligent people, I should think they would realize a losing situation when they see one.”

“If they were intelligent enough they’d never have taken us on in the first place,” Matthew points out.

“Arrogance,” Khan says simply, and Matthew nods in agreement.
“Do you think there’s any useful data left on the computers in the London facility?” Pike asks.

“Probably,” Matthew says. “We got through about two-thirds of the files, but I am not certain what is left. Would you like us to go back and finish decrypting them?”

“I would,” Pike says. “You may not be so worried about the remaining section 31 agents, but I’m not sure I share in your optimism. If there’s anything left on those computers that we can use to our advantage, I want to have it.”

“Then we’ll see what we can find,” Matthew says. “Cat, what are you up to?”

“Not computer searching,” she says firmly. “Boring. I will go back to London and join Amir and Aisha on the hunt for more agents or information gathered from Ikan’s hideout. If they do not need me, I am certain Admiral Pike will find something for me to do that does not involve staring at a computer screen for hours on end.”

“I have another project to work on,” Alona says. “If you’ll excuse me, admiral?”

Either Pike knows what she’s working on or knows better than to ask, Jim thinks, because all he does is nod and Alona slips out of the room.

“Do we have time for me to stop in and see Jill before we go back to London?” Jim asks.

“I think we can arrange that,” Pike says. “The last I heard she was going to be discharged this afternoon.”

“She’ll be thrilled,” Jim says.

“Speaking of injuries, Kirk, how are yours?” Pike asks. “You look a lot better than you did a couple days ago.”

“I’m fine, sir,” Jim says. “I heal fast.” Also, three pints of augment blood probably had something to do with it, but he doesn’t say that.

“Don’t push it too much,” Pike says. “We don’t need you ending up in Medical again.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says. “I’ll be careful.” And even if he isn’t, Khan will be.

The three of them head back over to Medical to find Jill, who happens to be awake and sitting up in bed, playing some kind of solitaire card game Jim’s not familiar with. Evan’s reading in the chair next to her bed, and the same brown-haired woman sits on the other side, sketching on a pad. “We’re the boring crowd today, but I get to go home later, so progress,” Jill says, looking up when they come in. “What happened?”

“Tell them in a minute,” the woman says, gathering her pad and her bag and getting up.

“Bird, seriously, they’re okay,” Jill says.

“I’ll come by your apartment later today,” the woman says, kissing Jill’s cheek.

“Bring Andy, if she’s around,” Jill says.

“I’ll see what I can do,” the woman promises and leaves.

“Was it something I said?” Jim asks once she’s gone.

“We got the last one,” Jim says, telling her what he knows. He doesn’t go into details about Khan’s conversation with Ikan, but does mention that Ikan suicided.

“Good, he can’t cause any more trouble,” Jill says.

“My thoughts,” Khan agrees. “We are headed back to London to see if we can finish decrypting the information on the computers.”

“Bring my boots back, would you? I liked that pair.” Jill grins.

“I will,” Khan says.

“Thank you,” Jill says. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do?”

“You can heal up,” Evan says, looking up from his book.

“I am capable of doing more than lying in a bed zonked on pain pills,” Jill says, scowling at him.

“Yes, you can play solitaire,” Evan says. “And cheat at it.”

“I am not cheating,” Jill says indignantly. “That’s just rude.”

“Who cheats at solitaire anyway?” Jim asks.

“Alona,” Matthew and Khan say together.

Jill snickers. “Doesn’t surprise me,” she says. “Anyway, you should get back to London. Keep in touch, okay? Let me know what’s going on and if I can help at all.”

“We will,” Jim promises.

Khan leans down, murmuring something to her in Russian that makes her smile and kiss his cheek. He kisses her forehead and straightens up, wings folding back. “Back to London?” he asks Jim and Matthew.

“Sure,” Jim says. “Let’s go poke at computer files.”

They go back to London and do just that; Jim gives up on the search after four hours and falls down on the bench for a nap. He gets woken by the sound of sparring, and blinks his eyes open to see Khan and Matthew fighting in the middle of the room.

Clearly they were making progress, he thinks, watching Matthew block a punch and Khan not quite dodge a kick. He wonders if they found anything, or how long they’ve been at this. He doesn’t see any visible bruises on either of them, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything.

Khan gets in a roundhouse kick to Matthew’s jaw, calling out “Disable!” as he does. Matthew growls but drops to his knees, and Khan gets a kill in on him before he can recover. “Don’t you know it’s not fair to kill the helpless?” Matthew asks, not moving from where Khan has him pinned.

“Since when did we ever play fair?” Khan asks, releasing him and giving him a hand up off the floor.

“Uh, never,” Jim says, sitting up. “I see you two were getting somewhere with the search.”
Matthew snorts. “Oh, yeah. Although kind of we are. We ran into a block of files that’s tougher to decrypt than the others, so we think they might have more useful information. We’re running a program now to try and extract the data, but it’s taking a while, so we decided to do something useful with the time.”

“How long have you been sparring?” Jim asks.

“This was our second round,” Matthew says. “Khan won both, the bastard.”

“If it makes you feel better I’m sure you could still kick my ass,” Jim says.

Matthew laughs. “Maybe.” He turns as the computer chimes. “Let’s go see if we’ve had luck, aye?”

Jim pushes himself up from the bench and walks over to Khan rather than peer over Matthew’s shoulder. “You okay?” he asks softly.

Khan nods, but doesn’t pull away when Jim reaches for his hand and instead threads their fingers together. “I have to admit something,” Jim says, glancing at Matthew who appears to be ignoring them. “Watching you with Ikan earlier, that was, um. Pretty damn hot.”

“You enjoy watching me convince people to commit suicide?” Khan asks, looking startled.

“No, not exactly,” Jim says. “It’s just--you were so in control with him, so cold, and it...yeah, it was kinda hot.”

Khan smiles slowly. “I will remember that,” he murmurs.

“Could you two not with the foreplay around me?” Matthew asks, not looking up from the computer. “Please? Seriously, I think I have something here, it’s a database of names and occupations. I can’t tell if they’re sleeper agents, actual agents, possible recruits, or none of the above, but it’s data. Do any of the names look familiar to you?”

“Let me see,” Khan says, pulling away from Jim and going to look at Matthew’s screen. He skims through the database, wings stretching a little before he folds them back. “I do not recognize the names,” he says after a few moments. “But I did not know many of the section 31 agents by name. The occupations are interesting, though. Note how none of them are Starfleet? I think perhaps this may be a database of either sleeper agents or cover identities. Does it link to anything else?”

“It does but I haven’t got it decrypted yet,” Matthew says. “You think maybe they were stupid enough to cross-index to actual names?”

“I have not seen much to indicate superior intelligence so far,” Khan points out. “I think it is entirely plausible they did just that. I would advise waiting to send the data to anyone, though, until we finish decrypting whatever it links to.”

“Teach your grandmother to suck eggs,” Matthew retorts. “Should be done here in less than ten minutes, assuming it works and doesn’t just bugger the whole thing.”

“That’s what I like about you, Matthew, you’re so optimistic,” Jim says. Matthew laughs and types another command into his computer.

“So far I’ve been very disappointed in these covert agents’ skills,” he says. “I keep hoping they’ll surprise me and give me something of a challenge, but it hasn’t happened yet. I thought Starfleet was the best and the brightest.”
“Yes, but we’re not engineered for genius,” Jim says. “And anyway, I have no idea what kind of people Marcus recruited for section 31. Maybe they weren’t the best of the best.”

“I’m thinking they weren’t,” Matthew says. “Anyway, this has a bit longer to run before it’ll tell me anything useful or not. I’m going out for a coffee, you two want one?”

Khan shakes his head, but Jim readily accepts Matthew’s offer, which makes Matthew laugh and clap his shoulder. “Back in fifteen,” he says, pulling the handle to open the door out of the room. “Please be decent and dressed when I return.”

“Do you really think so little of our self-control?” Khan asks mildly.

“Do they still have the fifth amendment in today’s world? Because I’m totally invoking it,” Matthew says, grinning.

“You’re not even American,” Khan says. “Also, I do not know.”

“I think we have something against self-incrimination,” Jim says. “But I’m still kind of insulted that you don’t think we’re capable of keeping our pants on for fifteen minutes, especially since I’m sleep-deprived and caffeine-deprived.”

Matthew laughs again. “I promise to return with caffeine for you if you promise to be in the same state in which I am leaving you.”

“Deal,” Jim says.

“Good man.” Matthew grins and jogs up the stairs, leaving the passage open after him.

“So now what?” Jim asks Khan.


“Over here,” Jim says, pointing to the bag. “We’ll bring them back when we beam back to San Francisco. Is there anything left for us to work on with the computer files?”

“Feel free to look at the database Matthew decrypted and see if any of it looks familiar,” Khan says. “You have been in Starfleet longer than I, you grew up in this world, there may be things I am missing.”

“Here goes nothing,” Jim says, moving to look at the database. He finds himself seriously distracted, though, because Khan’s standing right behind him, close enough Jim can feel his body heat, and when Jim looks down at the screen to try and study the data better Khan brushes a kiss over the nape of his neck. “Okay, that’s not fair,” Jim says around a shiver. “Do you want me to work or do you want to distract me?”

“Can you not multi-task?” Khan murmurs, kissing the spot where neck meets shoulder.

“You’re remarkably distracting,” Jim says, letting his head fall back against Khan’s shoulder. “And you’re trying to distract me.”

“Am I?” Khan sounds amused, though, and Jim laughs and turns around to face him, leaning in for a kiss.

_I love you._ He’s said it once, he can say it again, and yet the words freeze in his throat and Jim swallows, leaning his forehead against Khan’s shoulder. “You really don’t think we have to worry
about the remaining section 31 agents?” he asks finally, which is not where he intended to go but whatever.

“I really do not,” Khan says, hands on Jim’s back, under his wings. Jim curls his fingers into Khan’s hair and holds on, needing to believe him, needing him to be right about this.

Still, though. “There’s something you’re not saying,” he says after a moment, when neither of them speak and he can feel tension in Khan’s body.

“Before the Enterprise ships out,” Khan says. “We should review all personnel assigned to it and ensure we have not missed any sleeper agents.”

“I can vouch for my senior staff,” Jim says, but he sighs, knowing Khan has a point. “And your people. Our people. Whatever. You know what I meant. But...yeah, the rest of them, we should...”

“We have a bit of time before we are due to start getting ready to depart,” Khan says. “It should be sufficient.”

“God, this is going to suck,” Jim says, thunking his head against Khan’s shoulder for good measure.

“It will allow you an opportunity to get to know your entire crew,” Khan suggests.

“You’re not helping,” Jim says. “I’m going to make you do this with me, you realize.”

“Would not Mr. Spock be more suited for it? As he is your first officer?” Khan asks.

“So there’ll be three of us,” Jim says. “You worked section 31, you know their tells if they have any, you know what to look for. Spock can examine the records and see if anything seems wrong or out of place, and then you and I can talk to people. Anyone who has a bad reaction to you isn’t someone I want on my ship anyway.”

“I know you already had a few transfers,” Khan says quietly.

Jim shrugs. “No one I knew that well or cared about. Transfers happen, and I think all but one of them decided that after the battle with Marcus they wanted to be somewhere a little safer. The last one...well, you killed her father and she decided to work elsewhere.”

“Yes, I am not surprised,” Khan says.

“Honestly, neither was I, but she was civil about it,” Jim says. “I talked to her briefly. She said that she was having trouble reconciling what you did to the man who raised her with what she’d seen that man do to my ship, and she looked up the records of your trial and everything that was introduced as evidence, and...and she’s having a hard time of making sense of it all. You saw Marcus as a monster, and I’m not saying you were or are wrong, but he was Carol’s father, and she loved him, and she’s...struggling. I think the last I heard she was going to take some time away from Starfleet and figure out what she wanted to do next.”

“Very few things in life are so black and white,” Khan says. “Marcus honestly believed he was doing what had to be done to preserve the Federation. And it is entirely possible we will find ourselves in a war sooner rather than later.”

Jim sighs. “Yeah, I know, but...I can’t think about that right now. The torpedoes you designed, would they actually work if we refitted them to have fuel tubes instead of frozen humans?”

“Of course they would,” Khan says, sounding mildly offended Jim even has to ask. “Katsuro and
Bishop were working on that with Mr. Scott. They will be ready to load when we leave."

“You know, I think I actually knew that,” Jim says. “I’m tired. I’m forgetting things. Maybe when you and Matthew finish decrypting this database thing we can go back to San Francisco and sleep for a while.”

“You should lie down,” Khan says, sliding one hand up to rub the back of his neck. “It may be a while before we have anything workable and there is no sense in you exhausting yourself. You are still recovering.”

“Eh, I’m mostly recovered,” Jim says. “Just tired and sleep-deprived, but Matthew promised me coffee, that’ll keep me going for a bit. I promise when we’re done here we can go home and I’ll crash, okay?”

“All right,” Khan says.

Jim raises his head and kisses him, lazy and sweet, trying to get across what he can’t make himself say. Khan’s arms tighten around him and he kisses back, and of course that’s when Matthew comes back into the room, whistling tunelessly and carrying coffee cups. “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he says and Jim starts laughing, pulling away from Khan. “Seriously, Jesus, my eyes, he’s my fucking brother, things I never needed to see.”

“It was just a kiss, calm down,” Jim says, taking his coffee from Matthew.

Matthew scowls at him. “I don’t like you anymore,” he says. “Did the computer finish running the decryption program?”

“Not yet,” Khan says, glancing at it. “Soon, I think.”

“I hope,” Matthew says. “Otherwise we’re going to get very bored.” As if on cue, the computer chimes and he turns to it. “All right, beautiful, show me what you’ve got.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, my God, he finally said those three little words. Do you guys have any idea how long he’s been fighting me on this? Just would NOT say "I love you". Would not, at all, absolutely flat out refused. And now it shows up almost out of the blue. Jim, why do you make my life difficult?

The Carol Marcus bit is actually a loose end I’ve had in mind since about three chapters into the story but never had a chance to tie off until now. There’s just no way I could see her voluntarily agreeing to serve on a ship with the man who murdered her father, especially knowing that man is involved with the captain. Thoughts, dear readers?
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Do you know your crew by sight?

Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies for the delay in updating! I’ve been dealing with some RL issues that have left me with very little time to write, and I’m trying to make sure I keep all the story balls in the air before I end this. Hopefully you guys haven’t given up on me. I think this story has at most three or four more chapters, so the finish line is definitely approaching.

As always, thank you to everyone following along and hanging in there with me. Without you I’d have given up on this a long time ago.

They end up finding multiple databases that look like they should connect to each other in some fashion but remain stubbornly separate. “Now they get paranoid,” Matthew says, throwing up his hands. “Jesus bloody fuck, this is ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” Khan says, looking between screens. “I mean, yes, they were paranoid, but there has to be a reason for here. The section 31 agents may not have been the most creative I have ever seen, but they did take what they thought were adequate steps to protect most of their data. That those steps were remarkably far from adequate is beside the point.”

“So what’s so special about these, then?” Jim asks. “We’ve got--what, three? It’s like puzzle pieces, they have to fit together somehow. What data is in each of them?”

“This one has names and what we think may be cover identities,” Matthew says, pointing at it. “No Starfleet ranks or assignments in it. This one here is a list of Starfleet personnel--whether or not the names and ranks are real, I haven’t the foggiest--and what appears to be assignments, but again, no idea if it’s real or if it’s real how accurate it is. Our third database would be lovely if it contained anything but headshots and vital stats, but that’s all it has. No names, no identification, nothing.”

Jim chews his lip, thinking. His wings shift and ruffle and he sighs, forcing them to fold back. “Does each database have the same amount of data in it?” he asks. “Like, if we’ve got a hundred entries in the first one, do we have that many in the second one and the third? Because they’ve got to match up, right? One has the picture ID, one has the real name, rank and assignment, and the third has the cover.”

“One would think, aye,” Matthew says. “I haven’t run enough of an analysis on them to figure that out, and it’s not as simple as scrolling to the bottom and counting because God hates me. If there even is a God.” He runs his hands through his hair and over his face, palm rasping against his stubble, and sighs. “Okay. Here’s what I propose we do. I’ve made three copies of this data onto memory chips, and I can easily make more if we need them. Let’s take them back to HQ, inform
your admiral Pike, and then I can settle in to do some serious work while--what the hell are you two up to?"

“Also data analysis,” Khan says. “Before the Enterprise ships out, I think we need to review its assigned crew to see if we catch any anomalies.”

“Right,” Matthew says. “Well, have fun with that. I’m guessing there will be many meetings to talk to personnel about the upcoming five years and so on?”

“Probably,” Jim says. “I mean, not that I wasn’t planning on doing something like it anyway, but now we’ll have a dual purpose, I guess.”

“Do you know all your crew by sight?” Matthew asks.

Jim grimaces and shakes his head. “I don’t. I knew most of them by sight before the debacle with Marcus, but we lost some, and some have transferred, and I haven’t met all the new crew yet, and I didn’t know everyone before that. So if you want me to look through the images database, I can’t do it with a hundred percent accuracy.” He hesitates. “Spock might be able to, though. I know he was meeting with incoming transfers to make sure they knew what they were getting into with the five-year-mission, I ended up not being part of it because I got blown up. But I don’t know if he knew everyone before, and I don’t know if he has photographic recall.”

“Can you call him and ask him to meet us when we debrief Pike?” Matthew asks. “I can call the admiral and arrange for transport and a secure meeting room.”

“Yeah, hang on,” Jim says, taking out his comm-link and moving away from Matthew so they don’t talk over each other. Spock sounds as surprised as Spock ever does to hear from him, but readily agrees to meet them once Jim gives him a rundown of the situation.

Jim remembers to grab Jill’s boots and her bag before they beam back to San Francisco, tucking the former inside the latter and slinging the bag over his shoulder. Once they arrive, they head to Pike’s office, and Jim finally finds out that according to local time it’s 1400 hours. He doesn’t quite know how that happened but the last few days all blur together and they haven’t exactly been operating on a normal schedule. For that matter, he has zero idea what day of the week it happens to be but decides he can look it up later.

Pike looks remarkably fresh given everything, complete with clean, pressed uniform, but Jim figures that’s an admiral trick he’ll never learn. However, when Pike gets up and comes around his desk Jim sees the cane in his hand, notes that he leans on it a bit more heavily than normal, and winces. “Sir,” he says.

“I understand Commander Spock will be joining us as well,” Pike says.

“Yes, sir,” Jim says. “He shouldn’t be long.”

A moment later Spock knocks on the door and Pike motions him in, telling him to close it and activate the privacy seal. Spock’s eyebrow doesn’t quite go up but he does, and then the five of them take seats around the table.

“Tell me what you’ve got,” Pike says, drumming his fingers on the table.

Jim looks at Khan who looks at Matthew who sighs. “A fuckload of annoyances, pardon my Irish,” he says. “The last bits of data worth anything--aside from some more medical and scientific crap I’ve saved for later--were three databases, each consisting of a different piece of the puzzle. But they’re not linked in any fashion I can yet determine, yet being the key word.” He shoves a hand through his
already-rumpled hair and leans forward. “The small amount of analysis I’ve done on the files—and it really isn’t much to speak of—tells me that the amount of visible data does not match with the file size. They’re way off. There’s not nearly enough data showing to give me files that were this big or took this long to decrypt. What I think is going on is that there’s a backdoor in each database that links them, and that there’s an underlying encryption that if I can figure out what it is and break it will make the puzzle fit together.”

Jim looks at Matthew, impressed. Matthew hadn’t mentioned this in London, and Jim wonders when he figured it out. For all he knows Matthew did it while getting coffee.

“What do you need to get this accomplished?” Pike asks.

“The ability to clone myself and an endless supply of coffee,” Matthew says. “Failing that, I’ll take an endless supply of coffee and an empty office where I can play loud music and tax your advanced computers with a lot of coding and hacking I haven’t figured out yet. The music’s not optional, for the record, it’ll cover up my swearing and I think better with background sound.”

“Understood,” Pike says. “I can arrange that. Do you—”

“No,” Matthew says before Pike can finish the question. “No, I don’t know how long it’ll take. No, I don’t know if we’re talking hours or days or never. I am fairly confident it’s not the last, because frankly, I’m better than they were or are and they’ve pissed me off, which is never a good thing to do, just ask Khan. But I can’t give you any kind of time estimate until I get in there and figure out what exactly I’m dealing with.”

Spock looks mildly miffed at Matthew’s complete disregard for protocol, which amuses Jim; he thought Spock would have learned by now that the augments only follow protocol when it suits them or when they consciously remember. Jim can’t remember what rank Matthew actually holds, but it doesn’t matter; he’s used to power, and he doesn’t think of Pike as a superior officer.

Pike, fortunately, doesn’t seem to care. “If you’ll wait here, I’ll arrange for you to get set up,” he says. “And get the coffee started.”

“Fantastic. Ta. Wake me when it gets here.” Matthew puts his head down on the table and for all intents and purposes immediately falls asleep.

Khan snorts. “Always the dramatic,” he says, and Matthew raises a hand to flip him off without lifting his head.

“Gentlemen, if you please,” Pike says mildly. “Kirk, I take it you have some thoughts on next steps from your end?”

“Khan had the initial idea, but we do, sir,” Jim says, folding his wings back more tightly. “While we think that the actual threat level from the section 31 sleeper agents is fairly low, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. And with the Enterprise shipping out for five years, I’d especially like to be able to identify any double agents on my ship before we leave and the odds of something going very wrong increase. We think that we need to do a personnel review, talk to all the assigned crew and see if we can identify anyone with issues. I wanted to do this anyway, make sure I wasn’t getting anyone who didn’t really know what they were in for, and just talk to people as we’ve got a bunch of new crew.”

“How do you propose to identify them?” Pike asks. “I don’t know if we have time to wait until Matthew finishes with the databases, so we don’t have names or descriptions or anything to give us much of a clue.”
Jim hesitates, because this is the part he’s not sure about, but Khan smiles faintly. “Admiral, do you really think my people such poor students of behavior and body language?” he asks. Jim doesn’t quite know where he’s going with that, but Khan continues before he can ask or elbow him. “The how is simple in concept, if not in execution. I am aware Starfleet has monitored conference rooms, rooms with technology built into the walls that can track respiration, heart rate, and body temperature for multiple beings. I propose we use one of these rooms to hold the meetings with various personnel. While the captain and Mr. Spock speak with personnel about the upcoming mission and answer questions, I will be in the room as an observer. I suggest you use Alona and Ekaterina to observe unseen, from the observation room, and use a technician to interpret the readings from the sensors. Anyone who expresses discomfort in my presence, whether consciously or unconsciously, should be marked as someone to be spoken with more closely. Even if that person is not a sleeper agent, anyone uncomfortable with me in particular or my people in general may not be the best suited for the Enterprise.”

Because clearly Khan’s not going anywhere, and neither are his family, Jim thinks. Also, he wants to know how Khan found out about the monitored rooms because he’s never even heard of this before, but Pike clearly has. Under cover of the table, he brushes his hand against Khan’s in quick reassurance and gets a subtle pressure back. “What if they can cover well enough that no one picks it up?” Pike asks.

“Then we hope that before we ship out Matthew finishes his decryption and we have visual images and identifications to cross-check against the manifest,” Khan says. “I believe the Enterprise is currently scheduled to depart in five weeks, is she not?”

“Five weeks and two days, yes,” Pike says. “Matthew, should that be enough time?”

“Sleeping,” Matthew says. “Ask again--oh, fine.” He sits up and rubs his eyes. “Five weeks and two days gives me about two to three weeks to get it done, which then gives you barely enough time to cross-check and reassign personnel if needed.” He hisses in a breath and lets it out slowly. “It’s a good thing I don’t need much sleep.”

“It only took a matter of hours to get through most of what was on the computers,” Jim says. “Why-”

“Because those were openly encrypted and I saw what I was dealing with from the get go,” Matthew explains. “With these, first I have to find the back door, then I have to get it open, then I have to figure out what kind of encryption they used to hide the connections between the databases and break it and hope they didn’t build in a self-destruct that sends everything to hell if I get it wrong. It’s levels more complicated.”

“Could anyone help you with it?” Pike asks.

“No regular human could keep up with me, and frankly, I’m the best hacker out of my family,” Matthew says without arrogance. “Khan maybe, but you’ll need him for Operation Find The Needle in a Haystack. But speaking of my family, I compiled all the medical and scientific data we found--and there’s a fucking lot of it--when I wasn’t sleeping last night. I’ve got a few copies of it, and I’m hanging on to one just for security purposes, but I’d like to know who you want to start working on that so I can meet up with them. My suggestions are Anandi and Bishop, and I don’t know who else you want to include.”

“I have spoken with the two of them,” Pike says. “They will be taking point on the analysis, and both of them recommended we talk to Maeve and Dr. McCoy, which I did, so we have a team of four.”
“Just so long as I get everyone back before we ship out, sir,” Jim says as innocently as he can.

“Anandi’s not assigned to your ship,” Matthew points out.

“She could be?” Jim suggests, and Pike snorts.

“We’ll talk to her about that if she expresses interest and depending on the state of the research when the Enterprise ships out,” Pike says.

“Yes, sir,” Jim says obediently.

“Mr. Spock,” Matthew says. “Do you know every crew member on the Enterprise by sight?”

“I do not,” Spock says. “I know perhaps eighty percent. With recent transfers and—casualties—I have not been able to speak with each crew member.”

Matthew sighs. “Well, eighty percent is something, so maybe we can give this a go. One of the databases we found has headshots and vital stats in it, but no identification. Would you be willing to look through it along with Jim and see if you recognize anyone?”

“That is logical,” Spock says. “However, there is the possibility that we may miss someone.”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s better than nothing,” Matthew says. He slides a memory chip over to Spock. “Data is on there.”

“It’s going to take a bit of time to set everything up,” Pike says. “The soonest we’d be able to start crew meetings would be tomorrow afternoon, most likely. Kirk, you and Khan have been working almost constantly for the last few days and you’re still healing, most likely. Take the afternoon to recharge before you burn out. You and Spock can meet up tomorrow morning to look through the database.”

Jim badly wants to protest but he’s also aware of growing fatigue and various aches throughout his body, and from the glance Khan gives him he knows it too. “Sir,” he says instead. “Is it safe enough to go back to my apartment?”

“In the absence of any credible threat, yes,” Pike says. “We moved your things back over there earlier.” He slides Jim’s access card across the table and Jim snags it. “Matthew, stick around so we can get you squared away. The rest of you, dismissed.”

As they get up to leave, Jim almost forgets Jill’s bag and has to duck back and get it. “I’d like to stop by Jill’s place and give this back to her,” he says to Khan once they’re in the hall. “Also to see how she’s doing.”

Khan nods. “We can do that.”

They get a cab, and on the way over Jim calls Evan to let him know and make sure it’s all right. Evan tells him it’s fine and shortly thereafter Jim knocks on their door.

“Hey,” Evan says, opening it. “C’mon in, just keep your voices down, Jill conked out a little while ago and I want to let her sleep.”

“How’s she doing?” Jim asks softly as they come in. He hands Evan her bag.

Evan shrugs and his mouth quirks in a half smile. “Healing. Cranky that she’s not healing faster. Tired because she’s trying to do too much. Worried about being replaced on our ship if she doesn’t
heal soon enough.” He shrugs again. “So business as usual, pretty much.”

Jim smiles a little. “Sounds about right,” he says. “We don’t have to stay long.”

“It’s okay,” Evan says. “When Jill sleeps she either gets woken up by everything or nothing. I’m hoping this is the latter, but I don’t know.”

Out of curiosity, Jim looks around; he knew where Jill and Evan live, but he doesn’t think he’s ever been inside their apartment before. It doesn’t surprise him to see a lot of warm, rich colors and odds and ends, from a collection of glass flowers on the windowsill to two bookcases filled with physical books. Khan drifts over to look at them, almost without realizing it, and Jim smiles.

He sees Jill asleep in a giant overstuffed chair, curled up on the seat with her head on one arm and her legs dangling over the other. She has on a blue sleep shirt, but her feet are bare, and her hair spills over the arm of the chair. She looks about sixteen, Jim thinks, and smiles again.

Evan moves over to her, crouching down next to her and brushing a curl away from her cheek. Jill stirs at that and rubs her eyes. “I heard voices,” she mumbles. “Who’s here?”

“Jim and Khan came by,” Evan says. “Are you up for company or do you want to go back to sleep?”

“Mmf. No, ‘m awake.” Jill rubs her eyes and her face and carefully sits up, wincing a bit as she does. “Hi,” she says sleepily. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Jim says, walking over to her. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired of people asking me how I’m feeling,” Jill says, sticking out her tongue at him. “No, I’m okay. Just tired and sore, and Evan keeps forcing pain pills on me. Meanie.”

“Yes, I’m a horrible husband because I want you to not be in pain and heal,” Evan says patiently.

Jim snorts. “Are you up for talking a bit of business?” he asks, realizing something.

“Yeah, sure,” Jill says. “What’s going on?”

Jim sits down on an ottoman that seems to match the chair. “So, we found a few databases in the London room,” he says. “Matthew’s working on figuring out what they all are, but we think that if you put the pieces together it’ll give us names and IDs and covers for the section 31 sleeper agents.”

“Hope so,” Jill says. “Is there anything I can do to help? I’m not a hacker, though.”

“No, Matthew’s on it,” Jim says as Khan comes over to them. “But I have a question. Do you know every crew member on your ship by sight?”

“Between me, Evan, and Amir we do,” Jill says. “Although I just got in a few new transfers and haven’t met them due to healing, but I have their files which include pictures. You think one of my people could be an agent?” She frowns at that. “I thought I knew my crew better than that.”

“I’m not saying you have any agents, but it’s possible,” Jim says. “One of the databases has pictures and vital stats. Could you look through it and see if you recognize anyone?”

“Yeah,” Jill says. “Yeah, I can do that. Here’s hoping I don’t.”

Khan hands over a memory chip, and Jill folds her fingers around it. “When are you due to ship out again?” he asks.
“Maybe a week,” Jill says. “I’m supposed to be off medical leave in two days, but on light duty for a bit longer, so we’re figuring it out. Why?”

“Even if you do not recognize anyone, you may wish to meet with your crew,” Khan says. He gives her a very brief summary of the upcoming Enterprise personnel review meetings. “I think it might be a wise idea for all ships with augments to do something similar.”

“Oh, man, I don’t like this,” Jill says. “I don’t like the idea that I can’t trust my crew. We’ve shipped out with your people on board before and nothing’s happened.” She sighs. “But that was before everything blew up, literally, and what you’re saying makes sense in a really sucky way. I’ll set it up, or Evan will. We’ll figure out a cover.”

“Let me call Pike,” Jim says, pushing to his feet. “I can suggest he contact all other captains or department heads with augments to figure out how to do this.” He takes out his comm-link and moves away.

It doesn’t surprise him when Pike says he’s already thought of it and is working on the problem. He doesn’t sound happy about it, and out of curiosity Jim asks him how scattered the augments are. It turns out about six ships, three starbases, and some scattered around HQ or the Academy, and Jim winces, trying to figure out how the hell Pike plans on interviewing people stationed on starbases or figuring out who of the hundreds at HQ he needs to talk to. He’s secretly desperately relieved it isn’t his problem and gets off the link before he can either offer his help or Pike can demand it.

When he goes back over to the ottoman, Khan has taken his seat, but Jim waves him back when he starts to stand. “Your toes are purple,” he says in surprise, looking at Jill’s feet.

“Yes,” she says calmly. “Yes they are. I’m flexible and I was bored and I like nail lacquer. My toes are usually some color, and this time I was in the mood for purple. Have you never dated a woman who either had pedicures or did them herself?”

“Uh,” Jim says and grins sheepishly. “Never dated one long enough to pay that much attention to her feet, truth be told.”

Jill snorts. “Not surprised,” she says. “I do my nails, too. Starfleet regs allow for manicured nails so long as they look neat and professional and don’t interfere with your work. I just wish they’d allow for piercings other than ears.”

“What did you have pierced?” Jim asks curiously.

“My tongue, and I still miss it sometimes,” Jill says. “You ever?”

Jim shakes his head. “Nope. Never wanted any holes in my body I didn’t come with.”

“Evan’s the same way, and I bet Khan is too,” Jill says. “They can be fun.” She stretches and falls back in the chair, arms dangling over one arm and legs over the other. “You two should get going, enjoy the rest of your free time before you have to start analyzing your crew.”

“Here’s your hat, what’s your hurry?” Jim asks, amused.

Jill laughs. “No, not that, but Evan’s about to make me take more pain meds and they make me loopy and you don’t want to be around for that.”

Jim kind of does, actually; he learned in Spain that Jill while mildly intoxicated is hilarious, and he has a feeling Jill stoned on pain medication would also be hilarious. But he obediently says his goodbyes and leans down to give her a careful hug and shakes hands with Evan. Khan crouches
next to Jill’s chair and leans over to murmur something to her, brushing a curl back from her face. She smiles and kisses his cheek. “Da,” she says. “Of course. You do as well.”

Khan nods and rises smoothly. He says goodbye to Evan, who walks them to the door, and they leave. Jim wants to know what Khan told Jill, but doesn’t bother asking; whatever it was, he clearly didn’t want to be overheard.

They get a cab back to Jim’s place and on the way over Jim leans his head against the window, thinking. Something nags at him, something about the databases and files and identifying people and what had Jill said? She knew her crew except for a few new folks but--

“She had pictures,” Jim says, pieces snapping together in his mind.

Khan looks at him curiously. “What are you thinking?”

“I can’t believe we didn’t think of this,” Jim says. “Jill’s new crew, she has their files which include pictures. All Starfleet files include pictures. Why can’t we run a program to compare those against the database, see what it gets us?”

“We could,” Khan says, but something in his voice clues Jim in that he doesn’t think it’ll work.

“What’s wrong with the idea?” he asks.

“Since we have no way to narrow down the criteria, we would need to compare all of Starfleet’s files to the database,” Khan says. “That in and of itself would take a very long time, possibly longer than Matthew needs to decrypt it. As well, it is possible any agents in Starfleet have taken precautions to alter the images on their files, or switch pictures with someone else. Even if we did get matches, we have no way of knowing if they are valid.”

“Okay, but what if we narrowed the search a bit? If we only compared files from those ships with augments assigned to them,” Jim says. “That might get us something.”

“Possibly,” Khan says. “When we get back to the apartment I can call Matthew and ask him to start running that search, assuming he has not already thought of it.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Jim says. “Anything is, at this point.”

That gets him a faint smile and a nod. Jim smiles back and reaches over to take Khan’s hand, squeezing gently. He doesn’t let go until they get to his building.

“Haven’t been here in way too long,” he says, letting them into the apartment. “But everything looks like it did the last time we were here, so that’s something, I guess.” Their bags sit by the closet, and nothing else looks like it’s been touched.

“It is,” Khan says. “Let me call Matthew.”

Jim considers making coffee, decides he wants to sleep more than he wants the caffeine, and strips down to his underwear before sprawling out on the bed, wings folded back. He can’t quite hear what Khan’s saying to Matthew but the little he does catch isn’t English anyway.

When Khan takes a seat on the bed Jim jolts awake and sucks in a breath. “Startled me,” he says, trying to convince his body to relax. “What did Matthew have to say?”

“A lot of uncomplimentary things,” Khan says, resting a hand on Jim’s back, between his wings. “He said he will set up the search but doubts we will have any luck with it.”
“It’s still worth a shot,” Jim says. “And I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted. Wake me in a couple hours?”

“If you like,” Khan says. He slides his hand up to the back of Jim’s neck, rubbing the muscles. Jim sighs, eyes closing and body going lax. The last thing he hears is Khan saying something in Hindi.

When he wakes, he has to blink a few times before confirming that his eyes really are open, it’s just dark. Really dark, which doesn’t make a whole lot of sense unless Khan closed the blackout shades. Jim considers getting up to find him and then realizes Khan’s asleep next to him, fitted against his back the way he does.

He must have been completely exhausted, Jim thinks, because otherwise he’d have woken when Jim did. It’s so rare for Jim to be awake while Khan’s asleep that he doesn’t really know what to do; he doesn’t want to wake him. So he deliberately relaxes his muscles, doing his best impression of a sleeping person, and smiles when Khan doesn’t stir.

Khan’s a quiet sleeper, and remarkably easy to share a bed with even with the wings. He doesn’t steal the blankets, he doesn’t kick or snore, and he runs warm so Jim’s in no danger of freezing cold feet or hands. The only real problem Jim has with him is that he’s never in the bed when Jim wakes up, which puts a serious damper on sleepy, lazy morning sex. He can usually convince Khan to come back to bed if they have time, but it’s not quite the same.

This, though--Jim’s not sure this has ever happened before, with them in bed together and Khan sound asleep while Jim’s not. He has to admit he likes it, being able to lie here with Khan’s head tucked into the back of his neck and his arm over Jim’s waist, solid and warm and heavy. They’ve been running at full speed for the last however long it’s been, and Jim wants to savor this bit of quiet.

Khan murmurs something in his sleep, not in English, but he doesn’t sound upset or scared. Just a dream, Jim figures. He listens carefully, though, senses on alert for any indication it might turn into a nightmare.

Kind of funny, he thinks, that he’s the one essentially guarding Khan right now. He wishes they were facing each other; he’d like to see Khan’s face, whatever he can make out in the darkness. He’d like to be able to touch him, rub the back of his neck the way Khan does for him or give him a scalp massage or something. But he doesn’t want to risk waking him, so he stays where he is.

Again, Khan murmurs something, and this time the arm around Jim’s waist tightens for a moment. “It’s all right,” Jim murmurs back, covering Khan’s hand with his own. “I’ve got you.”

Khan sighs and goes quiet.

“I’ve got you,” Jim says again for no real reason but he can. “I’ve got you and I’m never letting go.” In the dark, with Khan asleep, it’s easier to say the things he can’t get out when they’re both awake. “I love you,” he says softly, closing his eyes. “So damn much it scares me sometimes. But that’s how it goes, I guess.”

He doesn’t get any kind of response, which makes him feel better; he doesn’t want Khan to wake up just yet. “You’re mine,” Jim whispers. “Always, and I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

He wonders if this is what Khan says to him in Hindi, when he’s mostly asleep and not likely to ask questions. If this is how Khan says ‘I love you’, because he can’t get the words out in English when Jim’s awake.

Jim doesn’t need the words. He thinks Khan might, and wishes he’d been able to say them earlier.
But it’s hard; he’s never cared about anyone this way, never loved anyone like this before, and it’s frankly terrifying to admit it openly.

He has a feeling Khan understands that, and wonders when he told Rani he loved her, if it was easier then, with her. But it’s not the kind of question he can ask. Jim doesn’t want to compare himself to Rani, and doesn’t want Khan to have to compare relationships. That’s not fair to anyone.

Khan sighs again and shifts, and Jim thinks he might be starting to wake up. “You can sleep,” he murmurs. “We’re safe here.”

Still, it doesn’t surprise him when Khan stretches against his back, rubbing his cheek against Jim’s shoulder. “You could go back to sleep,” Jim says. “We’ve got time.”

“I am fine,” Khan says, voice still blurred with sleep and rough around the edges. It does things to Jim to hear him like that, and he smiles, glad Khan can’t see his face.

“Well, then,” he says, turning over. “What if I made you a better offer that still means we don’t have to get out of bed?”

“Yes,” Khan says. Jim smiles and brushes the backs of his fingers down Khan’s cheek, over his throat.

There really is something to be said for lazy, sleepy sex in the dark, he thinks later, his body humming pleasantly and his head on Khan’s chest right where he can hear his heart beat. Khan’s hand runs idly up and down his back, between his wings, and every so often Jim turns his head to brush a kiss against Khan’s skin.

“I’m refusing to think about anything Starfleet related until the sun comes up,” he says finally. “Then I’ll deal with it.”

Khan laughs softly. “As you like.”

“This means you’re not allowed to think about it either,” Jim says, grinning. “Because if you start I’ll start.”

“I see,” Khan says, but he sounds amused. “What should we think about instead?”

“Food,” Jim says. “Not having your superior metabolism, I’m hungry. I have a menu for an all-night diner that delivers, so we don’t even have to go out. But it does mean I have to get up and turn on a light so I can find it.”

“Yes, it does,” Khan says.

“In a moment.” Jim feels too content to move, despite his hunger. However, his stomach growls loudly and he laughs, taking that as his cue to get up.

He turns the lights on low and looks at Khan for a long moment. “What are you thinking?” Khan asks, sitting up.

“That one of the perks of being captain is larger quarters,” Jim says. “Just to begin with, and then if you register a partner they make sure you have a bed big enough for two people.”

“I see,” Khan murmurs.

“I didn’t--you still have your own quarters, just if you want somewhere that’s yours,” Jim says,
feeling uncertain. “But I filled out the form that gives me space and accommodations for two people.”

“When did you do that?” Khan asks.

“Technically Bones did it,” Jim admits sheepishly. “I forgot and he nudged me about it because he was doing it for himself and Maeve, so I asked him to just put mine in. So he did.”

“That was thoughtful of him,” Khan says.

“He can be,” Jim says. “Just never thank him for it.”

Khan laughs. “I will not.”

“I think he might be thinking about asking Maeve to marry him,” Jim says, going to find the menu. “He’s old-fashioned that way.”

“So is she,” Khan says. “They are good together.”

“They are,” Jim says. He finds the menu and brings it back over to the bed. “Are you old-fashioned that way?” he asks abruptly.

Khan looks up at him. “Are you asking me to marry you?” he asks, sounding surprised.

“No, not exactly,” Jim says, ducking his head. “I’m asking if you would want to get married someday, and this was so not how I meant this conversation to go.”

“It is...a possibility,” Khan says carefully. “But I think I would want to know more about what benefits marriage has in this century. I do not need a legal contract to know you are committed to me, or me to you.”

“No, you don’t, and neither do I,” Jim says, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “And I highly doubt we’re having kids, so that’s something to factor out. It’s more, I guess, being able to be public about it. Society recognizes spouses in a way it doesn’t always recognize partners.” He shrugs. “Anyway, think about it if you want.”

“I will,” Khan says.

Jim leans over and kisses him. “Some days I think we should just both be committed,” he says and Khan laughs.

“Some days I would agree,” he says.

“Anyway. Food, and maybe we can play chess or something after we eat.” Jim kisses him again and gets up to find pajama pants. He can feel Khan watching him, though, and turns back after he pulls on pants. “What are you thinking?” he asks.

“Nothing important,” Khan says. “And not something I can easily articulate.”

Jim’s curious, but doesn’t push it. “All right,” he says. “What do you want to eat?”
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

We need to make sure our crew are safe.

Chapter Notes

Hi there. I need to apologize for the delay in posting - 2014 started on a bit of a rocky note, and I've been playing the game of meds adjustment for a while now which has had a pretty strong impact on my writing. Fortunately things seem to have stabilized and I'm back to normal, or as normal as I ever get *g* Hopefully you all haven't given up on me.

We're in the home stretch; for those of you curious, I think the story has about three more chapters and then it will be done. I'm not saying I'll never write in this universe again, but if I do I doubt it'll be something quite as epic as this! We'll see. I have learned through my many years of fandom that as soon as I say I'll never do something I end up doing it, so...yeah. (Also, bribing the author often works quite well, and feedback is an effective bribe. Mostly kidding!)

And for those of you who don't mind het and want more of winged!Khan, I as always point you to Wild Card. That one will keep going for a while, I think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the morning, Jim almost falls out of bed when two comm-links and his alarm clock all go off within seconds of each other. He slaps off the alarm and fumbles for his link, but before he can answer it Khan hands him the right one and takes his back. “Kirk here,” he says blearily, pushing himself to sitting.

“Is everything all right?” Spock asks.

“Yeah, it’s fine, just you woke me,” Jim says. He rubs a hand over his face. “What’s the plan for today?”

“I believe we should have a meeting with senior staff and augmented crew,” Spock says. “We can explain the situation and discuss strategy. I took the liberty of arranging one in an hour and a half.”

“Okay, cool,” Jim says. “Where are we meeting?”

Spock gives him a location and Jim nods. “Okay, sure, see you in an hour,” he says. He hangs up and rubs his hands over his face again. “Ugh. Who was calling you?” he asks, seeing Khan off his link as well.

“Anandi,” Khan says. “She has some questions for me about my time in section 31 and some of the data Matthew gave her.”
Jim’s stomach clenches. “That’s, um,” he says and stops because he doesn’t know what else to say. “Are you okay?”

Khan shrugs a shoulder. “She needs data,” he says, but he doesn’t sound thrilled. “I am meeting her and the others in half an hour. What was your call about?”

“Spock,” Jim says. “He scheduled a meeting with your people and my senior staff in an hour and a half. Will you be able to make it?”

“I will,” Khan says. “But I should be leaving shortly. Where is your meeting?”

Jim tells him and considers falling back on the bed before he sighs and pushes himself to his feet. “Do you have time for a shower?” he asks.

“Alone,” Khan says and Jim makes a face at him. Khan raises an eyebrow in return.

“Yeah, okay, fine,” Jim says. “I’ll make coffee while you shower, should have it ready so you can take it with you.”

“Thank you,” Khan says. He crosses to Jim and kisses him lightly before disappearing into the bathroom. Jim sighs and goes to make coffee.

He has enough time that he doesn’t have to rush getting ready but he still makes it to the meeting twenty minutes early. “Morning, Spock,” he says, seeing him at the table. “What’s up?”

“I have been reviewing the database Matthew provided against our crew files,” Spock says, looking up from his screen. “So far I have not seen any matches, however I have not run them through facial recognition software yet.”

“Check with Matthew before you do, he might already be working on it,” Jim says. “I had a similar thought last night and Khan talked to Matthew about it.”

“I will do that when we are done here,” Spock says. “Will Khan be joining us today?”

“Yeah, he had to meet with Anandi about something,” Jim says.

“I presume it is regarding the medical data?” Spock asks.

Jim sighs. “Yeah.” He turns a chair around and straddles it. “Yeah. We, um, we found a lot in London.”

“What sort of information did you find?” Spock asks.

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “I didn’t look at it. Matthew was the one to find and compile it all, and I elected not to ask what he found because I didn’t--” He hesitates, not quite sure how to put what he means. “I didn’t want to bring up bad memories any more than we had to.”

“That is logical,” Spock says, surprising him. “Will you ask the others what they learn?”

“Yeah, probably,” Jim admits. “It’s not something that should be buried, just in case the section 31 agents were using it. This way we know what to look for. It’s just a crap situation.” He glances up as Ekaterina, Chekov, and Sulu come in. “Morning.”

“Captain,” Sulu says, as does Chekov. Jim waves them to seats, but Ekaterina stops by him to touch his shoulder before she takes a seat.
A moment later Uhura comes in, as does Scotty, followed by Alona and Katsuro. Just after they all sit down, Khan slips into the room. Jim quirks an eyebrow at him and gets a shoulder twitch in response. He still can’t read anything on Khan’s poker face, but his wings seem quiet. He slides into the seat on Jim’s right, turning the chair around to straddle it the way Jim has done. Under cover of the table, Jim touches his hand, pleased when he feels warm fingers press against his for a moment.

He does a mental check of who else might be coming, figures they have everyone, and gets up to close the door and activate the privacy seal. “Okay,” he says, coming back to the table. “So here’s what’s going on.”

He lays it out as clearly and succinctly as he can, from the first threats by the section 31 agents to the bomb to the kidnapping to the London facility to current status. It takes him longer than he intended, but no one interrupts to ask questions while he talks, for which he’s grateful. “With us about a month away from shipping out, we need to make sure our crew are safe,” he says. “I am not saying that I think we have any sleeper agents on the Enterprise. I’m hopeful we don’t, and I hope we don’t find anyone. But with us about to leave for five years, we can’t just hope and close our eyes to reality. We have new transfers, we have new personnel, and no one in this room, myself included, can say we know every single person assigned to the ship well enough to vouch for them.”

No one looks happy, but no one argues, either. “How do you suggest we try and find them, then?” Scotty asks. “No such thing as an infallible polygraph.”

Jim looks at Khan. “Your turn,” he says.

Khan smiles faintly and lays out the plan the same way he’d given it to Pike the night before. “It is not an infallible plan, to your point, Mr. Scott,” he says. “But it is our best option at this time. Matthew is working on the data we retrieved from the computers in the London facility, and we expect he will be done with that before we ship out, in order to give us a chance to review the information against crew files in case we missed anyone.”

“The idea is to have meetings by department,” Jim says when no one comments. “Or rather, by groups within department. Spock, you and Uhura can coordinate that, I’m thinking?”

“Yes, captain,” Spock says and Uhura nods.

Scotty looks unhappy about something, though, and Jim looks at him. “What is it?” he asks.

“What if we find the wrong people?” Scotty asks. “What if someone we identify as a possible agent is completely innocent, and we miss someone who isn’t?”

Jim blows out a breath. “It’s a chance we have to take,” he says after a moment. “I’m not happy about it, and I’m hopeful we won’t get any false positives, but it’s a chance we have to take. Khan had a point that even if we don’t find any agents, we might find crew who are uncomfortable with the augments in general, and they might want to transfer somewhere else anyway.”

“Since we are not transferring off the ship, then yes, that would be a good idea,” Ekaterina says.

“And again, the idea is that Matthew figures out what we’re looking at before we ship out, so we can verify everything,” Jim says.

“What are the odds of that?” Sulu asks carefully.

“If anyone can do it, Matthew can,” Alona says, leaning forward to see him. “And he’s good under pressure.”
Ekaterina snorts. “His language devolves as he gets more involved, but yes, his computer skills do not.”

“Does he work better alone or with help?” Sulu asks.

“Alone,” Ekaterina and Alona say together. “He does not think out loud very much and he gets very lost in himself,” Ekaterina continues. “Anyone trying to work with him would just lead to frustration on both sides and minimal progress.”

“Got it,” Sulu says.

“Any other questions or concerns?” Jim asks.

Glances pass around the room but no one says anything. “Right,” Jim says after a minute of silence. “In that case, you all have things to do, I have things to do. Spock, you or Uhura will be in touch regarding who’s meeting when?”

Spock nods. “We should have the first one this afternoon,” he says. “Likely with engineering.”

Scotty looks grumpy but doesn’t say anything.

“Look at it this way,” Jim says. “Soonest done, soonest over.”

“I still don’t like this,” Scotty says. “I know my people.”

“I think the odds of us finding any sleeper agents in engineering are small at best,” Khan says, surprising Jim--and from the look on his face, Scotty as well.

“What is your reasoning?” Spock asks.

“Engineering by its nature is a close-knit group,” Khan says. “More than that, it is a group that has been working extremely hard and in close proximity to two of my brothers for months now. I think if any of your people were agents for section 31 or even simply uncomfortable with my people, you would know by now.” He looks at Katsuro. “Have you noticed anything like that?”

“I have not,” Katsuro says.

Scotty looks mollified by that. “Well, all right then,” he says. “I suppose we should just get it over with.”

“In your opinion, where are we most likely to find sleeper agents?” Spock asks Khan.

“Science and communications,” Khan says. Uhura looks indignant, but Spock raises an eyebrow.

“Explain, please.”

“Communications is obvious,” Khan says. “The ability to listen in on transmissions and have access to most data would be an invaluable resource for agents.” He looks at Uhura. “It has been my experience that one’s most trusted people should be in charge of comms.”

She looks pleased by that. “Thank you,” she says. “Still, the implication there is that I don’t know the other comms people on the Enterprise.”

“We did receive two new transfers for communications in the last month,” Spock says.

“I said before that no one in this room knows every person on the ship well enough to vouch for
them,” Jim says. “Myself probably first on that list. These guys are good, and they’ve been hiding for a while. We don’t know how widespread their net was or is and we don’t know how many of them are out there. We also don’t know exactly what their plans are these days, other than they’re rabidly against the augments. There’s a lot of information we’re missing and I’m not sure we’ll ever get all of it, but we’re doing the best we can to at least neutralize any threat they present.”

“You said communications and science,” Spock says to Khan after a moment. “Why science?”

Khan’s face tightens, but he answers. “There was an entire area of section 31 devoted to scientific research, in large part biological,” he says. “Medical sciences, to be precise. I think it likely that they would plant agents in science divisions to keep abreast of current research and work with the data the agents in London were providing them. In addition to medical, there was of course the weapons program, and the Vengeance, both requiring advanced engineering and scientific skills. I still believe that engineering is our least likely location, at least on the Enterprise, but science is a much larger department and diversified enough that it may very well hold agents.”

“That is logical,” Spock admits.

“We don’t have anyone from medbay here,” Uhura says. “Where’s Dr. McCoy?”

“On another project,” Jim says. “Oversight on my part, I should have asked M’Benga to be here in his place. Can you please contact him, fill him in? Bones is going to be royally pissed that we’re meeting with his people, but given the medical data we found we have to.”

Uhura nods. “I’ll take care of it, captain.”

“Thank you.” Jim rubs a hand over his face. “Remember, the official purpose of these meetings is just to talk to everyone about the five-year mission and make sure we have people who are comfortable with being shipped out for that long. Even if we don’t find agents, we may find people who need to rethink that decision. I don’t want any crew being made to feel guilty or unworthy because they decided this isn’t for them. Five years is a long time to be stuck on a ship with some cases complete strangers.” He grins. “For that matter, are you all certain you’re in?”

That earns him a snort from Ekaterina, a laugh from Alona, and a general murmur of snickering around the table. “Just checking,” Jim says, pleased with how the mood has lightened. “Anything else?”

There doesn’t seem to be. “Dismissed, get out of here,” he says, pushing to his feet.

Truth be told, he’s not entirely certain what he is going to be doing the rest of the day. He hangs back as the others leave, as do Khan and Ekaterina. “Something on your mind, Jim?” Ekaterina asks.

“I realized I’m kind of at loose ends,” Jim admits sheepishly. “I’m sure there are things I should be doing, but for the life of me I’m not sure what they are. What are you up to?”

“I have an unarmed combat training session in an hour,” Ekaterina says. “You are welcome to attend or participate.”

“Thanks, but not today,” Jim says. “Actually, I think I want to stop by Medical and, um, see what the others are up to.” He glances at Khan warily.

“I will go with you,” Khan says, surprising the hell out of Jim. “I have...insight the others may not, and my perspective may be useful.”

Khan brushes his shoulder with a wingtip. “I am all right,” he says.

“Are you certain?” Ekaterina asks.

“Yes,” Khan says. Jim’s still not quite sure he buys it, but there’s not much he can do about it.

“Come spar with me after,” Ekaterina says, not asking. “We will be in the usual gym at HQ.”

“All right,” Khan says. “Would you like me to be there for the session with your security people?”

She shrugs. “If you like. Some of them are not hopeless and I think they could use a target other than me.”

Khan nods. “I will see you there,” he says.

“Good.” Ekaterina leans up to kiss his cheek and heads out of the room.

Jim looks at Khan. “I guess let’s go hunt them down,” he says.

It takes a bit of searching to find the medical group; either no one knows where they’ve set up or no one’s allowed to tell them. Eventually they track down someone who points them to the right lab. Jim half expects to have to undergo some kind of biometric scan to get in the door, and finds himself proven right when the door requests a handprint before it lets them in. He doesn’t know if his will work, but he tries it and the door obediently swings open.

“No,” Bones says as soon as the door opens. “Busy. Go away.”

“Nope,” Jim says. “Be nice or I’ll sabotage your experiments.”

Maeve laughs. “You would not,” she says. “What can we do for you, captain?”

“We came to see what you were up to,” Jim says. “And Khan thought you might need his perspective.”

“Right now we are just trying to figure out exactly what data we have,” Anandi says, looking up from her screen. “There is...quite a lot of it.” She doesn’t look happy.

“Not all of it is from you,” Maeve tells Khan. “Most, yes, but not all.”

“Not all that comforting,” Anandi mutters. Jim peers at her screen, but all he sees are a bunch of differently colored blobs. “If they weren’t already dead, I’d kill them.”

“I believe Khan had first claim,” Bishop says mildly, looking up from his own computer.

“Can we please not talk about killing people when there’s a doctor in the room?” Bones asks irritably.

“But don’t you know we’re all savage killers and barbarians?” Anandi asks, changing what’s on her screen to a different picture of multi-colored blobs. “Huh. This is interesting,” she says, looking at it more closely.

“What is?” four people ask.

Anandi frowns, zooming in on one particular blob. “Virology,” she says. “They were trying--huh. They were trying to use Khan’s blood to develop a virus that would pass along the genetic superiority. That’s a technique I haven’t seen before, mostly because it wouldn’t work. I mean,
virology’s advanced a lot since I was studying it, but there’s no real way to create a virus that would give someone all of our advantages, they’re too ingrained in our DNA.”

“Did they realize that?” Bishop asks.

“Not sure yet,” Anandi says, distracted. “Cinco minutos, por favor.”

“Right,” Jim says. “What are you looking at?” he asks Bones.

“A lot of torture disguised as science,” Bones says with a scowl. “And no, I’m not going into details right now.”

Jim hides a laugh; it really isn’t that funny. It’s just that Khan and Bones have a very prickly relationship at the best of times, but clearly Bones wants to spare him from hearing details he already remembers too vividly. Really, Jim thinks he should have expected that courtesy from Bones; however cranky he may be most of the time, it doesn’t stop him from doing what he thinks is in his patient’s best interest.

Khan may not consider himself Bones’ patient, but Jim knows the reverse isn’t true.

Bishop murmurs something in French, looking at his computer. Maeve frowns and comes over to look at it, answering in the same language. “English, please,” Bones says in a voice that indicates this is not the first time he’s had to make that request.

“Pardon,” Bishop says. “I think I have found something here that does not match the rest of this data.”

“How so?” Bones asks.

“The results are an anomaly,” Bishop says. “I have a data set here of twelve responses. Eleven are within similar parameters. The last is wildly outside them. It seems as though all twelve tests were done under the same circumstances, so I am not sure what caused the discrepancy.”

Khan moves over to the screen. “Let me see,” he says. Bishop grimaces but moves aside to let him study it.

Jim watches them, not liking the way Khan’s wings ruffle and half-stretch before he forces them back. “I remember this,” he says. “The twelfth test was for control purposes, done on a normal human.” His mouth twists. “Surely you did not think I was the only test subject they had in their labs.”

“Non,” Bishop says, looking unhappy. “How many others were there?”

Khan shakes his head. “I do not know. I was kept isolated.” He looks at the screen. “Here is how you can tell the difference,” he says, indicating something Jim can’t see. “This in the results indicates a different test subject. This, here, was the indicator for me.”

“Let me see that,” Anandi says, pushing up from her seat. She goes to look at the screen. “Ah. That does make some things more clear.”

“What did you find about the virologists?” Bishop asks.

“They had about as much luck as we did three hundred years ago,” Anandi says with a tinge of satisfaction. “Which does not surprise me. There were reasons we failed, and I have not seen anything in today’s science to indicate those reasons have been addressed.”
“What problems did you have?” Bones asks.

Anandi sighs. “Many,” she says. She starts explaining and Jim loses her after about word three.

“Right, so, I’ll leave you to it,” he says when she finishes. “Let--let me know if you find anything I need to know?” He looks at Bones and an unspoken “Without Khan around” passes between them.

“Yeah, fine,” Bones says. “What are you doing anyway?”

“Crew meetings,” Jim says and hopes he doesn’t have to go into more detail. Bones seems to buy it, though, and none of the other three ask questions.

He and Khan leave after that. “Do you need to head to the gym?” Jim asks. “Or change first?’”

“The gym,” Khan says. “I have a locker there with suitable clothes.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Jim says. “I still don’t know what I need to do that I’m not doing. There’s probably paperwork, though. There’s always paperwork.”

“Bureaucracy, a constant of human and alien civilization,” Khan observes.

“Pretty much,” Jim says. “I’ll find a spare computer after you go to get beaten up and see what needs doing. Spock handles a lot of it because he’s more efficient than I am and it’s in part his job, but there’s always crap I have to do.”

“You are capable of efficiency,” Khan says. “When you want to be. However, you also put things off as long as you can if you do not like the task.”


“Except for those who tackle the least likely tasks first to get them out of the way,” Khan says.

Jim laughs. “Point. I am not one of those people. You are, I think.”

“On occasion,” Khan says. “It all has to get done eventually.”

“True,” Jim says.

They reach the gym and Jim pokes his head inside to see Ekaterina throwing knives at a human-shaped target on the other side of the room. He stays far back, but steps inside to watch her as Khan slips into the locker room.

One knife lands in the dummy’s throat, one in his forehead between the dots for eyes, a third thunks into its thigh--Jim guesses she was aiming for the femoral artery with that one. She lands three more, all in crucial spots, and nods before walking over to the target to pull out her knives and put them away.

“How often do you practice?” Jim asks finally, when she’s slipped her knives back into their hiding places and he’s failed to figure out where she keeps half of them.

“As often as I can,” Ekaterina says, seeming wholly unsurprised to see him there. “One does not maintain skill without it.”

“Point,” Jim says. “Although I’d think a lot of it for you by now is just muscle memory.”

“It is, da,” Ekaterina says. “But I still must practice to maintain that memory. Knife throwing is not
like riding a bike; you do not remember how to do it once you get back on. Or rather, you do, but your accuracy may be impaired, and with knives, accuracy is crucial.”

“Out of curiosity, how good did Uhura and Jill get?” Jim asks.

“Passable,” Ekaterina says. “Jill is better than Nyota, but both of them can hit the target three times out of four, and usually enough to disable if not kill. I can not, of course, swear to their ability to do this under duress, and both of them require more practice to become more accurate and hit the target every time. But they acquitted themselves reasonably well.”

“Good to know,” Jim says. He glances over as Khan walks into the room. “Are you two sparring before or after the class?”

“After, I should think,” Ekaterina says. “If we spar before, we may be healing injuries during class, and while that is not a bad thing necessarily, in this case we are to be the teachers.” However, she doesn’t pause as she drops a knife into her left hand and throws it at Khan. He catches it before it can thunk into his skull and throws it back, moving further into the room.

Jim moves out of the way as Ekaterina throws another knife before catching the first one, and in short order it looks like they’re juggling with knives, throwing and catching seamlessly. Ekaterina calls out something in Russian and Khan snorts, catching the last two knives and throwing them back to her. She snags them both and puts them away. “Not bad, brother,” she says. “Not bad at all.”

“Spasiba,” Khan says. “That was an acceptable warm up, and here are the others.” She turns as about six people come into the gym, dressed in unadorned black similarly to Khan and Ekaterina. Jim recognizes one of them from his ship, but not the others.

He sticks around long enough to hear Ekaterina welcome them and explain that Khan will be assisting her, and then long enough to see the first guy get thrown on the mat. Then he decides to escape before they can drag him into it.

Still at loose ends, he sighs and finds an empty office in HQ to look at his mail and figure out what ten things need doing most. It takes him a solid two hours to plow through most of it and respond, and by the time he finishes with the top five things, his head aches dully and his neck feels stiff from looking at the screen.

He finds a med-kit in the bathroom and takes a blocker, and while he’s in there splashes some water on his face. Tired doesn’t quite explain it, but at the same time it comes close. “Just been a long week,” he mutters to himself. Maybe two weeks; he’s not sure. Either way, he wants a week off, but that’s not likely. Spain seems like it happened five years ago.

Jim tells himself to quit the pity party and dries off his face and his hands. A glance at the chrono tells him he has some time til lunch, and neither Spock nor Khan have contacted him, so Jim pushes down the feelings of unease and heads back to the medical lab.

He finds Bishop and Bones huddled over one screen, with Anandi perched on a tall stool and studying something under a microscope. Maeve stands next to her, and from the few words Jim can catch they appear to be talking in Spanish.

“What do you want?” Bones asks, looking up at him.

“What’ve you got?” Jim asks.

Bones scowls. “A lot of shit you won’t understand because we barely understand it. Anandi and Maeve are looking at a lot of the results of bloodwork and other biochem crap. They took so much
from him I’m amazed he didn’t die of blood loss, so those two are trying to figure out what the butchers did with it all and if they were successful at anything. Meanwhile, Bishop and I are sorting through a lot of the comparison data, between normal humans and, well.” He blows out a breath. “Less bloodwork, more broken bones and other injuries.”

“They were thorough,” Bishop murmurs. “I would almost admire them had they not been experimenting on my brother.”

Bones glares at him. “You would not.”

“I said almost,” Bishop points out. “The pursuit of pure science often blinds people to the reality that they are working with human beings. Morality and ethics fall by the wayside in the attempt to build a better human being.”

“Which is exactly why all medical professionals in today’s day are required to take multiple classes on ethics as well as continue said training after graduating,” Bones says. “We don’t want another Eugenics War.”

“No more than do we,” Bishop says. “I think I might like to attend one of your classes on medical ethics sometime.”

“There’s video of the lectures, I’ll find it for you,” Bones says. “Since I doubt we’ll have time before we ship out.”

“Merci.” Bishop returns his attention to the screen. “Interesting,” he says after a moment. “They used a male and female control, apparently to gauge differences between sexes. I had not seen that before.”

“No, neither have I,” Bones says, looking over. “What specifically were they testing this time?”

Jim decides he doesn’t want to know and tunes out, walking over to Maeve and Anandi. It amuses him that the scarf wrapped around Anandi’s hair earlier now drapes over her shoulders and her hair stands up in a short puff of curls. Clearly she’s been agitated or frustrated about something, Jim thinks.

“Captain,” she says, glancing up at him. “I’m afraid all I have are a lot of microscope slides and other boring bits you won’t care about.”

“What can you tell me?” Jim asks.

Anandi sighs and pushes her hands through her hair, making it stand out more. “Everything they did was in an attempt to try and recreate our engineering,” she says. “They tried virology, they tried simple transfusion, I have not yet seen other methods but am sure they’re out there. We just haven’t gotten through much of the data yet.”

“Did they have any success with the methods you listed?” Jim asks.

“No,” Anandi says. “Well, not exactly. They got nowhere with virology. With a simple transfusion they were able to quantify minimal results, but not enough to continue with that line of research. If you’re curious what it means for you, I think that their results cannot be compared. For one, you received more blood than their control subject, and for another, you had already lost blood, whereas this person had not. We observed on you that you healed more quickly than someone would have without my sisters’ blood, and there may be other effects we simply haven’t seen yet.”

“Right,” Jim says. Not that he’d really been thinking about it, but good to know. “Anything else I
“I do not think so,” Anandi says.

“Anything else Khan shouldn’t know?” Jim asks carefully.

“Everything,” Anandi says, slumping on her stool. “But keeping this information from him will be impossible. He knows what was done to him, he will want to know the purpose of it, and frankly, were I in his place I would feel the same.”

“I think we all would,” Maeve says, touching Anandi’s shoulder.

“Si.” Anandi sighs again and straightens up.

“Question for you, on a totally different note,” Jim says, hoping to distract her a bit. He doesn’t like the unhappy look on her face, and even with her dark skin he can see shadows under her eyes.

“Yes?” Anandi looks at him curiously.

“Would you consider shipping out with us when we leave?” Jim asks. “You’ve clearly got skills we could use, and if you come with us, you four can keep working on this stuff if you need to, and...yeah.” He grins a little sheepishly and his wings ruffle. “What do you think?”

Anandi laughs, which makes Jim grin more. “I thought you might ask something like that eventually,” she says. “And yes, I think I would like that, assuming brass agrees.”

“Where your family is concerned, brass will sign off on most things so long as it’s not completely outrageous,” Jim says honestly. “They know better than to alienate any of you, because the moment they piss off one of you, the rest of you leave too.”

“Well,” Anandi says and laughs. “True. I’m pleased to hear they hold us in such high regard.”

“We have somewhat proven our worth multiple times over,” Maeve points out. “They damn well better respect us by now.”

“Yeah, trust me, that’s not a problem,” Jim says. “And--” His comm-link goes off. “I’ll talk to you guys later.” He answers, setting it to privacy mode and ducking into the hall. “Kirk here.”

“Jim,” Spock says. “I have arranged for the first crew meeting in three hours. I suggest those of us attending convene an hour before to discuss tactics.”

“Which gives us time to get lunch, too,” Jim says. “Okay, great. Also, I took care of a lot of the paperwork backlog you left for me, and we need to put in one more transfer.”

“Who is transferring?” Spock asks.

“Anandi’s shipping out with us,” Jim says.

“I see,” Spock says. “I will prepare the form, but I will need both her signature and yours.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Jim says. “You can have me sign it before the meeting today and we’ll swing by Anandi’s lab later.”

“Have they found anything?” Spock asks.

“A lot and none of it’s good,” Jim says grimly. “I’ll tell you about it later. See you in a couple hours.
Wait, where are we meeting?"

Spock doesn’t do humor but he sounds amused as he tells Jim the room location. “Thanks,” Jim says. “Kirk out.” He hangs up, decides he has time before lunch, and goes in search of Matthew.

When he asks about Matthew at HQ he gets pointed to a wing and told to follow the noise. When he steps off the turbolift, he can hear a dull thump that sounds like bass, and when he follows it down the hall it gets louder until he gets to the door of the lab Matthew has commandeered. Jim wonders if Matthew will even hear him, but knocks before trying the door. It swings open easily and he gets immediately assaulted by a wave of sound, some kind of hard rock with screaming guitars and heavy bass. Jim shuts the door hastily to keep any more from escaping and winces. “Matthew?” he says, almost shouting to be heard over the music.

Matthew has about five computers set up at different tables along the walls and on the table in the middle of the room, and he bounces between them, fingers flying over the keyboards and screens. It takes him a moment, but he looks up and sees Jim and holds up one finger, typing a quick command into his current computer. A moment later the music stops, and Jim’s ears ring in the silence.

“Ow,” he says.

“Sorry,” Matthew says. “Wasn’t expecting visitors. I should have the door keyed to automatically shut off the music when it opens. You can spare me the lecture about losing my hearing, though.”

“I won’t give you one, but you have enhanced hearing, why the hell do you need it that loud?” Jim asks.

Matthew grins. “Covers up my swearing and I work better with it. If it’s too quiet I get antsy. Also it keeps most people away. And before you yell at me for disturbing the neighbors, no one else is on this hall, we made sure of that.”

“I’m not going to yell at you, I promise,” Jim says patiently. “I just came by to see how you were doing.”

“Bollocksed it up all to hell and back,” Matthew says. “The first copy I tried working with had a self-destruct, corrupted the whole fucking thing. Fortunately I have a lot of spare copies. So then I had to figure out how to disable that, which took me another two copies. After that it’s just been painfully hacking into the underlying code, which is going about as fast as a slug on Valium. Do you still have Valium in this century?”

“Ah, I don’t know,” Jim says. “Are you making any more progress?”

Matthew sighs and shoves his hands through his hair, rumpling it even more and making parts of it stand up on end. He has the beginning of a fairly decent beard, Jim notes, and surreptitiously glances around to see how many empty coffee cups litter the room. He only sees two, but has a feeling those have been used multiple times. “Maybe,” Matthew says, sounding annoyed. “It’s hard to tell. It’s like I won’t know anything until I swing the door wide open. There could be another self-destruct in this somewhere, so I’m being careful.”

“Don’t kill yourself trying to get it,” Jim says. “We need you alive and intact.”

Matthew snorts. “If the butchers in section 31 couldn’t break Khan, this isn’t going to kill me.”

Jim sighs. “Okay, true, but...still.”

“It’s fine,” Matthew says, touching Jim’s shoulder. “Really. I’m just frustrated and probably
operating on low blood sugar or some shit. Hacking is seventy-five percent shit, twenty percent disaster, and five percent success.”

“It’s almost lunchtime,” Jim says. “Do you want to take a break and come get food?”

“No, but I should,” Matthew says. “Give me five to set up a couple things?”

“Sure,” Jim says.

Matthew grins and moves back to one of the computers in the middle of the room, typing quickly before moving to a different computer and doing the same thing. One more computer, and then he nods. “Okay, let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

I am by no means a scientist nor am I a doctor, so if I have any inaccuracies in the scientific content in this chapter I sincerely apologize. I actually did read an interesting fic a while back where the scientists who created Khan did actually use virology to create the rest of his family, but for the life of me I can’t remember who wrote it or what the scientific basis was. (If it was you and you're reading this, let me know so I can credit appropriately.)
Jim watches Khan, taking in the rigid tension in his body that he won’t express verbally, the banked rage that simmers just below the surface, waiting for a target to present itself. Khan won’t snap at him, won’t dare hurt him, but the anger needs an outlet and right now Jim’s the only one around.

He understands Khan’s fury all too well. Being forced to relive those memories, willing himself to confront what was done to him--Jim grits his teeth at the look on Khan’s face from the lab, the stony expression and deliberate tone of voice. Khan pretends it doesn’t matter; everyone knows better.

At the moment, Khan stands by the window, staring out into the lights of the city, but Jim doubts he’s actually registering anything. His hands clench at his sides, knuckles white with strain, and his wings stay perfectly still. Jim considers his options, realizes he only has one that might work, and takes a breath. This could really, really go badly, and he has to trust that Khan won’t hurt him, that he’ll have enough rational thought left to hold back from lashing out.

Slowly, he walks over to Khan, resting his hands on Khan’s shoulders, wincing at how rigid they feel. He promised to keep Khan safe, but how does he protect him from the inside of his head? How does he save him from himself?

Only one way Jim knows, only one way he’s capable of. He can’t fight Khan, can’t spar with him when he’s like this; too much risk that he might lose control, might actually injure him. If he’s going to fight out the rage, better it be against someone who can match him or best him. Jim can’t.

This, he can do.

He leans in and brushes his lips over Khan’s throat; Khan starts and looks like he’s about to speak. “Don’t,” Jim says softly, tightening his hold on Khan’s shoulders. “Do you trust me?”

Silence for a moment; Jim waits for Khan to battle with himself. He has to know what Jim’s thinking, what he intends. “I don’t trust myself,” Khan says finally, his voice hoarse.
“That’s not what I’m asking,” Jim says. “Do you trust me?”

Khan swallows. There’s only one answer he can give without lying, and they both know it. “Yes,” he says.

Jim tightens his hands again, hard enough to press down against the taut muscles, digging his thumbs in. “I have you,” he says steadily. “I have you. You’re safe here.”

“I--” Khan starts, and Jim moves one hand to cover his lips.

“Don’t,” he says again. “Just trust me.” He slides his hand down, over Khan’s throat, tipping his head back against Jim’s shoulder. Khan’s throat works as he swallows, fights back the instinct to pull away; Jim strokes his skin, going for soothing instead of arousing at the moment.

It takes a minute, maybe two, but Khan breathes out slowly and his body starts to relax. “There,” Jim murmurs, kissing his temple. “That’s it. I’ve got you.”

He’s in no hurry. They have time and if he pushes too much too soon, Khan will fight back without meaning to. Jim kisses his temple again, strokes his throat. “You’re mine,” he says quietly. “You’re mine and I will take care of you.”

He wonders who the last person to say that to Khan was, before him. Did anyone ever, after Rani? He doubts it.

“Nothing else matters,” Jim tells him, holding him close, one arm around his waist, under his wings. The other hand stays on his throat, light enough that Khan might not see it as a threat.

Khan closes his eyes, lashes dark against his skin. He relaxes more, trusting Jim to take more of his weight, letting Jim support him. It’s a start.

Jim kisses the shell of his ear, his cheek. “Undress for me,” he says, waiting for Khan to straighten up before he steps back. He watches, though, not willing to take his eyes off Khan, who moves more slowly than usual. Jim doesn’t think he’s doing it as a challenge; the battle here is within Khan’s head, not between the two of them.

When Khan’s nude, Jim just looks at him for a long moment, taking him in. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get tired of this, of the pale skin and dark hair, the black feathers on his back. So beautiful, and so very much his.

He steps forward, tangles his hand in Khan’s hair and pushes, forcing him down. “Kneel,” he says, and Khan stiffens for a moment before he sinks to his knees, bowing his head. Jim tightens his grip and pulls his head back, forcing Khan to look at him, to meet his eyes even as Jim goes to one knee in front of him.

Without warning, he leans forward and bites, hard, right where neck meets shoulder. Khan gasps, his body jerking; Jim doesn’t raise his head for a moment, sucking a bruise into pale skin. He doesn’t--quite--break the skin, but he comes close, and he feels Khan shudder. When Jim does raise his head, it’s only to kiss Khan, hard and messy, teeth scraping his lip. He doesn’t give Khan a chance to pull back, hand still tight in his hair, and while they both know Khan could easily get away if he wanted, he doesn’t.

“I’m going to take you apart,” Jim tells him, voice low, pulling back just enough to meet Khan’s eyes. “I’m going to break you into pieces, until there’s nothing else left.”

Khan shudders again and it looks like he’s about to say something, but Jim shakes his head. “No.
The only thing I want to hear from you is begging or if you ask me to stop.”

Something flashes in Khan’s eyes, anger and desire mixed, and Jim tightens the hand in his hair, brings his other up to cover Khan’s throat. “You’re mine,” he says, and God, this is such a rush, there’s nothing like it in the universe. “Do you understand?”

Khan licks his lips. “Yes,” he says finally, voice a dry rasp.

“I want you to promise me something,” Jim says. “I want you to promise me that if you need me to stop, you will tell me.”

Again, that flash in his eyes, and Khan says nothing. Jim yanks his head back. “Promise me,” he says evenly, fascinated by the arch of his neck, the pale line of his throat, a dark bruise still visible at the base.

“I...will,” Khan says, sounding like he’s forcing the words out. “You have my word.”

“There we go,” Jim murmurs before he bites again, the other side of Khan’s throat, enough to make him choke back a moan. He wishes the marks would last, that he’d see them tomorrow, make Khan feel them under his clothes.

They won’t, but it won’t stop Jim from trying.

He brushes a kiss over the mark he leaves, licking the indentations left by his teeth and blowing gently on them. Khan shivers, swallows, and a bit more tension eases out of him. “Good,” Jim murmurs, easing his grip on Khan’s hair. “Stand up.”

He gets to his feet as Khan does, not quite ready to let go of him yet, and kisses him again, hungry and desperate for the taste of his mouth, the heat and slick of his tongue. Khan makes a low sound into the kiss, leaning into Jim, hands coming up to grasp Jim’s shoulders.

“No,” Jim says, pulling back, closing his hands around Khan’s wrists and pushing his hands down. Khan tenses, the instinctive pull almost enough to break Jim’s hold. Almost--and then he stops, takes a breath.

“If you want something,” Jim says, keeping his voice as even as he can, “you have to ask me for it.”

None of this is exactly safe; Jim’s playing with fire and he knows it. Khan could pull away, could refuse to cooperate, and then they’d be back to square one or worse. If Jim shows any hesitation, the least hint of uncertainty, that’s exactly what will happen. He keeps his face impassive, his body still, and by some grace of God his wings don’t move.

Khan’s mouth works but he doesn’t say anything. Jim waits, watching him battle himself, holding on tight. Khan’s wings shift, half-stretch and fold back, and Jim says nothing. “Kiss me,” Khan says finally, almost a whisper. He takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “Please.”

Jim feels electrified, like he’s just had a hit of the best drug in the universe, and lets go of Khan’s wrists, sliding his hands into Khan’s hair and pulling him into a kiss. He doesn’t know which of them is hungrier for it, truth be told, but while he can feel Khan’s hands open and close at his sides Khan doesn’t reach for him, doesn’t try to touch him. “That’s it,” Jim says when he finally pulls back, looking at Khan’s swollen lips. “That’s it. Just let go and trust me.”

Khan shivers all over. He’s not nearly where Jim wants him, not even close, but he’s trying. Jim smooths a thumb over his cheekbone, cups his cheek in his palm, pleased when Khan leans into the touch.
He kisses Khan again, gentle this time, lets go when he steps back. “Lie down on the bed,” he says. “On your back, hands over your head.”

It takes a moment, but Khan moves. Jim watches him, waiting until Khan’s done as Jim told him before he moves to get what he needs. He’s aware of Khan’s eyes on him, but Khan doesn’t say anything and Jim stays quiet.

When Jim comes back to the bed, he shows Khan the things in his hands; the box of cuffs and the blindfold. “Do you want these?” he asks, setting them down on the edge of the bed. “Tell me.”

Khan could easily say no, could easily refuse. But he swallows, nods. “I do,” he says. Again, the pause, the visible struggle within himself. “Please.”

“Yeah,” Jim says, taking the cuffs out of the box. “I’ve got you.” He fastens the cuffs around Khan’s wrists, checking the fit carefully even though he knows where to fasten them by now. He stretches Khan’s arms up, a little bit more, raising his wrists slightly off the bed, and locks the cuffs so Khan’s stretched out, spread out on the bed. He knows it can’t be the most comfortable position; that’s the point.

“Close your eyes,” Jim says, moving to fit the blindfold in place. Khan almost jerks his head away, tensing; again, Jim waits for him to relax just a little, to breathe out, before he settles it, tightening the straps enough that it won’t slip. He slides a hand down Khan’s neck to his shoulder, thumb pressing the bruise that hasn’t faded yet. Khan’s breath catches, his head falling back, and he’s so beautiful Jim has to lean down and kiss him again.

“Tell me what you want,” Jim says, still pressing the bruise, his other hand flat on Khan’s chest, over his sternum. “Tell me what you need.”

“Touch me,” Khan whispers. “Please.”

Jim’s stomach clenches at hearing the words. “I will,” he says, moving to kneel between Khan’s legs, raking short nails down his chest and over his stomach. “I’ve got you.”

He doesn’t want Khan to get used to anything, doesn’t want him able to relax into this. So he alternates touches, random caresses with sharp scratches and pinches, never anything Khan can predict or figure out. Jim leaves a couple more bite marks, one on Khan’s left hip, one around his right nipple. Both make Khan actually whimper, a desperate sound he can’t stop.

The only thing Jim doesn’t touch is his cock, although God it’s tempting, and every time he glances down and sees it, hard and flushed with blood, leaking steadily, he has to swallow and keep himself from just taking Khan into his mouth.

But that would be over too soon for both of them. Khan’s not out of his head yet, not completely, and Jim isn’t going to stop until he is.

Jim grabs the lube with one hand, his other barely brushing over the inside of Khan’s thighs, light enough to be a maddening tease and make Khan’s muscles flex under his hand, almost trembling. He makes his touch a little firmer, enough that Khan relaxes slightly.

Then he pinches, hard, twisting the sensitive skin enough to get a choked cry from Khan. “Something wrong?” Jim asks, stroking the abused flesh, soothing the hurt he caused.

Khan moistens dry lips, tries to take a breath, doesn’t quite succeed. “No,” he manages finally, but all but whines when Jim skims his fingers over his balls, heavy and full.
“If you want something,” Jim reminds him, “you have to ask me for it.”

He slicks two fingers, rubbing his cheek against Khan’s hip while he does just to maintain contact. He’s not sure Khan will ask, not yet, but that’s all right. Jim can be patient. Not usually, but this--this is worth patience.

He presses a kiss to the bite mark that’s already fading and kneels up. “Bend your knees,” he says. “Feet flat on the bed.”

It takes a moment, and for a second Jim wonders if Khan even heard him, if the words registered. But then he moves, slowly, letting Jim see all of him.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Jim murmurs, running a hand down his thigh, skimming between his legs and back. He shifts to make things easier and brushes his slick fingers over the almost-hidden opening to Khan’s body. Khan shudders and before Jim says anything, his legs shift further apart.

Jim smiles and presses just there, not entering him, just teasing. “Do you want this?” he asks, making small, light circles, knowing what it must feel like from the way Khan’s muscles tense and relax, over and over.

Khan doesn’t answer, and Jim smacks his hip with his dry hand. “Answer me,” he says. “Do you want this?” He makes his voice a bit sharper, a bit more demanding.

He hears Khan suck in a breath, ragged and harsh. “Please.” His voice is nothing like the smooth, articulate tones Jim’s used to, and God, it’s so damned good. “Please, Jim.”

“Perfect,” Jim says softly, pressing those fingers into him slowly. He’s so hot inside, a velvet vise around Jim’s fingers. So much heat and so much strength, even here and now, even as Khan’s breath rasps in his throat and his body struggles to relax around the penetration.

Jim watches him, the color spreading down his throat into his chest, the faint impressions of bruises already mostly faded, the flex and release of his thighs. Then he looks down, watching Khan’s body open to him, red and slick from his fingers, yielding to whatever he wants. It’s such a fucking rush to see it, to watch Khan give into him like this.

He can’t help it. He pulls his hand back, earning himself a desperate whine, and hunches over awkwardly to lick at him, pressing his tongue in where his fingers were. God, it’s even better like this, tight wet heat and Khan making broken, choked moans with every breath. This isn’t even really about Khan right now; Jim needs this.

“Heed,” Khan says brokenly. “Jim, please.”

Just a little more, and Jim raises his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Tell me what you need,” he says, his own voice husky.

“Fuck me,” Khan says, arms tense where he pulls against the cuffs, chest heaving as he tries to breathe. “Please--Jim, please--”

“Easy,” Jim says, resting a hand on Khan’s belly, feeling the muscles jump under his touch. “I’ve got you. I’ll give you what you need.”

He slides those two fingers back into Khan, smooth and fast, enough to make Khan gasp and push back against his hand. More lube and he adds a third finger, possibly too fast or too soon but Khan just moans helplessly, trembling against the bed.
Sweat beads at Khan’s hairline, his temples, the hollow of his throat. Jim wants to lick it away and promises himself he can soon, that he can kiss Khan’s flushed face and bite the throat that’s already healed, that he can leave more bruises that will disappear before he lets Khan come back to himself.

“Please,” Khan begs, a catch in his voice. “Jim, I can’t--”

“You can,” Jim says, even as he twists his fingers hard and Khan cries out, almost arching off the bed. “You can. You will. For me.”

Khan shudders all over, panting for breath. “I need--Jim, please--”

“I could make you come just like this,” Jim says, rocking his fingers in and out of Khan’s body. “I could watch you fall apart, just from my fingers, just because I wanted to feel you break like this. I could give you my hand and watch you shatter around my fist, make you feel so full, so owned you don’t know anything else. I could just stop, and leave you empty, all slick and wet inside, begging me for anything.”

“Please,” Khan whispers.

“Come for me,” Jim says, twising his hand again. “Come for me, and I’ll fuck you like you need until you come again for me, and then I might give you my hand after that, until you come again and it almost hurts.”

Next time he does this, he thinks, he wants something else, some kind of toy he can use to fill Khan up, something that won’t give, will just stay until Jim decides enough is enough. He likes the idea of binding him, filling him, and...leaving him to struggle with it until he wears himself down.

Khan’s biggest battles are always against his own mind, and Jim knows it.

“Come for me,” he says again, fucking Khan hard with his fingers, pressing against the right spot inside him. “Give it up, let me have it.”

Khan gasps as he comes, arching up and spilling all over his own stomach. He falls back against the bed, dazed, breathing hard, barely aware when Jim pulls his hand back and hastily strips out of his own clothes, wiping his hand on his shirt hastily.

He’s so hard it hurts and he has to grip the base of his cock hard, gritting his teeth to get some control back before he just comes. His hand shakes as he slicks himself and then he manages to get where he needs to be and push into Khan, leaning down to lick the sweat off his throat, sink his teeth into that reddened skin. Khan jolts, head tipping back just enough for Jim to bite him again, right under his jaw, that soft vulnerable skin.

“You’re going to come again for me,” Jim tells him, bracing his weight on one hand and reaching down with the other to wrap his fingers around Khan’s cock, soft now and slick with his own come. “As many times as I want.”

“I can’t,” Khan breathes, trying to squirm away from Jim’s touch, but he’s got nowhere to go and Jim doesn’t let go of him. “It’s too much, I can’t, Jim, please--”

“You can,” Jim says, moving slow and steady even though it grates at his self-control. “I know you can, you’ve done it before.”

Khan whimpers, trying to move under him and getting nowhere; if he really wanted to, Jim knows, he could throw Jim off him, kick him out of the bed even as they are now. But either he hasn’t thought of it or he doesn’t actually want to or both.
“Come on,” Jim murmurs, smiling when he feels Khan start to get hard again. “There we are.”

He thinks he’s finally pushed Khan past the point of coherent speech, which he’s never managed before and God, he really really wants to do this again, like tomorrow. Khan’s head tosses against the pillow and his hands open and close on nothing, pulling against the cuffs that won’t budge no matter how hard he tries.

Jim’s own self-control is disintegrating and he can’t keep the slow, steady pace, but it doesn’t matter; Khan’s hard in his hand and velvet hot around him and the sounds he keeps making are ripping Jim to shreds, making him move harder, faster, each thrust wringing a choked cry or a whine from Khan’s throat. “Come on,” Jim whispers, not even sure Khan can hear him. “Let me have it, let me have you, come on. I’ve got you, just let go and fly...”

He thinks he can almost see it, when it happens, when Khan just shatters under him and nothing else matters. He’s so fucking beautiful like this, lost in his own head; Jim growls and kisses him hard, demanding everything and getting it in spades. “Come for me,” he says, tightening his hand. “I’ve got you, just come for me.”

He’s fairly certain the words don’t even register but Khan comes without a sound, back arching off the bed enough to almost lift Jim up as well. Jim kisses him again, muffling his own groan in Khan’s mouth as he finally stops holding back and lets himself come, Khan trembling under him.

“I’ve got you,” Jim says as soon as he can catch his breath and ease back. He sucks in a breath, crawls up to unlock the cuffs but leaves them and the blindfold on, and pulls Khan into his arms, holding on tight.

Khan just shakes against him, burrowing into Jim as close as he can get, breathing hard, and if his cheeks are wet with anything other than sweat Jim pretends he doesn’t notice.

“I’ve got you,” Jim whispers over and over into Khan’s dark hair, pressing kisses into tumbled curls. “I’ve got you. You’re safe. You’re safe now.”

It takes a while for Khan to stop trembling, long enough that Jim’s starting to wonder if he pushed too hard, if this was too much. But slowly, his body goes lax and still, and his breath steadies. Jim says nothing, just holds him and keeps him close, even when Khan shifts in a way that indicates he might want to move. “Just stay here,” Jim says, in no hurry to let go of him. “Just relax, I’ve got you.”

Khan sighs and nods against Jim’s shoulder.

After a few more minutes, Jim touches Khan’s cheek. “I’m going to take the blindfold off,” he says. “Keep your eyes closed.”

Khan nods without and Jim slips it off, tossing it aside somewhere. It takes a moment, and a few blinks, but Khan opens his eyes; when he does, Jim lets him pull back so they can look at each other. “You okay?” Jim asks softly, touching his still-flushed cheek.

“I am,” Khan says but he has to swallow twice before he can say the words.

“You want a shower?” Jim asks.

“Yes,” Khan says.

“Yeah. Thought you might. Let me just--” Jim moves to kneel on the bed, unbuckling one cuff and then the other, taking Khan’s slim wrists in his hands. “You were beautiful,” he says quietly, looking
at him. “That was...that was incredible.”

“Yes,” Khan admits, looking down. “It...was what I needed.”

“I know,” Jim says, pulling him close for a kiss. “I know. Let’s go shower.”
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Sometimes the only way to defuse a bomb is to set it off under controlled circumstances.

Chapter Notes

I feel like I've kind of done this backwards. Interlude #2, posted the other day, actually ended up being a missing scene from this chapter--I'm pretty sure you'll all see where it fits in. Apologies for the out of order posting, and if you folks would like me to try and edit this so the interlude comes after this chapter I can do that. I didn't realize when I wrote the interlude that it would end up fitting in here like it does.

Anyway. More plot! More angst! Hope you're all still enjoying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No one talks much over lunch, lost in their own thoughts. Jim doesn’t like the shuttered expression on Khan’s face, the tension in his body. He knows the other augment see it as well, from the way Anandi and Maeve keep looking at him, as if they’re about to say something but then don’t. Matthew is either oblivious or deliberately not commenting, but either way he eats quickly and disappears before Jim’s even finished his sandwich.

“He can be a bit...obsessive,” Maeve says.

“So can we all,” Anandi points out.

That’s an understatement if ever there was one. Jim looks at the rest of his lunch, not really hungry anymore. He knows the augment tend to be driven perfectionists, and yes, obsessive doesn’t even come close. Jim guesses it’s something to do with how they were created and trained.

Normally he finds it somewhat amusing and somewhat scary at the same time. At the moment, all he can think is that Khan’s probably obsessing inside his own head, replaying memories over and over that he’ll never be able to forget.

He wonders if Khan will actually make it through the meeting today, if his self-control will hold out longer than his anger. Jim really hopes so, because otherwise they’re all fucked. If Khan loses it--he could easily kill someone, or multiple someones, and Jim doubts he’d be able to save him again.

Grim thoughts.

He tosses away the rest of his food and heads for the pre-meeting meeting, needing a bit of space to try and clear his own head. He has to be able to put on a good front, pretend there’s nothing more pressing going on than prep for the mission, and right now all Jim wants to do do is crawl into bed with Khan and pull the covers over their heads.
On impulse, he goes outside, needing fresh air and sunshine. It helps somewhat, and he just stands there, face tilted up to the sky, refusing to think about anything until he hears someone clear their throat behind him.

When he turns, he sees Anandi standing there, hands folded in front of her, scarf wrapped around her hair again. She looks completely unruffled and professional, but Jim can still see shadows under her eyes. “Hi,” he says, feeling awkward. “Is there--what’s up?”

“Nothing in particular,” Anandi says, glancing up at the sky. “Like you, I found myself in need of air.”

Jim sighs. “Yeah. It’s been a long...week? Two weeks? I’ve lost track.”

“Something like that,” Anandi agrees. “Are you all right, Jim?”

“I’m not sure,” Jim says without meaning to. “Okay, that’s not fair.”

“What is not fair?” Anandi asks.

“You and Khan and--everyone,” Jim says, gesturing. “You ask me questions and I mean to say one thing and something completely different comes out.”

Anandi smiles a bit impishly. “Perhaps you are just not very good at lying.”

“No, I think you all have some freaky weird interrogation power,” Jim says, but smiles back. “I’m...I’m all right, I guess. Just...worried about my crew, about what we might find or might not find. And...”

“And you worry about Khan,” Anandi says quietly.

“Yeah.” Jim sighs. “Yeah, I do. It’s--something’s got to give, and I don’t know what it’ll be or when it’ll happen, but I feel like he’s a ticking bomb.”

“Not inaccurate,” Anandi says. “The more information we need from him, the more quickly the timer counts down, and he will never tell us he can’t, he will never tell us to stop asking.”

“So why don’t you just stop?” Jim asks. “Why don’t you just tell him you don’t need his input?”

“Because we do need it,” Anandi says. “I have test results and lab results and microscope slides and reams of data to analyze, but none of that can tell me the motivation behind what was done. None of that can tell me what the ultimate goal was, whether it was to engineer more people like us or learn how to destroy us or something else entirely. I have found information that points to research into biological and chemical warfare. Maeve has found indications of other lines of inquiry. Khan may not know all the programs that occurred at section 31, but he was there, he has a better indication than do any of us.”

She sighs and pulls the scarf off her hair. “And by our questions, by us asking, he can admit what happened, he can speak of it. I know he does not wish to do this, I know he would prefer to bury the memories and never acknowledge them. But we as a people don’t have the luxury of forgetting. What was done to Khan will stay with him the rest of his life, and if he continues to deny those memories, he will never allow himself to try and heal from them.”

Jim licks his lips. “But you’re hurting him,” he says finally. “I saw--don’t tell me you didn’t see him at lunch. He’s--it hurts him to remember this, to tell you what happened.”
“Are you familiar with how severe burns are treated, Jim?” Anandi asks, confusing the hell out of him. He shakes his head, and she continues. “There is a process used called debridement, in which the necrotic tissue is removed to allow the healthy tissue to grow and repair itself. It is necessary, for if the necrotic tissue is not removed, the wound will not heal properly. But it can be extremely painful.”

He gets the point. “I still don’t have to like it,” he says.

“Neither do we,” Anandi says. “You describe my brother as a ticking bomb, and I don’t disagree with you. But I think perhaps he needs to break before he can move on.”

“I just don’t want collateral damage,” Jim says.

“No,” Anandi says. “Neither do I.”

“Can I ask you something?” Jim asks, changing the subject.

“You may ask whatever you like,” Anandi says.

“Why poison?” Jim asks. “Why did you study that?”

Anandi smiles again. “We all studied how to kill people, Jim. With knives, with guns, with our bodies, any other weapon we could use or create. Poison interests me because it has traditionally been a woman’s weapon, a somewhat risky method. Some say poison is the weapon of a coward, someone too afraid to face his enemies in battle. I disagree. I will face my enemy anywhere I must, and I am not afraid to fight him. But some people don’t deserve the mercy of a quick death, or knowing their killer. Some people simply deserve to die without knowing why.”

“That’s...cold,” Jim says slowly. Every time he thinks he has a handle on the augments, every time he even slightly forgets their pasts or thinks they’ve changed, something like this happens.

“We are not good people, Jim,” Anandi says. “We never claimed to be.”

“I know,” Jim says. “Believe me, I know.”

“You are a good man,” Anandi says, surprising him. “A protector, rather than a predator. Your crew is loyal to you, and you to them. Not because they fear you, but because they respect you and trust you. I admire that. I did my best to create an atmosphere of loyalty in my advisors, my fighters, and I like to think I was successful. But I have never claimed to be anything but a predator. I would like to serve on your ship, to better understand your crew’s motivations, to understand your own.” She smiles a little and shrugs. “And I would like to see what is out there, in this galaxy, what worlds exist beyond our own, what civilizations we might find.”

“I have trouble seeing some of you as predators,” Jim admits.

“That is never something you should forget,” Anandi says quietly. “We may be integrated into Starfleet, we may have sworn to uphold its rules, but we are not tame, not in any sense of the word. We stay because we want to. We may walk at your side, but we are not leashed, and if ever we choose not to follow, we will attack if you try to stop us.”

“Khan said Marcus wanted to exploit his savagery, not just his intellect,” Jim says.

“Si,” Anandi says. “And yet Marcus was surprised when that savagery was turned on him.”

Jim sighs. “Yeah, well. I...I should get to the meeting. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”
“One more thought, before I leave you,” Anandi says. “Sometimes the only way to defuse a bomb is to set it off under controlled circumstances.”

Jim mulls that over as he walks to the conference room, thinking about what Anandi said. He knows what she was implying; he’s not stupid. He just doesn’t quite know what controlled circumstances would mean in this context.

It stays in the back of his mind as he and Spock and Ekaterina and Alona talk about the group of people in the first meeting. Khan slips into the room halfway through it but offers no explanation for his late arrival, nor does he contribute much to the discussion. He doesn’t even take a seat, choosing to stand against the wall, wings half-folded around his body.

How he’s going to get through this meeting Jim honestly has no idea. But he reminds himself he’s a captain and these people depend on him and Khan trusts him and...and an idea starts to form in his mind, nudging at his thoughts.

Unfortunately it’s not really an idea he can think about while meeting with his crew, so he shuts it down and pretends he’s not thinking about it and that he’s a completely mostly professional ship’s captain.

The meeting with about half the engineers lasts a little under an hour. Jim finds it a lot easier to get through than he expected, mostly because most of the engineers are just so damn excited about the five-year-mission, about the chance to really test the modifications they’ve made to the warp core and the power banks and so on and so forth. More than a few of them ask Khan to come brainstorm with them before they ship out, or even after, figuring out ways to tweak what they’ve already tweaked.

It’s actually...kind of adorable. Jim doesn’t even bother hiding the grin, and something in him unclenches a bit when he sees Khan relax slightly, talking to the engineers and asking questions about things they’ve already done or want to do.

They run over the scheduled time due to all the questions, and Spock finally has to interrupt and assure everyone that there will be plenty of time to discuss engineering later, for now they all have other duties. Jim swears he almost hears a chorus of disappointed “awww”s, but eventually all the engineers leave.

Ekaterina and Alona come out from the observation room. “Well, that was charming and also useless,” Ekaterina says, perching on the edge of the conference table.

“Useless how?” Spock asks.

“I did not note anyone or anything that seemed even the slightest bit unusual,” Ekaterina says. “Not that I entirely thought I would, given my brother’s observations earlier, but I would like to get these meetings accomplished and finished as quickly as possible.”

“Yeah, but now Khan has minions,” Alona points out.

“They might be Katsuro’s instead,” Ekaterina says.

“Mm, no,” Alona says. “Did you miss the looks the blonde was giving him?”

“Which blonde?” Jim asks.

“The twink,” Alona says. Jim blinks, confused, and she laughs. “Old expression, apparently. The slight one, green eyes, hair that looks like he’d prefer to wear it with much more product and color and who likely does drugs and hooks up in bars on his leave.”
“That is a remarkably illogical extrapolation,” Spock says. “I believe you are referring to Mr. Hanover?”

“Sure,” Alona says. “And I’ll bet you that if you look up his record, he’s got at least one bust for underage drug use and possibly prostitution although my guess is that one never made it to court.”

“Vulcans do not gamble,” Spock says.

“No, but I’ll bet you,” Jim says. “What’s the wager?”

“If I’m right, you let Khan teach you more about unarmed combat,” Alona says. “At least six sessions.”

“And if you’re not?” Jim asks. “Also, shouldn’t you get Khan’s agreement first?”

Alona looks up at him. “You in, brother?”

“Yes,” Khan says.

“So that’s settled. If I’m wrong--and I’m almost certain I’m not, but if I’m wrong, I promise to leave you alone about training in unarmed combat for a month.” Alona looks at Jim and grins. “Deal?"

Jim sighs. “Deal.” He shakes hands with her. “Spock, can you be our arbitrator and look up Hanover’s record?”

Spock doesn’t look pleased but taps at his tablet, saying nothing for a moment. “Mr. Hanover has three arrests on his record, however in one case the charges were dropped. He was arrested at fifteen for possession of illegal substances with intent to sell, at sixteen for solicitation--those charges were subsequently dropped--and at seventeen, also for possession of illegal substances with intent to sell. It appears that in lieu of prison time, he was assigned to drug rehabilitation and then enrolled in Starfleet to make a fresh start.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking he still uses,” Alona says. “But. There we are, and Khan, I hope you’re pleased.”


“Okay, explain to me how you knew all that,” Jim says. “Because Spock’s right, that was totally illogical.”

“He’s got scars on the inside of his arms,” Alona says, touching her forearms. “Needle marks. Some are clearly years old, mostly faded, but I saw at least two that look more recent. His eyes are way too bloodshot, so either he’s got vision problems, he’s hungover from something, or he’s damaged them with whatever he’s injecting. As for the prostitution--he’s pretty, he’s young, and he’s either gay or bisexual from the looks he was giving Khan. My guess is he went out to a club, got high, got picked up by someone and as they were stumbling their way toward whatever private or semi-private space they could find, the cops interrupted.”

“Also he was wearing nail polish,” Ekaterina says. “Which is not common for men in this century.”

“Nail polish isn’t against regs,” Jim says, remembering Jill.

“It is not, but I still rarely see men wearing it,” Ekaterina says. “For a man to have his nails polished a glittery black indicates a comfortability with alternative lifestyles.”
“Or a demanding daughter,” Alona says.

“Da,” Ekaterina agrees.

“None of this indicates he’s not competent at his job, of course,” Alona says. “And if he made it to engineering, I’m guessing he’s smart enough not to use when he’s on duty or might be going on duty. Probably has a stash he’ll take on the ship with him, though, since five years is a long time to stay clean if you’re not actively trying.”

“Did you guys notice anything else about the engineers?” Jim asks. “Anything that might cause a problem three years down the road?”


“No,” Alona says. “Khan?”

Khan shakes his head. “No.”

Jim looks at Spock. “You have any observations?”

“The engineers are more...enthusiastic than I had expected,” Spock says after a moment.

“Compared to you, Mr. Spock, even Anandi is practically giddy,” Ekaterina says.

Spock raises an eyebrow. “Anandi is logical,” he says. “I think perhaps she would see the advantages to the Vulcan disciplines.”

“She would but she still wouldn’t do it,” Alona says. “Vulcans may live and die by logic, but none of us are Vulcan. Emotions are too powerful for us to repress them.” She looks at Khan, almost challenging him. “Isn’t that right, brother?”

Khan says nothing but leaves the room, forcing his wings to fold back as he does and moving quickly enough Jim doubts he’d be able to keep up if he followed.

Ekaterina growls low in her throat and turns to look at Jim. “Fix it,” she says, not asking.

“You expect me to do the impossible,” Jim says.

“Do you love him?” Ekaterina demands. “Then go after him.”

Okay, not really what he wanted Spock to hear, but Jim blows out a breath and heads for the door, kind of following the trail of skittish people Khan leaves in his wake.

He finds Khan in the hall to the medical lab, standing near the door but not within sight of it, head bowed, hands tight at his sides. “Don’t,” Jim says, reaching him. “Don’t do this to yourself.” He reaches out carefully, touching Khan’s shoulder, and something in his chest cracks when Khan flinches away.

“Don’t,” Jim says again, flattening his hand against Khan’s shoulder. “Please. Don’t—don’t do this. They have enough data, they don’t need you to torture yourself.”

He doesn’t care what Anandi said about debridement and necrotic tissue; what he cares about is that Khan’s hurting and angry and ready to go off like a Roman candle. “Khan, please,” Jim says quietly.

Khan takes a breath, then another, and forces his hands to relax, raising his head. “It is fine,” he says.
“Don’t lie to me,” Jim says, slumping. “Please. Don’t. You’ve never lied to me before, don’t start now.”

“They need the data,” Khan says, not looking at Jim, not really looking at anything.

“Khan,” Jim says softly.

Khan turns to him, suddenly, eyes bright with anger. “I don’t need your pity,” he says fiercely. “I don’t need you to protect me from my own memories.”

It’s not about pity and the second part is so completely untrue that Jim doesn’t know what to say. “I don’t pity you,” he says finally, aware they’re in public space and anyone could walk by. “It’s not--do you not see what you’re doing to yourself? What this is doing to you? This whole thing, not just the--not just that,” he says, gesturing to the door of the lab. “The whole section 31 mess, the agents, the bombs, everything. Do you really not get it?”

“Explain it to me,” Khan says, voice clipped and cold. “Since you seem to have the superior intelligence.”

Jim doesn’t take offense at the dig; it’s rather like a trapped animal clawing the person trying to free it. “Not here,” he says, and before Khan can say anything else Jim grabs his wrist and pulls him down the hall, toward the door and the outside and the darkening sky. He knows Khan could easily pull away or simply refuse to go with him, but he does neither.

Not until they get outside, somewhere slightly less public or at least less likely to be disturbed, does he let go of Khan’s wrist. “All of this,” he says quietly. “Everything from the time Pike dragged us into that meeting about the bomb threat to now. It’s dragging up memories you don’t want to acknowledge and you don’t want to deal with but you can’t forget. Add to that everything that has happened since we got back from Spain. Khan, you wanted to die a week ago, and at the moment I’m not entirely certain you haven’t changed your mind!” Jim realizes his voice has risen, almost shouting at Khan, and takes a breath, forcing himself to calm and his wings to settle. “I don’t want to see you do this to yourself,” he says steadily. “I don’t want to see you put yourself through hell because you think it doesn’t matter, that you’ve moved on.”

“It’s in the past,” Khan says, sounding like he’s trying to convince himself.

“No,” Jim says softly. “No, it isn’t.”

He steps closer to Khan, not quite touching him. “I’m not asking you to tell me what happened,” he says. “I’m not asking you to tell anyone what happened. I’m asking you to give yourself a break.”

Khan says nothing, and Jim can’t read whatever’s on his face, but his wings stretch and fold back and ruffle. “Rather an unfamiliar concept,” Khan says finally, trying for humor and not quite succeeding.

“I know,” Jim says. “You’re a genius. You can learn new things.”

That earns him a half-smile, but--“They need the information,” Khan says after a moment. “And I am the only one who has it.”

Jim slumps. “Do you really? You were--what do you know that they don’t? They have all the results, they have--”

“They have numbers and statistics and analyses,” Khan says. “They do not have the motivations behind the...tests. They do not know whether there was some greater purpose at work or whether it
all meant nothing. I can--” He stops, breathes out. “I can tell them what the scientists wanted to know, what the purpose of each was.”

“How do you know it?” Jim asks.

Khan looks past him, into nothing. “Because they told me,” he says, his voice almost hollow. “Because they thought I would...appreciate knowing the greater purpose I was serving.”

“Because it was psychological torture,” Jim says. “Just another test.”

“That is likely,” Khan admits. “But I do not think they lied to me. They knew I would have recognized it.”

Jim sighs, hangs his head. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. Fine. If you have to do this, then let’s go do it.”

Khan looks at him for a moment. “You do not--”

“I’m not letting you do this alone,” Jim says. “Everyone in that lab, they want information. I just want you to have someone to lean on.”

He doesn’t actually know if Khan will accept the support. Sometimes Jim hates his pride, hates how difficult it is for Khan to admit he needs anything. The more he needs it, the harder it is for him to ask.

They stand there in silence for a moment, Jim refusing to back down and Khan clearly fighting himself over it. Finally, Khan breathes out, nods. “Let’s go, then.”

Despite it almost being dinnertime, or maybe past it--Jim’s not sure--he’s not surprised to see the four people still in the lab. Bones looks decidedly unhappy to see them, but the augments don’t look surprised. “Buenos tardes,” Anandi says. “Or is it evening?”

“Somewhere in between, I think,” Jim says. “Don’t you guys have clocks in here?”

“Somewhere,” Bones says. “We’ve been a little too busy to pay attention. Why are you here?”

“You need information I have,” Khan says.

Bones scowls. “Goddamnit.”

Jim moves closer to Khan, resting a hand in the small of his back, below his wings. Khan tenses just a little, but doesn’t pull away. “Tell me what you need to know,” he says.

Looks get exchanged around the room and there seems to be a consensus. “Here,” Bishop says, pointing at his screen. “I do not understand the reason for this.”

Khan nods and moves over to look at it.

Jim forces himself to listen, even though it makes his chest hurt and his hand clench. He watches Khan, watches his face become more and more expressionless even as his voice stays steady. The augments stay matter-of-fact as they ask questions, but Bones scowls more and more and when he has to ask a question his voice is curt. Jim knows he’s not upset with Khan; he’s unhappy about the situation.

Everyone is.

They stay in the lab a solid two hours, only stopping because the four haven’t been through enough
of the remaining data to know what they need to ask and Bones is starting to look tired. “I suggest we call it a night,” Anandi says. “We can begin again in the morning.”

“Aye,” Maeve says, and Bishop nods.

It takes them a little bit to get ready to leave, and then the six of them exit the lab. Bones punches a code into the keypad next to the door, which flashes red for a moment. “The handprint scanner’s only good for the six of us, but I’d still rather not take chances,” he says.

“Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you,” Jim mutters, finding grim humor in it.

He considers suggesting dinner, but after everything he heard food sounds completely unappealing. No one else mentions the idea either, and they leave the grounds without stopping.

“Here is where I leave you,” Anandi says when they’re a little out from HQ. “I will see you in the morning.” She studies Khan for a moment, then steps up to him, resting her hands on his shoulders. Khan leans down slightly and Anandi leans up, murmuring something in his ear. Whatever she says makes him close his eyes for a moment before he nods and steps away. Anandi looks at him a moment longer, then turns, walking quickly down the street.

A few blocks later, Bishop does much the same thing, touching Khan’s shoulder and leaning their foreheads together for a moment. Jim can hear whatever he says, but since it’s not in English he has no idea. Again, Khan nods, and Bishop says goodnight to the rest of them before he leaves.

“My turn,” Maeve says when they reach the point where she and Bones go one way and Jim and Khan go another. She leans up and hugs Khan, hard; Jim’s pleased to see his arms go around her after a moment. He thinks whatever Maeve tells Khan is maybe in Gaelic, but he’s not sure.


Words Jim never thought he’d hear Bones say. “I will,” he says.

“Yeah.” Bones sighs again. “Night.”

While Jim would really like to know what the augments said to Khan, he doesn’t ask and Khan doesn’t seem inclined to share. They walk back to Jim’s apartment in silence, each of them preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Once inside, Jim kicks off his shoes and strips out of his uniform, pulling on jeans and a t-shirt. Khan doesn’t, nor does he really watch Jim get changed, which doesn’t surprise Jim.

Jim takes a breath, watching him by the window. Either he does this or he doesn’t, and if he does this, either it works or...

It works.

After the shower, after they’ve dried off and crawled back into bed, Khan settles against him, his head on Jim’s shoulder and Jim’s wing draped around him. Jim closes his eyes, grateful for the warmth of Khan’s body, the relaxed muscles. “I’ve got you,” he murmurs. “I’ve always got you.” Khan says nothing for a moment, then takes a breath. “Thank you,” he says quietly.

Jim holds him a bit closer, runs a hand up and down his back. “It wasn’t just for you,” he says.
“I know,” Khan says.

“Yeah.” Jim sighs. “Yeah. I know you do. You...you have to let me take care of you. It’s not just--I need to know I can do this for you, that you can trust me enough to let go.”

“I do trust you,” Khan says softly. “I would not let anyone else do this.”

Jim swallows. “We should sleep,” he says after a moment. “Spock’s probably going to call early with the next set of meetings, and...” And they’ll need to go back to the lab at some point, and Jim wonders if they’ll play out this scene again tomorrow night. He both hopes they do--because Jesus, talk about incredible--and hopes they don’t, because it hurts to see Khan like this.

“We should,” Khan says, but he shifts a bit and leans up to kiss Jim, slow and sweet. One kiss leads into the next, and Jim thinks neither of them really want more, but it’s good like this.

Eventually, though, they settle back down and Khan fits himself against Jim’s back, head tucked against his shoulder. Jim draws the covers up a little more, closes his eyes.

A thought occurs to him and he almost laughs at it, but manages to keep from anything other than a grin. He’ll have to talk to Jill again, he thinks. She’ll probably have all kinds of suggestions for him. It might--possibly should--be embarrassing, but he can deal with that.

For now, he thinks Khan’s fallen asleep against his back, relaxed and content, and that’s all Jim wants.

He covers Khan’s hand with his own, letting himself drift off.

Chapter End Notes

As always, comments and criticism wholly loved and adored by the author.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

No man or woman can be self-sufficient all the time, and it takes more strength to bend than to break.

Chapter Notes

So I really thought I'd be done by chapter 60. I'm no longer certain of that. *eyes plot*

As always, thank you so very much for the kudos and comments and even those of you who just swing by to read. This started as a completely self-indulgent amusement for myself and has grown into a giant monster of a fic, and I'd probably have given up long ago were it not for you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the morning, his comm-link goes off at the same time someone knocks on the door. Jim grabs the former while Khan grabs pants and goes to get the door. The link, not surprisingly, turns out to be Spock letting him know the meeting with the rest of the engineers is at 1400, and then there is one with medical at 1700. Jim gets the details from him, acknowledges they’ll be there, and hangs up in time to see Alona and Maeve in the apartment, both of them with their arms crossed and looking at Khan.

“Uh,” Jim says. “What did I miss?”

“We’re going running,” Alona says. “Khan’s coming with us.”

“Right,” Jim says, staying in bed because he didn’t grab pants and would rather not deal with them commenting. “How far are you going?”

Maeve shrugs. “Until we get tired. I told Leonard I would be in late this morning, and Alona should not have anywhere to be until the early afternoon, so we have time.”

“I suggest you put on running clothes, brother,” Alona says to Khan. “Or we’ll drag you out as is.”

Khan gives her an absolutely venomous glare, to which she smiles sweetly. “Me and Maeve against you? We’d win. You’re stronger than I am, but not both of us put together.”

“This is ridiculous,” Khan says irritably.

“You’ve got five minutes,” Maeve says cheerfully.

Khan mutters something not in English and Alona laughs. “Such language,” she says. “Clock’s ticking, Khan.”

Jim resolutely keeps a straight face, and after about ten seconds Khan growls but goes to get clothes
and duck into the bathroom to change. “Everything go all right last night?” Maeve asks while Khan’s in there.

“Yes,” Jim says, face heating involuntarily. “Yeah, it…it’s fine.”

“Clearly, since you’re refusing to get up and I can only think of one reason why,” Alona says.

Maeve giggles when Jim blushes more, ducking his head. “Jim, I hate to break it to you, but we’re well aware you and Khan have sex.”

“Can we just not talk about this?” Jim asks plaintively. “I don’t ask you about your sex life with Bones.”

“No, but you are aware I have one,” Maeve says.

Jim falls back on the bed and pulls the pillow over his face, only moving it when he hears Khan emerge from the bathroom. “Take them away,” he says, pointing at Alona and Maeve. “Please God.”

Alona giggles this time. “Poor Jim’s not used to sisters.”

“He’ll learn,” Maeve says complacently.

Khan snorts. “What on Earth did you say?”

“Really, nothing much,” Alona says. “He just gets very easily flustered when we remind him we know you have sex.”

“I see,” Khan says.

Jim sighs and pushes himself up to sitting, reaching out a hand for Khan. “First meeting at 1400 hours,” he says. “Call me if you’re going to the lab before, I’ll meet you there.”

Khan nods. “I will,” he says, leaning down to kiss him briefly.

“See you later,” Alona says, wiggling her fingers at him before the three of them leave.

Jim doubts they’ll be back anytime soon. Which...he glances at the chrono, decides to take a chance, and calls Jill. “Kane,” she says, answering almost immediately.

“Hey, it’s Jim,” he says. “What are you up to this morning?”

“Nothing, really,” Jill says. “I’m still on medical leave until I see the doctor this afternoon, and Evan’s taking that to mean I’m not allowed to do much of anything but take pain pills I don’t need. You want to come over and save me before I punch him?”

“Actually, yeah,” Jim says. “I...kind of need to talk to you about something that has nothing to do with section 31. More like what I asked you about before Spain.”

“Got it,” Jill says. “Yeah, come on over.”

“Thanks.” Jim hangs up, pulls on clothes, wolfs down a protein bar and gets a cab to Jill and Evan’s place. Evan opens the door when he knocks, and Jim feels a little weird about this whole thing but whatever.


“Sure,” Evan says. “Jill’s over there.”

Jill’s in the same oversized chair as the last time Jim saw her, again with bare feet but dressed in jeans and a blue shirt. “Have a seat,” she says, waving at the ottoman or the couch. “What can I do for you? I’m really good at sex advice.”

Jim hangs his head. “Yeah, that’s...yeah.” He rubs his hands over his face. “This is...awkward.”

“Would you like me to make it easier?” Jill asks. She studies him for a moment, considering. “My guess, given everything that’s going on and what it means for you and Khan, is that you had a scene with him last night. It either went really well or really badly and either way you want suggestions for what to do next time.”

“It went really well,” Jim admits, not quite looking at Jill. “He...he needed it, but I think I did too.”

“The best scenes are like that,” Jill says as Evan comes over with coffee. “Hi, love. I’m giving Jim advice on scenes. You want to help, since my guess is that he wants to know more about running them?”

“All right,” Evan says, handing Jim and Jill mugs before nudging Jill over and fitting into the chair next to her.

Jim blinks at that, because he thought...Jill laughs at the look on his face. “I switch,” she says, sipping her coffee. “But with Evan, I usually sub. He’s good at getting me out of my head.”

The easy, matter-of-fact way she talks about this makes Jim feel a little less uncomfortable. “I’m guessing you and Khan switch off,” Jill says. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “But...with everything going on, I think...”

“Sure,” Jill says. “Makes total sense. Believe me, we’ve been there.” She glances at Evan, smiling, and he kisses her temple. “So are we talking help with the psychology, or more the mechanics?”

“Um,” Jim says. “Mechanics, I think. We have the stuff you bought for me, but not really anything else, and I think I want to try some new stuff.”

“Sensory play, impact play, general toys, or something else?” Jill asks.

“I’m not really sure,” Jim says, aware his cheeks feel warm. “I don’t...I don’t want to hurt him, but I need to be able to get him out of his head.”

“Your department, my love,” Jill says, looking at Evan.

“Honestly, a lot of it just depends on preferences,” Evan says. “The best way to get someone out of their head is to drag them down into their body, to make it impossible to focus on anything else, think about anything else.” He takes Jill’s hand absently. “Scenes have two aspects to them. There’s the psychology of it, subspace and such, getting someone to forget about anything else but what’s happening right now. Some people can find that really easily. Some people take a bit of time but can get there without much of a problem. Some people fight it, either consciously or unconsciously, and you have to pull them. My bet is Khan’s one of the last, in that he can’t get out of his own way.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Jim says. “It’s not—it’s not that he doesn’t want to. If he didn’t, there’s no way in the galaxy I could make him. He’s just--” Jim sighs, feeling almost like he’s betraying confidences
but at the same time, he needs to talk to someone about this. “The more he needs something, the less he wants to admit it. It’s not just him, most of the augments I know are similar, like they were conditioned to believe they didn’t need anything, and if they did, they were weak.”

“Pretty sure they were conditioned like that,” Jill says. “And yeah, I agree with you.”

Evan nods. “This is where the mechanics come in. You can talk someone down into subspace, especially if they’re used to it or less likely to fight it, but sometimes you need more. The more physically intense something is—and I don’t mean pain necessarily—the harder it is to concentrate on anything but what you’re doing, what you’re hearing. Sensory deprivation’s a really good aid because if you take away someone’s sight, all the other senses try to make up for it, so touch and hearing get magnified.”

Jim rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “Yeah, I know that one,” he says, remembering Khan using the blindfold on him. “It’s more—I have some ideas, but I don’t have the...stuff I’d need, and I don’t really know where to start looking.”

Jill giggles, which surprises him, and Evan snorts. “Boy, did you ever come to the right place,” she says, getting up from the chair. “Come with me, darling.”

Confused but game, Jim gets up and follows Jill to a large armoire set against the wall. She glances at him with a grin and opens the doors.

“Jesus,” Jim says, looking inside. “Did you buy a sex toy shop or something?”

“Sure looks like it, doesn’t it?” Jill laughs. “A friend of mine decided years ago that everyone should give me sex toys for my birthday and for holiday presents. Everyone else went along with it, and so they keep giving me things. I have never used most of the things in here, for the record. The top four shelves are things that have never been used, all cleaned and sanitized. The bins on the doors have things that can be sanitized and used by multiple people, like clamps or cuffs, and the drawers mostly have things like lube and wipes and stuff.”

She pats Jim’s arm. “Help yourself.”

“I don’t even know what half of these do,” Jim says slowly.

“So let’s talk,” Jill says. “Anything I really want to keep isn’t in here, so you’re welcome to pretty much anything.”

“Right,” Jim says.

By the time Jill finishes explaining, Jim has a small duffle bag full of things and a lot of ideas for later. The question will be whether he gets to implement any of them, or whether Khan will decide he doesn’t want to repeat last night. Jim honestly doesn’t know.

He says goodbye to Jill and Evan, heads back to his apartment to stow the bag, and is changing into his uniform when Khan walks in, sweaty from the run, hair plastered to his forehead and skin flushed from exertion. Jim looks at him, looks at the uniform pants he’s just put on, carefully takes off the pants, and walks over to Khan. “You look...really, really good,” he says, and before he can stop himself he leans forward and licks Khan’s throat, tasting him.

“I look rather like I need a shower,” Khan says, but he tips his head back when Jim nudges him and his breath catches when Jim bites, not hard enough to mark.

“Share it with me,” Jim says against sweat-damp skin.
“Yes,” Khan says.

They don’t have a lot of room in the shower, especially with the wings, but Jim makes it work, sinking to his knees and taking Khan into his mouth, Khan’s hands tangled in his hair. The hot water pours down on his head and his back and it’s almost too much heat but Jim doesn’t care.

Khan’s fingers tighten in his hair, not quite pulling; his thighs tense under Jim’s hands and even over the shower Jim hears his breath come faster, harsher. Come on, Jim thinks, slipping one hand back to cradle Khan’s balls, gentle but enough to make Khan gasp.

“Close,” Khan gets out and Jim smiles to himself, humming softly. Khan gasps again and shudders as he comes, hands flexing in Jim’s hair. Jim doesn’t raise his head right away, licking him clean until Khan tenses and twists away.

Jim coughs, clears his throat and pushes to his feet. Khan pulls him in for a hard kiss, one hand sliding down to wrap around his cock, jerking him off with a grip just shy of painful. Jim groans, holds on to Khan’s shoulders to steady himself, head dropping forward as he pants for breath.

Khan murmurs something Jim can’t understand and twists his hand just right and Jim groans, spilling over Khan’s fingers and his own stomach. It takes him a moment to catch his breath and another to let go of Khan but Khan pulls him back into a kiss before he does.

Eventually they finish washing up and get out of the shower to dry off. “What did you do while Alona and Maeve dragged me around most of San Francisco?” Khan asks, rubbing his hair with the towel.

“I went over to see Jill and Evan,” Jim says. “She’s supposed to get cleared for light duty later today. She thinks she should just be cleared for regular duty but I doubt she’ll win that argument.”

“Likely not,” Khan says. “I should head to the lab once we get dressed. By now they should have been able to evaluate more data.”

Jim sighs, dropping his head. “Yeah, I know. I’ll go with you.”

Khan touches his shoulder. “It will be all right,” he says. “I am...less angry about the memories today.”

Because of last night, Jim fills in, and a bit of warm satisfaction curls around him. Still, though. “It won’t be easy,” he says.

“No,” Khan admits after a pause. “But it will be all right.”

They head to HQ and find the lab easily enough; when they go inside, Jim sees Maeve and Bones studying one computer, Bishop at another, and Anandi on the same stool as yesterday looking at her screen. “Buenos dias,” she says when they come in, looking up.

“Morning,” Jim says. “How’s it going?”

“We are making progress,” Anandi says. “Slow, but progress.” She has a green scarf around her hair today, and when Jim looks a bit more closely he doesn’t see shadows under her eyes. Progress, indeed.

“Leonard and I would like your input on a few things, Khan,” Maeve says. Bones sighs but nods.

“What do you need?” Khan asks, moving over to them.
Jim tunes them out because he doubts he’ll follow anyway and moves over to Anandi. “Boom,” he says softly.

She smiles, looking up at him. “Good,” she says. “Maeve said she and Alona dragged him out for a long run this morning, too.”

“Yeah, they did. I think it helped,” Jim says. “It’s still...the next few days aren’t going to be easy on anyone, but I’m no longer worried he’s about to explode, at least not right now.”

Anandi nods, folding her hands in her lap. “You are good for him,” she says quietly. “Rani and I were never all that close, mostly because we did not interact that often. She was what he needed at the time, though, and I respected her for that.”

“And now?” Jim asks.

“Now you’re what he needs,” Anandi says simply. “As I’m sure others have told you.”

“Cat’s mentioned it, yeah,” Jim admits.

“It is difficult for him--for any of us--to admit we need help,” Anandi says. “To admit weakness, vulnerability, is not something we were ever encouraged or indeed allowed to do. But no man or woman can be self-sufficient all the time, and it takes more strength to bend than to break.”

“What do you do?” Jim asks. “When you need a break?”

“I write in my journal,” Anandi says. “I find the act of putting down on paper what bothers me allows me to distance myself from it and see it more objectively, and then I can handle it better.”

“Did you ever have someone to lean on?” Jim asks.

“I never wanted someone like that,” Anandi says. “I have my family, and I can talk to them if I need to, but I never wanted a partner.”

Jim wonders why, but doesn’t ask.

Instead, he looks a bit more closely at Anandi’s screen. “What are you looking at?” he asks.

“Bloodwork,” Anandi says. “Nothing all that exciting, I’m afraid, but I do need Khan’s assistance with some of it.” She looks over at where Khan has moved to Bishop’s computer and calls out something in Spanish.

“Un momento,” Bishop says, glancing up. He looks back down at the screen and asks Khan a question in French; Khan nods, answering him in the same language. Bones sighs, but doesn’t ask for a translation.

Bishop touches Khan’s shoulder, asking him something else quietly. Khan hesitates, then nods again, answering. Whatever he says makes Bishop smile a little, and he slips his hand around the back of Khan’s skull, bringing their foreheads together for a moment before he straightens up and kisses Khan’s forehead. Khan smiles and shakes his head before walking over to Anandi and Jim.

“You look well, hermano,” Anandi says. “Or at least better than you did yesterday. How far did Alona and Maeve make you run?”

“I stopped counting,” Khan says. “I have been told they will be showing up again tomorrow morning. I haven’t time for this.”
“Yes, you do,” Anandi says. “Besides, it could be worse. They could drag you running and then make you spar with Katsuro.”

Jim winces at the thought, and Khan almost does as well. “What are you studying?” Khan asks instead, changing the subject.

“Bloodwork,” Anandi says, pointing to the screen. “This makes no sense to me. What am I missing?”

Khan studies it for a moment, frowning in thought. “What was the previous set of data?” he asks.

Anandi flips back a couple screens. “There.”

“I think...” Khan says slowly. He stops, flipping back to the new data, and when he continues it’s in Hindi.

Either he doesn’t want Jim to understand, or--more likely--he’s so focused on the data that he forgot to speak English, Jim thinks. All the augments do it, if they’re not paying attention. It makes him wonder what exactly Anandi has there, but when he looks at the screen it makes less than no sense.

Khan doesn’t look unhappy, though, so Jim leaves him to it and walks over to Maeve. “So how far did you guys drag him this morning?” he asks.

“Mm, somewhere around thirty kilometers,” Maeve says. “We could have gone longer but I did want to get here before it got too late. Maybe tomorrow we can go longer.”

Jim shakes his head. “Better him than me.”

Maeve laughs. “We wouldn’t make you run with us,” she says. “Not like this, not without a lot more training. Although speaking of training, I hear Alona finally got you to agree to spar with Khan?”

“Remind me not to bet her in future,” Jim says.

“Khan is a good teacher,” Maeve says, patting Jim’s shoulder. “I think you may actually enjoy the lessons.”

She sounds so earnest and yet Jim eyes her, seeing a spark of mischief on her face. “I don’t like you anymore,” he says.

Maeve giggles. “Sparring can be very...energizing.”

“Why do you do this to me?” Jim complains.

“Because I’m your sister,” Maeve says. “It’s what we do.”

The matter-of-fact way she says it catches Jim off-guard. He knows the augments consider him one of theirs, that he’s their family, but he’s not sure anyone except maybe Cat has called themselves one of his siblings before.

He shakes his head but has to smile. “I’m still not letting anyone watch Khan make me look like an idiot,” he says.

“That’s fair,” Maeve says. She tucks a wave of hair back behind her ear and glances at Bones. “Give us a moment, love, please?” she asks.

Bones looks at her and raises his eyebrows, but she smiles. “Please?”
“Yeah, okay,” Bones says, hitting a few keys and moving over to a different computer.

“I don’t know what you did for him last night,” Maeve says softly when it’s just the two of them. “But thank you.”

“How do you know I did anything?” Jim asks, a little uncomfortable.

Maeve looks at him patiently. “Give me some credit for knowing my brother,” she says. “He is less agitated today, was even before Alona and I took him out. I’m not going to ask, but whatever you did worked, and you may need to do it again.”

“Yeah,” Jim says slowly. “Yeah, I think you’re right about that, especially over the next week or so.”

“Aye,” Maeve says. “Not an easy time for any of us. Alona and I didn’t drag Khan running just for his sake.”

“Are—are you all right?” Jim asks hesitantly.

“This is difficult,” Maeve says honestly. “It reminds me a bit of growing up, the reams of data the scientists collected on us. Anandi and Bishop and I stole a lot of that before...well, anyway. Some of the data we have here is very similar, and...it’s difficult to push back old memories.”

Jim’s guess is that they stole the data before killing the scientists, but isn’t about to ask. “If you ever need a shoulder,” he says instead.

“Thank you,” Maeve says, touching his arm. “I’m all right, though. I have Leonard, and he has a very good shoulder to lean on.”

“Yeah, he does,” Jim says. “He’s good like that.”

“He’s a good man,” Maeve says, smiling. “Which sometimes makes me wonder what he sees in me. I am not—”

“Don’t,” Jim says. “Don’t tell me you’re not a good person. You all do that and I don’t buy it. Especially not you.”

“Why especially not me?” Maeve asks.

“Because you’re a healer,” Jim says. “You help people.”

“I didn’t always,” Maeve says softly.

“No,” Jim says. “I know that. But things were...very different.”

“They were,” Maeve agrees.

Jim’s wings shift a little. “Anyway,” he says. “You and Bones are good together.”

“So are you and Khan,” Maeve says.

Almost involuntarily, Jim turns to look at Khan. He’s still with Anandi, talking to her and gesturing toward things on her screen, but Jim’s not sure of the language. Whatever it is, he seems easier about it than he did yesterday, so Jim figures he doesn’t really care.

“We should get lunch soon,” he realizes, looking at the clock. “We have a meeting at 1400, so we’ll want to sync up beforehand to talk about it.”
“Then aye, we should get food,” Maeve says. “Anandi, almuerzo, por favor?” She raises her voice just enough for Anandi to hear her.

“Si,” Anandi says, glancing over at them. “Cinco minutos.”

Jim watches all four people fiddle with their workstations, saving work and getting to stopping points, he guesses. Four minutes later, the six of them head to the mess. “Should someone get Matthew?” Jim asks.

“I’ll look for him,” Bishop says. “We’ll see if he agrees to eat.”

“Drag him if he doesn’t,” Anandi says. “Otherwise he’ll work himself until he passes out and wake up feeling like crap.”

“Oui,” Bishop says before heading off.

They find Alona in the mess, along with Ekaterina and Katsuro. About fifteen minutes into the meal, Bishop and a very rumpled Matthew return. “When was the last time you slept?” Maeve asks when they take their seats.

“No idea,” Matthew says. “Can’t remember that far back.”

Both Alona and Maeve smack him upside the head. “You’re getting a few hours this afternoon,” Maeve says firmly. “If I have to drag you back to your flat and drug you, I will.”

“Ow,” Matthew says, rubbing his head. “Can’t I crash here? There’s a couch down the hall from my setup.”

“No,” Alona says. “Because then you won’t sleep and you’ll go back to work. We’re not indestructible, idiot, and you know as well as I do that you need to recharge when you’re on a marathon like this.”

Matthew sighs. “Well, I’m not getting anywhere anyway,” he says wearily. “I promise to go back to my apartment and sleep for a few hours before I tackle this again.”

“Have you made *any* progress?” Jim asks cautiously.

“A bit,” Matthew says. “I appear to have found the door in one of the databases, but I think I need to find the other two before I can figure out how to get them open, and I don’t think the other two are coded similarly.” He eats a chip, swallowing before he continues. “If I wasn’t under a time constraint I’d be a lot happier about this. It’s actually something I’m having to work at, which rarely happens. But I haven’t got months to sort this out, so it’s irritating me.”

“Which database did you find the door in?” Khan asks.

“The one we think is cover identities,” Matthew says. “I tackled that one first, next is the photos. Random determination, really, I was running hacks on all of them and the covers broke first.”

Jim watches him wolf down the rest of his sandwich and guzzle the rest of his soda. “You’re going to make yourself choke,” Anandi says, giving him a look. “Five minutes to actually *chew* won’t kill you.”

“I’m fine,” Matthew says, pushing to his feet. “I’m going to go back to my flat and sleep for a few hours and then dive into this bullshit again. If you don’t see me by nine tomorrow morning, someone make sure I’m still breathing, yeah?”
“Oh, we will,” Alona says. “Maeve and I are taking Khan running tomorrow. I think you’re coming with us, too.”

Matthew groans. “I haven’t got time.”

“That’s what Khan said and I don’t care,” Alona says. “We’ll swing by your lab and pick you up, so be prepared, and if you’re not dressed for running we’ll drag you out in whatever you are wearing.”

Whatever Matthew says to her makes Alona, Maeve, and Anandi all laugh. “Bye, brother,” Alona says, wiggling her fingers. “Go sleep.”

“Oh, sod off,” Matthew grumbles, but heads out of the mess, long legs moving fast.

“How come you get to escape the morning run tomorrow?” Jim asks Anandi.

“I am not a distance runner,” Anandi says. “Nor am I working myself to exhaustion or emotional breaking point.”

Jim winces a little at that and glances at Khan, but Khan doesn’t seem bothered by it.

“Anandi’s more of a cheetah when it comes to running,” Alona says. “She’s very fast in short sprints, but isn’t much for extended runs.”

“Yeah, but I think your definition of a short sprint is different than mine,” Jim says.

“Ten kilometers or so is my best,” Anandi says.

“Yeah, that’s not short,” Jim says, shaking his head.

Alona giggles. “Are our measurements too much for you, Jim?”

Jim looks at her, almost disbelieving, then pushes his tray out of the way and puts his head down on the table. “I hate you so very much,” he says into the table.

Maeve pats his shoulder. “We are physically superior,” she says brightly. “There’s nothing to be--”

“Please,” Jim interrupts. “For the love of God, stop.”

“To be fair,” Alona says, “they have been together months by now. I’d think that if it were a problem we’d have discovered long ago. What do you say, brother? Anything you’d like to share?”

“No,” Khan says.

“Starting to rethink my offer of you signing on with us,” Jim says.

Alona giggles again. “Poor Jim, so maltreated. Khan can kiss it better later.”


She sighs. “As you like.”

Jim waits another minute or so before raising his head. He says nothing, but drains his water, pressing the cold glass against his cheek to ease the heat.

“We should go meet Mr. Spock,” Khan says, changing the subject. “Anandi, you’ll let me know if
you need more from me.”

“Si,” she says. “Do try to acquire more minions, would you? They come in handy.”

Jim doesn’t ask what for.

They clear their plates and split up, the lab quartet heading back to Medical while Alona, Khan, and Jim head over to meet Spock. They get there right as Ekaterina does. “Where have you been all morning?” Jim asks curiously.

“Studying Klingon language,” Ekaterina says. “And my usual teaching sessions. Where have you been?”

“The lab,” Jim says.

“Ah. I should have realized.” Ekaterina smooths a hand over her ponytail. “Well, Mr. Spock, with whom are we meeting today?”

They have enough time to quickly review files before the meeting, and then Ekaterina and Alona duck into the observation room. After yesterday, Jim’s kind of hoping for a similar reaction from this group of engineers and grins when he gets it. Khan gets peppered with questions and requests, the engineers talking over each other in their excitement to know more.

If any of them are sleeper agents Jim’s fairly certain they’re all fucked, because anyone that good at hiding his true motivations could be capable of anything. It’s a sobering thought, and a bit of his smile fades.

The engineers finally leave, not without some disappointment, and Ekaterina and Alona come out of the observation room. “You first or me?” Alona asks.

“De Paso,” Ekaterina says. “That is his name, da? The tall brunette with the beard?”


“He is having an affair with the short redhead,” Ekaterina says. “And I do not think it is going well.”

“It really isn’t,” Alona says. “She wants nothing to do with him, he hasn’t gotten the message yet. There might be trouble down the road.”

“There undoubtedly will be,” Ekaterina says. “Hopefully it will be easily resolved or dealt with.”

“Did you notice anything that would indicate a sleeper agent?” Spock asks, redirecting the conversation.

“No,” Ekaterina says. “No, I did not.”

“Nope,” Alona says. “But Khan has more minions.”

“Lucky me,” Khan murmurs dryly. Jim almost laughs to hear it.

“Did you notice anything?” he asks Khan instead.

“Nothing of importance,” Khan says.

Jim frowns, wondering what that means, but Khan doesn’t elaborate and no one else asks.
“We should review the files for the medical department,” Ekaterina says. “I believe we are meeting with all of them save Dr. McCoy?”

“Yes,” Spock says. “There were not enough of them to divide.”

So they go through the medical crew files, and then the meeting. Unsurprisingly, the medical officers are a lot less giddy about five years in space than the engineers--mostly, Jim figures, because they know what can go wrong and are usually the ones dealing with it when it does. Five years in space means five years of weird illnesses, injuries, accidents, and anything else they haven’t thought of yet.

But they’re still game, and by asking a couple supposedly innocuous questions Jim learns that half of them have a crush on Maeve and all of them think she and Bones should get married. Jim does not laugh at that, although God he wants to, but he manages to keep a straight face until they leave.

Then he cracks up, slumping in his chair and snickering. “Who has minions now?” he asks when Alona and Ekaterina join them.

“Apparently Maeve,” Alona says, also laughing. “Should we tell her the medical officers have a pool on when he’ll propose?”

“No, because she would want to bet,” Ekaterina says.

“True,” Alona says. “And no, Mr. Spock, I didn’t notice anyone that might be problematic.”

“Neither did I,” Ekaterina says. “But we thought--despite the data from section 31--that medical agents were unlikely simply because it is a smaller department than most and again, close-knit.”

“As well, there have been no transfers to or from the medical team since before the last mission,” Spock says. “Aside from Maeve.”

“Okay, well, cool,” Jim says. “Two departments down, how many more to go? Don’t--actually, don’t tell me. Just tell me who we’re meeting with next.”

“Security,” Spock says. “We have a meeting with them scheduled for 1100 tomorrow.”

“Well, that should be suitably easy,” Ekaterina says. “If there is a sleeper agent among security that I have not noticed in months of training with them, we have bigger problems.”

“No one is infallible,” Spock says calmly.

“No, this is true,” Ekaterina says. “But I have been in very close physical proximity with every security officer assigned to your ship over the last few months, and I should think I would have noticed had one of them harbored hatred toward me, even subconsciously. I am well used to fighting people who wished me dead, I can recognize it easily.”

She has a point, Jim thinks. “We should get dinner,” he says. “If we’ve got nothing else for today. And then--” He looks at Khan uncertainly.

“I should visit the lab,” Khan says matter-of-factly.

Jim sighs inwardly. “Yeah,” he says, not without reluctance. “Let’s grab food and then head over.” If they go to the lab first, he doubts either of them will be interested in food after.

Spock leaves them before dinner, and Alona grabs food and heads to Matthew’s lab to make sure he eats something, so it ends up just being Jim, Cat, and Khan in the mess. Jim stays quiet, mind
whirling with half-formed thoughts that refuse to solidify; thankfully, neither Ekaterina nor Khan ask him what’s going on.

Ekaterina studies Khan, though, not even trying to pretend she isn’t. Khan looks at her evenly, and after a few moments she asks him a question in Russian. He shakes his head, answering in Hindi, but doesn’t quite look at her when he does.

She reaches across the table and closes her hand around his wrist, asking him a different question in Hindi. This time Khan meets her eyes, but his voice is quiet when he answers and Jim swears he sees a tinge of color in Khan’s cheeks.

Jim’s not quite sure what they’re discussing, but whatever Khan says makes Ekaterina smile. She squeezes his wrist and sits back. “It is not a bad thing, brother,” she says in English.

“No,” Khan says. “No, I know that.”

“Do you?” Ekaterina studies him again, almost challenging him. “Perhaps you do,” she says after a moment. “The question then becomes less if you are willing to accept help and more if you are willing to ask for it.”

“Cat,” Khan says quietly.

“Konstantin knew what I needed without my asking,” she says. “And yet there were times I still asked.”

“Why?” Jim asks, because there’s something here he needs to know.

“Because when another person offers you help and you accept, you can tell yourself it is because the person offering needs it, because they need to help you more than you need their assistance,” Ekaterina says. “To admit to yourself that you are the one in need of help, in need of a shoulder to lean on or someone to stand between you and the darkness—that is much, much more difficult.”

Jim glances at Khan, but can’t read whatever’s on his face.

Ekaterina smooths a hand over her ponytail. “But I tell you nothing you do not know,” she says. “Do I?”

“No,” Khan says. “No, you don’t.”

“Da.” Ekaterina nods, satisfied, and gets to her feet. “I am going to go for a run,” she says. “Good night, brother.”

Khan nods. “Good night.”

Jim looks at Khan as they gather up their trays. “You okay?” he asks.

“I am,” Khan says.

Jim still doesn’t quite know if he buys it, but it’ll do for now. They head to the lab and walk in to an argument between Bishop and Anandi, both of them looking agitated and gesturing as they talk rapidly, Bishop in French and Anandi in Spanish. Bones looks grumpier than usual and Maeve stays quiet, watching the discussion.

“No,” Anandi says firmly. “No.”

Bishop sighs and shakes his head, disagreeing with her.
Khan listens to the conversation, head slightly tilted, and interjects when Anandi finishes speaking but before Bishop can respond, staying in Spanish. He gestures to himself, then Bishop, then Bones, and while he speaks quickly his voice is less strident than either Bishop’s or Anandi’s.

Whatever he says makes Bishop frown and Anandi shove her hands through her hair. “Impossible,” Anandi says when Khan finishes.

“No,” Khan says.

“But that would mean—” Maeve starts hesitantly in English.

“Yes,” Khan says. “It would.”

Maeve looks unhappy at that; Bishop slumps a little. Anandi sighs and shakes her head. “I did not want to believe it,” she says.


Anandi sighs again, slumping on her stool. “Well,” she says after a moment. “Where do we go from here?”

“As we were,” Bishop says. “Does it truly change things?”

“No,” Anandi admits. “That it does not.”

Maeve sighs, gathering up her hair and pushing it back over her shoulders. “So back to work,” she says. “Aye?”

“Si,” Anandi says and Bishop nods.

“Is there more you need from me?” Khan asks.

“Not just as of yet,” Anandi says. “Could you come by in the morning? Perhaps around nine?”

“We should be back from the run by then,” Maeve says.


“We’ll be by around five tomorrow,” Maeve tells him. “Please be ready and also be ready to drag Matthew out of his lab.”

“All right,” Khan says. “Good night.”

“Night,” Jim says. The others say goodnight and Khan and Jim leave, deciding without talking about it to walk back to Jim’s apartment.

Once inside, with the door locked and privacy seal activated, Jim crosses to Khan, takes his hands.

“You okay?” he asks. “What was the argument about?”

“Chemical warfare,” Khan says, sounding tired.

Jim doesn’t really want to know more; he can put the pieces together. “You want a shower?” he asks. They took one earlier in the day, but it’s not really about getting physically clean right now.

“I think I do,” Khan admits.
In the shower, Jim presses himself against Khan’s back, wraps his arms around Khan’s waist and kisses the nape of his neck, his shoulder. “You’re safe here,” he says softly. “You’re safe with me.”

Khan says nothing, but he relaxes a bit, leaning into Jim. Jim kisses the back of his neck again, leans his forehead against wet skin. “I’ve got you,” he murmurs.

They stay like that for a while, until Khan finally shuts off the water and they dry off and crawl into bed despite the relatively early hour. Jim leans into him for a kiss, not sure either of them really want sex, but Khan surprises him and presses him onto his back, his weight settling on top of Jim.

“Let me,” Khan says softly, kissing his jaw and his throat, biting gently over his pulse. “Let me.”

“Anything you want,” Jim says, closing his eyes.

He has no idea what time they finally fall asleep, but it’s not before Jim can’t find coherent words and Khan’s lost the ability to speak English.

Chapter End Notes

If you're reading Wild Card, Jill's armoire might sound familiar...
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

What did they promise you?

Chapter Notes

As a note - updating may be delayed somewhat for the next few weeks. I have a herniated disc in my neck and it’s causing a lot of pain and weakness in my left arm/hand - and that’s my dominant hand. Typing is, needless to say, difficult at the moment. I’ve tried everything else without luck, so I’m having surgery for it two weeks from Tuesday. (In related news, if you know anyone making android bodies, please let me know.)

I will do my best to keep updating but at the moment I have to prioritize my actual job over my writing as far as my ability to type goes, so I ask your patience until this gets fixed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The week settles into a routine. Alona and Maeve show up every morning to drag Khan out running with them; while they’re gone, Jim attempts to catch up on paperwork and start arranging things for when they actually leave. Khan gets back, showers, and he and Jim head over to HQ to meet with crew. After the meetings end for the afternoon or the evening, they go to the lab and spend time with those four until someone calls it quits.

Not the easiest routine Jim’s ever had, but it could be worse, and although he can see tension rising in Khan every time they go to the lab, he doesn’t quite get the sense of a ticking bomb anymore.

They keep not finding sleeper agents. Jim starts to maybe think there just aren’t any on his ship, that either they’ve been really lucky or anyone from section 31 transferred off when they realized how many augments were on the ship. He doesn’t say this to anyone, a little afraid he’ll jinx it, but he starts to relax ever so slightly about the meetings.

Then they meet with some of the scientists, specifically the biochem people, and something doesn’t feel right. Jim can’t quite put his finger on why, but something feels off. He knows Khan does as well from the subtle tension in his body, even as he keeps his voice relaxed and asks supposedly innocuous questions.

Jim glances at Spock, but can’t tell if he’s picked up on it or not. Not knowing what else to do, Jim lets Spock end the meeting, hoping maybe Ekaterina or Alona have more clues, or that Khan knows something.

“Dr. Tyler,” Khan says as the scientists begin to leave. “Would you stay for a moment? I have a question for you.”
Tyler looks startled, but nods. “Of course,” she says, tucking her hair back behind her ear. She’s not all that physically imposing, Jim thinks; petite and slight, with wavy blonde hair, she looks about as harmless as a kitten. But that doesn’t mean anything.

Khan waits until the rest of the scientists have left and rises to his feet. “What did they promise you?” he asks quietly.

“I don’t--what do you mean?” Tyler asks, but she’s nervous, more so than confused.

“Section 31,” Khan says steadily. “What did they promise you? Or what did they use to coerce you?”

“I really don’t--I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tyler says nervously, glancing everywhere except at Khan, hands twisting together in front of her.

“Give me the courtesy of being honest,” Khan says, a bit of scorn in his voice. “What did they promise you?”

Ekaterina and Alona come into the room, neither of them saying a word but moving to put Tyler between them, blocking her exit.

Tyler glances at them, back at Khan, and swallows. Something passes over her face and when she takes a breath, the nervousness disappears, replaced by something much colder. “You shouldn’t exist,” she says evenly.

Ekaterina sighs. “This again? Dull.”

“No,” Tyler says. “No, it’s not what you think. We’ve tried genetic engineering in the last fifty years--there aren’t any records surviving from the Eugenics Wars, but our science is so much more advanced now. And yet we can’t make it work. Every time we try the test subject dies within weeks. So you shouldn’t exist. And I want to know how three hundred years ago they accomplished things we can’t do today.”

“Why?” Jim asks. “Why would you--after the wars, we swore never to do it again.”

“Do you honestly think a normal human, even a squad of normal humans, stands a chance against a squad of Klingons?” Tyler asks impatiently. “Do you honestly think that when war comes here--and it’ll come--we’ll be able to win it with the tactics and the tools we have now? We need to be better.”

“At what cost?” Jim asks. “At the cost of throwing all your ethics out the window?”

“What good are ethics if your civilization gets destroyed?” Tyler asks. “Is it worth being ethical if you know you’ll lose a war?”

“Without ethics, one destroys one’s own civilization,” Khan says quietly. “The war is lost long before an external force ever comes in.”

“Is that what you told yourself when you fought?” Tyler asks. “How much time did you have for ethics back then?”

Khan studies her, saying nothing. “You wouldn’t understand,” he says finally. “You think the end justifies the means, that all is fair in war. It does not and it is not, and there are battles not worth paying the cost of winning.”

“You never lost,” Tyler says. “How would you know?”
“Part of being able to win is knowing when not to fight,” Ekaterina says. She studies Tyler and her lip curls. “Every time I think humanity has matured in the last three hundred years, I am proven wrong.”

Tyler scowls. “We’re trying to help humanity survive,” she says shortly.

“By losing what makes it unique,” Alona says.

“You say that like you think you’re less than human,” Tyler says. “Is it really so wrong of us to want to give other people the advantages you have?”

“Yes,” Khan says softly. “Yes, it is. We fought wars because humanity did not want to be like us, because they judged it better to be as they were and free than under our rule and advantaged. And they won. Power seeks power, Dr. Tyler, and should you succeed in creating a superior human, should you succeed in creating a race of them, they will invariably turn on you. They will invariably seek to gain power over the rest of humanity, in the belief that they are better, they can succeed where others have failed. Is that truly what you want?”

“We believed it, and we slept for three hundred years because humanity was too merciful to kill us,” Alona says. “Would you be as merciful?”

Tyler keeps quiet.

“Who else is on my ship?” Jim asks, changing the subject. “How many of you are there?”

“I don’t know.” Tyler shakes her head. “Really, I don’t. We only corresponded in code, and I only ever talked to the other scientists, and since he blew up section 31’s headquarters in London it’s been very scattered and disorganized.”

“As I thought,” Khan murmurs, almost to himself.

Tyler looks at Jim, nervous but at the same time resolved. “What are you going to do with me?” she asks.

“That’s not up to me,” Jim says, guiltily grateful for that. He looks at Spock. “Can you contact Pike?”

Pike arrives shortly thereafter, along with two security officers, and takes Tyler away. The five of them left in the conference room say nothing, each person lost in their own thoughts.

Alona sighs finally, sitting down on the table in front of Jim. “People are stupid,” she says, idly swinging her legs. “And they don’t learn, which is worse.”

“Ignorance can be cured,” Khan says.

“Yeah, but this wasn’t ignorance,” Alona says. “This was willful blindness and obliviousness.”

“They really have changed very little,” Ekaterina says, sitting down next to Alona. “I hoped.”

“We all did, Cat,” Alona says.

“Some of us are better,” Jim says, feeling more than a bit defensive.

“Some of you are,” Ekaterina agrees, turning to look at him. “But some were better back in our time, too.”
Khan hasn’t taken his seat since standing up to talk to Dr. Tyler, and his wings half-stretch and fold back and stretch again. Jim looks at him uneasily, but he says nothing.

Cat asks him a question in Hindi and he shakes his head. “No,” he says curtly.

Clearly she doesn’t buy it, and neither does Alona from the look she gives him, but neither of them push. “So,” Alona says after a moment. “What now?”

“We continue with the meetings tomorrow,” Jim says. “We’ve got what, four more days of these?”

“Yes,” Spock says.

Jim rubs his hands over his face. “Let’s get out of here,” he says. “We can--”

“I need to go to the lab,” Khan says.

Jim sighs. “Yeah, I thought you might say that. Let’s go, then.”

“What happened?” Anandi asks as soon as they walk into the lab.

Khan says nothing. Jim sighs. “We found a sleeper agent,” he says. “Among the biochemists.”

“Ah.” Anandi sighs. “What did he or she want?”

“They fail where we succeeded three hundred years ago,” Khan says, not quite pacing and not quite staying still, either. “Whatever the scientists did to create us, they can’t repeat it.”

“This is not a bad thing, brother,” Bishop says.

“Ah.” Anandi sighs. “What did he or she want?”

“Two.” Khan’s wings ruffle and stretch, though, and he grimaces, folding them back tightly. “What have you found today?”

Anandi studies him for a moment, and when she answers she does so in Spanish. Whatever she says makes Khan’s face darken, and he snaps out a response before she even finishes talking.

Maeve answers him this time, staying in Spanish, her voice calm and reasoned. Khan all but snarls at her, responding quickly and angrily, gesturing with sharp motions of his hands and arms.

“No,” Bishop says firmly, cutting him off. “No. I will not do this, brother, and neither will they. They don’t deserve your anger and you know it, and I am not going to give you more ammunition with which to injure yourself. Come back tomorrow and we may talk, but for now, you need to leave.”

Jim doesn’t think he’s ever heard one of the augments--except maybe Ekaterina--give Khan a direct order like this before. For a long moment, Bishop and Khan look at each other, tension crackling in the air; Jim’s almost afraid to breathe, not sure which of them will blink first.

Khan growls under his breath, but turns and leaves, moving fast. Jim blows out a breath, looks at Bishop, and goes after Khan, almost running to keep up. “Let’s just go home,” he says when he finally catches Khan outside. “Please.” He doesn’t touch Khan, not really sure it’d help or make things worse at the moment.

It takes a moment, but Khan nods. Jim doesn’t even ask whether he wants to walk or take a cab and just starts walking, Khan falling into step with him after a moment.

Neither one of them talk on the way back to the apartment. Jim thinks maybe Khan’s calmed down a
bit by the time he lets them in, but it’s hard to judge and he isn’t sure. He doesn’t know what to say, what to offer. Flying, maybe, but it’s not...he doesn’t think it’d be enough.

Khan says nothing, but once Jim locks the door and activates the privacy seal he gets out of his shirt. “I want a shower,” he says shortly, and the tone of his voice indicates he doesn’t want company. Jim watches him undress and duck into the bathroom, closing the door behind him, and sighs.

Something has to give, and Jim doesn’t think he can make the first move this time. He doesn’t know what to do if Khan doesn’t, but he has a feeling that trying what he tried last time will only end in disaster. Khan’s not in a mood to be soothed, not yet, and Jim doubts he can get him there without Khan admitting he needs it.

Jim changes into loose pajama pants, skipping a shirt, and sits down on the edge of the bed, waiting. Khan takes longer than usual in the shower, which doesn’t really surprise Jim, but eventually he hears the water shut off, and a few minutes later Khan walks out of the bathroom, still damp, towel wrapped around his waist.

Jim gets to his feet, looking at him, not quite sure what to do next. He can’t figure out the look on Khan’s face, like he’s almost afraid of something but at the same time he wants it. He doesn’t know what to say, or what to offer, and there’s something going on he can’t figure out.

Khan takes a breath, then another one. And without saying a word, he walks over to Jim and sinks to his knees.

The sheer charge that hits Jim takes his breath away. He swallows, kneels down facing Khan, tangling one hand in his hair, pulling his head up. “I’ve got you,” he says, his voice somehow steady. “Trust me.”

“I do,” Khan says quietly.

“You’ll tell me if you need me to stop,” Jim says, not asking.

“I will.”

Jim gentles the hand in his hair, runs his fingers down the back of Khan’s neck and closes his hand tight. Khan jerks, tenses, but doesn’t pull away. His eyes search Jim’s face, pale and intent, but he doesn’t speak. “If you want something, you have to ask me for it,” Jim says.

It takes a moment, but Khan relaxes a little when Jim doesn’t let go, doesn’t ease his hold. “Kiss me,” Khan says softly. “Please.”

Jim smiles a little and leans forward. The kiss is hard, demanding, a claim more than a kiss; Khan makes a low sound, yielding in a way he rarely ever does. Electricity runs through Jim’s body and he bites back a shiver, muffling his groan in Khan’s mouth. He bites Khan’s lips, kisses him until they’re both breathless and Jim feels almost dizzy from it. When he finally pulls back, he brushes his fingers over Khan’s mouth just to feel him, damp and kiss-swollen.

Khan makes a soft sound and draws Jim’s fingers into his mouth, teasing them with his tongue, sucking just hard enough Jim’s hand flexes and he swallows a groan. Jim pulls his hand back before either one of them really want him to, taking a breath to steady himself. “Stand up,” he says, pushing to his feet as Khan does, pulling him in for another kiss with one hand on the back of his neck and one working the towel loose, tossing it away somewhere.

He considers his options as he presses a kiss to Khan’s jaw, pulls his head back to bite his throat, hard enough Khan gasps and shudders against him. As always, Jim wishes the marks would stay,
wishes he could wake up in the morning and see the bruises, the scratches, everything. But that’s another matter and for now he has to figure out how to get Khan out of his head, how to set him off without blowing up the building.

“On the bed,” he says, biting his jaw. “On your stomach.” One more bite and Jim steps back; Khan takes a breath, touching the mark on his throat, before he moves.

Jim gets a couple things from the drawer he’s been using to hold all the stuff, deliberately not letting Khan see them when he crosses back to the bed. “Hands behind your back,” he says, running a hand down Khan’s back, between his wings. He knows it’s not the easiest position with the wings, but it’s still possible.

Instead of cuffs, though, he takes a length of rope to bind him, wanting something a bit harder than the soft leather. This will leave marks, will chafe if Khan pulls too much, and Jim wants him to have that, to feel the sting. Also, he knows Khan can break the rope if he absolutely needs to, whereas the cuffs won’t give.

He ties the rope securely with a knot Evan showed him and touches Khan’s hands, pleased at their warmth and the way Khan curls his fingers against Jim’s touch. “If your hands get cold or tingle, tell me,” Jim says, running a hand up his back again, closing around the back of his neck. Khan murmurs something that might be agreement and pushes back into Jim’s touch, relaxing against the bed.

Jim gets up to finish arranging him the way he wants him, settling a pillow under his forehead so his face doesn’t get smashed against the mattress and another one under his stomach to keep him from getting much friction. “Draw your knees up,” he says, keeping a hand on Khan as he moves around the bed, touching his arm, his hip, anywhere he can. “You all right?” he asks, moving to kneel behind him again.

“Yes,” Khan says softly.

“Good,” Jim murmurs to himself and leans forward to kiss the small of his back, bite his hip. Pale, flawless skin, not even really any freckles, and Jim bites him again, this time the curve of his ass and hard enough Khan makes a sharp sound and twists under him. Jim tightens his hands on Khan’s hips, holding him still before he bites again; he knows Khan could easily throw him off, but he doesn’t even though he shivers all over and makes a choked sound against the mattress.

“Mine,” Jim says softly against bruised skin, licking the indentations his teeth made. He doesn’t know if Khan can hear him or not and really, doesn’t care.

One more bite on his other hip and Jim draws back, snagging the lube and slicking his fingers, pushing one into Khan more slowly than he wants to but he can’t rush this, not when Khan’s still so physically tense. “Let me in,” Jim murmurs, hand in the small of Khan’s back, just below his hands. “Let me in.”

Khan takes a breath, forces himself to relax, his body yielding to Jim’s touch. Jim waits until Khan pushes back, until his breath catches, before entering him with another finger, twisting his hand and crooking those fingers hard enough that Khan gasps, twisting involuntarily.

“Tell me what you want,” Jim says, pitching his voice so Khan can hear him. Khan doesn’t answer, and Jim twists his hand again, pressing hard inside him. “Tell me.”

“More,” Khan manages after a moment, voice not all that steady. “Please.”
Something burns in the pit of Jim’s stomach, possession and pride and want. He slides another finger in, scratching his other hand over Khan’s back, his hips, pressing against the bruises already starting to fade. “I want to see you take my hand,” he says, smiling when he feels Khan shudder. “But...not just yet.”

He doesn’t expect a response and doesn’t get one, but when he pulls his hand back Khan almost whines, fingers curling into his palms. “I’ve got you,” Jim says, slicking the toy, thick and solid, a bit bigger than Jim is—which is weird to admit, but whatever. “Breathe.” Khan takes a breath, exhales slowly, and as he does Jim slides the toy into him.

“What--” Khan shudders again, squirming a little as he tries to adjust to it. His hands stay clenched behind his back; Jim runs a hand up and down his spine, soothing him.

“Just breathe,” Jim says softly, giving him a minute to get used to it, to figure out how to relax a bit. He watches, and slowly Khan’s hands uncurl and he relaxes slightly. “There we go.”

Except this isn’t nearly enough to get Khan out of his head, not as wound up as he was, and Jim knows it, knew it before they started this. He smiles a little to himself, because this should be interesting, and presses the button on the base of the toy that turns it on, quietly buzzing away.

Khan makes a short, broken sound and twists, all but whimpering at the feel of it. “You don’t come until I tell you,” Jim says, moving to crawl up his body, press himself against Khan’s back. He kisses the line of Khan’s shoulder, bites under his jaw. “And that’s not going to be for a while.”

“Jim,” Khan whispers, shivering under him.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are like this?” Jim asks him, kneeling up a little to brush his fingers down Khan’s spine, scratching lightly where his wings meet his back. He knows how sensitive those lines are for Khan and keeps his touch light enough that it’s almost torment, not quite tickling and too light for anything more than a tease. “Do you know what you do to me when I see you like this? How much I want to just keep you like this forever?”

Khan’s breath comes in harsh pants and he squirms under Jim, trying either to get more or get away; Jim’s not sure which. But he can’t get away from the toy inside him and he hasn’t really tried to get Jim off him. “I could keep you like this for hours,” Jim says, scratching a nail down Khan’s back where skin stops and feathers start. “Hard and desperate, stretched open and filled, unable to get any relief from it unless I let you. How long would it take before you begged me to come? How long would you try to stand it?”

He doesn’t get an answer, not that he expected one; he’s fairly certain Khan’s more focused on trying to breathe right now than speak. “I want to find out,” Jim says anyway, sliding his hands back up Khan’s back, dragging his nails over pale skin on the way back down. “I want to know just how much you can take before you break, before you forget everything else but me, but this. I want to know how long it takes before you beg me to come, how long would you try to stand it?”

He keeps talking to Khan, telling him everything he wants to do, everything he wants to see, touching him and scratching him and occasionally biting. Khan whines at that even as he tilts his head to the side, exposing more of his throat--Jim doubts Khan even realizes he’s doing it, but it gets him to sink his teeth in, hard enough Khan cries out, trembling under him.

“Tell me,” Jim whispers in his ear. “Tell me what you need.”

“Please,” Khan gets out. “Jim, please.”
“Please what?” Jim reaches down, presses the toy to feel Khan shudder. “Tell me what you need.”

“Fuck me,” Khan manages. “Please.”

Jim kisses his jaw, the bite mark on his throat. “I will.” He slides back down, turns off the toy and eases it out, setting it aside to be dealt with later. Khan exhales slowly, clearly trying to steady himself, and it makes Jim smile even as he knows this isn’t enough, Khan’s not where Jim needs him yet.

He undoes the rope around Khan’s wrists, seeing ridged marks from where it cut into his skin. “Arms over your head,” Jim says, touching one wrist; it takes a moment, but Khan moves, stretching out. Jim watches him for a moment before slicking his hand again, sliding three fingers into Khan easily. “I told you,” he says, curling his fingers, pulling his hand back slowly before pressing in hard. “I want to see you take my hand. Ask me and I might let you come then. Or I might not.”

“Please,” Khan whispers, fingers curling into the sheets. “Jim, please--”

“Not yet,” Jim murmurs, pushing a fourth finger in, thumb pressing just outside. “Not yet.”

Khan whines, pushing back against Jim’s hand. Sweat slicks the line of his back and he shivers every time Jim twists his hand, crooks his fingers. “Please,” he says again, ragged and desperate.

“No,” Jim says softly, pausing to slick the rest of his hand. “Not yet.”

He doesn’t want to push too much even though he knows Khan can take it, knows he can’t actually hurt him. If he’s learned anything from Khan, it’s that the slower he takes this, the more he drags it out, the better it’ll be in the end. Jim might not have Khan’s stamina, and he probably doesn’t have Khan’s patience, but he’s fucking determined, and that matters almost as much.

Khan shudders, twists against the bed. “Jim,” he says, pleading. “I can’t--”

“You can,” Jim says, resting his free hand in the small of Khan’s back. “You can. You will. Just let me in.”

He keeps murmuring to Khan, words he doubts Khan even processes, trying to steady him even as Khan trembles and each breath rasps in his throat. Just a little more, Jim thinks, pressing carefully. Just--there.

He curls his fingers, twists his hand, not quite enough to make Khan come but enough that Khan whimpers, pushes against him. He’s almost there, Jim thinks. Almost--and Jim realizes he’s holding his own breath, waiting for it, for that moment when Khan breaks. “Come on,” he whispers. “Just let go, I’ve got you.”

Khan gulps in a breath, shudders all over. He doesn’t say a word, barely makes a sound, and yet it’s so obvious to Jim, the release in his body and his mind. Nothing else matters, not now, and Jim thinks he could drag this out for hours and Khan wouldn’t even think to protest. He could refuse to let him come, could tease him and torture him and leave him wanting and Khan wouldn’t fight back, wouldn’t protest.

Jim won’t, of course, but he could and that burns, that makes his stomach clench and his throat tighten and he bends again, biting Khan’s hip hard, leaving a bruise and earning himself a choked moan. “Tell me what you need,” Jim says, twisting his arm. “Tell me, and I’ll let you have it.”

“Please,” Khan says, a broken whisper. “Please, Jim, I--”
He stops, like he can’t get the words out, and Jim pulls his arm back and shoves back in hard. “Tell me,” he says, a bit more sharply.

“Let--please, let me come,” Khan gets out, shivering all over. “Jim--”

“Yeah,” Jim murmurs, moving up his back to kiss his shoulder. “Do it. Let me feel you.”

He twists his hand again, hard, and Khan cries out, clenching around his fist and shaking so much he almost throws Jim off him. Jim kisses his throat, his ear, letting him come down slowly, still trembling and breathing hard.

“Easy,” he says, slowly easing his hand back when he thinks Khan’s ready for it. “I’ve got you, just breathe. Just breathe.”

Khan does and Jim thinks he hears tears but doesn’t ask or look. He grabs a wipe, scrubs off his hand and moves to pull Khan into his arms, hold him close. Khan hides his face against Jim’s shoulder and burrows into him; Jim doesn’t let go or even loosen his grip.

Finally Khan relaxes in his arms and Jim rubs the back of his neck, his shoulders just above his wings. He’s in no hurry for Khan to go anywhere and Khan doesn’t seem to be either, but he does shift, tilting his face up for a kiss, slow and easy.

One kiss turns into another; Jim has no intention of pushing for more just yet, but this is good as it is. He brushes his thumb over Khan’s cheekbone, feels damp skin and doesn’t know whether it’s sweat or tears or whether it matters.

Khan surprises him, though, and shifts again, moving onto his back and pulling Jim down on top of him, short nails scratching up Jim’s back between his wings. Jim shudders, arches into the touch even as he rocks his hips against Khan’s, grinds down against him and earns himself a groan. “Jim,” Khan murmurs, voice still hoarse, skin flushed and damp. Jim leans down, licks salt off his throat, bites just under his jaw.

“I want...” he says and stops because he’s not sure it’s okay, it might be too much.

“Yes,” Khan says simply.

Jim kisses him again, hard, pulling away reluctantly only to get out of his pants and slick his cock, his own hands shaking a little as he does. He takes a breath to steady himself, another one, and pushes into Khan, slick heat and pressure and Jim doesn’t know which of them groans first.

He leans down for a kiss, biting at Khan’s lips, pushing Khan’s hands over his head and pinning his wrists. Khan lets him, pulls at Jim’s grip but not enough to break it, arches up under him. Mine, Jim thinks, says it out loud against Khan’s mouth. Khan shivers and doesn’t answer him but he tips his head back and moans when Jim bites.

“I want you to come again for me,” Jim whispers, twisting a little, looking for the right angle. “I want to feel you break.” He knows he gets it when Khan jerks under him, sucking in a hard breath.

The question is whether Jim can last long enough to get Khan off again and he honestly doesn’t know but damn if he won’t try. Khan’s already mostly hard; he gasps when Jim works a hand down between them, fingers wrapping around his cock. “Come on,” Jim says, almost to himself. “Come on.”

“Jim,” Khan whispers, voice broken. “Please--”
Jim kisses him again, the angle awkward enough that he almost loses his balance but he manages to
steady himself. He swallows Khan’s moans, the choked gasps, groaning into his mouth and
wondering which of them will get there first.

He still doesn’t know whether Khan cries out first or Jim does; everything goes blurry and white, and
when Jim finally manages to focus he’s lying flat on top of Khan, both of them breathing hard and
neither one moving. Slowly, Jim lets go of Khan’s wrists, but Khan doesn’t move his arms.

It takes a solid two minutes before Jim manages to do anything other than breathe. “We really need a
shower,” he says, slowly easing back and kneeling up.

“Yes,” Khan says, but still doesn’t move. Jim gets to his feet, looking at him; it takes another thirty
seconds before Khan rolls to his feet, but when he moves he does so easily, with none of the heavy
exhaustion Jim feels.

In the shower, they lean into each other, soapy hands sliding over wet skin and fading bruises. Jim
kisses the marks that haven’t disappeared yet; Khan leans his forehead against the back of Jim’s
neck, above his wings, the way he usually does when they sleep. They stay under the water a while,
emerging only when fatigue threatens to make Jim fall over.

When they leave the bathroom, Jim has a moment to be very, very glad he wrapped a towel around
himself but still ducks behind Khan. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asks Ekaterina, who sits
patiently on his couch with a PADD in her hands.

“I came to see if my brother had finished sulking yet,” she says, looking up from the PADD. “Have
you?”

Khan ignores her, going to find clothes. Jim looks between them, sighs, and goes to find clothes of
his own, ducking into the bathroom to pull them on. When he emerges, Khan’s dressed and
Ekaterina’s in the kitchen, chopping something briskly. “Uh,” Jim says. “How exactly did you get in
here?”

“Khan gave me an access card when you were injured,” she says, glancing up. “I did not give it
back. We are having lamb for dinner. I brought wine.”

Jim looks at Khan. “Are you okay with this?”

Khan shrugs. “I like lamb,” he says.

“Not what I meant,” Jim mutters.

He’s relieved to see Khan’s mouth twitch in an almost-smile. “Do you mind?” Khan asks him.

“I think it’s a bit late to protest,” Jim says, but has to smile. “At least she didn’t come in...earlier.”

“Yes,” Khan agrees.

Ekaterina laughs--actually, Jim would swear it was a giggle. “So,” she says. “Like that?”

“Not quite,” Khan says.

She turns, raising an eyebrow at him, and asks a question in Russian. Khan hesitates, looks at Jim,
then nods. Ekaterina asks him something else, and again, he hesitates but answers her, switching to
Hindi to do so.
“Ah,” she says finally, turning back to the kitchen counter. “Well, good.”

“Is it?” Khan asks.

“Don’t be stupid, brother,” Ekaterina says without looking at him. “It does not suit you.”

“What news do you have for us?” Khan asks, changing the subject. “I know you have some.”

“That depends,” Ekaterina says. “Will you throw another tantrum over it?” She sets down her knife and turns to face him. “I heard what happened in the lab. That will not happen again, brother.”

“No,” Khan says quietly. “It will not.”

Ekaterina lapses into Russian; Jim thinks he catches Bishop’s name but nothing else. Khan grimaces, looks away, but finally nods. She seems satisfied with that and nods, turning back to whatever she’s doing. “Matthew was able to make some progress due to our confirmation of Dr. Tyler,” she says. “With her image and her name, he was able to do more analysis and thinks he can see how the databases link together. He is not willing to say he has found the key yet, but he said he thinks he can see the shape of the lock.”

“It’s something,” Jim says.

“That it is,” Ekaterina agrees. She dumps the contents of her cutting board into a pot and gives its contents a quick stir. “Dinner will be ready in perhaps ten minutes. Please set the table.”

As always, Jim wonders how she manages to order him around in his own apartment, but goes to get plates. He detours on the way, though, and kisses Khan, leaning into him for a moment. “You okay?” he murmurs, touching Khan’s cheek.

“Yes,” Khan murmurs back, leaning his forehead against Jim’s for a moment. “Thank you.”

Jim kisses him again, longer this time, pointedly ignoring Ekaterina. When he pulls back, Khan says something quiet in Hindi that Jim actually thinks he doesn’t need translated. He smiles a little, touches Khan’s lips with his fingers. “Yeah,” he says. “I get it.”

_I love you, too._

Chapter End Notes

I have some thoughts as to the hierarchy of power among the augments, and some of that played out in here. From my take on it, the augments don’t have a leader exactly, but they do have a few people they will sometimes defer to or whose opinion has greater weight than others. Khan, clearly, is one of those, as is Ekaterina. But that doesn’t mean his brothers and sisters won’t step in if they feel he’s in the wrong. Bishop rarely gives direct orders, so when he does, people tend to listen. Khan could have argued against him, in the lab, but enough of him realized Bishop was right that he backed down.

However, I think anyone else in the same situation, except maybe Ekaterina or Katsuro, would have not had any luck—which is exactly why Bishop spoke up.
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

It appears to be our Achilles tendon.

Chapter Notes

Apologies to you all for the rather long delay in posting; life has conspired against me. Also apologies for the shorter-than-usual chapter; I reckoned it better to update with a good stopping point than make you all wait even longer.

As always, I am humbled and thrilled by all of you who are sticking with me. Thank you so, so much. This story is winding down, but Wild Card is still going strong, so head on over there if you want more adventures of Khan and eventually his family.

When everyone gathers for the next round of staff meetings, Jim notes the almost-visible tension and wonders how they'll get through this without anyone snapping. And for once, it's not Khan being the source of most of it; Jim can't settle, can't make his wings fold back and relax, and ends up leaning against the wall for most of the session with half the comms people.

Something feels off to him, but he doesn't know if it's his own paranoia or if he's actually sensing something. He can't get any clues from either Khan or Spock, one using Vulcan coolness and logic and the other...well, that's just Khan being Khan. Frustrating and yet hot at the same time, and okay whoa there's a train of thought he doesn't need to follow right now.

When Spock dismisses them, everyone leaves except one, a tall, skinny blonde with hair barely short enough for regs. "Lieutenant Walken?" Spock asks politely.

Walken glances at Jim, then licks his lips and takes a breath. "Sir," he says. "I have...a demonstration, a project I've been working on. I wanted—well, if you don't mind?"

Khan's eyes narrow slightly and Jim tenses just a bit. "It's quite simple, really," Walken says. "I just—might I show you?"

"I'm not sure now is the right time, lieutenant," Jim says.

"Actually, sir, it's kind of perfect," Walken says. "You'll see when—may I?"

Jim forces himself to relax. "Will it take long?"

"No, sir," Walken says. "Not if I've done the calculations correctly."

Calculations? From comms? Jim blows out a breath and gestures. "Go for it."

Walken takes out a small box from his pocket, flips up the lid. He takes another breath, glances at the three men, and pushes the button inside.
Jim doesn't see, hear, or observe anything different. Khan, however, twitches after the first second. By the second, his muscles lock rigidly and a muscle jumps in his jaw. Jim doesn't even get a chance to tell Walken to stop whatever he's doing before Khan's eyes roll back in his head and he collapses on the floor in a seizure.

"Turn that off!" Jim shouts at Walken, hitting the button to call security. "Turn that off right this moment!"

"No, sir," Walken says, much less nervous than before. "It won't kill him."

"Spock," Jim says, knocking Khan's chair aside and moving to kneel next to him. "Turn it off." He vaguely remembers what to do for someone having a seizure, but Khan's jerking so much Jim can't move him or get anything between his teeth. "Now, Spock," Jim says when nothing happens.

"Captain," Spock says carefully and Jim glances up to see Walken pointing a phaser at Spock with the hand not holding the box.

"It won't kill him," Walken says again, steadily. "It won't kill any of them, and anything that doesn't kill them they can recover from fully. It is, however, the only way we've found to completely incapacitate them."

Jim grits his teeth, wanting more than anything to rip Walken's throat out. "What's the purpose of this, Walken?" he demands.

"You can't trust them, sir," Walken says. "You can't trust any of them. They'll turn on you quicker than you know and in ways you won't expect, and they don't hesitate to go for the jugular. I don't care what they've made you believe—sir, please, you don't know what they're capable of, what they'll do to you once they have what they want."


Walken takes a breath, then pushes the button again. Three seconds later Khan collapses against the floor, still and pale and blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth and his nostrils. "He'll wake up in about half an hour," Walken says. "Sir—please. Listen to me."

"No, I really don't think I will," Jim says through clenched teeth.

"You're condemning your crew," Walken says desperately. "Don't you see that?"

"I see you just tried to kill my crew," Jim says.

"He's not," Walken whispers. "He's not."

"Give me the device, lieutenant," Spock says, walking over to Walken. "Now."

Walken shakes his head. "I can't, sir."

"That was not a request, lieutenant," Spock says.

"I know. I can't." Walken steps back from Spock. He takes a breath, puts the box on the floor and shoots it with the phaser, destroying it. Before anyone does anything else, he puts the phaser against his temple and pulls the trigger.

Jim looks at Spock, who looks back at him silently for a moment. "I should find Ekaterina and Alona," Spock says suddenly. "If they were affected—"
“Go,” Jim says and Spock hurries out of the room. Jim stays on his knees next to Khan, afraid to touch him, afraid not to touch him. He sees the faint rise and fall of his chest, so at least he has that, and when he touches his fingers to the pulse in Khan’s throat he feels it beat normally, slow and steady and strong.

Spock returns a minute later. “They are also unconscious,” he says. “Alona had a severe nosebleed, and Ekaterina bit something in her mouth, I did not determine what. I stopped Security before they came here and requested they get medical teams.”

"Thanks," Jim says, glancing up at him. "This…this is a mess."

"Yes," Spock agrees, kneeling on Khan’s other side. "I presume the device used some sort of sonic technology, sounds a normal human could not hear."

"Makes sense," Jim says distractedly, more interested in the way Khan hasn't moved at all, not even his wings which fold around him as if trying to protect him from his own body. "Maybe Matthew can tell us more, if he finds out anything."

"It is possible," Spock says. "I can go speak with him once the medical teams arrive."

"Thanks," Jim says. He rubs a hand over the back of his neck. "We should…crap. I don't know a damn thing about that device, or what range it had. If Ekaterina and Alona were impacted, could anyone else in the building have felt it?"

"Possible but not likely, I think," Spock says. "But we will check."

"I don't know who else would likely have been around," Jim says. "We'll have to scan the building, if possible."

The door opens again and two medical personnel come in with a gurney. Jim moves out of the way—reluctantly, but he does—and watches them check vitals and whatever else they need to do before they carefully get Khan onto the gurney and head out with him. Jim follows, seeing two other teams taking Ekaterina and Alona in the same direction. "Call Dr. McCoy," he says to one of them. "He has the most experience with them."

The tech nods. "Already done, sir."

"I will talk to Admiral Pike," Spock says to Jim. "We will deal with Lieutenant Walken's body and determine a course of action. I presume you will be going to Medical."

"Yeah," Jim says. "I am. Call me, though, let me know what you and Admiral Pike come up with and if you need me."

"I will," Spock says.

"Thanks." Jim doesn't really think about it before he brushes Spock's shoulder with a wingtip, but Spock looks as surprised as he ever does—but not, Jim thinks, displeased. Not that Spock would admit to being displeased.

They part ways and Jim follows the gurneys to Medical, wincing at the blood covering the lower half of Alona's face along with the bruise on Ekaterina's temple and the blood on her chin and throat. None of the three augments move by the time they reach Medical and get directed to a large room where Bones is already waiting along with Bishop and Maeve. "What happened?" Bones asks immediately, moving to examine Alona while Bishop goes for Khan and Maeve for Ekaterina.
Jim takes a breath and explains what little he can. “I don’t know what the damn thing was, or what it did,” he says.

“Sonic,” Bishop says, glancing up. “We have extremely acute hearing and it has been used against us before. My theory would be something on the edge of ultrasonic frequencies and calibrated specifically. It is not…pleasant to hear things in that aural range. We can certainly survive it, but it has incapacitated us before. When we began to lose the wars, it was in part due to use of similar technology. Since regular humans were not affected, it was something that could be used freely.”

“Will they be all right?” Jim asks, not thinking about the implications of that for a moment.

“Oui,” Bishop says. “It will take some time for them to recover and wake, but they will do so.”

“Did you ever find out a way to counter it?” Bones asks, gently wiping blood off Alona’s face.

“No,” Bishop says. “Unfortunately, it appears to be our Achilles tendon. Earplugs are not adequate, and we never could find a way to avoid the effects.”

Jim blows out a breath. “We should scan the building, see if anyone else might have been impacted,” he says.

“Already on it,” Bones says. “Bishop said he didn’t think it was likely but we’re checking, and if any of the augments get brought into Medical they’ll come here.”

“Thanks,” Jim says. “Spock went to go talk to Pike, figure out what next, and then he was going to talk to Matthew, see if Matthew had any ideas or if the new information helped him out at all. I should…I should talk to Matthew, too, or...something.” But he looks at Khan, pale and motionless save the slight rise and fall of his chest, and knows he’s not going anywhere.

“If they need you, they will let you know,” Maeve says gently. She brings a stool over to Khan’s bed, the other side from Bishop, and nudges Jim into taking a seat. “There’s nothing you can do for him, but he will be glad to see you when he wakes.”

“You sure of that?” Jim mutters under his breath.

Maeve touches his shoulder, her fingers warm even through his uniform tunic. “This wasn’t your fault, Jim,” she says softly.

“I should have realized,” Jim says, slumping on the stool. “I should have—I knew something wasn’t right. I knew he—”

“Khan didn’t say no, either,” Maeve says. “And he could also have realized something was wrong. Section 31 agents are very good at being hidden unless they want to be seen. Did you know Walken at all well?”

“No, I didn’t,” Jim says. “He transferred in just...just before Nibiru, I think. Worked gamma shift, so I didn’t see him often. His personnel file...” He tilts his head back, thinking. “Average reviews, I think, nothing either extremely positive or negative. I don’t remember where he came from, he sounded generically American, maybe the northwest.”

“We’ll find out,” Maeve says, her hand still on Jim’s shoulder. “Can I get you coffee or water?”

“No, I’m okay,” Jim says. He isn’t, but Maeve lets it pass.

She gets a wipe and cleans the blood off Khan’s face, which makes Jim feel a little better. He’s seen
Khan bled before, of course, but this is different. This isn’t one of Ekaterina’s knives and it just looks wrong.

“Leonard,” Maeve says, startling Jim a bit. “Can you and Bishop run back to the lab for a minute? I left my memory chips there, by the last computer I was using.”

Bones looks at Maeve, mouth twisting in a not-quite smile. “You’re not very subtle, sweetheart,” he says.

“I don’t mean to be,” Maeve says, smiling back. “Please? I want to talk to Jim.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bones says. “But if any of them wake up, call me.”


To Jim’s surprise, Bones stops by Maeve to kiss her lightly, laying his palm against her cheek for a moment. He murmurs something in her ear Jim doesn’t catch and doesn’t want to know, but she smiles and covers his hand with her own.

He and Bishop leave quietly; Jim looks at Maeve, wondering what’s on her mind. She smiles a bit and pulls over another stool, sitting on it. “It is a hard thing, to love someone who you serve with, who technically works for you,” she says, tucking a lock of hair back behind her ear. “What is Starfleet’s actual rule about fraternization?”

Jim sighs. “It’s allowed,” he says. “Married couples can request to be assigned together, like Jill and Evan are. It’s not—I mean, people get involved on ships, it happens. It’s just—if the captain is involved, both people have to see a counselor for a few sessions, separately, to ensure the captain didn’t abuse his authority or that the other person isn’t playing politics. No one’s enforced that in, um, my case, but I don’t really think they need to.”

“No, I think not,” Maeve says. “But perhaps you would do well to see a counselor anyway, for your own sake.”

“Why?” Jim asks. “We’ve been involved a while now, it’s not—“

“We are getting ready to leave Earth for five years,” Maeve says. “And this is not the last time Khan will be injured in the line of duty. You need to be able to function even when he lies in medbay, Jim. I’m not saying you can’t do that now, but it might…you might benefit from speaking to someone about this.”

“I talked to Jill a bit,” Jim admits. “She said it’s hard, but you do it because there’s no alternative.”

“Essentially, aye,” Maeve says. “I just think you might want an impartial party to listen and offer advice. Does the Enterprise have a ship’s counselor?”

“She does, yeah,” Jim says. “I can’t remember her name, but I’ve met her a couple times. I’ve never needed to see her before now, though.”

“Have you seen her as part of the staff meetings?” Maeve asks.

“No, not yet,” Jim says. “She’s in the last group. And—I’d rather not talk to her until we determine she’s not section 31.”

“Of course,” Maeve says.
“Why didn’t you bring this up before now?” Jim asks curiously.

She smiles a little. “Leonard didn’t want me to,” she says. “He thought you would reject the suggestion outright.”

“He…yeah, okay, he had a point there,” Jim admits. “I don’t…I’m not really the therapy type.”

“No one is until they are,” Maeve says.

“Have you seen one?” Jim asks. “About, I don’t know, anything?”

“We were offered counseling services as we began to acclimate to this time,” Maeve says. “Some of us used them, others did not. I saw a counselor for a few sessions.”

“Was it helpful?” Jim asks.

“Somewhat,” Maeve says. “I thought Cat might benefit more, but she did not go.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Jim says with a snicker.

“No, nor me,” Maeve says. She touches Jim’s hand, clasping it for a moment. “I am your sister, and I will listen and offer my advice or suggestions any time you want them,” she says. “As will any of the rest of us. I just think you might do better to talk to someone who is not quite as involved with the situation.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jim says after a moment. “I don’t…I’m not sure how I feel about it, but I’ll think about it.”

“That’s fair,” Maeve says.

“Can I ask you something?” Jim asks.

“Anything you want,” Maeve says.

“Why Bones?” Jim asks. “Why did you get involved with him?”

Maeve smiles fondly. “He’s brilliant,” she says. “When I was beginning to work at Medical, I heard stories of him, and everyone agreed that while he might be…difficult, he was also one of the best doctors they had. I like that he is gruff and irascible on the surface, but it covers a bottomless well of compassion and empathy. He’s a kind man, and a caring one, and he gives of himself more than he would ask of anyone else.”

“He’s kind of a bastard sometimes,” Jim says without thinking.

“Yes,” Maeve says. “But neither am I perfect, and I like that he has a temper, that he can be sarcastic and cutting. I am not always on the side of the angels, Jim. None of my family are. We are not good people.”

“I don’t believe that,” Jim says. “You all keep saying that and I don’t believe it’s true.”

Maeve laughs. “I think we know—“ She stops as Ekaterina groans and tries to sit up, rubbing her eyes. “Easy, Cat,” Maeve says, hurrying over to her. “Just…take it easy.” She raises the head of the bed, letting Ekaterina lean back against it.

Ekaterina takes a breath, lets it out slowly. She asks a question in Russian, pinching the bridge of her nose.
Maeve answers her even as she gets a device to monitor Ekaterina’s vitals. When she finishes talking Ekaterina growls softly and closes her eyes, tipping her head back against the pillow.

“I know,” Maeve says in English. “Believe me, I know. Do you want something for the headache?”

“It will pass,” Ekaterina says.

“Mm,” Maeve says. She picks up a hypospray and presses it to Ekaterina’s throat quickly. “Now it will pass sooner.”

Ekaterina opens her eyes and glares death at Maeve. “I hate it when you do that,” she says irritably.

“I know, get used to it,” Maeve says. “Alona and Khan should be waking soon.”

On cue, Alona groans and presses the heels of her palms into her eyes. “Oh, fuck me, what the bloody buggering hell was that?” she asks plaintively.

“Sonic,” Maeve says.

“Well, that explains that,” Alona says. “Ugh. Since I’m not Cat, can you give me something for this headache?”

“Aye, of course,” Maeve says, picking up a different hypospray and getting Alona with it before raising the head of her bed.

“What happened to the bastard who got us?” Alona asks.

“He suicided,” Jim says. “Destroyed the device and shot himself in the head with his phaser.”

“What a pity,” Ekaterina murmurs icily.

“Yes,” Alona agrees.

Jim sighs a little inwardly, although he can’t quite blame them.

“Why hasn’t Khan woken up yet?” Alona asks, looking over at his bed.

“He was closer to the device,” Maeve says. “He should wake shortly.”

“Got it,” Alona says. She sighs and leans back against the pillow. “Again, I say ugh.”

Bishop and Bones return then, accompanied by Spock and Pike. “This room is getting crowded,” Pike observes. “How are you feeling?”

“Like someone turned on a device that screwed up my entire nervous system and gave me seizures,” Alona says. “Until I blacked out and woke up with a migraine.”

Pike winces. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“It wasn’t your fault, admiral, but thank you,” Alona says.

“Did Matthew have any thoughts?” Jim asks.

Spock shakes his head. “Not as yet, but he said he could not pay attention to new data for another two hours. I will return then and talk to him.”

“I’ll go with you,” Jim says.
Spock nods. “I thought you would.”

“Why hasn’t Khan woken yet?” Pike asks, frowning.

“He was closest to the device,” Maeve says. “It will take him longer to heal. Sonic devices like that scramble our nervous system, and while they do not do that much physical damage it takes time for the nervous system to reset itself.”

Pike nods, but doesn’t look happy about it.

“Every species has some kind of weakness,” Bishop says. “Even fictional superheroes. Superman had Kryptonite, for example.”

“Superman also could fly, among other things,” Jim says. “You can’t fly.”

Bishop looks pointedly at Khan, whose wings still stay folded around him. Jim ducks his head sheepishly, his own wings ruffling. “Okay, point.”

Khan stirs and mutters something under his breath Jim doesn’t catch. He presses his hands to his face, taking a breath and letting it out slowly. “Easy, brother,” Bishop says, moving to gradually raise the head of the bed. “Take it easy.”

“Sonic,” Khan mutters again, decidedly annoyed. He follows it with a string of Russian that makes Ekaterina snort.

“Such language, brother,” she says.

He growls something at her.

“Khan,” Maeve says. “Cat. Cut it out.” She gets Khan with a hypospray without bothering to ask if he wants it or not. He glares at her, but after a couple seconds his face looks less pained and he relaxes slightly.

“Could something like this kill you?” Pike asks carefully.

Bishop shakes his head. “It will incapacitate us, certainly, and an enemy could kill us while we were incapacitated, but on its own, no. The seizures will not kill us, and once the noise is mitigated, it is just a matter of us recovering.”

“How long does it take to recover?” Pike asks.

“It depends on the strength of the sound used, proximity to it, and other factors,” Maeve says. “On average, it’s a one to one ratio. Every second of exposure is a minute needed for recovery. But it doesn’t hold to that as exposure gets increased.”

Jim moves over to Khan’s side without really thinking about it, touching his hand and relieved to feel warm skin. Khan glances at him; he doesn’t smile, but his face softens slightly. Jim doesn’t-quite-smile back.

“How many more of these meetings do you have to have?” Pike asks.

“Three more,” Spock says.

Three more chances for something like this to happen. Jim’s wings mantle, indicating what he thinks of that concept. “No more today, though,” he says. “Maybe by tomorrow morning Matthew will have something for us.”
“It is possible,” Spock says. “He did not give me any kind of indication as to his progress.”

“He wouldn’t,” Alona says. “He doesn’t like to track it because he finds it frustrating, and it’s also very difficult to figure out. He’d rather spend the time fixing the issue instead of trying to find out how much time it’ll take to fix it.”

“Sensible enough,” Pike says. “If frustrating for the rest of us.”

“Believe me, admiral, it’s more frustrating for him,” Alona says.

“I’m sure,” Pike says. He looks at Jim. “What do you want to do next, Kirk?”

Jim considers it, saying nothing for a moment. “I guess we just go on,” he says finally. “I mean, we’ve got three meetings left, we need to have them. We’re shipping out in…nineteen days, so we don’t have a whole lot of time left to identify people.”

“And it would not be a good idea to delay the expedition,” Ekaterina says.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Jim says. “We’ve already pushed it back, and people are going to start getting antsy and wonder what’s going on if we push it back again.”

“We are putting a significant amount of weight on Matthew solving the database issue,” Spock observes.

“I don’t see a way around that,” Jim says. “Do you?”

Spock grimaces and shakes his head. “Unfortunately, I do not.”

“Sir?” Jim asks Pike. “Do you have an idea?”

Pike sighs. “No, I don’t,” he says. “Other than to keep doing what we have been and hope that either we identify the agents or they reveal themselves.”

“I think it unlikely we have more than one who has not been identified,” Khan says, getting up from the bed. “They would not have wanted to put too many agents on one ship for fear of them identifying each other and subsequently the crew. There may be none left.”

Ekaterina and Alona also get up, although Alona pinches the bridge of her nose as she does and Ekaterina pauses for a moment after standing, not-quite reaching out to the bed for support. Maeve murmurs something in Russian and Ekaterina makes a face at her. “Nyet,” she says.

“All three of you need to take it easy the rest of today,” Bones says. “I know how fast you heal, but I don’t like what the scans were showing me.”

“We are fine,” Ekaterina says.

“Not just yet, you’re not,” Maeve says. “You may be up and moving, but you’re not quite back to normal yet and you know it.”

“I do not know that,” Ekaterina says. “I know I am recovered.”

Maeve says something to her in Russian, sounding irritated; Ekaterina snaps a response and before it gets too much more heated, Bishop moves to face Ekaterina, his hands on her shoulders. He says something, calm and reasoned but his tone firm. Ekaterina scowls, mutters something back, but Bishop doesn’t let go of her and after a moment she sighs. “All right, all right,” she says. “I will go back to my apartment and pack.”
“Spasiba,” Bishop says. “Alona, same goes for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Alona says, waving a hand. “I’m not Cat, brother.”

“No,” Bishop agrees. “You are not.”

“Thank God,” Maeve says. “Two of her would be…I think the universe would protest. Loudly.”


“Likely,” Maeve says. “Khan, what will you be doing this afternoon?”

Khan doesn’t quite smile and doesn’t quite glare at her. “I suppose I shall be packing,” he says after a moment.

“Excellent answer,” Maeve says sweetly. “I’ll walk you and Cat back to your building.”

Both Ekaterina and Khan glare at her on that one, but Maeve doesn’t flinch. “Why don’t we leave now?” she asks. “Jim, will you be accompanying us?”

Jim hesitates, torn between things he knows he has to do and the large part of him that doesn’t want to let Khan out of his sight at the moment. “I think it unnecessary,” Khan says, saving him. “He has duties here and I am perfectly capable of packing clothes without supervision.”

“Yes, but I’m not asking you,” Maeve says.

“Yeah, but—no, I’ll be here,” Jim says. “Khan’s right, I have stuff to take care of. I’ll go back to the apartment once I do some of it.”

Khan looks satisfied with that answer, which eases Jim’s mind a bit. “Then let us all go,” Ekaterina says.
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

We may never get answers to some of these questions.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 60? Really? How the hell did we get here? *boggles*

As always, thank you so so much to all of you reading along; without you this story would have withered and died a long time ago. And speaking of long times, this story has officially been in existence over a year. How the hell did that happen? See above re: boggled.

Despite Spock being better at paperwork and bureaucratic red tape than Jim will ever be, Jim’s still the captain and thus has to wade through a ton of it. He finds a spare office at HQ and holes up with a computer and his PADD, grimly determined to get through as much as he possibly can.

Unfortunately, paperwork doesn’t serve to distract him from the image in his head of Khan having the seizure, blood running down his chin. Nor does it let him forget the expression on Walken’s face just before he killed himself. Jim wonders if he was always unbalanced, if somehow he’d slipped through the psych evals. He wants to know if section 31 knew he was like this and used him because of it, or if Walken became suicidal because of whatever section 31 did to him.

He sighs and pulls up Walken’s file, wanting some kind of information about the man. Unfortunately, he doesn’t find anything particularly illuminating. Walken was from Oregon, an only child whose parents died when he was at the Academy. Andorian flu, Jim notes.

Frankly, Walken’s file stands out just because it doesn’t stand out. He didn’t have any major commendations on his file but neither did he have any reprimands. His grades in the Academy were solid but not outstanding, and the psych notes just indicate that he was a somewhat introverted person who had been close to his parents and took their deaths hard.

Jim chews his lip, considering a few things. The augment’s blood can heal virtually anything, although it becomes more difficult the closer the person is to death. But Jim’s certain a transfusion of sorts would have saved Walken’s parents. Khan said as much when Jim asked him about Jill’s former captain.

Could this be why Walken signed on to section 31? Could he have wanted some twisted form of revenge, or wanted to use the augment’s biology to save others from his parents’ fate? It doesn’t quite line up—Walken graduated from the Academy two years before Marcus revived Khan. But on the other hand, Jim doesn’t know when section 31 recruited him, or what they told him.

He sighs and slumps in his chair, ignoring the way his wings feel stifled. Tyler he could understand; for her it was about science and winning a war she saw as inevitable. Jim doesn’t know Walken’s
motivations.

The question then becomes, does he have to? Walken is dead, and section 31 all but ruined. Does it matter why Walken was so convinced Khan and his people were a threat to the Enterprise? Does it matter why Walken decided to suicide rather than face trial?

Maybe it shouldn’t, but it does.

Something occurs to Jim and he frowns, looking at Walken’s file more closely and trying to spot a connection he doesn’t know for certain exists. He digs deeper, looking at Walken’s roommates from the Academy, his former crewmates, extended family, whatever he can find. It takes him a solid hour, by which point his eyes burn and his neck cracks warningly when he stretches it, but he thinks he has it.

He rubs his eyes, pushing up from the chair with a few creaks and a wince, and heads for the door, where he promptly collides with Spock as they try to leave and enter the room at the same time.

“Hi,” Jim says, stepping back and rubbing his forehead. “What’s up, Spock?”

“Matthew has made progress,” Spock says. “I presumed you would want to speak with him.”

“Yeah, I do,” Jim says. “I also made some progress. Some of the paperwork before we ship out, and…I think I know what pushed Walken over the edge.”

“Really,” Spock comments as they leave.

“Yeah,” Jim says. “He had the same roommate for three years at the Academy, guy named Jesse Henrick. They never served on the same ship, but it looks like they stayed close. Want to guess where Jesse ended up?”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “Vulcans do not guess, but a logical extrapolation would be the archive in London.”

“Got it in one,” Jim says. “I don’t know what he was doing there, but he died in the explosion. My guess is that he’d told Walken enough about the goings-on that when it blew up, Walken found a way to contact whoever was left and ask to get in on plans for revenge.”

“That would make sense,” Spock agrees. “Did you look up Henrick’s file?”

“No, I ran out of time and couldn’t stare at a monitor anymore,” Jim says. “I’ll mention it to Matthew when we see him, though, see if he knows anything.”

Spock nods. “Did Walken have any family?”

“A couple cousins and an aunt,” Jim says. “His parents died of Andorian flu when he was at the Academy. I think that might have been another motivator for him, since he’d probably have learned that the augments’ blood could have saved them.”

“Even though none of them were awake when his parents died,” Spock says.

“Revenge doesn’t always make sense,” Jim says with a grimace.

“It rarely does,” Spock says.

Jim doesn’t know if Spock’s trying to give him a pointed reminder on Jim’s initial desire to kill Khan or whether he’s just commenting, but either way it makes him look away, subdued.
They reach the hall with Matthew’s lab and Jim hesitates, not wanting to be deafened by the music, but he doesn’t hear anything as they walk down the hall to the door. Spock knocks firmly and a few moments later Matthew opens it.

“Nice beard,” Jim says, wondering when was the last time Matthew slept or shaved or anything. He looks relatively clean, and Jim doesn’t smell anything funky, but his clothes are wrinkled and Jim counts six mugs around the room.

Matthew snorts. “I’ll shave later,” he says. “Haven’t time now. Not when I’m actually getting fairly close to solving this puzzle.”

“What have you found out?” Jim asks as they enter the lab.

“I have found out how the databases connect,” Matthew says, sounding extremely pleased with himself. “I can connect one entry in one database to one entry in the other two. I just haven’t decrypted all of what the data means. I ran visual recognition on the images to see if I could identify your Dr. Tyler, and I found a match, so I’ve been using that to analyze the connections and see if I can figure out how it works from here. If I’m very, very good I should have this figured out in another day or two. Do you have more information for me? I could probably use it.”

“We do,” Jim says. “Spock tried earlier but apparently you weren’t ready.”

“Yeah, sorry, I wasn’t.” Matthew says. “I was at a point where any outside information would have completely thrown me out of my headspace. So, what’ve you got?”

“Two names,” Jim says. “One is Scott Walken, lieutenant in communications. I think he might have been a relatively recent recruit to section 31. The other is Jesse Henrick, and he was stationed at the archive in London until he died in the explosion.”

“Do you have images of either of them?” Matthew asks.

“I don’t but if you’ve got a spare computer I can pull them up,” Jim says.

“Hm. Yeah, I think I do.” Matthew looks around the lab and heads to one on the table in the middle of the room. He types a few commands, studies the screen, and nods. “You can use this.”

“Thanks,” Jim says, walking over to it.

“So how did you get these names?” Matthew asks. “Did something happen?”

“You could say that,” Jim mutters.

“Lieutenant Walken had a device that he used to incapacitate Khan, Ekaterina, and Alona,” Spock says. “After the staff meeting ended. He destroyed it and then suicided.”

“Let me guess,” Matthew says. “Sonic.”

“Yes,” Spock says. “Why was that your first answer?”

“Because it’s the only bloody thing that fucks us over and doesn’t bother regular humans,” Matthew says. “And believe me, back in our original time people researched all kinds of ways to take us down without collateral damage. The problem is that if you don’t kill us outright we’ll recover fully from whatever happened, and we’re really fucking hard to kill. We had people loyal to us, so it was never a feasible option to just assassinate us, and since the humans fighting against us didn’t want to kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of other humans just to take one of us out they had to find a way
to cripple us. So they did. It’s really remarkable, what human ingenuity can come up with when pressed."

"Does the sonic have any effect on non-augmented humans?" Spock asks.

"Drives dogs crazy," Matthew says. "If you’re asking whether it’d impact alien species, I’ve got no bloody clue as we didn’t have any to test back then. My non-medically educated guess would be that it wouldn’t unless said species could hear in that range. And for species who could, it might cause permanent aural damage." He considers. "Probably would, really, although Bishop or Maeve would know better than I."

"Are you susceptible to anything else?" Jim asks, glancing up from the computer.

Matthew shrugs. "Depends on the anything," he says. "If you poison us, we’ll get sick, it just probably won’t kill us. If we get injured badly enough, our bodies shut down and go into hibernation, as you know. We can get viruses and diseases, we just generally fight them off. Doesn’t mean we won’t get sick, but the odds of us dying from any one disease are pretty slim to none. Anyway. Do you have a picture for me?"

"I do," Jim says, pointing at the screen. "Walken’s the blonde on the left, Henrick is the bald man on the right."

Matthew comes over to him, looking at the screen. "Hm. Neither look familiar but I didn’t memorize every face in that database. Let me…” He nudges Jim out of the way and starts typing, after a moment moving to a different computer and then back to the first one.

Jim watches him work, realizing after about thirty seconds that Matthew’s likely forgotten they’re still in the room. He doesn’t know whether to interrupt him or just quietly leave; when he looks at Spock, he gets an eyebrow and half a shrug. Figures, Jim thinks. "Uh, Matthew?" he asks carefully. "We should—I don’t want to bother you."

"Just a tick," Matthew says absently without looking up. "Two minutes."

"Sure," Jim says, watching him.

Three minutes later Matthew sighs and stretches. "Okay," he says. "So I’ve found your Henrick in the database, and I see where he connects to the others, but I can’t quite tease out what entries he connects to. If Walken’s in here I couldn’t find him. But you said he was likely a recent recruit. How recent?"

"After section 31 blew up," Jim says with an inward grimace.

"Right, okay," Matthew says. "Then it’d make sense I haven’t got him. You need anything else from me or have anything else for me?"

"Not that I know of," Jim says. "How’s your packing going?"

"Alona’s doing it," Matthew says, going back to his computer. "I haven’t got time until I finish this. If I can’t get this done in time, we’ll have to talk about whether I can ship out or not."

"You’re coming with us," Jim says firmly. "We can transmit data back to Earth if we need to, but I’m not shipping out without you, or Alona, or anyone else."

Matthew snickers. "Aye, captain. If you’ll excuse me, I need to turn up the music and dive back into this. I’d rather not deafen either of you."
“Appreciate it,” Jim says. “Good luck.”

“Ta,” Matthew says.

They leave, and about halfway down the hall Jim feels the bass kick in. He shakes his head, hurrying down the hall faster to escape the thudding noise. “I have no idea how he focuses with this,” he admits to Spock.

“Truthfully, neither do I,” Spock says. “Did you finish the paperwork I left for you?”

Jim snorts. “There is no finishing it,” he says. “It’s endless. I got through about two-thirds of it before I started looking for Walken and what his motivations were. I figure I’ll hack through more of it after I start on my own packing.” Also he wants to get back to his apartment to see how Khan’s doing, but refrains from mentioning that.

“And I would presume you would also like to make certain Khan has recovered,” Spock says matter-of-factly.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Jim says, but his wings ruffle.

“I believe so,” Spock says. “But I understand why you would want to see for yourself.” He says nothing for a moment. “If it had been Nyota, I would do the same thing.”

“It’s hard,” Jim admits. “It’s…” He sighs. “I get why Uhura was so pissed at you after Nibiru. I’d have been pissed, too. But…what else could you have done?”

“That was, in fact, my argument,” Spock says. “But humans are not often logical when their family members are in danger.”

“Yeah, no, we’re not,” Jim says. “And you know, you’re part human. You’re allowed to not be logical once in a while if someone you care about is risking her life.”

“I do not believe it works quite that way,” Spock says but there’s the ghost of a smile on his face.

“I’m just saying,” Jim says with a grin of his own. “Anyway, how’s your packing going?”

“It is fine,” Spock says. “Have you started yours?”

“Nope,” Jim says cheerfully. “But it shouldn’t take that long.”

“In theory, no,” Spock says.

“I’ll be ready on time,” Jim says. “And even if I’m not, it’s not like you can ship out without me.”

“In theory, no,” Spock says and Jim laughs.

“What time is our meeting tomorrow and who are we meeting with?” he asks.

“It is at ten, and we are meeting with the social scientists,” Spock says. “We have two meetings tomorrow, one with the social scientists and one with support crew—the quartermaster, the cooks, and so on. The day after tomorrow is our last meeting with the crew who did not fall into any other category.”

“Like the ship’s counselor, the kid-watchers and teachers, and—don’t we have an historian or two?” Jim asks.
“Yes and no,” Spock says. “We do have one Earth historian who will be shipping out with us. But we also have two crew who align with the social scientists but do not consider themselves anthropologists. They are specifically focused on musical tradition, and gather songs and stories from each culture they meet.”

“How’d they end up on our ship?” Jim asks.

“Five years in space gives them many opportunities to collect music,” Spock says. “They requested the assignment, and Admiral Pike agreed.”


“One of them will be working in communications, and the other will be assisting in the hydroponic gardens,” Spock says.

“Okay,” Jim says again. “Are they married or just professional partners?”

“I did not ask,” Spock says.

“Fair enough,” Jim says, laughing. “Okay. So ten tomorrow. Here’s hoping the social scientists are less crazy than the comms folk.”

“If any of them were clinically insane, they would not—“

“Metaphor, Spock,” Jim says even though he’s certain Spock’s just giving him a hard time. “Let me rephrase. Here’s hoping none of the remaining crew try to kill anyone else in the crew. Or incapacitate them, since Walken wasn’t actually trying to kill Khan.”

“Yes,” Spock says. “It is concerning that the augments were never able to find a countermeasure to the sonic offense.”

“It is,” Jim says. “But on the other hand, every species has some vulnerability somewhere. Khan and his people are engineered against most of them, but they had to have a weak spot somewhere. I’m actually kind of surprised it took this long to come out. I’d have thought Marcus would have looked for it early on and it would have been in the data on…on Khan, in those first few weeks.”

“It is possible it is in that data but the four working on it had not yet come across it,” Spock says. “Or it is possible that the records were destroyed when the Kelvin archive blew up, and no one who had been working on it was alive to recreate the data. Anyone who could have gotten to the data in the secondary location may not have had the opportunity to do so or the skill to build the device.”

“All true,” Jim says. “Which makes me wonder how Walken accessed it and built the damn thing.”

“Possibly someone built it for him,” Spock says. “We may never get answers to some of these questions.”

“I know,” Jim says glumly. “And I don’t like the idea of shipping out for five years without knowing some of it, but we don’t have much of a choice.”

“No, we do not,” Spock says.

By this point they’ve reached the edge of campus. “I’m going to head back to my place and pack and maybe do paperwork,” Jim says. “I’ll see you tomorrow at ten.”

“Yes,” Spock says. “Please contact me if you hear anything from Matthew.”
“I will,” Jim promises. “You do the same.”

“Of course.” Spock inclines his head, Jim brushes his shoulder with a wingtip, and they go their separate ways.

Jim walks back to his apartment, wanting to enjoy the sunshine and the fresh air while he can. When he gets to his building, he stands outside for a minute, just relaxing and feeling the warm sun heat his hair and the back of his neck. He’ll miss that when they ship out, he thinks.

Eventually he goes inside and takes the lift to his floor. When he enters his apartment he sees Khan sitting cross-legged on the bed, bags and boxes neatly lined up under the windows. Khan has a small book in his hands, a red cover with no print Jim can see, and he smiles faintly as he reads.

“Hey,” Jim says softly, not wanting to startle him. “You made a lot of progress packing.”

“It was not that difficult,” Khan says, looking up. “I packed many of your things, as well.”

“Thank you,” Jim says, crossing to the bed and leaning down to kiss him. “What are you reading?” Khan carefully marks his place and closes the book. “Rani’s journal,” he says quietly.

“Did you dream of her?” Jim asks uncertainly. He sits down on the bed next to Khan, absently reaching for his hand.

“No,” Khan says. “No, I never have. Apparently that is your privilege. I simply…I wanted to remember where I came from in preparation for wherever it is we are going.”

He sounds almost defensive and a little embarrassed. “Hey,” Jim says, tightening his hold on Khan’s hand. “It’s—you don’t have to apologize or explain. She—she meant everything to you. I get why you’d want to revisit the memories. I’m not—you realize I’m not in any way jealous of her, right? Because that would be stupid. I’m not competing with her for you, I’m not upset that you still love her.” He smiles a little. “Besides, if I were I think she’d smack me in the next dream.”

As he hoped, that gets a smile from Khan. “Likely,” he says. “What did you learn today?”

Jim takes the hint and tells Khan about Jesse Henrick, and Matthew’s progress on the databases, as well as his conversation with Spock. “We should maybe stop by the lab tonight or tomorrow before the meeting,” he says. “I mean, they know what happened, but I’m wondering if maybe it helped them figure anything out.”

“Possible,” Khan says. “We can go by tomorrow morning.”

“You, um,” Jim says and shakes his head. “You scared the shit out of me. I should have known, I should have seen Walken was—“

“Jim,” Khan says quietly. “This wasn’t your fault. I am fully recovered, as are Cat and Alona. Walken would likely have activated the device whether or not you told him to do so. My only annoyance is that he killed himself before we could get information from him.”

“Or before you could kill him yourself,” Jim says because he has to.

“Yes,” Khan says after a pause. “That, as well.”

“I know you,” Jim says, managing to find some humor in it.

“You do,” Khan says, also sounding mildly amused.
“Honestly, given that scenario I’m kind of glad he suicided,” Jim admits. “I don’t have time for you or Cat to go on trial for murder, and we’re not shipping out without either of you.”

“I should think not,” Khan says dryly. “Not after all the battles you fought to get us assigned on the Enterprise in the first place.”

“There weren’t that many,” Jim says. “Well, not really. Kind of. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that we’re shipping out in less than three weeks and we still don’t know the extent of the network of people who want you and yours dead. I know they’re not that much of a threat, but you’ll have to excuse me, I’d really rather never see you having a seizure again.”

“It was not exactly pleasant from my perspective either,” Khan says.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Jim sighs and shifts to his knees, leaning over to kiss Khan. “How about we give up on packing for a bit?”

“I think that could be arranged,” Khan says, tightening his hold on Jim’s hands.

“Tell me what you want,” Jim says, rubbing his thumbs over Khan’s knuckles.

In answer, Khan lets go of his hands and leans over the side of the bed, picking up something. He sets the box next to him and takes out the cuffs. “Let me,” he says, taking Jim’s wrist and fastening the cuff around it.

“Anything you want,” Jim says, his pulse already quickening from the feel of the soft leather.

Khan smiles, slowly, and buckles the other cuff onto Jim’s wrist. “Undress for me,” he says, brushing his fingers over Jim’s cheek.

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says, taking a breath. He gets up, but his hands tremble just a little as he undresses and he doesn’t look at Khan until he crosses back to the bed.

“You’ll tell me if you need me to stop,” Khan says matter-of-factly.

“I will,” Jim says. Absently he wonders if they should agree on a safe word, but they’ve managed this far without one.

“Close your eyes,” Khan says; Jim does, and a moment later feels the blindfold soft against his skin. Khan fastens it securely and Jim blinks, but can’t see anything but darkness. It’s a weird feeling; he feels safe, grounded—but at the same time he feels like he’s in zero gravity, free-falling.

He follows Khan’s lead, letting Khan guide him down onto the mattress, stretched out on his stomach with his arms spread over his head. Khan fits a pillow under his forehead to keep him from being suffocated by the mattress and runs his hand up and down Jim’s back before he locks the cuffs.

Jim’s breath catches and he tugs at the restraint, just to feel it hold firm. He shifts a little, not really trying to grind against the mattress but not trying not to, either. He hears Khan laugh softly before he fits another pillow under Jim, effectively preventing him from getting any friction against his cock.

“So many things I could do with you,” Khan murmurs, dragging short nails down the line of Jim’s back, between his wings. “I had not realized quite how many things you brought back from Jill and Evan’s place.”

“Oh, fuck,” Jim mutters, swallowing hard.
“Eventually,” Khan says, amused. “But not for a while, I think.”

Jim swallows again and tries to breathe. Khan scratches him again, and again over the curve of his ass, down one thigh and back up, fingers barely brushing his balls. Jim groans without meaning to, but he can’t move into it, can’t push into the touch the way he wants.

“Do you remember what I told you?” Khan asks. Jim has no idea what he’s referring to, but before he can admit ignorance Khan continues. “I told you that there is a very, very fine line between pain and pleasure. That pleasure can be agony and pain can be ecstasy. I told you, Jim, that if you let me, I would take you there. I would see how long you could last on that line, what it would take to make you beg for more. I want to know what it takes for you to break apart, Jim, to be so lost in your own head that nothing else exists.”

Jim can’t answer him; his mouth went bone-dry when Khan was talking and he can’t manage to get enough saliva to make anything other than a bare whisper. Not that it matters; he’s got no idea what to say.

“Will you let me do this?” Khan asks softly, brushing his fingers up and down Jim’s spine. “I have you safe, Jim. Just trust me and let me take care of you.”

It takes him three tries to get the word out. “Yeah,” he whispers. “Yeah. Any—anything you want.”

“Good,” Khan murmurs.

Jim manages to take a breath, his whole body tingling in anticipation. But Khan doesn’t do anything other than touch him, running his fingers over Jim’s back, up to the base of his skull and down to his ass. It’s kind of soothing, really, and Jim starts to relax into it.

Then Khan brings his hand down sharply on Jim’s ass and Jim yelps, twisting under the blow. That fucking hurt and before he can even think to protest, Khan’s hand lands again, and again. Jim gasps, tries to squirm away from the blows and gets absolutely nowhere.

He struggles to breathe, to find a way to just get through it, but his ass stings like a motherfucker and he cries out every time Khan hits him. Wherever this line is that Khan talked about, Jim thinks he’s nowhere near it and he doesn’t like this and—

Khan’s other hand closes around the back of Jim’s neck, holding him tightly, and—Jim shudders all over, some switch flipping inside his head. He manages to get a breath, then another, realizing that his ass is on fire but the rest of his body feels like he’s been electrified, current running through him. His cock, somehow, is still achingly hard, and when Khan’s hand comes down again Jim whimpers, twisting into it.

“There,” Khan says softly, dragging his nails over Jim’s ass, hard enough Jim shudders and thinks those will leave marks. “I have you, Jim. Just let yourself fall.”

Jim shivers all over. The pain starts to blur, fire burning through him, bright and hot and fuck, he wants more. “Please,” he manages, gasping at the next blow. “Khan, please…”

“What do you want, Jim?” Khan asks, scratching the inside of his thighs.

He swallows a moan. “More.”

“Yes,” Khan says, and when his hand comes down this time it lands on the sensitive skin where ass meets thigh. Jim cries out even as his legs spread more.
By the time Khan stops, Jim thinks his ass and thighs have to be bright red, so hot that when Khan skims his fingers over them Jim whimpers. “Please,” he whispers, not even sure why.

“I have you,” Khan tells him, leaving one hand in the small of Jim’s back; Jim hears sounds he can’t identify and doesn’t care. Right now all that matters is the warm hand against his skin, grounding him, something he can cling to.

He breathes, inhales—and loses his breath in a rush when Khan pushes two fingers into him, smooth and deep and sure. It feels more than usual, even two fingers feeling so much bigger than he’s used to. Khan twists his hand, crooks his fingers, and on the second try Jim whines, trying to push back into it.

“You will not come until I let you,” Khan warns him.

“Bastard,” Jim groans and immediately wishes he hadn’t said that because Khan smacks his ass for it. “Oh, fuck, Khan—”

“We’re just getting started,” Khan says, smooth as silk even as he crooks his fingers again and Jim gasps.

Jim loses the ability to think, speak, move by the time Khan’s done with him, leaving him a trembling wreck on the bed, body on fire and desperate to come. Every touch sends sparks through him and he can’t tell what hurts and what feels amazing anymore; it’s all the same and he breathes harshly, fingers clawing at the sheets. He needs to come, he can’t take much more of this even though he knows he’ll take whatever Khan gives him, take it and beg for more.

Khan bites his earlobe, sharp and sudden. “Now, Jim,” he says, voice low and intent. “Now.”

Jim makes a sound that totally isn’t a sob and the world goes white around him.

When he comes back to himself, the cuffs have disappeared, he’s under the covers and fitted against Khan who has a wing draped over him, and he can still feel little shivery sparks when Khan touches him, fingers stroking his cheek, his hair, the back of his neck. “Did—did I actually pass out?” Jim asks hoarsely.

“You did,” Khan says, sounding more than pleased with himself. “Just relax, Jim. You did very well.”

The compliment makes something feel warm in Jim’s stomach and he closes his eyes. “That…that was intense,” he says after a moment. “Jesus.”

“Relax,” Khan says softly. “Give yourself time. You’re not in headspace to think about anything too carefully right now.”

Jim wants to argue that and knows he can’t. He sighs, relaxing a bit more. Khan murmurs something not in English but which Jim’s heard before. The familiarity combines with the utter exhaustion and he falls asleep before he knows it.
I saw him kill today. It had to be done, there was no question of the man’s guilt. He was a traitor, and a spy, and had Khan not killed him—well. It doesn’t matter what would have happened if not.

He takes these so personally. He carries out the sentence himself, because the final judgment is his; therefore, it is his duty to carry out the execution. And it’s not the killing itself that bothers him. I’ve seen him take down people without batting an eyelash, clean his knife, and return to the matter at hand. But that one of his own people would betray him, would go against him—that weighs on his soul, and I grieve to see it.

He didn’t know I was there, I think. I wasn’t in the crowd, I was on a balcony two stories up, outside guest quarters. Guest quarters for now, perhaps…perhaps if we are lucky, and Bishop and Anandi can work magic, perhaps they will be a nursery some day. But we need time for that first. We need peace, and time, and a chance to enjoy our lives without constant battle. Khan tells me we are making progress, that there are areas over the globe no longer at war, and I believe him, but it seems an endless task for so few people. I see the news, I hear the reports, and sometimes I despair that we will ever unify the world.

Certainly on days like today I disbelieve; how can we make peace with everyone if we cannot even trust our own people? How do we keep pushing forward if our own counselors are willing to sell us out to the highest bidder? I do not know.

But I must put my fears and my concerns away for now. Khan will be back soon, and he does not need me upset over the wars. Not when he has a death to mourn—and he does mourn, even if no one else sees it but me. He will wonder what he did wrong, why Kumar betrayed him, what he said to make Kumar seek out a new master. He will regret that he did not learn this sooner, that he had no way to stop the treason before it started.

He mourns what did not come to pass as much as he grieves for what did happen, and my heart aches for him. I love him so much it leaves me breathless; sometimes I look at him and wonder how this came to pass. Last night I woke early, around three, and I saw him standing by the windows, looking out at the stars. He was so beautiful, lost in thought, and I didn’t want to disturb him but I went to him anyway. I wanted to know what he saw out there, what held his attention.

“We’ll go someday,” he said, holding me close. “Once we achieve peace on this planet…we’ll find
I know he and Katsuro are already working on ship design, when they have moments to spare. I know others of his family have similar projects. And I think he’s right. One day we will leave, we’ll find out what else is there in the galaxy, in the universe. I look forward to it, but I dread it also, for if we leave, my brothers won’t come with us, my father won’t be on the ship.

My brothers argue with me when we talk; they say Khan will hurt me, that I’m a fool to love him. But they hurt me more than he ever has, with their accusations and their warnings and their jealousy. Khan would not allow them to come with us on our space journey, and I would not ask for it. But… but for all that, they are my brothers, and I love them, and I don’t want to be asked to choose between them and Khan. I know, of course, what I would choose, but I don’t wish to hurt my brothers by making it obvious.

He’s dangerous and violent and unpredictable, my Khan, and so gentle when he wants to be that no one would believe it. He’s not warm, not around others, but the casual brush of his hand says more than an open embrace could; the way he looks at me says thousands of words. His men know it, and they approve. I’m glad for it; Khan would not care if they didn’t, but I don’t wish to cause tension between him and his people. The war is hard enough without dissent in our own ranks.

Which brings me back to Kumar. Why did he betray us? Why did he turn against Khan? He would not say, when Khan asked, and so he died without us ever knowing the extent of his betrayal or the reasons for it. It does not sit well with me, and I know Khan is frustrated and angry over it.

I need to talk to his people about Kumar. I want to know how they feel, if there were warning signs we missed. I need to know whether any of them feel similarly to Kumar. Often they will tell me things they don’t tell Khan. They know, of course, that I don’t keep secrets from Khan and I will tell him what they tell me. But they still do it, and I am not going to waste that opportunity.

Tomorrow, I will start to talk to them, to find out what they know. Tonight Khan needs me. He will be angry, and I am the only person who can soothe his rage without becoming a target myself. He would never hurt me, he would never think to try.

My brothers tell me I’m a fool, that he could kill me anytime he wanted and not lose a minute’s sleep over it. But they are wrong, so very wrong. I’ve never been afraid of him, not even when we met and he had my family’s lives in his hands. Somehow, even then, I knew I was safe with him. I may be the only person, other than his brothers and sisters, to feel that way, and that saddens me.

Tomorrow will be a difficult day. There are no immediate battles to fight, but Kumar’s deception and execution weighs heavily on everyone here. We must know the details of what information he sold and to whom, but I don’t know where to start looking. Fortunately, that is not my job. My job is to soothe the men and women troubled by this and find out what they think of it.

But Khan is my priority, first and always. Without him…I can’t even imagine it. I won’t imagine it.

He should be done with audiences in half an hour. Just enough time for me to make our quarters ready for him. I’ll worry about his people tomorrow; tonight it’s just the two of us. The rest of the universe can wait.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

We cannot change who we are.

Chapter Notes

I think I have about three chapters left in here and then...then we're done. Wow. I'm boggled. Are you boggled?

Everyone’s on edge the next morning when they gather; Ekaterina keeps a hand half-flexed at her side and Jim knows she’ll have a knife in it as soon as she can’t be seen. Alona keeps taking her compacted staff out of her pocket and putting it back. Jim stares at his coffee mug, wonders if he really wants the caffeine, and pushes it away without drinking. Khan seems as impassive as ever but when Jim touches his hand under the table he feels cool skin, and frowns.

Thankfully for everyone’s sanity the meeting with the social scientists goes fine and no one takes out any weird gadgets to give anyone convulsions or anything else. He does note that the anthropologists, while very polite about it, clearly want to ask Khan a ton of questions about his original time and the people he ruled. Khan, also politely, demurs and suggests a nebulous time in the future that Jim has a feeling will never come, but it gets the disappointed anthropologists to leave.

“They don’t actually want to know,” Khan says when it’s just the augments, Jim and Spock in the room. “They think they do, but…” He shakes his head, muttering something in Hindi.

“I think you do not give them enough credit,” Ekaterina says unexpectedly. “Tell them, then. Tell them some of it.”

“And why should I?” Khan asks. His wings ruffle impatiently and he continues in Russian, his voice clearly annoyed.

Ekaterina looks at him for a moment when he finishes speaking, then leans up and smacks him in the back of the head. She continues in Russian, gesturing sharply and at one point reaching up to smack him again; that time, he grabs her wrist before the blow can connect and growls something at her.

Jim looks at Alona, who doesn’t appear concerned but has her head tilted to one side, listening to the conversation—which looks to be devolving rapidly into an argument and Jim would really like to get out of the line of fire if they get physical. He backs up slowly, keeping his eyes on Khan and Ekaterina.

“We cannot change who we are,” Ekaterina says finally in English, glaring at Khan.

“Can we not? Have we not done so?” Khan answers tightly. “We are not static, sister.”

“Nyet,” Ekaterina says impatiently. “But neither are we water. We are who we are. Something you
used to take pride in.”

“And I still do,” Khan says. “That does not mean I do not think we can evolve.”

“Not the way you want,” Ekaterina says quietly. “That way is not for us, brother. You know it isn’t. We cannot apologize for our past actions nor should we, and we cannot hope to avoid them completely in the future. We are not that kind of people. We never will be. Violence is bred into our very genes, there is no way to remove it.”

“On that, she’s right,” Alona says, finally joining the conversation. “We’re peacekeepers, not peaceful people. Keeping the peace requires a willingness to shed blood.”

“I am not arguing that point,” Khan says.

“Are you certain?” Alona asks softly. She glances at Spock and says something in a language Jim doesn’t immediately recognize.

Khan shakes his head and answers her, but he sounds tired when he does, and his wings fold around him for a moment before he forces them back.

Whatever he says makes both Ekaterina and Alona’s faces soften and Ekaterina immediately steps closer, holding him close. She murmurs something in his ear and he nods, his arms going around her to hold her tightly.

“Okay, that’s it, we’re getting out of here,” Alona says when they finally separate. “We’re going for a run. Or something. Whatever, something in sunlight that’s not here. Jim, you don’t need us for anything, do you? We’ve got four hours before the next meeting, right?”

“No,” Jim says. “No, we’ll be okay.” He’s not sure Khan will be, though, and he hesitates, looking at him. “Do you—” he starts and stops. Whatever Khan needs right now, he needs it from his siblings, not Jim. “I’ll see you later, okay? Four hours?”

“Yes,” Khan says. He does stop to touch Jim’s shoulder, though, before he leaves the room; Jim feels the warmth through his uniform tunic and relaxes a little.

“A curious conversation,” Spock says when it’s just them. “Do you have any thought what brought it on?”

“I really don’t,” Jim says and then hesitates. Is that actually true? Khan was reading Rani’s journal last night; in his own words, he’d wanted to remember where he came from. Jim wonders what Rani had seen, what she’d written about that bothers Khan.

There’s no way for him to find out unless Khan tells him. Jim won’t break anyone’s trust and read her journal, and he’s not about to admit to Spock that the journal exists in the first place. Not that he thinks Spock would want to read it or suggest Jim do it, but still. Things with Spock are still weird where Khan is concerned and Jim tries to smooth it over by not talking about it.

Spock looks at him, but Jim shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says. “I’ll…I’ll talk to him later. For now I’m going to try and get some more paperwork dealt with. Do you hate me or something? I swear there wasn’t nearly as much last time.”

“We were not shipping out for five years last time,” Spock says logically.

“Yeah, but…I’m getting buried in forms,” Jim says. “Are you taking out some kind of revenge?”
“I assure you, Jim, were I exacting any kind of revenge on you—which I am not—you would realize it,” Spock says. “Vulcans do not seek revenge, and even were I to act counter to Vulcan ethics, I am certain I could think of more suitable forms than merely burdening you with bureaucratic assignments.”

Jim stops, looks at Spock, and laughs, shaking his head. “Okay, you win that round,” he says, brushing Spock’s shoulder with a wingtip. Spock looks momentarily startled but doesn’t object. “And I have a feeling you have almost as much paperwork as I do.”

“Possibly more,” Spock says.

“Let’s not compare, I’ll just get depressed,” Jim says. “I’ll see you back here in three and a half hours?”

“Yes,” Spock says.

On autopilot, Jim heads for the lab, not realizing where he’s gone until he winds up outside the door. Figuring he might as well stop in while he’s here, he punches in the code and lets himself in.

“Buenos días,” Anandi says, looking up from her screen. She perches on the stool she usually takes, a paper notepad and pen on the table next to her. “We were not expecting you, were we?”

“No, I just stopped by,” Jim says. “Where did Bones and Maeve go?”

“Leonard was asked to assist in the ER as it is rather busy today,” Anandi says. “Maeve went with him. They will be back at some point, did you need to talk to them?”

“No, not—not exactly,” Jim says, hedging. Anandi looks at Bishop, who nods slightly. “But you do need to talk about something,” Anandi says, turning back to Jim.

“I—yeah,” Jim admits. “Do you guys have a minute?”

“Bien sûr,” Bishop says, coming around the high counter he was using. “What is on your mind, Jim?”

“The meeting went fine today,” Jim says, his wings ruffling a bit. “But—the anthropologists, and some of the sociologists, they wanted to talk to Khan about your original time, when he ruled a quarter of the planet. He put them off, but…it didn’t feel right, and then he and Ekaterina got in an argument over something I don’t understand, like whether or not they could change. It sounded almost like Khan was arguing your people should be able to, I don’t know exactly, but—move past violence? Become less—I’m not sure how to put it.”

“The age-old debate,” Anandi says, sighing. “We are a violent people, Jim. We seek out battle and we enjoy killing. Some among us think that it was engineered into us, that our tendency to violence was built into us just as our ability to heal and our enhanced senses. Some think it was a product of how we were raised and our experiences in the wars. This is not likely to be an argument we will ever resolve, and the truth likely falls somewhere in between.”

“It’s—I’m not sure what’s on Khan’s mind,” Jim says, leaning against the table in the middle of the room. “He— He hesitates. “He was reading Rani’s journal last night, and then this today, and I don’t know what’s going on in his head. Alona and Cat dragged him out for a long run, after the meeting, and I guess I’ll talk to him later, but…”
“We are preparing to leave the only home we have known,” Bishop says. “The only world any of us have ever lived on, and we are leaving it to venture into the unknown for half a decade. I would be more surprised if our people were not feeling…uncertain about the future. This is what we know, but how will our lives and our skills translate to what we do not know? We can only hope we are adequately prepared, and one way to do that is to remind ourselves of who and what we are, where we come from and the ties we have to Earth.”

“That’s—kind of scarily similar to what Khan said last night,” Jim says. “He said he wanted to remind himself of where he came from in preparation for where we’re going.”

“Well, it is logical,” Anandi says.

“Oui,” Bishop agrees.

“How are you coming along with the data here?” Jim asks, changing the subject.

“Progress,” Anandi says. “Not necessarily the fastest progress in the world, but neither is it the slowest. We are starting to see a pattern in some of the tests, which makes it easier to analyze the results. But at this point we do not see anything we think would be an immediate threat or would indicate there are biological or chemical weapons somewhere that need destruction. We will, of course, continue to work on analyzing the data but we can do that from the Enterprise.”

“Makes sense to me,” Jim says. “Are you packed?”

“We own very little,” Anandi says. “I am perhaps three-quarters packed already. The quartermaster will be collecting bags in another week, I understand?”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Jim says. “Gives them time to get everything to the ship and sent to people’s quarters, and then everyone gets one bag to bring aboard with them.”

“Si,” Anandi says. “Very efficient.”

“It’s not always, really, but they try,” Jim says.

Bishop laughs. “Anything involving large numbers of people will by its nature be less efficient,” he says.

“Yeah, true,” Jim says. He glances at the chrono and wonders if Jill’s around. “I’ll—I’m going to take a walk, get some air,” he says. “I’ll check in with you later?”


“Thanks,” Jim says. He nods goodbye to Bishop and leaves, heading out into the sunshine. It feels heavenly on his hair and his wings and he relaxes, finding a bench in the sun to sit on and enjoy it. After a few minutes, he calls Jill, wondering if she and Evan are even on-planet or if they’re shipped out. She messaged him a couple days ago but Jim can’t remember to save his life whether she was letting him know they were getting into town or leaving it.

“Kane,” Jill answers after two rings.

“Jill, it’s Jim,” he says. “Are you in town or somewhere random?”

“I’m in town,” Jill says, laughing. “We got in two days ago, we’re here until next week. We had a minor engine malfunction that we couldn’t quite identify, so we came back to have more people figure out what broke. Did you not get my message?”
“I did but it’s—it’s been a long week,” Jim says sheepishly. “You have time for coffee or something?”


He has enough time to stay on the bench for a bit, letting his mind clear and enjoying the sun. Eventually, though, he gets up, walking down to the coffee shop. He gets there before Jill and orders a drink, taking it outside and snapping a table. Just as he sits down, he sees Jill come in; she waves at him and ducks inside to get her own coffee.

She comes out a couple minutes later with a tall go-cup and a plate. “Share the brownie with me,” she says, setting it between them as she takes her seat. “I couldn’t resist. What’s up?”

“Not much,” Jim says even though he knows it’s a lie. “Well, no. Stuff.”

“Stuff,” Jill repeats. “You want to be a little more specific about that?”

Jim takes a sip of his coffee. “So…we found a second agent,” he says slowly. He tells her about Walken and the device he’d used on Khan, as well as Walken’s backstory and the reason why he joined section 31. Jill stays quiet while he talks, but her hands tighten around her cup and she grimaces more than once.

When he finishes, Jill takes a breath and carefully pushes her coffee cup away. “If I touch it I’m going to throw it at something and that would be a waste of coffee,” she says. “Shit. It’s good that the augments are okay, it’s not good that there could be others out there with similar weapons.”

“Yeah,” Jim says gloomily. “Pretty much.”

“Shit,” Jill says again. “What else is going on?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Jim asks with a weak smile.

She reaches out for her cup, looking at him. “Yeah, but you’ve got something else on your mind. What’s going on?”

“Something’s bothering Khan and I don’t know what it is,” Jim says. “He’s—he was reading Rani’s journal last night, which is fine, I mean I’m not upset or anything. But he’s clearly thinking about something, and he had a conversation-slash-argument with Cat and Alona earlier about whether they—the augments, that is—whether they can change or not, or whether things like violence are bred into them. So I wonder what he read, what’s going on in his mind that he’s asking questions like this.”

“Have you asked him?” Jill asks.

Jim shakes his head. “I haven’t had time. Alona and Ekaterina dragged him out running after this morning’s meeting, so I’ll try and get some time with him before the afternoon one. Or after.”

Jill nods, taking a sip of her drink. “I’m fairly certain he’d tell you if something were seriously wrong with him,” she says after a moment. “Or if he had major concerns about something. Odds are he’s just thinking about the upcoming mission and what’s going to happen on it. I would be.”

“Most of us are,” Jim says. “I just…with everything, I just want to make sure he’s okay, you know?”
“I do,” Jill says. She reaches over and squeezes his hand. “You love him, and you want him to be all right. I’d be more concerned if you weren’t worrying.”

Jim smiles a little and squeezes back. “Thanks. I’m—“ He grins sheepishly and shrugs. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Oh, you’ll see me,” Jill says. “There’s video calls, and messages, and I’m sure our ships will cross paths once or twice in the next five years. Or more. You’re not being sent out into the abyss with no way of telling people where you are and what’s going on, you know?”

“I know,” Jim says. “It’s just—five years is a long time.” He shakes his head to clear it. “How’re things with you and Evan?” he asks.

“We’re good,” Jill says. “He’s out with his brother for the afternoon, which is why you just got me today. Cade’s in town for a thing and they decided to grab lunch.” She takes a sip of her drink and makes a face, putting it down. “I must be getting a bug or something,” she says. “Coffee tastes weird these days. The first half a cup is fine, and then it just tastes off.”

“Have you seen a doctor about it?” Jim asks.

“Eh, it’s not a big deal,” Jill says. “I’m just feeling a little under the weather. I don’t think I’m contagious, though.”

“You better not be, I can’t afford to get sick less than three weeks before we leave,” Jim says, smiling. “I’ve got too much crap to deal with.”

Jill laughs. “I know the feeling. I’m okay, though. Just a stomach thing, if that.”

“If you say so,” Jim says dubiously. “You might want to get it checked out before you ship out again, though.”

“Yeah, if I’m not feeling better in a couple days I’ll see the doctor,” Jill says. “Stop bugging me about it.” She makes a face at him and Jim laughs.

They talk of inconsequentials for a bit longer, Jill’s last mission and preparation for the Enterprise leaving and so on. Eventually Evan calls Jill and asks if she wants to meet him and Cade for a drink, and Jim takes that as his cue to excuse himself. He gives Jill a quick hug and heads back to HQ, finding a spare office to tackle even yet more paperwork.

He grimly hacks through as much as he can before he escapes to find food and a headache blocker. He doesn’t see anyone at lunch, but it’s not that much of a surprise. Bones and Maeve might still be in the ER and everyone else is likely working on other things or still out running.

When they do all meet in the conference room again, the three augments have changed clothes and Alona’s hair looks slightly damp. “How far did you run?” Jim asks.

“Maybe thirty kilometers,” Alona says. “We lost track after a while.”

Jim shakes his head. “You guys are crazy.”

“Yes, but that has nothing to do with our athletic skills,” Alona says.

Jim has to laugh at that. “Okay, point taken.”

The mood feels lighter overall and while it’s not quite enough to get Jim to relax, he’s feeling less on
edge when the meeting begins. He relaxes a bit more by the end, when no one identifies anything
problematic either with the staff or anything else, and is about to suggest they consider dinner or
something when Alona’s comm chirps.

She answers without setting privacy mode and Jim winces at the blast of sound. So does everyone
else and Alona shouts something into the link. A moment later the noise cuts off and Matthew starts
talking a million kilometers a minute, not in English.

Alona and Ekaterina listen closely and then Ekaterina laughs. “We will be there in five minutes,” she
says in English.

“Where are we going and why?” Jim asks, following the others.

“Matthew unlocked it,” Alona says. “He solved the database problem.”

Jim trips on a stair and almost slams his face into the floor before Khan catches him and keeps him

“I wonder when he slept last,” Ekaterina muses. “We may have to knock him unconscious.”

“That’s nothing new,” Alona says.

“Do you render your siblings unconscious often?” Spock asks.

“ Mostly just Matthew,” Alona says. “And mostly just when he’s on a tear and hasn’t slept in a
week.”

“How long can you function without sleep?” Spock asks.

“Depends on the level of exertion required,” Alona says. “Every day stuff, nothing strenuous, about
a week. If we’re pushing ourselves, maybe four days. If we can get even a couple hours’ sleep now
and then we can keep going indefinitely.”

“I don’t think Matthew would willingly let you knock him out,” Jim says dubiously.

“Well, it’s not like we’d hit him over the head,” Alona says. “There are acupressure points, hit them
right and your body goes into sleep mode. Khan’s tall enough to get them.”

“Even if we did hit him over the head I think he would likely be all right,” Ekaterina says.

Alona snickers. “Maybe.” She knocks firmly on the door and opens it without waiting for an answer
from Matthew.

“Hello, mountain man,” Ekaterina says when she looks at Matthew. Jim laughs; he really does have
one hell of a beard and he probably needs a haircut, too. He thinks Matthew was wearing that shirt
the last time he saw him, too.

“What—oh, right,” Matthew says, scrubbing at his jaw. “I’ll deal with it later. For now, voila!” He
hits a couple buttons and the wall screen lights up with what looks to be a personnel file. Picture in
the upper left hand corner, names and vital stats upper right, details below. “When you put all three
together in the right order, this is what you get. Image, name, aliases, current rank and assignment—
well, current as of before the archive blew up—and cover stories. I have sixty-three files so far and
the program’s still compiling the rest, I expect I’ll have about a hundred by the time it’s all done.”

“I can’t tell if that’s a lot or few,” Jim admits.
Matthew shrugs. “I’d say medium,” he says. “And I’m not about to swear this is a complete list. All I can tell you is this is all the data I have. It’ll compress itself when it’s done compiling and send to necessary parties, including you, Pike, and a few other people.”

“Is Jill on that list?” Jim asks. “She might have—“

“Yes, she’s on there,” Matthew says. “All captains with our people on their ships will get it.”

“Thanks,” Jim says. “I can’t—no, I lie. I can believe you did it. Just…that was a ton of work.”

“Yes, it was,” Matthew says. “But I’m better than they were.”

“And so modest, too,” Alona says, rolling her eyes. “You need a shower, a shave, and sleep.”


“Khan and I will walk you back to your apartment,” Ekaterina says.

“You’re going to make him knock me out, aren’t you,” Matthew says dolefully. “I fucking hate it when you do that.”

“It’s either him or tranqs,” Alona says.

Matthew hangs his head. “We’ll discuss,” he says. “Anyway. This should finish compiling in an hour or less, depends on how much data is left. The databases keep giving me weird errors when I try to figure out the size, probably due to the encryption. They’re not corrupted, though, I did triple-check that. I have to say, this was much more interesting and difficult than the computers we found in London. Makes me think that some of what was in London was meant to be found, but I don’t think these databases were ever expected to be accessed by anyone not in section 31.”

Jim nods. “You really think they wanted that data to be found?” he asks.

“I think that the data on the computers in the London facility was much more poorly encrypted and hidden. Either they wanted it to be found or they didn’t care if it was. The levels of security on the databases I finally broke through were exponentially tougher, and there has to be a reason for that. There were three self-destructs built into these that had to be disabled, and layers and layers of decryption. And if you flubbed one of the decryption layers, it triggered a self-destruct even if you’d disabled those. Someone was paranoid as fuck. But not nearly as much so on the other data.”

Matthew shrugs. “I’m not a psychologist or a sociologist, but it’s logical to me.”

“Tis,” Spock says. “Were there any fail-safes or self-destructs in the other data?”

Matthew shakes his head. “No, not that we found, and we double and triple-checked.” He covers a yawn. “Anyway, my recommendation would be to run the images and the names in this chunk of data against existing Starfleet files and figure it out from there.”

“Thank you,” Jim says. “This…this is awesome.”

“Tis, at that,” Matthew says. “I haven’t had a puzzle quite like this one in a while, and it was fantastically fun.”

“You have odd definitions of fun,” Jim says.

Matthew laughs. “Better this than slicing people into shreds, yeah?”

Ekaterina snorts. “Depends on the person. Come, brother, Khan and I will see you to your
apartment."

“But—“ Matthew starts and Ekaterina smacks him upside the head. “Ow.”

“Let us go,” Khan says, taking Matthew’s arm in what Jim thinks is an intent to keep him from running away.

“This is really unfair,” Matthew grumbles.

“So is life, deal with it,” Alona says cheerfully.

Matthew grumbles and complains and gripes but Ekaterina and Khan steer him out the door. “Well, that was suitably amusing,” Alona says. “I’m going to go find a sparring partner. Katsuro’s around somewhere, I think.”

“I should go find Pike, let him know what’s going on,” Jim says after she leaves. “You want to come with me?”

Spock nods. “I believe he is in his office.”

They find Pike exactly where Spock thought they would. He’s on a video conference, but mutes it when they knock. “What’ve you got?” he asks, rising to his feet behind his desk.

“Matthew solved the database issue,” Jim says. “Should be incoming to your email once it finishes compiling all the records. He thinks there will be about a hundred files.”

“That’s both excellent and not,” Pike says, frowning. “Going through those to match them to files will be time-consuming, to say the least. A hundred files against all of Starfleet…that’ll take time.”

“I suggest we begin with the crew complement of the ships on which the augments serve,” Spock says. “As they will have the highest risk.”

Pike nods. “Good thinking. Where is Matthew?”

“Being forced to sleep,” Jim says. “I don’t really know when he last left the lab.”

“You know,” Pike says and smiles a little. “I’m glad the augments are on our side. I really wouldn’t want them for enemies.”

“Most people wouldn’t, sir,” Jim says.

“History disagrees with you,” Pike says. “It does make me wonder why they eventually lost, though.”

“Sheer numbers, I would hypothesize,” Spock says. “There were less than a hundred of them and billions of regular humans. Eventually even those humans loyal to the augments would have realized they would lose in the end.”

“Makes me wonder what they felt when the Botany Bay left,” Jim says almost to himself.

“You haven’t asked?” Pike asks.

Jim rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “It’s…they don’t like talking about it,” he says. “If they want to talk about it, it’s on their terms. Mostly they don’t talk about the wars and things unless it’s an off-hand comment. I’m not about to poke a sore spot just to satisfy my curiosity.”
“Logical,” Spock says.

“Honestly, from the things they do say I think I don’t want to know about the rest,” Jim admits. “It… Khan said at one point that Marcus didn’t want his intelligence so much as he wanted his…his savagery. And that’s a really accurate word. They’re all predators and they’re very aware of what they’ll do if pushed.”

Pike nods. “Let’s hope they never think we’ve pushed them.”

“I’ll second that,” Jim says. “Because they’d tear us apart.”

He gets the sense Spock wants to ask him something, but not in front of Pike. Jim holds his tongue until Pike has to go back to the video call and dismisses them. “Something on your mind?” he asks once they’ve left.

“Curious,” Spock says. “You remain involved with Khan despite your knowledge that he could easily turn on you and kill you. This is illogical.”

“Yeah, but you know I’m illogical,” Jim says, smiling. “And it’s not—I don’t think he’ll turn on me. I don’t think any of them will. They’ve accepted us as their people, and they’d rather die than turn on one of their own. I just—I’m aware that at some day in the future, it’s possible they’ll re-evaluate their alliance with us. That if we ever do something they’d consider a betrayal, we’re fucked.”

Spock nods. “I see.”

“You still don’t like that I’m involved with him, do you,” Jim says frankly.

“Like is a human emotion,” Spock says. “I find your involvement with him illogical, and I believe that your attachment to him will cause you to make irrational decisions. It has already been proven that you find yourself in more danger as a result of this relationship.” He pauses, continuing slowly. “However, I realize that you do not agree with me and that I am unable to change your mind. Nor am I likely to change Khan’s. I am not convinced this will not turn out badly in the end, but I will not attempt to dissuade either of you.”

“I’ll take it,” Jim says. “Honestly, I think some of it is that you two are a lot alike, and you don’t like that. You don’t want to be like him.”

“I am not like him,” Spock says.

“Yeah, you kind of are,” Jim says, grinning. “You’re very not like him in some ways, and very much like him in others. It’s interesting to watch.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “You have interesting ideas of what is interesting,” he says.

Jim laughs. “Maybe. I am going to try and cross-check Matthew’s database against our crew roster, you want to help me? Correction, sorry, will you help me?”

“Yes,” Spock says. “Yes, I will.”

“Thank you,” Jim says. “Let’s go find an office.”

It takes them an hour to compare Matthew’s files—all hundred and nine of them—with the Enterprise’s crew files. Jim slumps in relief when they finish, the only hit having been Tyler. “This doesn’t mean people weren’t recruited after section 31 blew up,” he realizes. “Like Walken. But I think we’re okay.”
Spock nods. “I would agree.”

“You never agree with me,” Jim says.

“I just did,” Spock says and Jim catches a hint of humor in it.

He decides not to call Spock on it and gets up instead, stretching his wings briefly. “I’m going to find Khan and figure out what we’re doing the rest of today,” he says. “Tomorrow’s the last crew meeting, right? At ten hundred?”

“Yes,” Spock says, also getting up.

“I’ll see you then,” Jim says, brushing Spock’s shoulder with a wingtip before he heads out.

He takes the expedient route of calling Khan. “Where are you?” he asks when Khan answers.

“At Cat’s apartment,” Khan says. “She asked for company while packing.”

“Would she mind if I came over, too?” Jim asks.

“She would not,” Khan says.

“Then I’ll be there in about twenty,” Jim says. “Should I pick up food on the way?”

“If you like, yes,” Khan says. Jim hears Ekaterina in the background saying something, but doesn’t know what. “Cat says she would like Greek,” Khan says.

“I’ll find it,” Jim says. “Catch you in a bit.” He hangs up and wonders where he can find Greek between here and his building.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Sounds like everyone's life is changing.

Chapter Notes

And the countdown to the finish line begins. I think we'll be ending this amazing journey with chapter 65. Maybe 66. But it's in sight!

I feel the need to apologize for how self-indulgent this chapter ended up being. On the other hand, I started this as a ridiculously self-indulgent thing and you all went along with me, so hopefully this will work for you, too.

In the morning, Jim and Khan end up at the meeting room early simply because neither of them were asleep. Jim keeps his coffee firmly in one hand but feels surprisingly awake for the little sleep he got. Khan, as always, is impossible to read.

Jim sits on the edge of the table, taking a sip of his coffee. He’s about to ask Khan a question about Rani’s journal when a young woman walks in, dressed in a black pencil skirt and soft blue shirt. She’s remarkably attractive, Jim thinks, but he has no idea who she is or why she’s here.

“Captain Kirk,” she says, walking to him quickly. She holds out a hand—neatly manicured nails, no rings—and Jim takes it, still confused. “I’m Shannon Kowalski, your ship’s counselor. I apologize for not being available for the previous meetings, but my brother was getting married and, well, there was a lot of family to be dealt with.” She smiles, quick and easy, tucking a wisp of strawberry blonde hair back into her loose chignon. “Commander.” She holds out a hand to Khan, who also takes it. “I wanted to come by early and introduce myself, as I’m new to the ship. I have graduate degrees in psychology and psychotherapy, I’ve been doing Starfleet counseling for the last eight years, and I requested assignment to the Enterprise. We have a fairly extensive counseling program for those based on Earth or a couple other planets, but there isn’t a similar option for people shipped out. Since you’re going to be gone for five years, I thought it was important that you have at least one counselor on board to mediate disputes or handle crew problems before you get to the point of all out fights or crew members incapable of doing their jobs. Also, I wanted to see what was out there. So I argued for your ship to be assigned a counselor, specifically me, and Admiral Pike and Admiral Barnett agreed.”

“Are you officially an officer?” Jim asks.

“In a sense yes, in a sense no,” Shannon says. “I went through the Academy, but then I went on to graduate school. Starfleet counselors often don’t hold or acknowledge official rank because we need to be outside the ship hierarchy in order for people to feel they can trust us. I’m a second-grade lieutenant, I believe, but I avoid uniforms unless otherwise ordered and I won’t be serving as any kind of science or operations engineer on your ship. You can just call me Shannon, or Dr. Kowalski.
if you feel the need to be official.”

Jim’s not entirely certain what he thinks of her. She’s pretty, he’ll give her that, and she sounds like she knows what she’s talking about, but at the same time...he’s just wary. He doesn’t know whether it helps or not that she reminds him of Maeve, too; similar but not the same coloring and Shannon has a lilt in her voice that reminds him of Maeve and Matthew. Again, similar but not the same.

Khan studies her for a long moment, not saying anything. To give her credit, Jim thinks, Shannon meets his eyes and doesn’t look away. She doesn’t appear intimidated at all. “Why are you here so early?” Khan asks finally. “The meeting is not for another half hour.”

“For one, to come and introduce myself as I just did,” Shannon says. “For another—I’m well aware of Starfleet regs on fraternization and I think a lot of them are bullshit, but I have to abide by them and counsel people to follow them. I obviously can’t order either of you to do anything, but I would very much appreciate it if you would each give me an hour of your time, separately. All information is confidential, I can’t be compelled to give it to anyone, even a superior officer, and I wouldn’t. Whatever you tell me stays with me.”

Jim fully expects Khan to flat out refuse. But Khan stays quiet for a moment, and when he does say something it’s in Russian, almost to himself. Shannon smiles a little and answers him. “Okay, when the hell did everyone around me learn to speak this?” Jim grumbles.

“I spent a while traveling with a woman I greatly admire and respect,” Shannon says. “She was Russian, and she taught me the language, along with a few others.” She looks back at Khan and asks him a question.

Khan hesitates, then nods. “Da.”

“Spasiba.” Shannon inclines her head to him and turns to Jim. “Captain? One hour?”

If Khan’s agreed, Jim has no way out. “All right,” he says. “But my time’s kind of limited.”

“I’m sure,” Shannon says. “How does your schedule look this afternoon? From thirteen hundred to fourteen hundred?”

“I can probably make it work,” Jim says. “Where do I meet you?”

She gives him a location within HQ. “I promise, it’ll be painless,” she says, smiling.

Jim isn’t so sure about that one, but manages to smile back. Khan says nothing, still considering Shannon for a moment. She raises her eyebrows at him. “Is there a problem, Commander?”

“No,” Khan says slowly. “I rather think not.” He moves, quickly, reaching around behind Shannon and pulling a knife out of the back of her blouse. Well, he tries; she turns, blocks him, counters with a kick that he blocks, and ends up with the knife firmly gripped in her hand—with his hand wrapped firmly around her wrist. “How many do you carry?” Khan says, not letting go.

“Why should I tell you?” Shannon asks, smiling.

“Consider it the price of me releasing you,” Khan says.

She laughs. “Two,” she says. “One down my spine and one in my boot. The rest vary depending on situation.”

Khan nods in approval and releases her. Shannon slips the knife back into its sheath under her shirt.
and straightens her clothes. “Do I pass?” she asks.

“Yes,” Khan says, smiling faintly.

“Thank you.” Shannon folds her hands at her waist. “Since we’ve a bit of time, I am going to find myself a cuppa. May I get either of you tea or coffee?”

“Thanks but I’m good,” Jim says.

Khan shakes his head.

“I’ll be back soon,” Shannon says and leaves quickly.

“What is she, like Maeve met Cat and they had a baby?” Jim asks Khan, a little amused by it.

“Not quite,” Khan says. “Rather, someone who has had training in how not to fight fair. Starfleet does not teach its officers to conceal knives, and she has clearly had years of training with hers.”

“She’s a counselor, not a covert ops person,” Jim says.

“She is someone who has learned to defend herself,” Khan says. “Something of which I can approve.”

“I don’t need to be jealous or anything, do I?” Jim asks warily.

Khan smiles and shakes his head. “No, of course not.”

Jim feels only moderately relieved by that.

In short order, Shannon returns with a large go-cup, followed by Spock, Ekaterina, and Alona. Shannon introduces herself to them and earns a couple eyebrows but no outright objections to her presence. “It does seem logical to have a counselor, given the length of the mission,” Spock admits. “Although will one be enough?”

“I’ll be working with the medical staff,” Shannon says. “They won’t be fully qualified counselors, but in an emergency or if I’m somehow unavailable, it’ll be better than nothing. I would have been here for the meeting with the medical staff but I had a rather large family reunion and wedding to deal with, I just returned.”

“I presume you were not the one getting married,” Ekaterina says.

Shannon laughs. “No, not me. My older brother.”

Jim doesn’t miss the assessing look Alona gives Shannon, but he doesn’t catch Shannon’s response, if she has one at all.

The meeting with everyone else goes fine, which Jim appreciates as he’s massively distracted. He can’t seem to focus, isn’t sure what Shannon wants to talk to him about later, and they’ve got less than three weeks until they leave. It’s starting to hit him just now not ready they are—logistics are one thing, supplies and preparations and paperwork, that’s all fine, he can handle that.

But five years into the unknown. They could find anything. They could find another black hole to an alternate timeline, one where Khan and his people are still asleep or dead or…anything. Jim really kind of hopes they don’t find another Spock; two are enough. He also doesn’t know if he wants to meet his counterpart from another timeline, although it might be interesting.
He wants to go, more than almost anything. But he’d be a fool not to be at least a tiny bit nervous about it.

When the meeting breaks up, the others head for the cafeteria for lunch; Jim follows on auto-pilot, thinking about what else they might encounter out in the galaxy. He knows Khan’s aware of his distraction, as Khan glances at him more than once, but he doesn’t push and Jim stays quiet, lost in his own thoughts.

He really doesn’t want to go talk to Shannon. But he said he would. “I’ll find you later?” he asks Khan as they bus their trays.

“Yes,” Khan says. “I will likely be at the lab.”

“I’ll look for you there,” Jim says. “Wish me luck.”

Khan smiles a little and brushes Jim’s shoulder with the edge of his wing. “I think you will be fine.”

“Probably,” Jim says. “We’ll see.”

He finds Shannon’s office easily enough and knocks on the doorframe. She calls a welcome and Jim walks in, looking around. One window, treated to block some of the light but still let enough get through, two bookcases full of actual physical books, a ruthlessly organized desk, and—interestingly—a basket of fabric and spools of thread and things by her chair. “I sew,” she says when she catches him looking at it. “Make a lot of my own clothes, when I have the time.” She comes around her desk and closes her door, activating the privacy seal. “Normally I suggest people take the couch, but I think you might be more comfortable on the ottoman.”

“Probably,” Jim admits, taking a seat on it. It’s a bit low, but he manages, and his wings stretch a little, appreciating the room. Shannon settles into what Jim guesses is her counseling chair, a high-backed green thing.

“This is a recorder,” she says, setting a small black box on the arm of the chair. “It’s for my notes only, I encrypt it so no one else has access to it and I never put recorded notes on any computer with connections to cyberspace. If you’d rather I didn’t use it, I can take notes on an old-fashioned notepad.”

“Uh, no, it’s fine,” Jim says. “I don’t—I mean, you’re the one who wanted to talk to me, so…how does this work?”

Shannon taps the top of the recorder and folds her hands at her waist, crossing her legs. “We’ve got less than three weeks until we go into the unknown for five years,” she says, smiling. “I’m looking forward to it—it should be a fantastic adventure—but at the same time, it’s also going to be difficult, and scary, and there is the possibility that not everyone shipping out will return home in five years. Add to that, you’re in a relatively new relationship with someone you were supposed to—actually, Jim, what were you supposed to do?”

“Kill him,” Jim admits, looking at his hands. “Marcus wanted me to fire the torpedoes at Qo’noS, kill Khan. Well, Harrison, then. Spock talked me out of it.”

“Yes?” Shannon says. “Something I think all of you were grateful for later,” Shannon says. “Yes?”

“Yeah, but not—“ Jim pushes his hands through his hair. “It’s so weird, how it all happened. Like—I didn’t like him, I sure as hell didn’t trust him, but…but he had wings, and I’d never met anyone else with them. Neither had he. So there was a connection from the beginning. If he hadn’t had them…” He shakes his head. “Things could have turned out so differently.”
“What do you think of the way things turned out?” Shannon asks.

“I’m…” Jim stops. “I’m not sure,” he says slowly. “I’m—I’m glad that we could revive Khan’s people, that they agreed to work with Starfleet, with us. I’m really, really glad they didn’t decide to turn on us, because that…I don’t even know what would have happened. You know what Khan did on his own—imagine with six dozen more of him.”

“It would have been war,” Shannon says quietly. “And three-sided war most likely, because the Klingons would have seen an opening and moved to take advantage of it.”

“Yeah.” Jim looks at her. “You study political science or something?”

“Or something,” Shannon says. “Do you think the only reason Khan and his people decided to be our allies was you?”

“God, that sounds so presumptuous,” Jim says, laughing. “Like I’m the one thing that made them stop from declaring war on us.”

“Yes, but think about it,” Shannon says. “You decided to take Khan in for trial rather than kill him on sight, or even without sight. You listened to his story. You trusted him—how much is up for debate, but at the end of it, he came back to Earth with you, with the Vengeance. You fought for him at his trial, you fought for his people to be revived. As gestures of goodwill go, Jim, you gave him a remarkably big one.”

She leans forward a little. “Do you think he became involved with you out of gratitude?”

“No,” Jim says immediately. “No, I think he did it because I confused the hell out of him.”

“How do you mean?” Shannon asks.

“I was the one who kept pushing,” Jim says. “I invited him back to my apartment, for a drink, and I was the one who told him—” He stops, laughs. “Why am I telling you this? I didn’t even tell Bones all of this.”

“Your secrets are safe with me,” Shannon says. “And sometimes it’s easier to talk to someone who isn’t part of a situation.”

Jim shakes his head again, almost in disbelief. “I told him I wanted hm,” he says, looking at his hands. “I was the one to initiate things between us. He didn’t—he didn’t want to want me. He really didn’t want to have a relationship with me, but…it kind of happened, and now here we are.”

“How did it kind of happen?” Shannon asks.

“We just—we kept spending time together,” Jim says. “I helped out with his people, with helping them get used to this time, find places for themselves. He was pretty key in refitting the Enterprise, much I think to Spock’s displeasure, but they’re…”

“They’re what?” Shannon prompts when Jim stops.

“They’re way too alike and completely not alike,” Jim says. “They’re both very logical, very efficient, but Khan admits to his emotions, lets them guide him sometimes. Spock, obviously, doesn’t. I think…I think Khan is what Spock could be if he ever stopped living by the Vulcan code of logic, and I don’t think Spock likes it. But at the same time, Khan’s very…he can be colder than anything, and ruthless, and I don’t know if Spock recognizes that in himself or if he just doesn’t want to go down that path. It’s kind of like if you take Spock, make him—I don’t know, darker, and
willing to admit to emotion, you’d get Khan. I don’t think Spock likes that but I think it amuses Khan, which Spock doesn’t like either.”

“But liking things is an emotion,” Shannon says.

“Yeah, I know,” Jim says. “Maybe I’m projecting. They are getting along better than they used to, at least there’s that. Like, they play chess now sometimes, so we’re making progress. And Spock has said he doesn’t think our relationship—Khan’s and mine—is logical but he’s going to stop trying to argue us out of it.”

“What do your other friends think?” Shannon asks.

“Bones used to think I was batshit crazy, but now he’s in love with Maeve,” Jim says. “So he’s got no room to talk. Everyone else…I think they’ve come around. No one thought it was a good idea at first—hell, I didn’t think it was a good idea at first—but it works. It…it really works.”

“Why?” Shannon asks.

“Because he gets me,” Jim says, rubbing the back of his neck. “Bones, he gets me but he tells me I’m crazy half the time, or I’m going to get everyone killed. I mean, it’s his job to keep everyone alive, plus he’s a cranky bastard, so he’s pessimistic as hell. Khan—he doesn’t tell me I’m crazy. He tells me if he thinks I’m wrong, if there’s a flaw in my thinking, but he’s never told me I’m out of my mind, he’s never told me I’m too much for him. He just…he goes with me, and he’s—he’s got my back.”

“It sounds like that’s something relatively new for you,” Shannon says.

“Khan said that once,” Jim says. “He said—he thought in some ways I had it harder than he did, growing up. He fought freaking wars, but he had his family, he had his people. He asked me who I had. I told him I had Bones, but he asked me who I had before the Academy.”

“Who did you have?” Shannon asks quietly when Jim stops.

“No one, really,” Jim admits, not looking at her. “Mom was gone—she’s still gone, we don’t really keep in touch. Frank—was an asshole, we’re not talking about him. I was a genius delinquent, I didn’t make a lot of friends that lasted past the hangover the next morning.”

“Do you think that’s part of the reason you and Khan became so close so quickly?” Shannon asks. “The need for connection?”

“Maybe.” Jim looks over at her. “I still don’t know why I’m telling you all this. I never talk about this shit.”

“I promise, Jim, I don’t have any psychic powers, and I don’t have any kind of truth-compelling equipment in my office,” Shannon says, smiling a bit. “Maybe you just needed to talk to someone not immediately involved in your circle.”

“Maybe,” Jim says dubiously.

“I’m not here to judge you,” Shannon says. “I’m not here to tell you what to do. I’m just here to listen and offer a suggestion or two.”

“What suggestions do you have for me?” Jim asks.

“Trust your judgment,” Shannon says.
That’s so completely opposite anything Jim thought she’d say that he stares at her, speechless. “You, uh, want to expand on that one?” he asks when he thinks he has a voice again.

Shannon laughs and uncrosses her legs, leaning forward. “I’ve read your reports, Jim. Nibiru aside—and we’ll just say I don’t agree with official Starfleet policy on that one—you got your people home safely. You lost some fighting Marcus, yes, but that was well out of your ability to control. What I have learned in my years of doing this is that some people are like Commander Spock, able to analyze everything and make a logical decision—but then when logic doesn’t apply, they freeze, or they fail. I’m not saying Spock will do either of those things. I’m just saying that being rule-bound has very strong disadvantages. If you play by the rules when the other person doesn’t, you’re buggered.”

“Okay, I’m not disagreeing, but…” Jim shakes his head.

“Why did you invite Khan to your apartment? Why did you ask him to spend the night?” Shannon asks.

“Because…because I wanted him to start to trust me, maybe,” Jim says. “Because I did—“ His cheeks heat and he looks down. “I wanted him, sure, but more than that, I wanted to figure him out. He’d saved my life multiple times already and I didn’t know why, and…he was a puzzle and I wanted to figure him out.”

“And if you’d gone by strict logic, if you’d followed the rules strictly, you never would have,” Shannon says. “Would you?”

Jim shakes his head again. “No, I doubt it.”

“So do I,” Shannon says. “And there’s no question in my mind that your relationship with him is a very positive thing for both of you.”

“Why?” Jim asks.

“Because everyone needs someone that they can count on without reservation,” Shannon says. “Everyone needs at least one person who will be there to catch them no matter what, no matter the time or the circumstance. Khan may have his family for that, but you didn’t. You have Dr. McCoy, but would you call him at two in the morning in an emergency and trust him to just be there and not ask questions?”

“I’d trust him to be there,” Jim says. “And then I’d trust him to give me hell over it later.”

“Which has its place, I’m not saying it doesn’t,” Shannon says. “Everyone also needs someone who will speak truth to power. But what you have with Khan now, it’s a relationship of mutual support. You’ll be there for him no matter what, and he’ll be there for you. And no one, anywhere, will ever convince me that’s a bad thing.”

“Has someone tried?” Jim asks.

“Not as such, and no, I’m not telling you more than that,” Shannon says. She sits back in her chair and crosses her legs again. She has a tattoo on her left calf, just above her ankle, Jim notes. A Celtic tree, similar to the one he saw on Alona’s back.

“If someone’s trying to upset my crew—“ he says, ignoring the tattoo.

“No one is,” Shannon says. “All I will say is that you know that some people are still somewhat untrusting of the augments, and are looking for arguments to bolster their case. They won’t find them
That mollifies Jim a bit and he nods, relaxing. “Okay.”

“Jim, I want you to be able to talk to me,” Shannon says. “I can’t force anyone into counseling and I can’t force anyone to talk to me once they get here. Dr. McCoy can order mandated sessions with me if he thinks a crew member needs them, but I can’t and I won’t force anyone to reveal things they’re not comfortable with revealing. I certainly can’t make you talk to me if you don’t want to. But you’ve got a ton of responsibility on your shoulders and a lot of unknowns ahead, and I’d like to think that if you felt like you needed to, you could come talk to me. I won’t tell anyone else what we’ve talked about, and I don’t acknowledge to anyone else who I’m seeing as a patient or not.”

“Confidentiality’s a big thing for you,” Jim observes.

“It has to be,” Shannon says. “There is no legal tactic or challenge that anyone could bring to force me to reveal what I’ve discussed with you. The only exception is if I feel a patient is a danger to himself or those around him. I don’t think that’s the case with you.”

“I certainly hope not,” Jim says, grinning a little.

“We’ve got some time left,” Shannon says. “What else do you want to talk about? This is your time.”

“Why did you want to join the Enterprise?” Jim asks.

She laughs. “When we’re not in session I’ll tell you about it,” she says. “This isn’t about me, not right now.”

He figured that would be the answer but had to try. “Sometimes I can’t believe we’re actually heading out for five years,” he admits. “It’s…it’s going to be a hell of a ride.”

“It is,” Shannon says. “Are you ready for it?”

“Oh, hell no,” Jim says. “But is anyone?”

She smiles. “I don’t think you can be.”

“I don’t either,” Jim admits. “I just...there’s so much out there we don’t know about. So many possibilities.”

“What do you want to find?” Shannon asks.

“Honestly?” Jim asks.

“I do prefer honesty, yes,” Shannon says and makes him laugh again.

“I want to find a winged humanoid race,” Jim says. “Just so...so I know there’s one out there.”

“It’s been hard for you, being alone like that,” Shannon says.

Jim sighs. “Yeah.”

“Do you think you’ll find one?” Shannon asks.

“I think anything’s possible,” Jim says.

“I would agree,” Shannon says.
By the time Jim leaves, he feels oddly refreshed and reflects that it’s a good thing he’s involved; he
doubts hitting on the ship’s counselor would be a good idea, no matter how attractive she is.

On his way to the lab, his comm-link chirps. “Yeah, Kirk,” he says, answering it and setting privacy
mode.

“Come to the apartment,” Khan says, sounding slightly strangled. “Immediately, if you can.”


“In a sense,” Khan says, which doesn’t reassure Jim at all. “Just…get here quickly.”

“On my way now,” Jim says and hangs up.

He makes it to his apartment in fourteen minutes, slightly out of breath and more than slightly
worried about what’s going on. When he stumbles through the door he sees Evan standing by the
kitchen and Jill curled into a tiny ball crying into Khan’s shirt. “Uh,” Jim says, looking at Evan.
“What—huh?”

Evan looks somewhat shell-shocked. “Honey,” he says, reaching down to touch Jill’s shoulder.
“Come on. It’ll be okay.”

Jill takes a breath, sniffs, scrubs her eyes and looks up at Jim. “I’m pregnant,” she says, a little
wobbly. “I’m not supposed to be, I had the implant and everything but they fail in like one out of five
million women and hi, that’d be me. And—” She sniffs again, looks at Khan, and looks up at Evan.
“You tell him, I can’t get through it.”

“She was pregnant when she got hit in London by the stunner blast,” Evan explains. “Her doctor
thinks that if Khan hadn’t donated his blood, she’d have miscarried. It wasn’t far enough along for
anyone to even notice at the time, and since she had the implant no one thought about it. But the
important thing here is that the baby’s going to be fine, Jill’s going to be fine, and we have about
seven months to figure out what the hell we’re doing next.”

“I wanted kids, or at least a kid, but in some nebulous future, not…not now when there’s a clump of
cells in my uterus rapidly growing,” Jill says, looking down at her abdomen. “This is kind of
absolutely terrifying.”

Jim licks his lips, not sure how to say it. “There are—you have—“

“I know,” Jill says, cutting him off. “We have options. I don’t have to have this baby. But I believe
in fate, and…and this baby is determined to survive, so we’re going to have it. Well, I’m going to
have it, and Evan’s going to keep me partially sane.”

“I like the qualifier on that one,” Evan says.

“Well, it’s not like I was all that sane to begin with,” Jill says, making a face at him.

“I know,” Evan says patiently. “I married you.”

“Yes, so which one of us is actually crazier?” Jill asks, laughing. She takes a breath, lets it out
slowly, and gets up. “I’m going to borrow your bathroom and wash my face. I hate crying, it gives
me a terrible headache. Blockers are safe, at least.”

“I’ve got those,” Jim says. “In the medicine cabinet, I think.”
“Thanks.” Jill wipes her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt and ducks into the bathroom.

Jim looks at Evan. “Uh,” he says.

“That…about sums it up,” Evan says. “I’ve been bugging her to see the doctor for a week, because she’s just felt awful. She swore it was just recovery from everything and she was fine, but she wasn’t, so I finally got her to go today. She told me it was some stupid bug, she’d be fine and I was wasting her time and the doctor’s time. I went with her, because we were going to get lunch after, and the next thing I knew the nurse is asking me to come in and Jill’s sobbing all over my shoulder and I swear to God, I thought it was something terminal for a minute until the baby part got through.”

“How did no one catch this?” Jim wonders. “I mean, she had surgery. How did they not notice?”

“Because she’s only a few weeks along at most,” Evan says. “We think she conceived while we were in Spain, but we’re not a hundred percent certain, and any way you look at it she would have only been a couple weeks pregnant when she got hit in London. The only way to tell would have been a blood test, and no one bothered to do one of those when she was in surgery because it wasn’t important.”

“You should sit down,” Jim says, realizing that Evan’s paler than normal.

“You should sit down,” Jim says, realizing that Evan’s paler than normal.

“So, we’re…not really sure what happens next, but we think it’s going to involve taking a few years’ leave of absence to have the baby and stuff. It’s a question of where.”

“How so?” Jim asks.

“We want to be near family, but it’s a question of which family,” Evan says. “My dad’s dead, my mom lives in Germany—she runs a hotel, and she loves it, but we don’t want to live in Germany. Jill’s parents live in New York, but she’s not close to them at all. But there’s Jake’s family, and they’ve wholeheartedly adopted Jill and me by extension. They’re also in New York, so we think we might end up there. If nothing else, it’d give the baby a lot of cousins and playmates. Jake has a big family.”

Jill emerges from the bathroom, face damp but calmer. “Are you telling Jim and Khan our location woes?” she asks, curling up in Evan’s lap.

“You don’t,” Jill says. “You just live with it and make coffee.” She tucks her head against Evan’s shoulder. “God, I’m not going to be able to do this in a few months. And what really sucks is that you two won’t be here to meet baby Kane, especially since there would be no baby Kane without you.” She stretches out a bare foot and pokes Khan lightly in the leg. “We’ll figure it out. Maybe you can come back on vacation or something.”

“Perhaps,” Khan says. “When will you find out the baby’s sex?”

“Not for a bit, I don’t think,” Jill says. “It all kind of washed over me after the pregnant thing sunk in. I have no idea what happens next, to be honest.”

“We go back to the doctor tomorrow,” Evan says in the tone of a man who has said the same thing more than once. “Then we get a plan for the next seven or eight months, then we start looking into finding a place to live in New York that’s near Jake’s family and not that close to your parents assuming we find a doctor in that area we like.”
“I’m sure Eema will have recommendations,” Jill says. “And my doctor here should also have a recommendation or two. They have networks, and it’s not like you can’t get from New York to San Francisco in half an hour. If we absolutely have to, we’ll commute back here.”

“Is beaming safe for pregnancy?” Jim asks. File that under sentences he never expected to say.

“Yes but I don’t know as I trust it,” Jill says. “Like a lot of other things, it falls into the category of there’s no reason for it not to be safe, but no one’s ever done a study on it because that would be highly unethical.”

“Right,” Jim says, deciding he needs to sit down. The coffee table looks good enough, and he takes a seat, facing the other three. “What’s going to happen to your ship?”

Jill shakes her head. “No idea. That’s one of those things we have to figure out in the next few days. My recommendation would be to promote Amir to either actual or acting captain and slot in an experienced Starfleet officer as his XO, but I can only make the recommendation, I can’t force brass to follow it.”

“Yeah, I know that one,” Jim says. “So who have you told so far?”

“You,” Jill says. “I have to call Eema, and then Evan’s mom, and then my parents, and then I don’t know who we tell next. But you and Khan were here, and this is kind of Khan’s fault anyway, so we told you first.”

“Andy and the bird,” Evan says.

“Yes,” Jill says. “They come before Eema. Actually, I need to call them now or they’ll never let me forget it.” She stays where she is for another moment, though, before she pushes to her feet and slips on her shoes. “Evan, are you coming with me or are you going to stay and cling to male company before you get overwhelmed by female hormones?”

“When you put it like that,” Evan says. “I’ll stay here a bit longer.”

“I’ll be outside,” Jill says. “Come find me.” She leans down to kiss Evan, leaning her forehead against his for a moment. He brushes her hair back, running his knuckles down her cheek, and she smiles, kissing his hand before she straightens up. “This is going to be insane,” she says. “And Khan, don’t think I’m going to forget that you saved baby Kane before mama even knew about him. Or her.”

“I was more interested in saving you than the baby,” Khan says.

“Two for one deal,” Jill says. She crosses to him and leans down, hugging him tight and murmuring something in his ear. Khan returns the hug and kisses her forehead.

“Well, congratulations,” Jim says when she comes to him. “And…good luck?”

“Thanks,” Jill says, giving him a hug. “We’re going to need it.” She looks down, touches her stomach as if in reflex, and leaves, taking out her comm-link as she does.

“You look like a man who needs a drink,” Jim says to Evan once she’s gone.

“Wouldn’t say no,” Evan admits.

“I have vodka, and I think whiskey,” Jim says, heading to the kitchen. “Which do you want?”
“Vodka,” Evan says. “Please.”

Jim grins, pulling the bottle out of the freezer. He pours three glasses and brings them back to the living room, handing one to Evan and one to Khan. “So…congratulations,” he says.

“Thanks,” Evan says, clinking glasses before he downs half his drink. “I really…yeah. We talked about kids, but we didn’t think someday would be now.”

“I think it generally works like that,” Jim says. “Maybe? I don’t know. I’ve never had to worry about it.”

“And you likely never will,” Evan says. “Really, we should have figured her implant might fail at some point, given the rest of her physical oddities, but…it worked this long, so we thought we were safe.”

Khan takes a sip of his drink. “Will she need to worry about anything while pregnant? Due to her physiology?”

“We don’t think so,” Evan says. “We’re not sure, but we think she’ll be okay. The biggest problem she’s going to have—pardon the pun—is that she’s just so small. But she’s healthy and in great shape physically, so her doctor thinks she should be okay. And they can fix almost any problems these days, so we’re not that worried. Well, we shouldn’t be that worried. We’re both a little freaked.”

“Understandably, I would think,” Khan says.

Evan grins sheepishly. “Well, yeah.” He takes another sip of his drink. “I wish you guys would be around when the baby’s born, though.”

Jim kind of does too. “We’ll figure something out,” he says. “Video and things, and maybe we’ll come back to Earth at some point.”

“Maybe, yeah,” Evan says. “You guys ready to ship out?”

“Maybe?” Jim grins. “We’re working on it. Mostly now it’s down to paperwork and packing.”

“Always fun,” Evan says. “What are you going to do with your apartment?”

“We’re putting most of what we’re not taking in storage and giving up the place,” Jim says. “The building has a lot of Starfleet officers, so they’re used to this. They’ll come in once we’re gone, pack it all up, put it in storage, and clean the place. It costs, but it’s better than doing it ourselves.”

“Usually is,” Evan says. “If you need someone to check in on your stuff now and again, we can probably manage it. We’re likely moving to New York but not for a month or two, and getting back here is easy enough with shuttle or beaming.”

“Thanks,” Jim says. “We might take you up on that.”

“Sure,” Evan says. “Least we can do, right?” He looks at Khan. “I know you didn’t know she was pregnant. But you saved her life, and the baby’s life, and…and we’re not going to forget that.”

“She likely saved mine,” Khan says quietly. “It is not something I will forget, either.”

Evan sighs. “Yeah, okay.” He finishes his drink and sets the glass down. “I should go find my wife.”

“Probably,” Jim says. “You going to be okay?”
“Ask me in eighteen years,” Evan says.

Jim laughs. “For what it’s worth, I think you two will be good parents.”

“Thanks,” Evan says. “I…I really hope so.” He blows out a breath and pushes up from the couch. “We’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks,” Jim says.

Evan leaves; Jim looks at Khan. “I got nothing,” he says after a moment. “That was…unexpected.”

“Yes,” Khan agrees, sounding about as nonplussed as Jim feels.


Khan nods. “I would agree.”

Jim expects Khan to ask him how things went with Shannon, but he doesn’t mention it at all. Instead, he suggests they try and pack a bit more. Jim goes along with it because they really do have to pack and he doesn’t really know if he wants to talk about his conversation with Shannon or not.

Anandi calls about an hour in, asking Khan to come by the lab to answer some questions. Jim pulls on his shoes without thinking about it; Khan may be less tightly wound about it these days but it’s still difficult for him, and Jim doesn’t want him to go alone.

Mutual support, Shannon had said. That sounds about right. Jim smiles a little, thinking about it, and touches Khan’s hand in the lift down to the lobby. Khan gives him a mildly surprised look, but returns the pressure; something in his face eases a bit.

They’re not ready for shipping out, but at least they’ve got this.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t actually know when ship’s counselors became a thing - I don’t remember them being in TOS, but hello Deanna Troi in TNG. I just think it makes a ton of sense to have at least one psychologist on board if you’re shipping out for five freaking years.

And yes, those of you who thought Jill was pregnant, you were correct. *g*
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

Are you ready?

Chapter Notes

And away they go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days to departure. Jim’s apartment feels empty save for the dust. He has enough clothes and toiletries to survive the next few days, a bag packed to take on board with him, and…pretty much nothing else. The fridge is bare, or just about; Khan’s things are also on the Enterprise, save for his carry-on and a couple other items. Jim thinks but isn’t sure the box of Rani’s things hasn’t been sent up to the ship yet. His guess is that Khan will take them up in his carry-on, but he hasn’t asked.

Somehow all the paperwork gets done. Jim doesn’t quite remember how; it all blurred together after the fifth day of staring at computer screens, but Spock tells him they signed all the forms and checked all the boxes and pending anything else—like classified torpedoes being loaded onto the ship—they’re good to go.

He sits down on the edge of his bed, looking around the bare space. It’s not that he’s all that attached to the apartment, and it doesn’t bother him that they’ll be moving into a different space when they finally get back to Earth. But he has a lot of memories of this apartment, mostly from the last year, and it’s…weird.

Jim still hasn’t decided how he feels about everything when Khan walks in the door, scattering raindrops and bringing the scent of damp feathers. “Hi,” Jim says, standing up. “How long were you out in the rain?”

Khan shrugs. “It started drizzling about five kilometers before the end of our run, but did not start seriously raining until I was walking back to the apartment.”

“You want a shower?” Jim asks.

“I think I am wet enough,” Khan says, mouth quirking in not quite a smile.

“So not going there,” Jim says, laughing. “But you’ve got about forty-five minutes to clean up and change before this dinner Uhura planned for everyone.”

“Yes,” Khan says, moving to the bathroom to get a towel. “The bon voyage party. She has not stopped talking about it for the last four days.”

“Do you talk to Uhura that often?” Jim asks, watching Khan emerge from the bathroom, rubbing his hair dry with a towel.
“I do not,” Khan says. “Cat does.”

“Makes sense,” Jim says. “I talked to Matthew earlier today. He said they’ve located about ninety percent of the section 31 personnel that are still alive, and have neutralized about eighty-five percent of those. And of the ones they’ve brought in, most of them are freely rolling over on the others. I’m not entirely certain if they’ve discovered agents we didn’t know about, but mostly all I care about at this point is that there’s no one on my ship and no one on Jill’s, either.”

“It is not quite Jill’s ship anymore,” Khan says, stretching his wings and beating them once to shake off water.

“It’ll always be her ship,” Jim says. “Did you talk to her today? I didn’t get a chance.”

“I did,” Khan says. “She and Evan have found a home in New York, near Jake’s parents. Jill says it should hold all three of them even with all the things a baby requires. The doctor says she is completely healthy, and the baby should be fine, but she is not allowed to do extreme sports until after she recovers from the birth.”

“She must be thrilled about that one,” Jim says.

Khan smiles faintly. “She actually did not seem too upset, but I get the impression right now she’s still somewhat overwhelmed with the fact that she and Evan are having a baby, so everything else is so much noise.”

“Makes sense,” Jim says. “I think they’ll be good parents. Kind of wish we’d be around to see the baby. I mean—I don’t want kids, I never did, and most of them are freaky little monsters, but sometimes they’re cute, and any kid that has Jill for a mom is going to be a riot.” He considers that for a moment. “Okay, Jill as a mom is going to be a riot.”

“Likely,” Khan agrees. “I am sure we will get video and messages and such.”

“Yeah, definitely,” Jim says. He walks over to Khan and reaches up to run his fingers through Khan’s damp hair, pulling him into a kiss. “You ready for this?” he asks, leaning his forehead against Khan’s.

“Define ‘this’,” Khan says, settling his hands on Jim’s hips.

“Five years into the unknown,” Jim says.

“As ready as one can be,” Khan says. “Are you?”

“Nope,” Jim says cheerfully. “But it’ll be awesome.”

Khan smiles. “It will be interesting, at least,” he says.

“What do you want to find out there?” Jim asks. “I don’t think you’ve ever told me.”

“I do not know,” Khan admits. “So many possibilities.”

“Do you want to—I have no idea how we’d do it, but do you want to find out what happened to your people, in an alternate timeline?” Jim asks.

Khan hesitates, long enough that Jim wishes he hadn’t said anything, but then he shakes his head. “No,” he says. “No, I don’t.”

“Why not?” Jim asks.
“What would the point be?” Khan asks. “I highly doubt that in another universe you and I would be allies, or anything else for that matter. Did you ever ask the older Spock if his Jim had wings?”

“I did,” Jim says. “He didn’t.”

“Without that connection…many things would have gone differently,” Khan says.

“I hate thinking that,” Jim says. “I hate thinking that if we weren’t—if we didn’t have these, that we’d have stayed enemies, that you’d have tried to destroy my ship.”

“Nevertheless, it is a true statement,” Khan says.

Jim sighs, leaning his forehead against Khan’s shoulder. Khan holds him a little tighter, his wings wrapping around Jim, warm and familiar and feeling like home. “I still…I want to find a species like us,” Jim admits.

“I know,” Khan says quietly. “I do, as well.”

“And…” Jim bites his lip, decides to say it. “I kind of—if we do find an alternate timeline, or something, I kind of…I’d like to meet my dad. It’s probably not possible at all, but…if it ever was, somehow, I’d…I’d like that.”

“Understandable,” Khan says.

Jim doesn’t ask about Rani; unless they find an alternate timeline three centuries off from their own, it’s not going to happen. “Anything else you want to find?” he asks instead.

“No,” Khan says. “I rather think I would like to ship out with no expectations.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Jim says. “You may be the only one, though.”

“We shall see,” Khan says.

Jim straightens up, smoothing a damp lock of hair off Khan’s forehead. “We should change and get ready to head out,” he says reluctantly.

“We should, yes,” Khan says. “Who will be there tonight?”

“Everyone,” Jim says. “Senior staff, all of your people on the ship, some friends and family. I think Jill and Evan will be there, and maybe Shannon.”

“She is senior staff, is she not?” Khan asks.

“I guess, yeah, but I’m not used to thinking of her that way,” Jim says. “Not sure anyone else is, either.”

“Perhaps not,” Khan says. “That does not change her status.”

“I know,” Jim says. “I know. Have you—did you talk to her?”

“I have,” Khan says. “Twice.”

“Okay,” Jim says. “You don’t have to tell me anything about it, I just wondered.”

Khan nods, letting go of Jim and folding his wings back; Jim tries not to feel cold. “Have you spoken with her?”
“Yeah, once,” Jim says. “Well, twice, but once was at lunch and I don’t think it counted really.”

Khan doesn’t ask him what they talked about, which doesn’t surprise Jim. He distracts himself from thinking about those conversations by hunting for slightly nicer clothes to wear to the bon voyage party, and by the time he and Khan finish changing it’s time to go. They leave the building just in time to catch a break from the rain and decide to walk to the restaurant.

Of course, it starts pouring half a block from the place, and they get soaked by the time they duck inside. Jim thinks there’s something very appropriate about that, but can’t put his finger on what; he’s more interested in using the bathroom dryers to get himself from “drenched” to “tolerably damp”.

They emerge somewhat less soaked and immediately get beers thrust upon them by Uhura. “Thank you,” Jim says, taking his glass before it sloshes over the side. “Who’s here already?”

“Look for yourself,” she says cheerfully, waving a hand around the private room she’d arranged for the party. “You’re not the last but not the first either.”

“Good to know,” Jim says. He looks around; by one wall he sees Sulu and Spock engaged in some kind of conversation, and over by the bar he sees Shannon and Scotty. The amount of S names in the room makes him smile.

He almost chokes on his beer, however, when he sees Shannon and Scotty both get short glasses of whiskey—at least, Jim’s assuming it’s whiskey. They laugh, clink glasses, and down the contents. Shannon doesn’t even grimace, and Scotty laughs again.

“She drinks like an Irishman,” Matthew says; Jim almost jumps, not having realized he was there.

“She is Irish,” he says instead, covering.

“Really? Well, then.” Matthew grins and heads for the bar.

Jim shakes his head, but he smiles, watching Matthew order himself a drink and one for Shannon. She laughs, but she takes it and Jim sees them introduce themselves. Scotty looks mildly disappointed, but a moment later Alona walks over to the bar and he brightens up immediately.

People come by to say hello to him, wish him luck on the mission; Jim doesn’t know some of them and wonders just how many people Uhura invited. He does grin for real when Jill comes in and makes a beeline for him, wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him tight. “Going to miss you,” she says against his shirt. “Don’t get killed.”

“I won’t,” Jim says, hugging her back one-armed so as not to drop his beer. “Good luck.”

“I’m going to need it,” Jill says. She steps back and looks at Khan, then takes Khan’s mostly-untouched beer and hands it to Jim.

“Uh, what—“ Jim starts and then Jill literally jumps on Khan, wrapping her legs around his waist and hugging him hard. More than a few people laugh at that one, and Jill does too before she leans down to murmur something in Khan’s ear.

Khan nods at whatever she says, and holds her a moment longer before she jumps down.

More people, more well-wishes and handshakes and drinks; Jim reflects it’s a damn good thing they’ll all have a day to recover as he thinks more than one person in the room will be seriously hungover the next morning.
Possibly including him, but the beer and the whiskey flow freely, as do the wine and the vodka and whatever else people are drinking. No one ends up dancing on tables, for which Jim can only be grateful, but there’s a lot of laughter and some dancing on the floor once the music starts. Too full from dinner to join anyone—plus he doesn’t dance—Jim straddles a chair and watches the others, happily buzzed.

“So,” Ekaterina says, sprawling in a chair next to him. She has a glass of vodka in one hand and Jim knows it’s not her first—or even her third. “Are you ready?”

“About as ready as I’m going to be,” Jim says, looking at her. “You?”

“I am ready for people to stop asking me if I am ready,” she says, laughing. “A new chapter in our lives, what is not to like? Five years into the unknown, with a potential war on the horizon, species we have not yet met, the risk of danger and combat…I am pleased.”

“You are a very strange person,” Jim says.

“I am a fighter,” Ekaterina says. “And there will always be battles to fight.”

“I wish you weren’t right,” Jim says.

She pats his shoulder and takes a sip of vodka. “It seems a constant of all species, regardless of origin or history. Conflict is universal. One hopes that by the time a species is advanced enough to develop warp drive that the need for war has diminished, but this is not always the case.”

“No, it isn’t,” Jim says. He sighs, looking at his mostly-empty beer and wondering if he wants another one. “Still, I can hope we won’t have to fight a war.”

“As can I,” Ekaterina says. “Battle is one thing. War is quite another, and I have fought enough wars.”

“What do you want to find?” Jim asks. “Out there. What do you want to find?”

He’s not prepared for the wistful look on her face. “I want…” Ekaterina sighs and downs the last of her glass. “I want to find a way to speak with my Konstantin. If alternate timelines can exist, if you can dream of Rani, surely there would be something in this galaxy that would allow me to see my mate, to speak to him one last time.”

“What was the last thing you said to him?” Jim asks softly.

Ekaterina smiles a little. “Dream of me,” she says.

“Did you dream of him?” Jim asks.

“Scattered bits,” she says. “Cryosleep prohibits higher brain function, but I do think I occasionally dreamed of him anyway.” She sighs again and shrugs. “I envy you your connection to Rani, such as it is. I do not understand it but I envy it nonetheless. Have you dreamed of her lately?”

“I haven’t,” Jim says. “Not for a while.”

“Perhaps she does not think you need to,” Ekaterina says.

“Maybe,” Jim says. “This is an awfully melancholy conversation.”

“I am Russian,” Ekaterina says. “Everything is melancholy. And why should this not be? We are leaving everything some of us have ever known, to go somewhere none of us have ever been. We
choose this, but there should be an element of mourning, should there not? As we say goodbye to the
known and move into the unknown?”

“True,” Jim says. “Just…this is a party, and we should be celebrating.”

Ekaterina laughs at that and clasps his shoulder. “And so we shall,” she says. “I need more vodka, I
think, and what is that machine that Scotty and Matthew are setting up?”

Jim looks at it and almost whimpers. “It’s a karaoke machine,” he says, dropping his head forward.
“Clearly some people in here have had way too much to drink.”

“Clearly,” Ekaterina says, laughing again. “Well, let us see who steps up to the microphone.”

No one wants to be the first one up; a bunch of people cluster around the machine but Jim thinks
they finally resort to drawing straws to force someone to go first. It turns out to be Scotty, who has
the entire room dissolved in laughter by the second verse and who gets waved off with a round of
cheers.

Jim gets himself another beer and watches the next few songs, wincing when Chekov—clearly not
sober and equally clearly pushed into it by Sulu—massacres a Russian song Jim’s never heard
before, but even he can tell that was more off-key than on.

Following him Alona and Matthew literally push Ekaterina onto the stage. She glares at them, but
picks up the mike, closing her eyes for a moment. When she starts singing, the room falls silent
almost immediately. She has a beautiful voice, Jim thinks absently, clear and powerful even if he
doesn’t know the words.

Another voice joins in with harmony a few lines in and Jim looks around to see Maeve, her voice
lower than Ekaterina’s but no less beautiful. Bones just looks at her while she sings, almost as if he
doesn’t believe she’s real.

Jim can empathize.

A male voice comes in next—Jim expects it to be Matthew but it turns out to be Bishop, moving
through the crowd to stand next to Maeve.

The recorded music goes quiet but the three augments don’t stop; Jim doubts they even realize it
happened. Ekaterina has her eyes closed and Jim swears he can see a tear on her cheek.

One more voice joins in, male, slightly higher than Bishop’s; Jim looks and almost chokes on his
beer when he sees Khan. He never knew Khan could sing. It doesn’t entirely surprise him, given the
man’s speaking voice, but still.

The four-part harmony gives Jim a shiver down his spine and he almost wants to hold his breath, not
wanting anything to disturb the singers. Everyone else seems to have the same idea; no one moves.

When the song ends, Jim feels a keen stab of disappointment but before anyone breaks the silence
Maeve calls something out in Irish, followed by Alona laughing and clapping her hands to count the
rhythm—and then they’re off again, joined by Alona and Matthew this time, something much more
upbeat but still with that incredible harmony.

What follows turns out to be a small concert, but Jim wonders if the augments even notice the rest of
the room. Katsuro’s the only one who doesn’t join in, but he forms a makeshift drum out of
something and keeps rhythm for the rest.
After some amount of time—Jim doesn’t know how long—Ekaterina finally shakes her head. “I am parched,” she says. “I need water before I sing anything else.”

About four glasses of water get thrust at her before she finishes speaking, and she laughs. “I take it you enjoyed,” she says, taking a glass from Chekov.

“Where did you learn that?” Bones asks, looking at Maeve.

“We were taught the arts,” Maeve says, taking the water glass he hands her. “To be a superior human, one must be educated in all aspects, including the creative and performing arts. We often sang together as children, and we encoded messages in our lyrics when the wars began.”

“That was beautiful,” Shannon says quietly. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Bishop says.

Jim gets a glass of water and makes his way to Khan. “I didn’t know you could sing,” he says softly, handing Khan the water.

“I have not in years,” Khan says, taking a sip of water. “But some occasions call for it.”

“Are all of your family that good?” Jim asks.

Khan shakes his head. “Some were more inclined toward visual arts, some toward text-based expression—prose and poetry. We all sang to some extent, but not all of us excelled at it.”

“So it’s just luck that you seven did?” Jim asks.

“Luck, coincidence, training,” Khan says. “However you like to call it.”

“I think I like to call it you and me sneaking out of here to go home,” Jim murmurs and sees heat flash in Khan’s eyes. “I want you to fuck me one more time in the apartment before it’s not ours anymore.”

“Yes,” Khan murmurs back, and his fingers curl around Jim’s wrist.

They try to sneak out. They don’t succeed, but the party seems to be breaking up anyway. It takes them half an hour to say goodbye to everyone and flee into the misty night, walking back to the apartment.

Jim’s skin tingles every time Khan’s hand brushes his on the walk back, every time their wings bump. Neither of them say a word, but by the time they get into the apartment Jim feels almost ready to explode.

Before he gets a word out Khan pushes him up against the wall and his mouth lands on Jim’s, hard and possessive and oh, yeah, this is going to be good. Jim growls into the kiss and digs his fingers into Khan’s shoulders, giving as good as he’s getting, earning himself a growl in response and Khan’s thigh pressing right where Jim wants it.

By the time they finally sprawl on the bed, wrecked and sweaty and sated, the sheets are half on the floor, Jim’s shirt is in shreds, he’s got bruises on his hips and Khan has a fading bite mark on his shoulder.

“Fuck,” Jim says finally, the first word he’s said since leaving the party. “I really, really hope the soundproofing on the Enterprise is good.”
“You don’t know?” Khan asks, his voice rougher than usual.

“Never really tested it,” Jim says. “Guess we’ll find out.”

Khan laughs, which surprises him. “I suppose we shall.”

Jim covers a yawn and considers getting up to shower or remake the bed, but honestly he can’t be bothered and he’s comfortable where he is, even though he’s going to itch like a motherfucker in the morning.

He doesn’t care. He sprawls a little more comfortably over Khan and closes his eyes, listening to Khan’s heartbeat.

The day before they leave takes forever. Jim has nothing to do, really, but neither does anyone else. A bunch of them end up hanging out at their usual coffee shop in the late afternoon, just to have something to do. The augments there—Khan, Ekaterina, Anandi and Alona—end up playing a weirdly complicated game involving dice and sugar packets as counters. The dice come from Jill, who studies the game for two rounds before joining in.

“Why do you carry dice on you?” Jim asks.

“Why don’t you?” Jill counters. “I carry dice and cards. I’m a gambler.”

“Okay, I guess you have a point,” Jim says. “I’m not entirely certain what it is, but I guess there’s one.”

She snickers and punches him in the shoulder. “Dice are kind of a universal, I’ve found. Every society has some kind of gambling framework, and dice go back thousands of years. So I bring them, and a lot of times they come in handy.”

“I’ll remember that,” Jim says.

“Here,” Jill says, digging a box out of her bag and handing it to him. “Jake gave these to me, now I’m passing them on. Maybe they’ll bring you luck or some shit. Either way, use them in good health.”

Jim looks at the dice and smiles a little; they’re gray with some shimmers of blue and green, and they remind him a bit of Khan’s eyes.

Not that he’ll ever admit that.

He puts the box in his pocket and watches the rest of the game. The players call it quits after the fifth round, with Anandi well in the lead and Jill in second place. Jill puts the dice away and the lot of them get up to leave.

“Okay,” Jill says to Jim. “Have a hell of a time. Send pictures.” She jumps up and lands on him, her legs around his waist. “Take care of yourself, take care of Khan,” she says, hugging him hard enough he thinks she bruised him.

“I will,” Jim says. “I will.” He hugs her back, not wanting to let go for a moment.

She kisses him soundly and drops back down. “See you in five years,” she says before giving Khan the same treatment.

“Take care of yourself,” Khan says to Jill, touching her stomach gently. “And the baby.”
“I will,” Jill promises. “And—” She hesitates, then stretches up to murmur something in his ear. Khan leans down so she can, but whatever she says makes his eyes go wide and he jerks in surprise. “If you don’t—” she says hesitantly.

“No,” Khan says slowly. “No, I…I would like that.”

Jill blushes a little. “It may not—but we’ll see.”

“Let me know, either way,” Khan says, touching Jill’s cheek.

“I will,” she says. “Be well.”

As they walk back to the apartment, Jim looks at Khan. “What was that all about?”

“The baby,” Khan says. “If it is a girl—they want to name her Rani.”

“Oh,” Jim says softly. “Oh, wow.”

“I was not expecting that,” Khan admits. “But…I like that she asked.”


“It is something she would do,” Khan says thoughtfully. “I just had not anticipated it.”

“You can’t anticipate everything,” Jim teases him.

“I can certainly try,” Khan says, a glint of humor in it. Jim laughs and bumps shoulders with him.

The two of them join Bones and Maeve for dinner, lingering over espresso and tiramisu. “I will rather miss this,” Maeve says, taking a sip of her espresso. “The ship has coffee, of course, but we’re not likely to have time for leisurely dinners like this.”

“Certainly not in similar surroundings,” Khan says.

“Who knows, maybe we’ll find a planet with amazing food and a policy of open hospitality,” Jim says. “It could happen.”

“It could,” Bones says dubiously.

Maeve laughs and smacks his arm lightly. “You are such a pessimist.”

“I’m a realist,” Bones says indignantly. “And the reality is that we’ll find a place like this and the food will be poisonous.”

“Then we’ll have Anandi cure us,” Maeve says. “Or find a way for us to eat the food.”

Jim laughs at the look on Bones’s face. “She’s got you there,” he says.

“Oh, shut up,” Bones says, scowling at him.

“Come on,” Jim says. “It’s our last night on Earth. Lighten up.”

Bones glares at him a moment longer than snorts and sits back. “This is going to be a really long five years,” he says.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Maeve asks. “Frankly, I’m looking forward to it. I’ve never been off Earth before when I was awake to enjoy it. And at some point I would like to space walk, but I’ve no idea
when that would be. I meant to try it before we shipped out but ran out of time.”

“It’s a ship,” Bones says. “Things are going to break, and at some point someone’s going to have to go EVA to fix them. You could probably go then. If you want to risk life and limb, more than you’re already doing by going into space.”

“Leonard,” Maeve says firmly, and to Jim’s utter surprise he shuts up.

“So,” Jim says, feeling a bit mischievous. “Entertainment on a starship can be sometimes lacking. What would we have to promise to get you guys to sing again?”

“Possibly rather a lot of alcohol,” Maeve says, laughing. “We’d not done that since…a long time ago. I think—” She looks at Khan and shuts up.

“The last time we sang like that was at Rani’s funeral,” Khan says quietly. “It…it would be good to make some new memories.”

“It would,” Maeve says, reaching across the table to touch Khan’s hand. “It would indeed.”

Jim almost wishes he hadn’t asked, but he hadn’t known either. Under the table, he touches Khan’s thigh; Khan glances at him and Jim can read the reassurance in his face.

“I only wish we had Konstantin to join us,” Maeve says. “He had the most amazing bass voice, and when paired with Cat’s soprano—they sang like angels, or demons as Cat often insisted. Either way, it was beautiful.”

“Are you all different?” Bones asks. “I don’t know the right terminology.”

“Cat is a soprano, Alona and I are mezzo-sopranos and Anandi has a contralto I only wish I did,” Maeve says. “Matthew is a tenor, Khan and Bishop are baritones although Bishop has a slightly deeper voice, and Katsuro refuses to sing. So aye, we’ve all parts covered except bass, but they’re so hard to find. Bishop can fake it, if he needs to, but he’s not a true bass, not like Konstantin was.”

Jim remembers Anandi’s voice from the night before, smoky and rich, almost like aural velvet. He’d love to hear that again, to be honest, although if he’s really honest he mostly wants to hear Khan sing again.

“Perhaps we’ll have time to practice together on the ship,” Maeve says. “Certainly there will be down time. One cannot solely work and sleep.”

“No, definitely not,” Jim says. “It’s one shift work, two off, although usually it goes one on duty, one sleeping, one off shift unless things happen.”

“Which they always do,” Bones says but it’s less of a grumble than usual.

Maeve laughs. “Aye, well, life would be boring if they did not. I think we are getting signals from the very polite waiter that we need to settle our bill and leave.”

“Probably,” Jim says. He pays the bill because what else will he have to spend money on for five years, and they leave, going their separate ways.

He knows he should sleep, that it’s going to be a long day tomorrow, but his mind won’t calm down. He settles against Khan, tucking his head against Khan’s shoulder and consciously relaxing his body; even if his mind doesn’t quiet he can convince himself to get some physical rest. Khan’s fingers run up and down his spine and his wing drapes over Jim, warm and comforting and soft.
He doesn’t remember falling asleep but he knows he’s dreaming when he sees the throne room, sees her standing by the windows. “Hi,” he says, walking over to her.

“Couldn’t let you go without one last chat,” she says, smiling as she turns to look at him. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to talk to you again once you ship out. I’ll try, but…I don’t know.”

Jim doesn’t bother asking why; she won’t tell him. “Any last words of wisdom?” he asks instead.

“Have fun,” she says. “Take care of him. Promise me you’ll take care of him. He’s not invulnerable and he’s not as strong as he thinks sometimes.”

“I know,” Jim says quietly. “And I will.”

“I know you will,” she says. “You’re good for him. You’re what he needs. And…he’s what you need, too.”

“Yeah,” Jim admits. “Yeah, he is.”

She smiles and touches his hand; Jim thinks it’s the first time she’s touched him. He expects her fingers to be cool, but they’re not. “Good luck,” she says.

“Thanks,” Jim says, smiling. “And…if I don’t see you again, it’s been…interesting.”

She laughs. “Yes.”

The room dissolves into darkness and Jim wakes up, seeing the gray threads of dawn through the window. He smiles again, brushing a kiss over Khan’s collarbone, content to stay where he is for a few more moments.

Eventually they both get up and wash up and get ready, taking their bags downstairs. Jim turns in their access cards, shakes hands with the manager, and they get a cab to the shuttle bay, where their bags get loaded and they mill around talking to service personnel and crew.

The crowd parts as Pike comes through, leaning on his cane slightly but moving fairly well. “Sir,” Jim says.

Pike smiles. “Hell of a journey you’ve got ahead,” he says.

“Yes, sir,” Jim says, grinning.

“Good luck.” Pike claps him on the shoulder. “Don’t break my ship.”

She’s not Pike’s ship anymore but she’ll always be his ship, Jim thinks. “I won’t, sir,” he says.

“I’ll make certain of it, sir,” Scotty says and Pike laughs.

“If anyone could, Mr. Scott, you could.” He shakes hands with Scotty and looks at Khan for a long moment. “Don’t prove me wrong,” he says finally.

Khan smiles faintly. “I won’t.”

Pike nods, extending a hand. Khan shakes it, and something passes between them that Jim can’t read but whatever it is leaves Pike satisfied. He nods again and turns to go.

“What was that all about?” Jim murmurs to Khan.
Khan shakes his head. "Nothing important."

Jim doesn’t buy it but they’ve got to get on the shuttle and he doesn’t have the privacy to bug Khan about it. Something flutters in his stomach when they dock and he has to restrain himself from jumping down to the floor.

On the bridge, he looks around and smiles. Uhura, Spock, Sulu, Chekov. Khan, in his role as science officer—and getting Spock to agree to step back to only first officer and second-ranked science officer had been difficult, but he’d finally done it. In medbay he knows Bones and Maeve are running through their checks and supplies; in one of the science labs he knows Anandi and Bishop are doing the same.

“Mr. Scott, how’s my warp core looking?” he asks, hitting the intercom.

“She’s purring like a kitten, captain,” Scotty says in satisfaction. “All set to take us anywhere.”

Jim grins and settles into his chair. “Mr. Sulu,” he says. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Aye, sir,” Sulu says, grinning back.

Right before the ship drops into warp, Jim looks over and meets Khan’s eyes. Khan smiles a little and Jim almost laughs. Who would ever have thought, when Marcus had sent him to kill John Harrison, that this would be the result?

No regrets, and five years to go. I love you Jim thinks, and he wonders what Khan sees in his eyes because he nods, just a little.

Jim turns back, just in time to see the stars flash by. This is going to be awesome.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, my God. I'm literally shaking as I write these notes, as I run this chapter through spellcheck and make sure I haven't made too many egregious errors. We're...we're done, folks. I don't know how many ways I can express my gratitude and appreciation for all of you who've read along with me, who've cheered me on along the way and kept me going when I thought I was going to falter and fall. This is the longest story I've ever written, period, and the audience that has gathered for it humbles me more than I can ever express.

Thank you. Thank you so much for being there, for reading and commenting and leaving kudos. Thank you for your appreciation, for your patience when I took a while to update, for your comments about things that made me see things differently, for your interest in my OCs and your belief that I could make a cracky premise into something solid and not really crackfic at all.

I won't say I'll never write more in this universe, because invariably when I say I'll never do something I end up doing it. But I think it's going to be a bit before I return to these characters. This story has lived in my head and my heart for almost fourteen months and to have it finished is something I wasn't entirely certain I could accomplish. I need some time to process that before I move on.
However, having said that: If you do want more stories with an overlapping cast and different primary relationship, I once again point you to *Wild Card*, which is still very much in progress and which I hope to finish someday as well. (Also, it has bonus Konstantin!)

Once again: Thank you. Thank you so much.

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